

Migration as cabaret

– POLITICAL CABARET AND THE POLITICS OF CABARET

The Berlin cabaret died in the Nazi concentration camps, together with its producers and performers. Is it possible, in a time when fascism is once again advancing, to tell the story of migration as cabaret? This is a question that Malin Axelsson, dramaturg of *Europa Europa*, is trying to find an answer to.

The Parisian "original" cabaret was characterised by political satire. The sharpest pens and musicians of the 19th century gathered in the nightclub Le Chat Noir to make fun of the regime of the still young republic. The most explicitly political variety in the history of the cabaret is probably the communist agitprop of early 1930's Berlin. The open form of address typical of the cabaret was used for agitation ("agit"), and propaganda ("prop"), as well as recruiting. But the agitprop movement also questioned the political potential of cabaret. Since the main purpose of cabaret was to entertain, attract laughter, and excite, there was a concern that it might not be able to mobilize the proletariat. How politically effective can cabaret really be?

Cabarets in Harlem, New York in the 1920's and 30's, created space for social and personal expansion over sexual and racial borders. Here, one could take the risk of forbidden flirtation. Dance body against body against body. Make mixed alliances. Make taboo contacts. Conspire. The Harlem cabarets often constituted a place for cross-boundary communions. Here, identities and power relations were dissolved, which opened up space for "criminal intimacies", relations and stories that were not recognised or allowed by dominant discourses and social institutions. These intimacies were invented and developed in interaction between the audience and the artists, and consisted of fleeting queer and spontaneously emerging social and sexual encounters. Relations were transformed between the tables during the course of the evening, and these transformations always involved a certain risk. The vice squad patrolling the streets of Harlem conducted regular inspections of the nightclubs, and queer excesses were possible mostly after hours, when the cabarets continued behind locked doors and closed shutters.

The Berlin cabaret scene, which was mostly sustained by Jewish artists, composers, and intellectuals both on stage and in the audience, was persistently controlled by police, which could lead to some absurd re-writing of songs and numbers. In time, the Nazi regime subjected the Berlin cabarets to tight control and eventually criminalized them. The Nazis even tried to replace the "negative" satire used in cabarets of the Weimar era with a "positive" cabaret designed to support the regime and its goals, but it failed since the artistic results were completely humourless.

The politics of cabaret have at times been raw and cannibalistic. Historically, a white middle-class audience has been present, searching for an authentic and original Harlem, Paris, or Berlin. The legendary cabaret Cotton Club in Harlem was even decorated to remind the visitor of a southern slave plantation, and racist portrayals using blackface could be seen both in the American and the European cabaret. In Berlin, racist stereotypes of Jewish people were an

occasional feature. The cabaret has often been a venue where the stranger is portrayed as a fetishized object, something for a white audience to consume and enjoy while seated around tables filled with champagne and food. The postcolonial feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes about the contemporary consumption of the stranger in ads and films: "The white consuming subject is invited to eat the other: to take it in, digest it, and shit out the waste."

The history of cabaret is ambiguous and not always very well documented, but the crossing of boundaries and borders is something that continues throughout. In cabaret, there are no strict borders between the stage and the auditorium. Neither does it have a clear line between the artist and the audience, fiction and reality, night and day. Shows take place long after closing hours, the audience intoxicate themselves beyond all limits and eat back to back, rubbing elbows. The tables are almost always round and small and the chairs easy to move from one table to another. The cabaret is also immediate and unbound, separates movement from time and exposes time in its uttermost, definite condition. Its non-representational performance, what drama theorist Michael Kirby describes as "non matrixed" means that the actor or the music only represents itself, in a state of honesty, in the same time and space as the audience. In this direct intimacy, where the lines separating spectators and artists, fiction and reality are dissolved, political possibilities, as well as a risky vulnerability, are opened up.

The boundaries that are often built between the stage and the house, reality and fiction, artist and spectator, create rigid systems that are reflected in the border between for example Swedish and non-Swedish, Europe and the rest of the world. Borders, to use the words of sociologist Avtar Brah, are "arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic". Brah describes borders as territories patrolled to keep out those who are constructed as outsiders, strangers, as the Other. Borders nurture prohibitions, fear, claims of property, of "mine", "yours", and "theirs". What would a more inclusive aesthetic look like, and how can we, in performing arts, imagine a more inclusive world?

Europa Europa draws from the fluid and confusing conventions of the cabaret and mixes them with performance art activism, modern dance, sound art. The agency of the collective, a boundless acting, stands in the centre. An emcee-collective, a polyphonic body, takes the place of the lonely host of the cabaret. Europa Europa, holds an activist claim for cultivation. Its aesthetics mix performance art, video, music, pop, sound art, web, marketing, demonstration, facts, social media, printed text, seminars, and conversations into an activist mash.

The show is also part of a larger, cross border and multi-solidary movement. "Multi-solidarity is not divisive, but inspiring" theatre and gender studies theorist Tiina Rosenberg. "It forces us to cooperate across borders, together with each other, not at the expense of each other." Rosenberg describes the 21st century as "the feminist turn" in Swedish performing arts. Today, there are more than fifty active feminist, independent performing arts groups in Sweden. Groups like Ful Stage, Tryck, Ardour, Integrationsteatern, Rue de Silence, Kvalitetsteatern, Skabbteatern, Teater Interakt and many more, are working in different ways with an intersectional performing arts practice, creating stage art

that draws attention to how different power relations like gender, sexuality, race and age interact. It is an explosion of independent performing ARTS groups, far bigger even than in the 1970's. Perhaps, at the root of this growing movement is the fact that we live in a repressive, racist and homophobic time where feminist politics and art in a broader sense have little place on the agenda, both in politics and on the stage. In such a time, these free groups function as utopian laboratories where borders are smashed and opened. By studying feminist, norm-critical, queer, and political theater and dance, feminist theatre theorist Jill Dolan analyses utopian performing arts, and makes the point that such practices have the power to restore faith in social change, even if they only explore thoughts that for some time have been socially neglected, like the ideas of solidarity and community. Dolan describes theatre as a place for hope and dreams of a different world.

"Thinking of utopia as processual, as an index to the possible, to the "what if", rather than a more restrictive, finite image of the "what should be", allows performance a hopeful cast, one that can experiment with the possibilities of the future in ways that shine back usefully on a present that's always, itself, in process."

(Dolan, 2005, s. 13)

Beyond the oppressive borders that surround us, there is a future that depends on what we do and think today. To stage the utopian "what if" – "what if there were no borders!" – is to translate the revolution into performing arts practice here and now.

The Berlin cabaret died in the Nazi concentration camps, with its producers and performers. Is it possible, in a time when fascism is once again advancing, to tell the story of migration as cabaret? Perhaps it is just there, in the borderless and utopian space of the cabaret, a theatrical space where we cease to claim what is "mine" and what is "yours", that migration is possible to tell. And not only tell – but also re-imagine with our bodies, as a completely different movement, entirely different dramaturgical and political systems. Migration as a tale about heroes.

Bibliography:

Ahmed, Sara, *Strange Encounters : Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Routledge 2013

Brah, Avtar, "Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities" in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader* (ed. Reina Lewis, Sara Mills), Routledge 2003

Dolan, Jill, *Utopia In Performance, Finding Hope At The Theatre*, The University of Michigan Press 2005

Felshin, Nina, *But Is It Art? The Spirit of Art as Activism*, Bay Press 1995

Jelavich, Peter, *Berlin Cabaret*, Harvard University Press 1993

Rosenberg, Tiina, *Ilska, hopp och solidaritet – Med feministisk scenkonst in i framtiden*, Bokförlaget Atlas 2012

Vogel, Shane, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, The University of Chicago Press 2012