

***Clean Room*: television-format distortions and experimentation on stage**

When I came across the *Clean Room* project I was really curious: it was presented as a series, but it was taking place in the theatre, as part of a festival: Tanz im August (Dance in August). I took to musing about the forms that Juan Domínguez and his team (María Jerez, Alice Chauchat, Sara Manente and others) might have invented so as to adapt the television format for the stage. This step was allowing him to carry out an in-depth experiment with the format of the theatrical dispositive which he has been wanting to apply himself to for some time. I remember conversations with him in which he mentioned how, in other spheres such as audio-visual productions, it's usual to offer works so short as to last a minute, and so long that the audience grows old with them, for example. The prospect of adapting the television-series format has presented opportunities not only for experimenting with time, but also for dealing more radically with other types of issues – some of which he has been working on for some time in his pieces (ways of sharing his own research with the audience and opening it up for them; pushing out the fixed boundaries of dance practice), and others which are new for him: reorganizing the relationships between creator, play and producer and inter-connecting reality and fiction.

The adaptation-idea was especially interesting for me since I already knew Juan Domínguez' earlier pieces, and in them he doesn't work with a plot, characters, psychological motivation, credibility of the fictional universe or other issues that tend to characterize both a more conventional kind of performing arts practice, and television series – both based on narration. So, it was a matter of finding out to what extent *Clean Room* can be called a series. The point of this question was not so much to judge the production by fixed ideas of what a series or a play ought or ought not to be, as to investigate how the television-format contaminates, fogs up, breaks up and breaks down the theatre-format that we know. And this is the job that Juan Domínguez and his co-workers set out to do.

The first thing that caught my attention was the change in the notion of time spent together that *Clean Room*, as a series, brings about: instead of seeing a piece one evening, the spectator is invited to enjoy a series of encounters (six episodes) over the course of a week. And this fact means that the production promotes another way for the audience to relate to the work: the audience is involved in a different way (if they have missed an instalment they ask to be filled in, for example); spectators who have been present at every instalment recognize one another as acquaintances or fellow travellers; the audience's imagination is stimulated as they ponder what might be in store for them; and their memory is brought into play as they piece together what has already gone on with what is happening now. Above all, the notion of expectancy is shown in a new light as one

of the most interesting features of the adaptation: the audience is actively predicting future instalments; the dénouements of the actions that are taking place; the destiny of the characters whom we've come to know. But how is one to work with expectancy when, as in the case of *Clean Room* and Juan Domínguez' works in general, even the most basic narratological features have been dispensed with?

Episode 1.

A clue can already be found in the first episode. The audience are waiting on the stairs and landing prior to going into the area where they understand the episode is going to take place. Before they begin to feel that they're being kept waiting, André Thériault, one of the festival organizers, appears, microphone in hand, and begins to introduce the piece and the context in which it was written (the *Clean Room* project was carried out in this latter phase in the Podewil Palace, the venue where it is now presented). Before the audience realizes what's going on, he's already passed the microphone to a female artist who is also in residence and who is to present her piece within the next few days. And she, besides explaining her project, comments at some length on certain aspects of the building which the organizer had mentioned. At that point one of the spectators, an architect who is completely *au fait* with the building's history, takes over from her and... almost imperceptibly, the audience's impatience has turned into curiosity and they are totally caught up in the first episode.

This first instalment's strategy is precisely this: while the audience think they're waiting to be let in – waiting for the fiction to begin, it dawns on them that, of course!, the show was already under way before they identified it as such. The stuntman from action films, the mannequin, the twins playing ping-pong, the plumbing malfunction in the loos... are the components of a fiction that was already taking place before the audience perceived it as such. But the construction of the piece isn't only a matter of the progressive recognition of the elements of fiction that have sneaked in one after another on the stairs: constructing *Clean Room* is actually the audience's job.

And so the fiction is played out not only in the hall we're going to go into, but also before that stage – in the expectation we feel as we wait to go in, at a time when we've already begun to cast our minds forward, to imagine, to feel we're being kept waiting, to suspect that something's up and finally to confirm that, without having physically been let in, *we are indeed already in the territory of Clean Room's fiction.*

Episode 2.

Because actually the spaces that we are let into in this series are two in which we always already are, but which we don't usually take any notice of in terms of materials for

constructing an explicit piece of fiction; the first one that we visit is the space of consciousness itself. The other one – constantly present and already so during the situation on the stairs – is the social space of the us, which compels me here to refer to my experience in the plural, with the pronoun us.

Following the first episode on the stairs when the waiting time was drawn out, with mounting expectancy, and casting our minds forward to what will happen in the second one, finally we are let into the space. The hall that meets our gaze is empty, darkened and with cushions spread on the floor. What awaits us is actually a different and much more intimate and personal space: one devoted to fantasies, memories, desires and all kinds of mental images. Sara Manente's voice draws us away from this physical space and little by little, through descriptions of images (always incomplete) leads us into a fictional world which each person creates for themselves: "You are outside walking together towards the canal. Two twins are walking in the distance. They come towards you, holding ping-pong balls. How are they dressed?"; "The floor is a soft surface, what is it?"; and: "You go through the tunnel. For a while nothing is seen, but you can hear a noise. What kind of noise?"

Her voice carries on in the same vein, outlining a journey in which each person decides who they're going with, what places they're visiting, what they're dreaming up, where they're going, what objects they're coming across and how they're relating to them. But there's a disturbing undercurrent to this journey: each person also discovers (apart from the images which, of their own free will, they place in the story) many others that arise unexpectedly and without having been evoked, and which persist in coming into their mind even though unwanted. Thus, although the spectator had in mind a particular fellow traveller, the image of a different one kept bobbing up and eventually took over from the first; or the scene in which the spectator had placed themselves changes uncontrollably into a very different one – opening for the spectator a kind of psychoanalytical gateway into his or her own fantasies or fears.

If we stay focussed on the ways in which the theatrical device is altered in *Clean Room*, the one that comes most to the fore in this second-episode experience is the emptying of the stage. As I said, we were let into an empty, darkened room. It goes without saying that this piece departs from a show-format with the audience looking towards a place where its content is happening or taking place. But that's not all: the piece also departs from the production of ready-made images for the audience's consumption or appraisal. In conjunction with the emptying of the stage or hall, what the spectators are offered is a more substantial work where they use their imagination to construct fiction.

By the end of this second episode the mind-journey has come to resemble reality: there's a very diffuse borderline between the act of imagining music in that constructed mind-

world and slowly catching on to the fact that it really is playing, on the stairs where we were previously. So the concert is experienced as the continuation of a dream, as a fantasy that has become flesh and blood in the midst of the real – in a reality once again shared with others.

Episode 3.

The third episode can be understood as a bridge between that mental space of the second episode and the social one, shared with others, which we will arrive at fully in the fourth. Once again, starting from the staircase, we are let into the hall: this time there are two winding lines of chairs forming a kind of passageway, so that when a person sits down s/he has someone else directly opposite him or her, and at the same time s/he can see a large part of the audience. Once again we enter the space of the intimate via the voice coming from the loudspeakers. But in this instance the voice takes us not to a far-away imaginary world, but to what is around us. It deftly steers the audience's attention from this setting (the light, the sound, the materials of the room: "Of all the sounds you are hearing, which ones can you not recognize?") to personal questions: "What is the minimum that you have to do to produce a change?"; "In what would you like to be a beginner?" to, finally, focussing on the other people in the room, especially the person in front of one: "Where did you see the person in front of you for the first time?" and playing a game that's a combination of imagination, guessing what comes next, and searching, detective-like, for clues: "Is this person a compulsive liar?"; "Which musical instrument fits with this person?"; "What kind of underwear is this person wearing?". Thus, in an effectively-arranged list of questions, we've been led from the personal fantasy-space that we entered in the second episode to the social space of the fourth.

But the really interesting thing is that over and above this construction which takes us from the intimate to the public, recognition is given to a series of features which conjure up something that might be called choreographic narration, making it possible to experiment still further with adapting the television-format to a stage work. Classical narratological theory holds that there are two types of 'existents', that is, features which form part of the narration and that come into play in the work. It recognizes them because they have a clearly defined identity or because they carry a lot of weight in the story. They can be of two types: characters (the hero, the villain) and ambient conditions (a hurricane, the plague). In this instalment we are already able to recognize some spectators. True, they haven't yet become part of the action; but we remember them clearly from some shared moments, either on the stairs or at the concert or in this third episode, in which we've been able to study them in detail. Having seen that there are no actors, performers or dancers, we realize that we ourselves, the members of the audience, are characters for the others. But in this emptying of the stage yet another element takes on a lot of importance: the

situations offered to us, the other type of 'existent' that narratology presents, and which in this instance consists of that off-beat arrangement of chairs which compels the spectators, visitors, characters or whatever we might call them, to seek out ways of relating to it; and consequently, compels the narration (that which happens) to proceed.

Episode 4.

In the fourth episode full immersion in the space of the social takes place. We cease to be characters for others (identities who are observed, who are pondered) and go on to interact instead. The hall we are taken to has been set up with a series of tables for four people at which, over the forty five minutes that the instalment lasts, the audience is served a meal accompanied by questions written on cards, which are also brought to the table in a dramaturgical succession. In this instance, the audience being by now fully engaged in dialogue with the other, the questions are answered not by individuals on their own, but by the group, as part of an informal conversation – the people at each table exchanging opinions, sharing memories and experiences of other episodes, and imagining together.

Juan Domínguez' work, for as long as he has been doing it, has renounced the spectacular. Plays such as *All Good Spies Are My Age*, *The Application* and others present the spectator with a reflexive stage on which aesthetic considerations, the process of creation, and the dramatist's own creative uncertainties and problems are shared with him or her. In *Clean Room* the spectator is invited directly to become part of the piece and to co-create it with the dramatist, using the situations that are set up for him or her. Instead of a group of spectators looking in the direction of where the content of the play is taking place, the dramatist has in mind a group of spectators looking at one another (third episode) and holding conversations (fourth episode), and out of this shared situation he creates a community of sorts, no matter how short-lived or superficial it may be.

But steering clear of the spectacular doesn't entail steering clear of the theatrical. Ever since the 1950's, micro-sociological studies have appraised us of the theatrical mechanisms which are brought into play in even the most banal situations of everyday life, such as a dinner with friends (or with strangers, as in the case of *Clean Room*). And as a matter of fact, in recent years Juan Domínguez and Cuqui Jerez have been conducting research laboratories and workshops such as those which they led as part of the MA in Performing Arts Practice and Visual Culture, with what they call hyper-reality: a study of everyday situations which in which the attention is focussed on their theatrical dimension.

Episode 5.

Once again we're on the stairs waiting for the next instalment to start. We revert to the same point as we do every evening. Again we take our places as if nothing had happened, but with the knowledge and memory of the earlier instalments – relaxed and at home in a now-familiar situation and looking forward to a new experience. In this too, *Clean Room* differs from an ordinary television series. In common with a television series, each instalment begins in the same way; but unlike series – industrial cultural products where events follow a stereotyped and foreseeable course – in *Clean Room* we don't know what's in store for us. The episodes are not variations on a same unfoldment-theme, but rather, different approaches to the theatrical device and its components: situation, spectators, time spent together. The fact that the performance starts each time on the stairs is indeed a nod to the element of recurrence that characterizes the series, but it doesn't entail the element of repetition in which the audience's response mechanisms are pre-encoded and pre-set. However, this does not preclude certain elements from earlier episodes of *Clean Room* from cropping up again from time to time, helping to interconnect some of the diverse experiences offered to the audience in the four earlier instalments: images spanning the spheres of the mental and the shared; questions whose answers the audience ponders in private and in public and which, as they pop up from time to time, function as a nod and a reference.

This time glasses and champagne are passed all around the audience queuing up on the stairs and landing, supposedly waiting to be let into the hall; right then and there, Sara Manente proposes a long-drawn-out, collective toast which all 80 members of the audience join in ("To you all, who are all, here and now!") and which takes up almost all the time of the episode. The toast includes every imaginable subject: "To excessive experiences!"; "To a 12-hour walk!"; "To watching the same film more than ten times!"; "To Gonzalo Montón Valladares, who cycled 3000 kilometres in 21 days from Madrid to Berlin!" – even people and things that we've imagined (people who play a part in the first episode; images conjured up in the mind-journey of the second) and situations in which we've been in episodes three and four. There's a mounting feeling of elation as the list of things to toast gets excessive: unlike the list of images in the second chapter and the list of questions in the third – which are expertly arranged in a logical order that enables the audience to pursue their mind-journey and to switch from a spatial to a more detective-like awareness – in this super-sized toast the list is jumbled, chaotic: the only way that the abundance of the real can be conveyed. The most effective order for conveying an idea of the immensity of contradictions which render any attempt at classification futile (we've been able to observe throughout Western history that all classifications produce monsters of everything they leave out) is precisely the list, a jumbled arrangement that doesn't lend itself to a quick look; rather, it goes to great lengths to show us all the details of the real. This toast, which could have gone on forever (if we'd been invited to include everything we'd like to toast) finally ends with an introduction to the space of the sixth episode,

Berlin's River Spree: "To the Spree! That is now carrying bodies, drugs, love messages, guns, food, gold and silver on its flow!". In the second part of the episode that begins with the toast, the audience as a group is invited for a walk whose destination we don't know, but which we've been given a clue to.

Episode 6.

In the sixth episode the spectator can even choose the type of space s/he will go for out of those successively introduced over the course of the series: during a boat trip along the river which the whole of the community that has coalesced over the course of the five earlier episodes goes on, each person can choose either to enter the social space of exchanging impressions of the landscape and of their prior experiences in *Clean Room*, or to re-enter the mind-space of constructing fiction.

Many artistic works that function outside of the theatre-venue or spaces such as an art gallery or museum tend to enhance perception of a normally-overlooked setting which, thanks to the type of attention that the artistic event cultivates, takes on an identity and becomes meaningful. In the case of *Clean Room's* episode six, the reality of the banks of the Spree that fills the moving field of vision of the spectators in the boat performs not so much this function as that of providing materials to be absorbed into the fiction. Thus, in as much as this sixth chapter leads the audience into a mind-space, reality is not the ultimate goal of the boat trip, but rather a tool for constructing fiction more effectively. The rolling images, like in a film-experience (already offered to the audience in some way in the second episode), that meet the gaze of the people on board the boat are produced not by virtual guiding of the daydream (by their minds), but by the physical movement of the boat along the river. The spectacle provided by both banks of the river in Berlin, together with a series of decontextualized sounds played over the boat's loudspeakers, enable all the elements of reality to be used to construct once more a personal film – a flow of dream-images in which, once again, there is a mingling of fiction and reality, the seen and the mentally projected, the actual and the imagined.