

Hypocritical theatre

Hollandia's intermedial multiverse

Henk Oosterling

(Center for Philosophy & Arts, Erasmus University Rotterdam)

Once the theatrical performance is over, what remains is energized perplexity. Looking at Hollandia playing is as exhaustive as it is energizing. My outer senses are aroused and my inner sense seduced, provoked, sometimes attacked and violated, but always invited to reflect and react. Hollandia's sublime powerplay challenges me physically as well as mentally. I am submerged in an all over reflection traversing affective tensions ranging from reflective joy to pensive pain. What happened? To my philosophical opinion my involvement is engendered by a fivefolded operation, specific for Hollandia's methodical approach of theater: political, micropolitical, metaphysical, intermedial and actoral engagement.

This layered engagement results from a critical position, in which the borders between reality and theatre are not as much raised as a problem as they are exposed as a shared common ground. Hollandia aims at an exposition of socio-political and existential dilemmas by theatrically composing multimedial and interdisciplinary tensions. I qualify this as a condition of the inbetween. By exposing the in between Hollandia triggers a specific disposition in its audience: a being of the 'inter' or literally 'inter'esse. Whether her *entertainment* and *inter-esse* is still critical in a Brechtian sense is not the issue. To Hollandia Pasolini and Artaud are greater inspirations. If there is a need for the notion 'critical' I'd prefer to call their position *hypocritical*. In a production-aesthetic sense Hollandia avoids making a straight, unambiguous political statement; from a reception-aesthetic perspective their performance gets under your skin and works on your nerves as the paintings of Francis Bacon do. Both body and soul become critical. After reflections on *exposition* – content - and *composition* – artistic multimediality - I will outline the philosophical *dispositions* of Hollandia's multiverse.¹

0. Position

Dancer, actor and director Johan Simons met percussionist Paul Koek in 1982 at theatre company De Appel. Simons was heading a workshop, Koek had by then been acting in Eric Vos' theatre productions for close on eight years. Koek had founded the Nederlands Rok Ensemble and was at that time a member of the Hoketus ensemble of Louis Andriessen. When Simons founded the Regiotheater in 1983 the practice of writing their own scripts was thrown overboard. As a member of the actors' co-operative The Wespetheater he defined its activities as 'making socially engaged theatre about the historical setting of a location, using our own scenarios based on topical matters, and performed at places where there never are any theatre performances, accompanied by the local brass band'.

Theatre company Hollandia came into being in 1985 as a result of a merger between the Regiotheater and Acht Oktober, a theatre company from North Holland. Simons became Hollandia's artistic director. Koek joined up with him a year later, though still acting in plays like *Bakeliet* (1986) by Gerardjan Rijnders of Toneelgroep Amsterdam. Within five years Hollandia had grown into a theatre group in which social-political commitment and a form-experimental approach entered into a completely new relationship. Simons started to take care of the acting and imagery, while Koek enhanced the tactile-rhythmical sound concept. Simons

¹ See for an extensive analysis: Henk Oosterling, *On the Border*, in: *Hollandia 1985-2000*. Paul Slangen, Tom Blokdijk, Rick Spaan (eds.), Zaandam 2000. The cassette contains words (book), images (photobook), sounds (cd) and motion (cd-rom).

is the farmer looking out over his land, while Koek is listening to the granulated structure of the clods.

1. Exposition: class struggle revisited and revised

Hollandia stages the smaller and larger tragedies of modern man. According to her 'tragic' point of view, everything that aims at the highest achievable level will be overturned. The fall is inevitable. The subject of hybris and downfall reaches back to her first tragedy: *Prometheus* in 1989. After *Greeks* (1991) *Hercules and Medea* was performed as part of a school project; *Medea* had already been used in Müller's *Love Drama* in 1988, and returned in the music theatre play *M is Music, Monologue and Murder* (1993). Another four tragedies followed: *Persians* (1994), Xenakis' adaptation of *Oresteia* (1995), *Phoenician Women* (1996), *Ifigeneia in Aulis* (1998) and together with Het Zuidelijk Toneel, with whom Hollandia fused in 2000, she staged *Trojan Women* (1997).

Translating the classical Greek mytho-existential perspective to the politico-existential perspective of modern life, Hollandia portrayed the life of worn out oddballs and eccentric outsiders, ruthlessly holding up a mirror to post-industrial information society. Ecstatically she vents the curbed anger, resulting from modern man's desillusions. As if she wants to ward off its violence by 'acting it out', she reallocates members of all classes to the post-agrarian and post-industrial sites that were left behind by them: cleared out market gardens, breaker's yards, abandoned gas plants or flour mills. Peasants struggle and mourn in *Ella* (1986), *Gust* (1987) and *Peasants Die* (1989) up till *Dirty Thieves* (2000). Fishermen revolt and die in *The Sea of Doubt* and *In good Hope* both in 1995 and in *Whale Tale* (1997). Soldier's desires derail in *Woyzeck* (1992/2001), petty bourgeois lie and cheat from Schnitzler's *Round Dance!* (1989) to *Brimstone and Treacle* (1998). Middle class people's libidinal economy collapses in *Theorem* (1990), while industrialists and multinational capitalists selfdestructively plot in *Two Voices* (1997) and *The Fall of the Gods* (1999). Finally labourers commemorate their slavish lives and idle revoltes in *Kingcorn* (1997), *Biotex* (1999), *Industrial project 1 KLM Cargo* (1998), *Quick Lime* (1999) and *Dirty Thieves* (2000).

Hollandia's plays are about uprootedness and community, powerlessness and perverted exercise of power, alienation and authenticity, shrewd hypocrisy and impotent honesty. The eccentrics are socially disrupted and morally ambiguous. Always out of place, they are maltreated and maltreat others. Finally they are brought down by the ecstatic fears or their hubristic perversions. If incidentally things take a change for the better, this happens in an equally miraculous as morally ambiguous manner, like in Pasolini's *Theorem* and Potter's *Brimstone and Treacle*. That modernity's despair leads to compulsive behaviour is shown in pseudo-rituals, in which disrupted lives temporarily gain coherence and sense. 'Of course life is completely pointless,' Karin says in *Ossi-town* (1990), 'but it has to be beautifully pointless.' Or to phrase Achternbusch's hypocritical call: 'You don't stand a chance, but seize it!'

2. Composition: localised sound images

This content is met by precise forms. These are transformed into a specific style, in which music, location and performance play their part. By introducing the physical impact of music and location Hollandia aims at diminishing the distance between audience and actors. They leave the foetal fyke of the playhouse behind. By mixing sounds and rhythms, noise and bodily awareness into their theatrical imagery, taking their audiences to places where they do not feel at ease, Hollandia reminds them of the constitutive gap between theatre and life, while at the same time intensifying and enhancing the audience's sense of commitment and involvement.

a. electronic music theatre

In collaborating with Dick Raaijmakers in *The Fall/Dépons* (1993), *The Fall of Mussolini* (1995) and *Hermans' Hand* (1995) Hollandia adds to its theatrical performance electronic music. Words are grafted on images, images on sounds, sounds on actions. This tensional composition of different media parallels on a content level the existential tension of the protagonists. Dithyrambs, madrigals, arias and non-western melodic melody lines are more than simply a musical support: sound deconstructs the unity of the images, as the rhythm stresses the intensity of the theatrical gesture. In order to permanently link these experiments to Hollandia's theatrical performance, in 1997 a musical group was founded within Hollandia: the sound and rhythm laboratory Veenstudio.

More than being illustrative Koek's research into the potentialities of the 'sound images' and the cinematic sound 'imageneering' of Raaijmakers both dynamise and transform Simons' imagination. Koek's experiments with repetitive patterns eventually lead to the systematic application of the 'hoketering' that was already applied in *Suus* (1988) and in the tragedies: a stuttering pronunciation of syllables in one long drone. Given Koek's appreciation of associative theatre, composing becomes combining. Like in the first Russian films images are cut without anecdotal bridges, sounds are sampled on rhythms, images, words and gestures.

Voices become instruments that produce new theatrical and dramatic effects. The electronically amplified and digitally edited melodies and rhythms as well as the rolling of earthly materials such as wood, iron, grass, vegetables, stones and paper as in *Su-pa* (1996) enhance the reflective quality of their powerplay: between eye and ear an intermedial experience is forged. When for instance Marinus van der Lubbe cries out with misery, his raging and verbal cruelty becomes an acoustic performance: the framed arsonist of the Reichstag ecstatically repeats "Gottadusumfing!!!" while running 'sur place' or beats his soul with drumsticks out of dusty books. Being digitally externalised, dubbed and doubled, his soul becomes 'sensable'.

On a content level sound and rhythm deconstruct psychological realism. Moreover, via a 'multimedia' enhanced theatricality the audience is tempted to reflect physically. As such sound, image, light, motion and words enter into a far more interesting pact than is suggested by the term multimedia. Hollandia strives for an integral approach: intermediality.² While remixing musical sound, theatrical image, dramatic gesture and textual meaning, on a reception-aesthetic level she invites her audience into the in between. Intermediality is the non-foundation – the 'Ungrund' - of her new theatrical reality.³ Aiming at the inter Hollandia's music theatrical motivation can be understood as a 'Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk', in accordance with avant-garde imagination.⁴

b. location theatre: 'contactility'

Simons and Koek experienced the playhouse as stuffy and oppressive. Confined to its foetal darkness, audiences are cut off from their bodies and the world. Hollandia's music theatrical reality takes (its) place in dilapidated sites: 'tableaux mourants'. On a content level these ruinous sites parallel the alienation of the protagonists. These desolate ambiances reflect both the reversibility and the fictitious pretensions of civilisation. On an experiential level they reflect a hypocritical longing for authenticity and community, on a socio-economical level their decrepitude reveals the history of the location.

² I refer to the debate on intermediality that became relevant in the beginning of the nineties. See for instance: Jürgen E. Müller, *Intermedialität. Formen moderner kultureller Kommunikation*. Nodus-Publikationen, Münster 1996; Yvonne Spielmann, *Intermedialität. Das System Peter Greenaway*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag, München 1998.

³ In Taormina 2000 Hollandia was acknowledged by the EU as a 'new theatrical reality'.

⁴ See: Suzanne Häni, Alois Müller, Toni Stooss, Harald Szeemann (eds.), *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk. Europäische Utopien seit 1800*. Verlag Sauerländer, Aarau/ Frankfurt a/M 1983.

Though Hollandia once considered building its own theatre, the establishment of her Bayreuth would have destroyed one of the most adventurous aspects of her theatre work: the audience's journey to an unknown, 'unheimische' location. The reception-aesthetic quality of this pre-theatrical traject can hardly be underestimated. Having reached the site, using visual and tactile 'tensors' in locks, greenhouses, football stadiums, busses and under the bridges the audience is installed in an atmospheric ambience. Dining before as in *Two Voices*, or in between as in *KLM Cargo* is also part of this physical ambience.

Indirectly Hollandia raises pivotal questions about the relationship between theatrical reflection and on the one hand the body of the audience, on the other local history. These respective 'meta'physical and 'micro'political aspects problematize the boundaries between theatre and life, while these between actuality and history are brought into experience. Smells, street noise, daylight and tactile or kinaesthetic sensations constantly make the audiences aware of a shared physical presence now and here: contactility. Of course, this 'now-and-here' awareness is shared with all performing art, and especially with the avant-garde performance. But Hollandia adds a new dimension comparable to Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty. Words can become sheer stress marks, thus dissolving the narrative dimension of language into physical elements with the scream as the absolute limit of their theatrical reality. The interactions between content, form, style, the continuity between traject and subject, the diffusion of matter and mind get the audience's bodies by the short hairs. On a reception-aesthetic level reflection and corporeality no longer oppose one another.

3. Dispositions: intermediality and interesse

All this explains why Hans-Thies Lehmann qualifies Hollandia's 'site specific theatre' in *Postdramatisches Theater* as a area of 'Gemeinsamkeit'⁵ for the actors and the audience. For me this shared experience as 'contactility' is a physical disposition of Hollandia's engagement. It is 'le degré zéro' of their political commitment. Within a socio-political context Hollandia's enlivenment of theatre could be understood as the flipside of a theatricalisation of life⁶ and an aestheticisation of public space⁷, so characteristic of the past decades. Engagement, however, is to global a notion to analyse the critical value of this theatrical intervention. Hollandia's commitment has to be specified. The entr'acte of various artistic media and disciplines, the acte de présence of both actors and location and the experiment with the receptive abilities of her audiences all together produce a new theatrical reality with a specific critical value.

Hollandia stages an existence in the inbetween: a theatrical inter-esse. In this atmospheric frame postmodern fragmentation becomes a coherent, reflective experience. The crossovers of artistic media and disciplines evoke all sorts of tensions in bodies, as a result of which 'the space in someone's head is enlarged', as Dick Raaijmakers put it, when talking about *The Fall of Mussolini*. Different medial 'tensors' tune the audiences to a reflective sensibility.

But is Hollandia's interesse 'political' and 'critical'? In the closing sentences of *Postdramatisches Theater* Lehmann takes stock of twenty years experimental theatre. He concludes that in the taboo-breaking 'aesthetics of risk', aesthetic and political-ethical themes are not only shown with respect to content, but are also experienced by the audience in a affective disorientation. Indeed, engagement is not just a cerebral matter.

a. political commitment: solidarity

⁵ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatisches Theater*. Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt a/M 1999, p. 306.

⁶ See for instance: B. Joseph Pine II, James H. Gilmore, *The Experience Economy. Work Is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston 1999.

⁷ See: "Philosophy, Art and Politics as Interesse", in: *Issues in contemporary culture and aesthetics*, no. 9, Jan van eyk Akademie, Maastricht 1999, p. 98.

Hollandia's political commitment reaches back to the Wespetheater. Influences from the Werkteater - also the roots of dramaturge Tom Blokdijk - are undeniable. But for Hollandia *Leonce & Lena* (1993) has played a decisive role in repoliticizing their theatrical performances. Büchner's play raised the question of the role of theatre in times when - shortly after the Gulf War - the Balkan is about to explode. To put it more pointedly: what does theatre mean in a depoliticised Global Village whose suburbs are ablaze? What does acting mean in a world where the influence of the media has turned politics into a circus?

Nevertheless Hollandia's plays are not purificatory. There is no univocal political message, although the voices of the oppressed or those on the edge of society resound time and again. From 1997, the plays increasingly started to concentrate explicitly or implicitly on current affairs. In *Voices*, the adding of Shell topmanager Herkströter's farewell speech, with its merciless pragmatism, Hollandia exposed Shell's involvement in the execution of intellectuals in Nigeria. But all the themes of *Voices*, *The Fall of the Gods* and *Quick Lime*, were already present in the plays before 1993, albeit less apparent, but nevertheless recognisable: in the nazi-symbols in *Concrete* (1987), in Gerard Rutten's film, admired by the nazis, that inspired the performance of *Stale Water* (1994) and after 1993 in the plays based on Pasolini's or Visconti's work.

b. micro-political commitment: moral ambiguity

Within this political commitment, Hollandia's theatrical subject par excellence is 'le degré zéro' of morality: the amoral deadlock in the human soul from which moral judgement becomes possible. The preference for Greek tragedies, for Pasolini and Potter, for Kroetz, Müller, Achternbusch and Beckett bears witness to a fascination for absurdist and tragic bass lines of human existence: unbridled perverted exercise of power by corrupt politicians, unfeigned racism and the bourgeoisie's slumbering xenophobic impulses, perverted fetishism of church leaders and decadent conceit of tycoons. Hollandia's micro-political theme is fundamental dissonance in human relations. She does not focus on consciousness of separate individuals, but on the immanence of their relations: only this 'inter' turns individuals into what they will be. By paying attention to this economy of desires, the struggle for power is transferred to a hardly visible, micro-political scene of 'dividuals': individuals who are divided within themselves. Although demons, devils or dimes force decisions upon them, their human condition remains a balancing act on a rope that has been knotted between double binds: man's existence as a tension between pathos and logos, interior and exterior world, between intensities and interests. Reconciliation is out of the question, even if that impression is sometimes made, like in *Theorem* and *Brimstone and Treacle*. The latter play seems to have a happy end, but the daughter's final screams indicate yet another, even deeper conflict. Tragoedia incipit.

c. meta-physical commitment: interacting

These micro-political tensions are staged by the audience's physical involvement with the location. Jammed together in unheated greenhouses, draughty factories, damp garages and echoing production halls, presence is reflected in their own body and in the bodies of the actors: uncontrolled and naked, in precarious positions that mirror the audience's presence. Body become reflective, the reflection meta-physical. Even when Hollandia returns to the frame in a playhouse - in *Bloodlust* (2000), *Quick Lime* and *Brimstone and Treacle* - she keeps on objectifying her audience: while entering the theatrical foetal fyke, the audience is shamelessly monitored by the actors. Now and then the actor/character seizes upon the audible presence of their spectators to stress the in between. When acting becomes interacting, Hollandia's entertainment becomes critical.

d. intermedial commitment: reflection of the media

Hollandia has her media interact as well. The commitment that stems from the theatrical adaptations of current social-political dilemmas, the exposition of individual tensions and the metaphysical experiences of the audience are intensified even further by multimediality and interdisciplinarity. Brecht's 'Verfremdung' becomes intermedial: every sensory impression is alienated from itself and expropriated by new mediamatic interventions. Sounds deconstruct texts and make images 'sensible'. This 'acte de présence' of different media mixed into each other, this 'intermedia' as Fluxus artist Dick Higgins called it⁸, lifts Brecht-like effects of alienation onto a medial level: the audience can no longer identify with the narrative, not because of a counter-narrative - Brecht still assumed that an ideological perspective existed with an unambiguous political meaning - but because of mediamatic breaks.

e. actoral commitment: entr'acte

The fifth form of commitment that is methodically engendered by Hollandia's plays results from an actoral reflectivity. Hollandia always stimulated actors to be self-reflective in performing their characters. Initially this selfreflectivity was evoked externally: men played women or vice versa. Or as in *Prometheus*, various actors played one character, in *Voices* one actor various characters. In *The Fall of the Gods* every actor is accompanied by an actor/character that alternately functions as a tenant or as a prompter. Sometimes actors feel out each other's alertness. While lying on the wooden floor with his head resting on his hands, actor Bert Luppens in *Leonce & Lena* says about twenty five times in a row 'Fly on the wall', while gazing intently at Leonce/Jeroen Willems. This nearly cabaretesk repetition gives the act of acting back to the audience.

But the most intriguing form of actoral selfreflectivity comes about when an actor in a Hegelian sense reflects on his or her acting while acting to engender a infinite selfreflectivity. But the actor can even turn against the character. Then the abyss of the 'inter' is wide open: the audience cannot but mind the gap within the theatrical performance. This entr'acte gives the 'now-here' aspect utmost urgency: theatre as a fully lived experience. As a result of this reflective quality the character even looks displaced for a moment: *dispositioned*, lost on the site. Now-here becomes no-where, to phrase it in a more Deleuzean vocabulary.

4. Hypocritical theatre

Once again: Is Hollandia's starting point still critical in a political sense? Not if that means that Hollandia wants to spur its audience on in the race of the nations. Even though a Brecht-like tone sometimes resounds in Hollandia's contemplative compositions, Brecht's cultural-pedagogical options are wholly unfamiliar to Hollandia. When Johan Simons, in reference to *Korbes* (1986), is asked whether he agrees that it is an extremely cynical play, he parries this question with the remark: 'you have to force yourself to give answers'. But to what questions does Hollandia give an answer?

During the time of Aischylos, when the Dionysian choral dance is already adapted to the political demands of classical Greek polis, out of the democratic core - the chorus - one of the dancers steps forward. This masked protagonist starts a dialogue with the chorus, answering their questions and comments. This proto-actor is called *hypokrites*, literally: he who answers. Only after Plato's condemnation of art as double semblance or sheer appearance the hypokrites changes into the two-faced hypocrite we still know today. In this tragic sense Hollandia's theatrical multiverse is hypocritical: she answers the dilemma without giving straight answers. Hollandia stylises a two-faced challenge to face both body and soul.

⁸ See for a more systematic exploration of intermediality: Henk Oosterling, "Intermediality. Art Between Images, Words, and Actions" in: *Think Art. Theory and Practice in the Art of Today*. symposium under the direction of Jean-Marie Schaeffer. Witte de With, center for contemporary art, Rotterdam 1998, pp. 89-100.

Hollandia explicitly expressed its solidarity with marginal eccentrics and emphasises the moral ambiguity that haunts every claim to power. Individuals need some kind of community to resolve this ambiguity. By constantly exposing a discrepancy within both good and evil and by sanctifying and at the same demystifying images as 'Bildung', Hollandia evokes the hypocritical interesse of life.