

A part of the
experience
of us

–

a conversation
with
Juli Apponen

Elin Amundsen
Grinaker

A part of the experience of us is a conversation between Juli Apponen and Elin Amundsen Grinaker, talking about the performance *Life is hard and then you die – part 3*.

Elin Amundsen Grinaker has a master in Dramaturgy from Aarhus Universitet. She works as a freelance dramaturge for artists including Lisa Lie, Idun Vik, Artilleriet produksjoner, Panta Rei and Lene Therese Teigen, amongst others. She is an editor of the feminist online fanzine Blazer, where she also writes, and she works as a program dramaturge at Black Box teater.

When I experienced Juli Apponen's performance *Life is hard and then you die – part 3* at Oktoberdans fall 2018, I was overwhelmed by the amount of words and details. Of the shifting between medical journals, dreams and astronomy – but maybe most of all by her care for the audience she was giving this somehow brutal text to. She started the performance by telling us that if someone had to leave during the performance, "people have their reasons." We had a conversation about the piece, the making of an autobiographical text and of language as something that can be violent.

In Life is hard and then you die – part 3, the text is the focus, the props are text, and the text focus on the body. How did this piece become a reading?

There are several reasons why it became both a text and a reading. One of them is that I was regarding writing as the most difficult, scary, or complex form for me as an artist. Everything becomes so definite, while on the other hand it is so flexible and subjective. Also writing an autobiography is a weird thing. Resistance creates material, so I am always looking for impossible tasks in my work. For this text, there is a clear reason for trying to make a language on pain. Elaine Scarry writes in *The body in pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*:

"To have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt"

“Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unshareability, and it ensures this unshareability through its resistance to language”

“Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.”

I read this at the same time that I was collecting material for *Life is hard and then you die – part 3*. It intrigued me, and the performance had to be text, nothing but a text.

As for the props, I really wanted to stick to the writing theme, and I came up with the idea of translating the violence to the paper. To make something common, neutral and seen as “a clean slate” transform into an extremely charged physical body, make it perform something very violent. It is also connected to the contrasts in the text where extreme content and experience is edited into a seemingly coherent and understandable form, but ends up in cognitive dissonances.

You have also worked with pain as a topic in other forms?

I made the choreography *Everything Remains* in collaboration with Jon Skulberg. This is also autobiographical and deals a lot with the same content as *Life is hard and then you die – part 3*, but without words. It is minimal in form but maximalist

in content, which is true for almost all of my work. Complexity should already be in the material and not something I need to reconstruct in the process.

When I saw your piece in Bergen, people talked about experiencing a physical pain when listening to and watching the show. I also felt this, but at the same time, I felt taken care of. You started the performance with telling us, that if someone had to leave, it was ok, and that “people have their reasons.”

I think I said that if someone needs to leave the room, for whatever reason, I do not mind and no one else should either think of the reasons why, because we all have our reasons. Since I invite the audience in to this experiment of sharing so much pain, it is important that I don't keep them as a hostage. There is definitely a little claustrophobic element to stick so much with the abundance of physical pain. That said, there have been very few occasions where someone has left the room. I did embed as much care and other types of material in the text as I could, having these parts where you are suddenly transported into a very different world, like the strange sex dreams or astrology.

I am very open with the fact that I am creating a situation where I am manipulating people. That is what artistic articulation is for me. In all the elements of this piece, there is so much physical and psychological pain. And there is even more now

than what was there in the beginning, because it's been added to since the premiere in 2014, when it already was too much. After that, even more surgeries happened.

You added the experiences of the surgeries after 2014 into the already existing text?

Yes. The first time it was 40 minutes, now it is one hour. Nobody can really take in and remember everything, but that is the experience I am conveying, because I can't either. That was another reason to write it down and articulate it for myself, too. It has to do with how trauma and memory functions. I only read it when performing it, since it's a lot for me to take in, as well. I share that with the audience.

There is a point not doing it by heart?

Yes, and it wouldn't even be possible. In the beginning of performing it, there were five surgeries, now there are nine. I remember I was reading, coming to surgery number four, realizing I couldn't remember all those things. In that way, personally the text is also about making those things real by processing and remembering – and sharing – as you are supposed to do with a traumatic experience. I'm not necessarily so interested in inspiring people, there is a whole mainstream industry that is constructing a narrative that mostly caters a kind of hero myth. It's important for me to talk about the space where

one ends up after “too much” and the ambivalence and confusion this generates.

What we can share

I don't work with fiction at all. In this case it comes from my experience, and in *Life is hard and then you die – part 3* I have been in the midst of it while performing it.

While there is this dimension of notes and memories of the past, the present is very close. I always end the piece by putting it into the context of what is currently happening for me. Once I did it in Copenhagen one day before going to a new surgery, and I told this at the end of the reading. I don't want the audience to be able to create a distance from it. We have to remain in the struggle sharing difficult experiences. We desperately need new narratives and ways of dealing with fragility not only as an interesting concept, but as a shared reality. That is another reason for it to be a live reading, that the body who has experienced this is present, reading the text.

What does this “here and now” bring to the piece?

It becomes very real, and audiences experience physical reactions. Already when writing it, I knew that it would be a difficult performance to experience, so when I had the first draft finished, I tested it out with people that I trusted. I wasn't sure if I could do such a thing with an audience. If it was ok.

They told me that they felt taken care of, as they were also thinking a lot about their own bodies and experiences, which is what I am striving for. At the same time, it was hard for them. I think it has to be hard to listen to, because I wouldn't truthfully convey the experiences if it wasn't hard, or at one level near-impossible, to take it all in. That's how it was for me, that is how it has to be for the audience, and that is the form the dramaturgy takes from reality. Objectively, it is terrible. But it happened. The whole piece is an experiment on what we can share.

Not just something random

There is almost no place in the text where I write my own opinion. I try to use as much as possible what others have said or written. There is this bureaucratic language and journals – what the world or others have said about me or their reactions to me, and then, in contrast to that, I bring in what I was thinking about, or experiencing, when I was in these specific physical and mental states. So there is this perspective of the extreme inner and outer pendulum in motion.

Because there is also the expansion from the subconscious with the dreams, and the stars far, far away?

Yeah, I was trying to work with a balance. I have all these surgeries that I shortly describe – the bureaucratic system which is here to help people

– but because life rarely fits into a formula, this language and process often has a lot of friction. To counterbalance the pain, there is, for example, the sex dreams. I am very interested in sex generally. I had genital reassignment surgery, which is a very intimate area to have surgery, and also is commonly linked with sex. In addition to taking care to create a balance, another reason for bringing them in is that dreams and sex are at the heart of psychology. In my work I like to feed the hobby psychologist that lives within us. I do that intentionally, especially in this piece. When you are in the position as audience, you analyze and read what is presented to you, because you know that this is not just something random. Somebody is really trying to mean something.

Then there are parts with astronomy, and my astronomical chart which actually was done when I was born in 1981. I don't believe in astrology, but it is a bit scary how accurate that chart is, full of details. The whole text is a collage of different fractions and it's not chronological, which is also how our memory works. Memories are often a memory of a memory, that we experience with all our senses, and not only as an intellectual recollection. That is also a part of the impossibility of language.

I recall having to go home and meditate after seeing the piece. I needed to let it settle, and didn't want anything to disturb it.

That is what I have tried to achieve, to suggest some heavy ethical meditation. And that is the reaction that has been described to me wherever I have travelled with the piece. I am satisfied that people need to think, to be alone. I need people to feel that something has changed. It is not necessarily because I see myself as some noble artist with a mission, but more as a critical need as a human being in trouble in this society and world.

Is this important for you when you are the audience, as well?

Yes, I do go to the theatre because I want to be changed, somehow. That is why I chose that form, because there is the possibility of a very holistic experience. You are physically there and want to be emotionally and intellectually challenged. That is why the whole situation of live performance is so special to me. In my work the connection with the audience, the intimacy and trying to breaking the barriers between us, is important. I have an image of wanting to peel off the shield we have.

In my work I am trying to get to the extremes, confronting myself, using myself and my material. One reason for using my own life, is that it is good material because it was so fucked up. Another reason is that one's own material is very available and there are less ethical problems in going to the extremes when exposing your own life rather than

someone else's. Though I did that also with the solo, *Blind Boi Diaries*, which I directed with Sindri Runudde. This was his autobiography that mixed text and dancing. It was such a pleasure to work with material that wasn't mine, but I had to do it to myself first to be able to take care of someone else's story.

The language is violent

I feel that the language is a representation of a binary world. How can we work on a language that is broader?

Language is definitely a problem, but *Life is hard and then you die – part 3* does not challenge language in that way. The language here is informative and economical, so the potential poetry comes from how different elements connect each other with small details and connections. It starts to mess with language, or maybe rather with experience, by the sheer amount of too much information, that is somehow impossible to absorb. But the text in itself is really simple and approachable. Language and writing is both a problem and a blessing. It is also where you can stretch reality the most, but at the same time you are doing it with words that have a history and are collectively determined to have a specific meaning. When I write, I always end up digging into dictionaries, questioning single words a lot, figuring out the definition and the history of the words I am using.

Like: Do I want to use this word?

Yes, do I want to use it? Taking away one word can change a whole sentence, challenging some kind of status quo. I think language is really violent. The violent part of language is very apparent in my text, and even in parts where one might not think much about it, because it describes so much physical pain. All bureaucracy represents violence. Bureaucratic letters I have received – that relate to my body and identity – have such a specific way of using language that it is almost poetic for me sometimes. It's interesting to look at it as research and to be able to have a distance from it. As, for example, a letter that I received from Finland when I finally organized my identity there, after being officially both male and female for 4 years in two different countries. I can see in the letter how language is so inadequate and how clumsily it is written. And that is just at the official level; it can't even begin to describe the complexity I personally experience regarding gender specifically, and the human experience in general.

In the last decade even the consciousness that different trans existences exist is a new thing for many, and it is partly re-defining and challenging language. But what many of the critics are missing is that it is not taking away, but on the contrary is widening the possibilities of language. The fragility of an identified status quo seems to be destabilized

by very small changes that have always existed, but have been pushed away into hiding. It's interesting that the gender neutral pronoun 'hen' (they) finally made its breakthrough in Sweden and the fact that it is just more practical to write 'hen' instead of the two binary pronouns. It didn't get more complicated. It became easier.

So "the other" is melting into a broader normality?

What I am trying to do, is to go straight to the heart of the problem, and through to the problem of othering. And it has worked. It was a really risky thing to bring in all the strange and exotic things of the 'other.' But in this I have a principle, a hidden contract with the piece: too much or nothing. To satisfy curiosity, but too much. Or nothing. It has to be all of it. We have to share the pain, and the audience has to contemplate pain in their own life. I am taking the exotic and the other, and I am forcing it to be a part of the experience of us. It is not about them being entertained by the story of 'the other.' They receive an experience that is difficult and painful enough to not be entertainment, and they go into themselves. I force them to think about their own body. Otherwise, I would absolutely stop performing this piece.