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'I hope that the debates the performances stimulate will change something'

Interview with Danish playwright Christian Lollike

Karolína Stehlíková

[guests]

Christian Lollike (b. 1973) studied philosophy and literature at the University of Roskilde. Between 1998 and 2001, he also studied stage writing at the Danish School of Art at the Aarhus Theatre. He writes radio plays, screenplays and drama, which he also stages himself. His work also includes sculpture, concert, ballet, opera, and action art. In 2005–2011, he worked at the Aarhus Theatre as a regular author and director. Today he is the artistic director at Copenhagen's Sort/Hvid Theater (formerly Café Teatret), which focuses on performative art.

Lollike received several awards. He won 2013 Playwright Award for his plays *Shaft* (*Skakten*), *Cake Factory* (*Kagefabrikken*) and for the dramatization of the manifesto of the Norwegian extremist Anders Breivik, *Manifest 2083*. His staging of Danish classic *Erasmus Montanus* in the Aarhus Teater in 2017 resulted in three Reumert Awards.

In his plays, Lollike deals with the political and moral problems of contemporary Western world. His texts are often provocative and controversial, revealing the dark sides of modern society. They address many diverse issues such as prostitution, media and advertising, church, euthanasia, immigration and terrorism, and environmental crisis. Several of Lollike's plays were translated and staged in the Czech Republic. The play *The Ordinary Life* (*Det normale liv*), directed by Josef Kačmarčík, was staged by the National Moravian-Silesian Theatre in Ostrava in 2017.

This interview is one of the outputs of the course in Contemporary Scandinavian Drama held at the Department of Theatre Studies during the spring term 2020. After reading a selected play by Christian Lollike, students were asked to think of some questions for the playwright. Some questions were then sent to Christian Lollike, who kindly answered them via e-mail during June 2020.

[**Jan Doležel**] You have been employed as a playwright at the Aarhus Theatre. Can traditional drama emerge in such a set-up? I mean, with regard to literary drama by playwrights from Goethe to Bernhard? Are dramas written by directors perhaps less distinctive and more dependent on the way those dramas were first performed? Conversely, do you think such directors may lack personal connection with their own literary work?

[**Christian Lollike**] There has clearly been a development and today the texts for theatre are more often written by people who are close to the theatre. This may mean that



Fig. 1: Christian Lollike. Foto Jon Bjarni.

the literary quality is lower because the 'playability' is considered superior. Yet, on the other hand, Shakespeare, Molière and Danish playwright Ludvig Holberg were associated with the stage without compromising the literary qualities of their works.

[Jan Doležel + Tereza Tvrdíková] In your dramas you often focus on current topics with an emphasis on controversial themes – the terrorist attacks of September 11 or the manifesto of the Norwegian attacker Anders Breivik. From these texts, one can feel your desire to deal with the negative personalities of our time. How can we avoid being promoters of these villains? Are you perhaps afraid that your dramas will be misunderstood or misinterpreted?

[Christian Lollike] For me, a big part of the art is getting the audience to indulge in something or associate themselves with someone (terrorists), which or whom they otherwise will not bother to indulge in. That's the central point. There is always someone who can/will misunderstand the work. You cannot avoid this.

Personally, I am often more attracted to cruel deeds than the pleasant ones.

In a way, I became a promoter of Breivik. This was unavoidable. However, I learned that the way he was viewed and portrayed was false. He was seen as a mad man and not as a political terrorist. That is why I put up with being perceived as his promoter.

[Anna Šilhanová] Your plays provoked a passionate debate and earned you a reputation of a playwright-provocateur. You yourself said that through these plays you want to explore and understand defining events that have a great social impact. Do you think you have succeeded? Have these plays given you a new perspective or a better understanding of what happened and why?

[Christian Lollike] The press and most people were really refusing to see or consider Anders Breivik as a terrorist. I think that our performance questioned this issue. In addition, I think my performances can make us understand better the symptoms these terrorists epitomize in our society. I think I have partially succeeded in this.

[Anna Šilhanová] In your opinion, 'theater should hurt'. You seem to share this view with your Swedish colleague Larsen Norén who says that "every performance should be a wound that is only slowly healing". How do you hope your plays will influence your audience? Do you believe that they have an ability to change something in the contemporary social setting?

[Christian Lollike] I aim to raise doubts in the audience, to make them think and see the world in a new way. If they do, something has changed. Also, in the community. And I also hope a little bit that the debates the performances stimulate will change something even for people who haven't seen them.

[Tereza Turzíkóvá] In our seminar we read your play *The Ordinary Life* (*Det normale liv*). The topics present in this text reminded me of the book *Supervise and Punish* (*Surveiller et punir*) by Michel Foucault and his concept of biopolitics, where the state inconspicuously regulates the bodies of citizens to the point of creating a 'Big Brother' within themselves, a kind of modern panopticon. Your play is critical of this system – but is there a way to break out? Where do you think the way out is?

[**Christian Lollike**] Yes, I was very inspired by Foucault when I wrote that text. Since then surveillance has only gotten worse. It is very hard to see the way out. In this respect, I am disillusioned.

[**Natálie Rivolová**] In 2020, we were surprised by the global coronavirus pandemic. Do you think that the events and the panic accompanying the pandemic will inspire you enough to write a play about this topic in the future?

[**Christian Lollike**] Yes, but I don't know how. Though quite specifically: I think that 5–6 months ago we could not have imagined that the state could take power over the market and, for example, stop air traffic; and then it happened. A philosopher (Žižek, perhaps) said that it is easier to imagine the downfall of the world than the disappearance of capitalism. Maybe it's not like that anymore.

[**Natálie Rivolová + Karolína Stehlíková**] Some people believe artists are able to sense the future. What do you think will be different after this crisis is over? Or what would you like the consequences to be?

[**Christian Lollike**] IF I am very optimistic, I see that the crisis and the way it has been tackled showed us that we can change our behavior – which is necessary in relation to the climate challenges. Perhaps we see the return of the global community. IF I am pessimistic, I see how we are now struggling to return to the fast pace of production. With in this perspective, the crisis will make no difference other than create more anxiety.

Translated from Danish by Karolína Stehlíková