

SPOTLIGHT

a performance text written
by Marja Viitahuhta (2012)

TO BE READ ALOUD



I am in front of an audience which I can not see, standing on a stage, illuminated by the light of a spotlight so bright that it frames my vision inside an empty sphere of light outside which there is only darkness and glimpses of movement and though I know that within that dark there is an audience, a group of people, that can see me - and I presume that they are watching me - their current existence is revealed to me only by the sounds that they make: the shifting of feet, the casual coughs, sometimes even whispers or sighs; their non-visible presence, which I sense and which, together with the fact that I stand on a stage under the light of a spotlight, apart from them, sets and marks this moment as a staged event, a moment separated from other everyday behaviour, an action that can be called performance,

which, be it either planned with a detailed script and including well-rehearsed actions or speech, or sketched out as an idea with a more loose structure, or a spontaneous and sudden happening or a show based on improvisation, in which case the performer must rely on his or her own skills of handling the elements of the performance and the situation where they are being presented either in relation to his or her plans or the way that she (and from now on let's keep it a "she" just for the sake of shortening things a bit) is used to keeping the pieces of her performance together or in relation to other conditions of the performance such as weather, if the performance was held outdoors, or the size of the venue, if it was done indoors, or the responses from the audience, or the nature of the event being a comedy show or a ballet premiere or an art gallery opening, or in case of a participatory performance where the members of the audience are expected to make the work happen together with the performer or performers, whether they want it or not,

in all these cases the performer is the one to initiate the performance: to negotiate with the backing crew (if there is one) that the conditions are as desired or prepare them alone if she must, or get personally ready, including the planning, practising, and preparing of the performance: rehearsing the lines or moves, writing the script, making or choosing the outfit, planning the lighting, choosing the site, organizing the documentation etcetera, all in all the work that precedes the actual moment of the performance

which, when it has started will proceed according to its own content, its storyline, if there is one, or presenting its multiple stories, which, naturally can vary in length, form and style, that can appear one after another, by means of a script that leaps from one narrative to another and back, a story, where different parts of the whole narrative appear and intertwine, or simultaneously by means of using several performers or by use of media, like video, audio or text, thus applying a kind of a layer, a "story within the story", for example like:

"I have a cat. It is a wonderful cat with its bright eyes, small ears, whiskers and its grey fur. Its tail moves in peculiar ways when

it is happy and it purrs in a soft and comforting way when it enjoys my attention. It can cry a heart-braking miaouw when it is hungry. The cat is beautiful and I have had it for some time. I would never like to lose my cat, but unfortunately I know that even though cats are told to have nine lives, it will sooner or later die, most probably before me and therefore I sometimes get sad over losing my cat. I know that it is foolish to be sad over the death of my cat while it is still alive. I should remember what my mother used to say: "One should not dwell today on the sorrows of tomorrow."

Or:

"When I wrote the first version of the script for this performance I was living with my partner in a residency in Berlin, working on a film script. Our apartment was situated in Prenzlauer-Berg next to a playground where we saw families and kids play and have picnics and spend time even late in the evenings. Sometimes we went there to play some ping-pong. It was August, it rarely rained, time went by without a quarrel, and the weather was warm and lovely. Sometimes in the evenings I would watch out from the kitchen window, opening it wide out to the street and smoke a cigarette. I also worked by the window and when I took some time off from the writing I would look out and see the building on the other side of the street. Often I saw this one man sitting in his chair, watching television. He was there in the daytime and in the evenings, I never saw him outside. I never saw him move away from the chair either. Every time I could spot him he would be sitting on that chair, looking at the television, changing channels with the remote controller, feet on the table, drinking or eating whilst watching. Often the light from the television was reflected on his body and on the walls, it was greenish and without seeing the actual imagery on the Tv-screen I started to suspect he was watching football games. Only once I saw another person there with him: it was a woman who brought trousers to the man. He took them from her and sat still, without putting them on. The woman then went away and I did not see her again."

and so the performance can continue following its structure, that on its behalf, in its simplest way can be understood as a three-parted continuation: a beginning, middle part and ending, which are sometimes framed from both sides by the prologue and epilogue - a form familiar from any time-based or narrative form of expression - a book, a film, or a piece of music,

and even if such conventional structure would not be explicitly presented in the performance, like in the case of installation-like, ongoing performances lasting very long durations,

the performance itself, due to its very nature of being a live and thus time-based art form, is still commonly perceived through some sort of structure, often narrative, if not with a plot, then at least as a collection of images or actions, a continuation of atmospheres and effects, light situations, sounds and music, or the poses and movements of the performer,

which all, by their nature and by the order in which they appear, form the content as well as the dramaturgy of the performance, giving a sense of what is about to happen and what the performance aims at, an idea of what the performer wishes the audience to feel or think about the performance, creating scenes and parts and moments within the performance where the spectators might experience tension, interest, surprise, satisfaction or boredom, the points that can be described with such titles as an introduction, a rising action, a climax, a falling action or a resolution, the moments within the performance that may feel as a starting point of events, a period of building up tension, a time of

tranquility, the calm before the storm, a moment where contradictions clash, a time of solving a mystery, a surprising conclusion, an anticipated ending or a long-awaited re-appearance of something or someone, where the hero kisses the heroine, the protagonist empties the waste bin, a grandmother remembers her trauma while stroking the head of her grandchild, a dancer forces his last jump before breaking his leg and so on,

all lasting either a strictly planned and rehearsed duration or a time previously undefined, a time that it takes for the piece to "get ready" in a sense, which could either mean going through all the planned actions and parts or getting a sense that the piece is now complete, close to its ending,

which, alike the starting point of the performance is an important moment within the performance, a point where at the latest the performance shapes together and comes about, a point therefore anticipated by both the performer and the audience, a borderline again between performance and the other everyday behaviour,

a point of return, where the social environment opens up again, where people start to make eye contact, chat about what they have seen or maybe about something other than the performance just seen, a moment when the performer also leaves behind her status of being a performer, stops to perform, in a sense, though it might be that since the performer has become aware of her own way of being present, of her body and its size and movements, of her gestures and her parlance - the way she speaks, she is still using some of her skills of controlling all those elements even when the performance is over and she meets people, and it could be argued that social life is like that, that not only the performer but people in general are performing themselves when they act in social environments,

yet it is somehow relieving to think that when the performance ends, the performer stops performing, in a sense undresses her performing role, even when the performance has not been a play with costumes and acting, when such gesture of taking off or leaving the status of being a performer is more subtle, it is nonetheless still there, in a way or another, though it might be that even the performer herself does not notice it happening,

and it is more than often that the performer must confront this moment with a method or a technique to get past it, though sometimes, almost accidentally, the performer lets it happen so slowly that for some time there is still a vague atmosphere of surrender that overwhelms the performer, a period of being in between things: not fully back from the effort of performing, and yet no longer actively producing things to be on display: a moment that easily triggers emotional reactions such as nervousness, shame, fatigue, self-consciousness, excitement, pride or so, depending on many influences and reasons that apply straight after the performance, such as the length of applause, the feedback from the audience, confronting friends and family in the audience, doing encores or even the very temper of the performer, her previous experience from similar situations or her physical condition in that situation: how well she has eaten before the performance, if she is tired or thirsty or suffers from a few or psychological conditions such as undergoing a period of emotionally charged things in her personal life, but no matter how strong the effect, it usually passes sooner than one notices, and this is usually the desired outcome since not very often the performer wishes to showcase these emotional effects to the public as such, perhaps due to their intimacy or perhaps due to the fact that their appearance is often read as some sort of failure, at least if they appear already during the performance, spoiling or disturbing the performance, and yet, at the same time, a hint of them is expected to show from the performer if the audience is in favour of the performance, they in a way complete the audience's experience, and in any case to the performer herself they are aspects of the

performance, that influence the experience of performing, sometimes even motivating it or giving strength and courage or some audacity to the performer,

who has either succeeded in channelling her insight and transmitting her message and aspiration to the audience, or failed in doing so or anything in between success and failure, which after all is also a judgment made by the members of the audience,

who may or may not use their individual means of processing their experience of the performance afterwards, possibly using the already mentioned ways of splitting the whole performance into smaller parts, which help the spectator in analysing their personal experience of it, making it easier to talk about what has been seen, and it could even be argued, that afterwards the performance can be approached in detail by language only due to such analysis and, that critique and discourse is possible only via deconstruction and divisions,

and here it is important to note, that naturally the members of the audience are individuals with individual tastes, who have their own, preceding notions and understanding of structure and dramaturgy that guideline their expectations and their comprehension of the performance while they watch it, who make comparisons between different parts of the performance in relation to their own taste or feelings, such as "my favourite part", "the worst part", "the dull moment", "greatest bit", "funniest things about it" and "the part during which I fell asleep",

who might or might not have made themselves familiar with the background of the performer, the score of the concert, the novel that the script of the play refers to, or the history of the event or the venue and thus orientated themselves to seeing the performance in advance, and who may come from various different cultural or social backgrounds, who may have things on their mind that influence the reception of the performance in great deal and in retrospect might become an important part of the experience of seeing the performance even if they had nothing to do with it,

and therefore it is always inevitably artificial to speak of an audience as a unit,

and it could be argued that the group of people that form the audience become unified only in relation to the performance as a circumstance, a situation, where they are given a position that differs from the one of the performer, even if -as in the case of participatory theatre- the audience or someone from the audience might end up performing within the performance, to fulfil or supplement components or parts of the performance or influence in great deal the outcome of the performance,

yet the members of the audience, if, when entering the performance venue are offered a place to sit, will be seated in the area, which appropriately is referred to with the same title as the people sitting in it: "the audience".