

# ***Hush little Baby* in the light of the Avant-Garde**

## **Political potential of Reality Theatre**

*Signhild Linderoth Christiansen*

*Hush little Baby* was directed by Ditte Maria Bjerg at the theatre Camp X in 2009<sup>1</sup>. The performance combines the fictional story of a Danish middle-class couple with the true stories of four former Filipino au pairs. In this article I present *Hush little Baby* and locate and discuss a political potential within the performance.

*Reality theatre* has become a new tendency – or maybe already a new tradition – within the post-dramatic theatre. Social problems, or groups from outside an artistic sphere, is given priority and the intention to communicate certain social topics, has led to new artistic forms on stage; a dramatic text and its inherent dramaturgy step back in favour of real life situations. The post-dramatic theatre is closely related to general tendencies of intervening and relational expressions within contemporary art. I experience and understand *Hush little Baby* in the light of these tendencies.

I believe that a political potential can be pointed out on two levels in this performance. The obvious political elements are to be found on the first level, these elements can be seen as direct consequences of the actual political agenda behind the project, including the fact that the au pairs are brought onto the stage.

On the second level, I find a political potential that is not communicated directly, but works in more subtle ways. This level of political potential is characterized by different means of doubleness. I point out this doubleness by using the notions *performance* and *performativity* by Judith Butler<sup>i</sup> and the *Verfremdungseffekt* by Bertolt Brecht<sup>ii</sup>.

The discussion refers to themes concerning the legacy of the avant-garde, the art institution, intersubjectivity and reflexivity. Both levels of politics – but most explicitly the first one – are discussed from a feminist point of view.

### *The Performance*

The fictional part of the performance portrays a current middle-class family with two kids, living in

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<sup>1</sup> Camp X existed 2007-2009. The Copenhagen state theatre community Københavns Teater founded Camp X, as an effort on experimenting and international contemporary theatre. (Schultz, Laura and Christoffersen, Erik Exe: “Camp X bliver til Teater X”, in *Peripeti* 18/2 2009)

Denmark. The couple, performed by Danish actors, works a lot. They have problems at work and they long for more spare time. At first, the thought of an au pair in the house seems foreign to them, but soon they find it attractive, and engage the first Filipina. During the performance they engage one Filipino au pair after another, all performed by the same Korea-born Danish actress.

The actors act in a realistic way and the dialogue is written in a naturalistic language. The architecture of the stage is a traditional one; the audience is placed together as a group in front of the stage. A realistic set design shows a veranda and behind that, the front of the house. Most of the fictional story takes place on this veranda. The time is spread out over several years.

The fiction, with its set design and imaginary time, is interrupted by the monologues of the authentic au pairs, as they one by one speak directly to the audience, and tell their personal story. The room changes into an authentic room with a projector and a screen. The au pairs speak in a microphone and the atmosphere reminds of a formal lecture or a documentary film. Some au pairs show their private photos from the journey from The Philippines to Denmark. Most of the au pairs speak English, but one speaks Danish. Their stories are very personal and include feelings and attitudes towards their parents and children in The Philippines.

By dividing the performance into two parts, space and time is interrupted and disjointed. Fragmentation also occurs in other ways throughout the performance. Some fragments even allow interaction between the audience and the au pairs - such as playing with balloons, offering the audience fresh fruit and singing a community song. In what can be regarded as an epilogue, the very last thing we see of the performance, the au pairs entertain with karaoke singing in the entrance area of the theatre.

### *The legacy of the avant-garde*

From a historical point of view, fragmentary dramaturgy made as an aesthetic revolt is not new with the reality theatre. The concept of *Hush little baby* refers to strategies both from the tradition of political theatre and from the performance tradition. Logically, theatre and performance are deeply anchored to each other, and in this context it is worth mentioning that when theatre becomes political, it very often moves closer to what is characterized as performance.

Performance became an artistic mode in its own right in the 1970's. It has been remarked that performance art belongs to the traditions of the avant-garde, and traces its heritage from futurism through dada, surrealism and happenings. Performance is part of the movement where real-life activities began to be looked upon as art.<sup>iii</sup>

Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu Jar*, performed in Paris 1896, is often mentioned as the first avant-garde theatre play.<sup>iv</sup> With an anarchistic form and a satirical parody on the bourgeoisie as the storyline, it led the way for the experimenting avant-garde theatre that had started to develop. Obviously, central differences exist within those of the historical avant-garde movements that involved theatre as an artistic and political place for expression, which most of them did. But despite great differences, for instance between futurism and expressionism, they share a will to revolt against the naturalistic drama; it's fourth wall-aesthetics and its boundary between the fictional setting and its audience.<sup>v</sup>

In Germany Bertolt Brecht reacted on the avant-garde theatre movements. He shared the ambition to make a revolt against naturalism, and he believed that only a fragmentary form could depict modern life. Among others the director Edwin Piscator inspired Brecht. Piscator believed that theatre is always political – even when it argues not to be. What separates Brecht and his epic theatre from the earlier and parallel avant-garde movements, is his critic of the emotional involvement and of the appeal to irrationalism and spontaneity in the audience – elements that can be found in most other avant-garde movements. Another important difference between Brecht, and most of the other avant-garde approaches, is his will not to destroy the art institution, but rather to completely change the function of it in society; he wanted to make it a forum for political and critical ideas.<sup>vi</sup>

In this referring to the theories of Brecht I focus on the Vefremdungseffekt; the technical and artistic instrument that allows the audience to be consciously critical observers, by creating a distance to the storyline of the play. By making the familiar seem unfamiliar and the unfamiliar seem familiar, Brecht wanted to open up the eyes of the audience and make them see that everything is defined by history and not by nature; everything could be different, and that it is the people itself, who can change the history. To achieve this effect, interrupting fragments are used. Among other elements, such as songs and political statements on boards, documentary elements serve to constantly keep the audience in the sphere of critical thinking, and – at the same time – never forgetting that they are watching a construction of epic fragments, that could turn out in any other thinkable way.<sup>vii</sup>

### *Two levels of Politics*

What is communicated directly to the audience in *Hush little Baby*, and what I have pointed out to belong to the first level of a political potential, is a problematization of the global consumption, and

of the fact that ordinary families systematically use this certain kind of cheap labour, that is not discussed or questioned in general. The performance points out that care has become a highly valued and consumable service. From a feminist point of view it is important to mention, which Camp X also does in the press release<sup>viii</sup>, that the au pairs have no right to work in Denmark, since the services in the domestic sphere, like cleaning and taking care of babies are seen as being a part of a normal family life and therefore doesn't count as working. But paradoxically the families have the right to employ the au pairs up to 30 hours a week, with the domestic duties.

I believe that these official rules of engagement of an au pair rest on the history of the patriarchy, where the domestic sphere is identified as female, and as a sphere isolated from a public and masculine sphere that includes the labour marked.<sup>ix</sup> While the Danish women in most aspects have become a part of a general public domain, the au pairs are placed in a silenced area: the domestic and private home. The reason to mention this, is, that I believe, that the fact that it becomes a political statement to bring the au pairs onto the stage, is caused by the fact that the theatre is a public domain – and a contrast to the domestic area – and in that way is an example of the theatre used as a social instrument and as a public space for debate. In other words, the theatre is used in a post-Brechtian way, as a platform to make the voice of these specific women heard, individuals with little or no voice or active role in the public sphere and in the current political system.

In the following I move on with the second level of political potential.

Since performativity and theatricality have been developed in human science, sociology, anthropology, linguistics and elsewhere, the connections between the fields have made new inspiration and expressions within the performance art. In the 1990's a performative turn took place within art, which meant that focus changed to *how* art does, rather than *what* it does. Professor of theatre Marvin Carlson insists that in whatever field performance and performativity are utilized, "(...) they are always involved with a sense of doubleness, of the repetition of some pattern of action or mode of being in the world already in existence. The doubleness is an effect of distance resulting of consciousness itself."<sup>x</sup> I believe that this doubleness that Carlson points out can be found in the part of the performance that treats the authentic au pairs, as well as in the performance as a whole. Concerning the scenes with the au pairs, doubleness occurs because they create an awareness of their own roles as au pairs – and as au pairs portraying au pairs. In fragments they stage the myth of their identity as au pairs by offering fruit and handling out songs – all of it carried out with self-awareness and a friendly and helpful attitude. The audience watches the women in this

situation of self-awareness, and because the women are being apparent to themselves, they become apparent to the audience.

This awareness of the au pairs is clarified by the performance as a whole, since the audience knows, that the au pairs are watching *and* participating in the same fiction made over “the lives of au pairs” as the audience does.

As mentioned earlier I believe that in general, the doubleness in the performance can be handled with the distinction between performativity and performance developed by Judith Butler.<sup>xi</sup> Butler explains performativity as the discursive repetitions of the social norms that structure our lives and behaviour. In that manner most of the individual performance is unconscious, and regulated by social rules incorporated in every human being. But at the point where the singular performance and performativity meet, a possibility for displacements and variety turns up. This means, that in this dialectical formation of the subject, the subject can take some kind of agency through conscious and individual choices in the singular performance. These choices potentially make displacements and destabilizations within a repetitive discourse.<sup>xii</sup>

The fictional part of *Hush little baby* is based on a discursive and repetitive performativity – the couple acts according to the norms, which in this certain case means to hire a Filipino au pair. Within this discursive frame the individual performances of the real au pairs permits displacements. None of the women implement radical or subversive destabilizations, but I believe that the fact that they are given a space where such destabilizations are possible is important and makes a difference. And an important receptiveness occurs by the fact that the audience senses that displacements might take place; the au pairs are thereby met as separate individuals with separate needs and stories.

The relationship between fiction and reality, art and life, work and private life, fictional identity and authentic identity, fictional time and real time, authentic space and designed space in *Hush little Baby*, enables another kind of doubleness taking place. This doubleness entails an ongoing process of distancing, which keeps the audience critically observing. The audience never surrenders to empathy or overwhelmingly artistic impressions, because they are constantly disconnected or interrupted in their reception of the performance. The tension between performativity and the singular performances, contributes to this distancing process. Even though a Brechtian V-effect is not used in a narrow sense in the performance, this distancing process, caused by doubleness in broader sense, entails an effect similar to the *Verfremdungseffekt*.

*The art institution, intersubjectivity and reflexivity*

As a consequence of distancing effects and doubleness that keep the audience activated and ambiguous, the relational aspects turn important. The performative turn in the 1990's made art defined by its intersubjective and relational character – as an event depending on an audience – and not primary as an art object.<sup>xiii</sup> Naturally, intersubjectivity has always been of great importance concerning theatre, but the dependence on an audience becomes obvious within new ways in the reality theatre – and so in *Hush little baby*. It strives to debate and intervene in society; which cannot be done without an active audience. This relational aspect becomes apparent in the epilogue: As the audience leaves the scenery they are met by the karaoke singing Filipinas in the entrance area of the theatre. This causes great confusion since as it is not sure weather the women are acting as themselves, as characters, if they are serious or making fun, if the singing is a part of the performance, or if the audience actually should leave. The performing emerges in the intersubjectivity and spontaneous interactivity of performers and audience.

With this intervening and debating strategy Camp X joins a postmodern use of the institution, labelled as New Institutionalism.<sup>xiv</sup> The art institution is used as a platform for debates and criticality and themes that are not artistic in a traditional way. But at the same time in our late modern society, both art and the institution have become a part of the same global machinery that the political philosophers Hardt and Negiri call *The Empire*, where nothing can be denoted as an outside.<sup>xv</sup> In that sense the art institution has become part of the general self-consciousness and reflexivity in the world.

I believe that these characteristics of the institution refer to the two levels of criticism or political potential that I have pointed out within the performance: Firstly, the institution is used as a public platform to make problems in society visible – in this case the trade of au pairs in Denmark.

Secondly, the institution actually stages the reflexivity and dynamics between performativity and performance that in general exists in our late modern society. This means that paradoxically, the institution itself is a part of this reflexivity and dynamics, and “plays” the part as a public domain within the performance. Theatre theorist Solveig Gade explains how complicated dynamics emerge when the history of the institution, as an autonomic authority in society, meet the general reflexivity of today, and refers to professor Morten Kyndrup, arguing that the art institution has become a part of the artwork itself, since the artwork responds to art as a totality, including the institution.<sup>xvi</sup>

*Art being political*

In *Hush little Baby* the boundaries between life, art and politics are blurred and very reflexive. I certainly believe that the performance can be recognized as a piece of political art, but in a world, where nothing can be categorized as being isolated and non-political.

Brecht transformed the avant-garde strategies into more materialistic and dialectic – but still revolutionary – strategies. In the intervening art and reality theatre of today, the legacy of these strategies has lost their revolutionary aspect, and has grown very complex and they are often hard to see through. Continually new and advanced ways to communicate with an audience are created. To be political under such circumstances is a question of how the awareness of this situation of reflexivity is actually used. And a question of paying attention to the fact, that within this reflexivity, structures of power and injustice still exist and need to be considered as real.

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### *The performance*

*Hush little Baby* at Camp X 25.01.09 – 28.03.09

Director: Ditte Maria Bjerg

More info: <http://campx.dk/HUSH%20LITTLE%20BABY.aspx.htm>

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*Notes*

<sup>i</sup> Gade, Solveig 2008: p. 30

<sup>ii</sup> Brecht, Bertolt 1982: p. 93 ff.

<sup>iii</sup> Carlson, Marvin 1996 p. 111

<sup>iv</sup> Kvam, Kela 1974: p. 8 f.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.: p. 8 ff.

<sup>vi</sup> Brecht 1982: p. 53-63

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid.: p. 74-76

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.campx.dk/47EE27031213489B8B88B9D5EE96E429.ashx.pdf>

<sup>ix</sup> Rosenbech, Bente 1992, s. 67-70

<sup>x</sup> Carlson, Marvin 1996: p. 80

<sup>xi</sup> Gade, Solveig 2008: p. 30

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xiii</sup> Gade, Solveig 2008: p. 24

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid.: p. 66 ff.

<sup>xv</sup> Gade, Solveig 2008: p. 53

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid. p. 46