

Swim or drown in a sea of possibilities - by Carolina Maciel de França
Comments on the rehearsals of Betrayal (Harold Pinter)

How do you deal with absolute freedom. I imagine that might have been one of the questions suffocating director Mesut Arslan during the Betrayal rehearsals. In his adaptation of Harold Pinter's piece, he seems to be taking revenge on the little space he (and anyone else) is given working with the text and chose for a décor that could tender to every whim.



Lawrence Malstaf provided him with nine white 15-feet tall walls that could move around like the pointers of a clock. He also provided Arslan with two overview miniatures to play with. At the time of the showcase of the walls @ wpZimmer, I could hardly imagine where he was getting at, but when I entered the Black Box at second residence Dommelhof, with actors Dennis Deter, Lotte Heijtenis and Thomas Proksch working on their text, I was surprised to see it working quite naturally. In fact, opportunities were pretty much endless – yet another scary street.

A piece with four actors

While the actors rehearse, Mesut, Lawrence and dramaturg Ata Unal discuss the possible effects that could be created within this extended flexibility offered by the décor. In English this basically means that to me - the walls will also be playing the part, as individual actors and changeable elements. They move, capture, enlarge, invite and imprison, according to the role they are given. They were the fourth and main actor.

Central at the Dommelhof residence, was the assemblage of those individual elements into one tight and coherent fit. Arslan proves to be the kind of intuitive director, kindly but firmly forcing his actors to try every possible tone and emotion until he feels the words have connected to the wall's movements or position. As a result, I heard a lot of "Again from the beginning, but try this now" alternately used for the actors and for technician Turan. And that requires a lot of patience. At some point in the rehearsals, somewhere late in the afternoon, Mesut had the technician turn the walls into a room inside a room (or a see-through cage) and asked his actors to perform the text yet again, only this time to do it laughing. It proved hilarious, combining well with the absurdity in the dialogue, and changing its tone completely - for the better. It may have been an experiment, or a technique to fight simmering fatigue, but yet again the thought crossed my mind that this too could be endless.

The setting, the actors, the lights and the text are in constant interconnection, any slight change in any of those elements are of influence. To think of which role is attributed to it at which part of the play, is thus an important question at several levels. I left Dommelhof with the thought that trial and error was the best way to find out. Moving the bits around, trying everything over and over again and most of all: to continue even if you see walls coming at you.



When I return unexpectedly two days later, they are taking a break in silence – all in front of their screens. Part of the crew that is Turkish, discussed Turkish politics, as Tayip Erdogan had recently closed down Twitter and YouTube.

Detaching from the Twitter Mwitter, I went into the blackroom again. The difference is immediately felt: a new, diagonal arrangement draws me in at once – I also see that someone compromised in a previous discussion about whether or not to put chairs at disposal. But most of all the atmosphere differed from two days before, simply because they all seemed more confident, more in control of the nine walls. Or maybe they'd just gotten used to it. Either way, the walls seemed less pressing and unpredictable.

As I sit down at one of the most excluded tables, Thomas sits down in the corner at my left and starts recording a romantic piece of text. Whether it was his intonation or the fear that I might spoil his recording: his voice made me freeze at the spot. Then Lotte joins him with her iPhone, then Dennis. Before I leave again I watch them for one more hour, experimenting with the presence and absence of their voices and bodies within the curbs of the white walls. As I watched them freestyle, laugh and swap phones, I realized that you had to be completely at ease to have fun and take risks. I left Dommelhof with the echo of their recorded voices and live laughing ringing in my ears, also a bit surprised at how much things could change in 48 hours. The walls were now definitely tamed, the phase was now one of experiments.