

TAC D'A,

A project by Juha-Pekka Marsalo
discussion/10 July 2006

The "Théâtre Amateur Contemporain d'Aubervilliers" (Tac d'A) is a project by the dancer and choreographer Juha-Pekka Marsalo with participation from the inhabitants of Aubervilliers. The project is conceived for everyone who lives and works in Aubervilliers, and has no age limits or training requirements. Its purpose is to create the conditions necessary for anyone who expresses the desire to try performing on stage. The first phase took place at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers between December 2005 and June 2006. After several weeks of workshops, a group of 24 (children, teenagers, adults and pensioners) presented a show to the public titled "Ouverture", based on the languages of its participants and prepared collectively. The discussion below is a transcript of talks between Tac d'A participants and some of the professionals involved in the implementation of this first phase. Initiated by Juha-Pekka Marsalo, this meeting was part of the Tac d'A preparatory process.

Speakers:

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO
(artist, initiator of the Tac d'A project)

SEVERAL PARTICIPANTS IN THE PROJECT

YVANE CHAPUIS
(co-director of the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers)

GUILLAUME DÉANGES
(secretary general of the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, coordinator of the Tac d'A project)

PIERRE QUENEHEN
(Cités Musiques, financial partner of the Tac d'A project)

ANNE ROUSSEAU
(head of dance of the Conseil Général de la Seine-Saint-Denis, financial partner of the Tac d'A project)

HERVÉ LAVAL
(dance critic)



Tac d'A, Juha-Pekka Marsalo, first workshops organised by age group in January and February 2006.

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO

At this meeting I would like us to think about the issues involved in a project like the Tac d'A and for this debate to be seen as a continuation of the work. I would like to find a way for the amateur who took part in this experience to have an input on the questions that the project raises for professionals. It's fairly easy to remain a simple spectator, but how does one become a fully-fledged actor? Personally, I think that as soon as the project started it was in everyone's interest to find their own way and be able to think about their work. That is why I wanted to organise this meeting between the participants of the Tac d'A and one or two professionals who saw the show.

YVANE CHAPUIS

As co-director of the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, I thought it was interesting to support Juha on the Tac d'A project inasmuch as he was trying, on the basis of his professional practice as a dancer and choreographer, to deal directly with the reality around him by devising a project that would bond with Aubervilliers, the town where he lives. This is not the first time the Laboratoires have supported this kind of artistic procedure, but it is the first time for us that a project of this kind came from the field dance. What interests me within this kind of approach from a theoretical point of view is, for one thing, the fact of carrying out artis-

tic experiments outside the framework generally set up for art and, for another, testing art's capacity to exist outside this framework.

Juha's project consisted in working with people of every age who were neither dancers nor actors and organising an experience with them based on their desire to perform on stage. So it wasn't a matter of him considering them as performers and expecting them, say, to learn several specific techniques that they would then be able to reproduce on stage in front of an audience. No, Juha's project—and this is why we supported it—consisted in setting up the conditions to act on a desire, a desire to perform on stage.

The first task of the Laboratoires was to inform the Albertivillariens that this experience was possible. We used several different communications networks. Juha met some 120 people in workshops between the months of January and February. Everyone was able to attend three or four workshops. These were organised by age group. Then, after these working sessions, for those participants who wanted to take the thing further Juha suggested that they continue at a more intensive rhythm with a view to collectively creating the show. A group then formed, including most of you. You worked from February to May and a show was put on. The important thing about this project for the Laboratoires was more than just the organisa-

tion of a show with a group of local inhabitants; it also included the whole process put in place during this experiment.

PIERRE QUENEHEN

Personally, what interests me is the process that has just been described: the fact of enabling an exchange between an artist working in Aubervilliers and people living in his neighbourhood. Different techniques were used to this end, going from financial contributions to the allocation of a space like the Laboratoires, so that you would have the time to work with Juha. There are a number of different ways in which one can get involved in artistic practices, from going to the museum or theatre, buying tools such as books, or taking courses at the conservatoire. The experience proposed by Juha is more limited in time and more directly linked to the everyday existence of an artist. Because he does not teach, he is not used to working with amateurs. The primary aim of his work, as I understand it anyway, was to be able to be with you in an artistic project without imposing anything on you, apart from the simple fact of working. Indeed, it is important to note that you had a considerable amount of time compared to other kinds of cultural intervention, because the Laboratoires, Juha and you yourselves made yourselves available over a very long period. By giving you the chance to work on the



Tac d'A, Juha-Pekka Marsalo, first workshops organised by age group in January and February 2006.

day of the week that suited you, Juha himself showed incredible flexibility compared to what is usually the case. Thus, to the extent that there were no constraints, it is rather heartening that so many of you took the thing the whole way. The final show leaves a trace of the work that has been done, but what particularly interests me, beyond this show, is the fact that all of you together, working from highly diverse worlds and desires, had this working time and were able to question what you saw in the work done by the others, and what Juha said to you and what you thought about it. This experience also enabled you to define your positions in relation to artistic action.

MOTHER OF ONE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Yes it's true, I thought that the conditions for participation were very flexible and the proposition was interesting because it was the children who created their show.* There was no teacher at their backs and that gave them a certain freedom. And I think the children really appreciated that flexibility, just as we did as parents.

ANNE ROUSSEAU

What was your reason for getting involved with the project?

* The group of 24 included 8 children and teenagers.

PARTICIPANT

Originally we thought that Juha was going to direct us and give us set exercises. The fact that it didn't take that direction some people found discouraging. In fact, we had to find our own ideas. That took time, and could be really slow. Then we started sorting a few things out. And from there we obviously went all the way to see what we were capable of, even though there remained this nagging worry about what we would come up with.

PARTICIPANT

I personally did theatre at school and my teacher told me about this workshop. At first I came out of curiosity, I thought I was going to learn some dance steps. When I realised that it was going to lead to the idea for a show, I decided to continue with it. On top of that, it was a chance to make friends and be with all the different age groups.

ANNE ROUSSEAU

Do you have the impression that you have done some contemporary dance, which is what you came for?

PARTICIPANT

The project didn't really develop in that direction. However, in the passage that my friend and I offered to develop, we chose to do dance.

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO

But then what is contemporary dance?

PARTICIPANT

I would define it with a "Why not?" Personally, I came to every session the way I had to the first. "Everyone welcome" they wrote. So we turned up and they told us to act. That's interesting: we were acting, but what, how and why were we acting? At the same time, Juha really got us thinking about what we were doing. He talked to us about classical dance, contemporary art, so that we would continue to perform. Performing with other people like that arouses your curiosity.

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO

Can we say that it was contemporary dance? For me, it's like contemporary dance. That's exactly why we're here, to think about the value of this experience.

PARTICIPANT

Can't we just call what we did "contemporary expression"? We are here to say things: I can dance so I dance, I can write and I write, I want to do a sketch so I do a sketch. Everybody contributes their own idea. Sometimes, we don't exactly know what to do but we do know that we have something inside us and that we only need to wait and seek it out. And there can also be

encounters, as happened to me with Marie-Joe: this experience worked with the two of us, even if we don't know what made it work. After several discussions and attempts, we decided to do a sketch, which in the end had nothing to do with what we'd written. That's what it's all about, expression, what we made and what Juha guided us towards, knowing how to show us what was strong and what we should highlight. This brings different levels into play. We aren't doing just dance, just theatre or just corporeal expression. One of us could very easily have offered to do a painting while someone else was singing.

PARTICIPANT

It's certainly true that the mixture of ages and cultures in these encounters was very enriching.

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO

To come back to the possibility of producing a show at the end, I think that the proposition was put forward with the idea that every artist becomes responsible to his or her public when he or she gets up on stage. This responsibility may become stronger when you're paid.

MOTHER OF A PARTICIPANT

Originally we didn't want the children to be paid. The experience was meant to be all about the pleasure of taking part.

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO

The remuneration was approved by a democratic vote in the group.

YVANE CHAPUIS

For the Laboratoires, there was a point in remunerating you because that went with Juha's philosophy, that is to say, to repeat the term you used, this determination to "go all the way". And with this remuneration we can in effect say that Juha and the Laboratoires went the whole way. The proposition that was made was based on the desire to perform on stage, the urge to take responsibility and commit to work without waiting for someone to tell you what to do. Juha helped you to work in this direction, based on your own ideas and their organisation. The latent time that you have just described is part of every creative process. Finding a form is an experimental project and it usually takes time. Juha wanted to create conditions similar to the dynamic of artistic experiment. Now, at the Laboratoires we consider that the remuneration of an artist is legitimate, for

both the time of work and the time of performance. Even if with the budget for Tac we couldn't remunerate working time, the halfway house situation of paying performance time seemed the best solution and we were able to stick to that.

ANNE ROUSSEAU

This is an interesting problem because it raises the question, at what point do you become an artist?

YVANE CHAPUIS

Joseph Beuys upheld the idea that every individual is an artist.

PARTICIPANT

We are all artists. You only need to say what you have to say, to project something, to know how to be free.

PARTICIPANT

When the project started we were working in groups. In mine there were only adults. The young people were separate. Then later we all got together. For me the fact of managing to work with people you don't know and to reach an agreement and produce something together implies a kind of artistic side.

PARTICIPANT

We are artists once we start taking all this seriously: we turn up, we are assiduous, we work and we produce something that is presentable.

ANNE ROUSSEAU

I agree that the relation to the public is important. For me, art is also a relation. An artist is someone who will offer a way of looking at an event, at the world, at himself. This is something very personal, something unique. What I am going to see at a given moment is unique. I can come back the next day to see the same show and experience it in a totally different way. This characteristic is an essential part of art for me. However, the fact of getting up on stage in front of an audience doesn't make you an artist.

PARTICIPANT

There is an artist in all of us, even if you can't of course reduce it to the simple fact of getting up on stage and playing the clown.

GUILLAUME DÉSANGES

But being an artist is not some absolute, definitive label. I think that the experience you had was

artistic from the moment you started taking decisions. You took responsibility for what was shown. And for this you must certainly have been led to ask questions that an artist asks, in terms of time management, of space management, of the relation to narrative, references, etc., and all that with the idea that the public would be watching. So when you say that you felt like artists when you started working seriously, I think that the issues became manifest at precisely that moment, at the moment when you see yourself being seen by another person's gaze. Now, at that moment Juha was not there to tell you what to do. You weren't just performers, you had to take decisions. It seems to me that this position brings you close to one of the possible definitions of an artistic act, even if that doesn't necessarily mean being an artist "for good" or being a "good" artist.

PIERRE QUENEHEN

I think that you are really that much more an artist if you are constantly creating the conditions to reformulate these questions, without any bitterness towards the world. Gradually, your certainties diminish. The better you can do something in details, the more you see its weaknesses and in the end there's no moment when you can stop and rest. Doing this work again and again is both a reward and a difficulty. I'm sure you saw many of these states that are the artist's daily lot and motor.

GUILLAUME DÉSANGES

A person one might call an artist is often someone who has dedicated his life to his art, which is not true of everyone here. "Artists" could perhaps be defined as individuals who have decided that this commitment is more important to them than anything else. It is also in the long term that one can say more precisely who is an artist.

YVANE CHAPUIS

Nevertheless, perhaps we don't need so much to know what makes someone an artist as to think about the way in which art can inform each person's life. You cannot be a professional artist and still make your life into a work of art, that is to say, be free or at least work towards one's own freedom, with all the constraints from external circumstances. I think that the experience carried out here with Juha was based for one thing on this possibility and this need to take decisions in order to give form to a desire, in this case, the desire to perform on stage. By inviting everyone



Tac d'A, *Ouverture*, on June 2-3, 2006, at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers. Photo by Sandrine Aubry

who was interested in working on the stage, first of all, and saying that they could come to work when they wanted, and with the financial support from the different partners, Juha created the conditions in which this desire to perform on stage and making it come true became or were understood as primarily a matter of personal will and commitment.

HERVÉ LAVAL

In a conversation with Juha we were talking about this very important distinction between amateur and professional, and the assumptions to the effect that professional work is more interesting than amateur work. I saw the second performance of the show and I thought it was pretty outstanding. I thought that what I had seen could be much more interesting than many a so-called professional production. There was a power, an energy, an incredible sense of life on stage that indicated real artistic purpose. You managed to share with us your sensibility, your energy. Beyond the question of the names you give to things, it was this pleasure you yourselves took and that you gave to the viewers that matter to me. I think the mixture of bodies and ages is very beautiful. In dance, even if things are beginning to change, there are bodies that you don't see because they are considered as non-standard. The show you produced reminds me of slam, which

taught me to look differently at other kinds of bodies and to let them have their own particular way of talking, their own story. In the show you gave us there was room for everyone.

ANNE ROUSSEAU

I saw the show on the first night and I gather that the performances could be totally different from one night to the next. When Juha told me about his project I was deeply interested by this determination to bring together people from different generations and backgrounds who supposedly had no artistic experience. I couldn't wait—because often you come to see a show with expectations or at least the desire to be touched, to thrill—to see these different people sharing a common experience. However, all I saw that night were individuals each presenting propositions that touched me to varying degrees, but I didn't see a common story. I had a feeling of solitude when I didn't see this relation between the individuals. That doesn't mean nothing happened with your way of working. But for me the performance was still a disappointment.

PIERRE QUENEHEN

This shared something can perhaps be found in the catalogue-like quality of the show, with lots of different subjects following on from each other and possibly seeming highly diverse, but at the

same time breaking up the narrative. When the young footballer intervenes in the song of one of the actresses and then the three boys start singing the same tune in the high notes, we never get the feeling that they are mocking anyone. On the contrary, my feeling is that you can achieve this kind of sequence because there is something shared behind it, which is why there's no visible arguing and no signs of intolerance.

PARTICIPANT

The community also affirms itself in the closing dance, where everyone takes part.

ANNE ROUSSEAU

It's not necessarily the fact of doing something together that makes it shared. It is shared when there's common ground between ideas. It's a question of knowing what is being created together in relation to each person's background, how at a given moment individuals come together and spin their web together.

YVANE CHAPUIS

If there is a community, then I think it's there implicitly. If you want to have a more visible community, that is to say, one that you work in with a view to showing the signs of a community, then maybe that's a figure that will be constructed in the future. Because it is important to

say that what was done at the Laboratoires is a first phase of Tac d'A. In any case, that is the perspective in which Juha presented his project to us and in which we decided to support it. But to come back to this figure of the community, I think that for things to happen the way they did in the show, for each person to take their place on stage and to occupy it so serenely, there was a shared experience. It's just that this shared story doesn't appear on stage.

PARTICIPANT

The fact that everyone found their place in the show already represents a shared experience because it was a long and difficult process getting to that point. It took us several weeks of working together, and we didn't know each other. We began by meeting in small groups before trying things out. Some people stopped coming when we'd already started working with them, so we had to start again on a different basis. Also, the fact that our group was made up of different generations at first didn't help cohesion. Teenagers, children and adults all have their own worlds and in spite of that we had to relate. It was hard going, all the way through to the performance. I thought that it would just lead to small, disparate presentations, a series of numbers, but there was a shared energy, even so. Now that we know each other better we may perhaps be able to achieve something different.

GUILLAUME DÉSANGES

It's certainly true that, compared to a "classic" creative process, you would have expected this project to involve maximum constraints. It was work with amateurs, and what's more an open, non-selective proposition, which meant that neither Juha nor the participants had chosen the people they were working with. What's more, Juha didn't decide either what was going to happen or what should happen between us. Now, I think that an artistic act is an individual act. When you go to see a show, generally the choices were made by someone who takes responsibility for them, at least as regards the coherence and overall effect of the production, for example. Genuinely collective projects, even in dance, are always very difficult to carry through and to grasp. Often, they are "false" collective projects, that is to say, in the end there is always a dominant consciousness and responsibility that brought together the people and elements and who took the essential decisions. In the case of

Tac d'A it was fairly complicated because Juha threw himself into the process with real determination, but right to the end he didn't decide who would come, who would be present, and because he didn't act directly on the propositions and their finalisation in the show. I agree to some extent with Anne Rousseau in that, if I put myself in the position of a simple spectator who didn't know about the particular way the work was done, then no, the show I saw was not something I could appreciate as a whole. I can't say whether or not I like the overall piece because the propositions were too disparate. However, I do think that there is the echo of a certain energy, which is sometimes very striking, that was generated between the participants in this adventure, that this was palpable on stage, both in the individual exchanges and the group scenes.

ANNE ROUSSEAU

Just to come back for a moment to this question about what art is, I can appreciate your experience but for me art goes beyond something "nice" or "enjoyable." There is a moment when there is something that must transform my gaze, transform my relation to the other.

YVANE CHAPUIS

The artistic project in question here is Juha's. If this project transformed something, then that transformation occurred within the experiment carried out by Juha and the participants which enabled minds to meet so they could produce something together. The Laboratoires didn't support this project in the expectation that Juha would produce artists, or indeed that a choreographic or theatrical work of art would be the result. In our early discussions with Juha the production of a show was very hypothetical and was never an end in itself.

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO

As performers in this show, did you sense a difference between the two performances?

PARTICIPANT

We put in a lot more energy and attention in the second show, it was more concrete.

PARTICIPANT

The first time, we were happy to have brought it off, we all congratulated each other. But the second time there was more pressure. We knew it was the last time and so there could be no mistakes.

PARTICIPANT

For the second show we learned from the mistakes we made the night before. We were better able to get our bearings in relation to time so as to improve ourselves.

PARTICIPANT

For me the last performance was more intense, especially since it was the last time we were seeing each other, so we really had to give it all we'd got.

JUHA-PEKKA MARSALO

I have been assessing what happened, too. I saw the difficulties during the premiere, like the fact that the public applauded every intervention. But then this show was not put on with some final idea in mind. However, when I watched the second performance I was really surprised because all the things I had imagined it would take years to improve were already happening. I mean the fact of being aware that it was a show they were performing and not just a simple sketch. People didn't just want to show what they could do individually and perform their little number, but were touching on something much bigger: working together. But in order for the project to continue, it is important that there should be the discussion that I have tried to instigate with you today.

Juha-Pekka Marsalo is a dancer and choreographer, associate artist of the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers in 2005-2006. He lives in Aubervilliers (France). *Tac d'A*, a project proposed by Juha-Pekka Marsalo, developed at the Laboratoires between December 2005 and June 2006. *Ouverture*, a show directed by the Théâtre Amateur Contemporain d'Aubervilliers, shown at the Laboratoires on June 2-3, 2006. Production Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Company Juha-Pekka Marsalo. With the support of the Conseil général de la Seine-Saint-Denis and the Fondation Aéroports de Paris. In collaboration with the Pôle ressources pour les pratiques amateurs en Seine-Saint-Denis.