Dreams of tentacles –

ON AIR production's *Truckers and Trackers. Alien unmade*
at the AULA/ Milchhof, Berlin, Germany,
21. September 2006

Review and Interview

By

Wibke Hartewig

Scene from *Truckers and Trackers. Alien unmade*, ON AIR productions (2006)
© ON AIR productions

Dark, infinite space. Suddenly a lonely, reddish light penetrates it. Our 'storyteller', Neal Wach, has turned on a small reading lamp on the table in front of him, ready to enter the script he's holding. What we see is part of a sparsely equipped media laboratory, a small area with black walls, whose fourth wall is formed by the table. In the background, there is a second table with a monitor, a second lamp and a second microphone; occasionally, the performer crosses the space from table to table in his rolling chair. Above the table in the foreground, a row of four video screens forms the upper part of a frame for this space - a quite undefined place, lit only by one or other of the lamps, and by the light of the screens when in use. Could this be a TV station with a news reader? As the events unfold and the (virtual) 'space-truckers' enter the scene, this little area suddenly resembles the claustrophobia-inducing bridge of a space shuttle. And the row of screens, when all lit white, creates the convincing illusion of a spaceship corridor.

Equipped with only the technology absolutely necessary to master the space, the ON AIR-quartet of Frauke Havemann (director), Eric Schefter (video artist), Neal Wach (performer) and Mark Johnson (author) present at the AULA/ Milchhof what they call a 'live film'. The 'live film' aesthetic consists of a single live performer (Wach, lit so that only his head and upper torso are fully visible), who is in direct dialogue with three pre-recorded video versions of himself. These show up on the screens as huge heads that face the audience most of the time. Reading, talking and communicating through facial expression, the four of them slip into the roles that Johnson's script provides for them: Standardman, the mission commander; Hooker, the engineer; Fremont, the cook; Compost, the science officer; Mother, the computer system; and – some alien life form. To assist the audience in differentiating the characters, Wach and his doubles incorporate some minor props (a pair of glasses here, a headscarf there), as well as characteristic facial expressions, voices, and accents.

Take a series of motifs from the Science Fiction/ Horror genre, cut them into small pieces, add the following words, pictures, light and sound effects to ensure a stable, consumable form, and mix everything rhythmically: a faint mechanical pounding. An isolated place. An alarm goes off. Slimy. Sticky. Saliva. Semen. A transmission from an unknown source. Strong wind. A hostile environment. The first contact. It. Beeping. Crew members should not be left alone. Hunger. Food. A search. The sound of running feet. A scream. Fearful facial expressions. A treacherous computer system. Passwords. A blood test. Distrust. Harassed glances. The examination of alien samples. Quarantine. White lights, red lights. Darkness. Whereabouts unknown. Lush, pathetic string music. Grand emotions. Blurred identities. Imitation. Trying to reach someone by transmitter who does not answer. Hysterical reactions. Noises of the spheres. Forbidden inter-species love. Tentacles.

Mark Johnson's script crossbreeds material like Bill Lancaster's *The Thing* and Dan O'Bannon's *Alien* with material from his own work, in the process alluding to major works of the Sci-Fi genre such as *Starman, 2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Bladerunner.* Johnson also draws on elements from other popular genres, including the questioning methods of the crime story and the schmaltzy lines typical of melodrama ("And didn't I give you everything an alien possibly can?"). If you care to draw a story line through the accumulation of media fragments that makes up this production, you could do so in two sentences: a crew of four is left alone together at some isolated place, maybe a spaceship, maybe a research station, which is controlled by a computer system called Mother. An alien life form is detected somewhere on the premises, and one crew member after the other is attacked by it, until in the end only Mother and alien remain. Or… maybe not. This kind of narrative analysis doesn't get you very far with this piece of theatre. To further explore the multi-layered montage presented, it might be helpful to look at how its components interrelate.

The fragments combine, overlap, and penetrate each other, fragments which are often cut off sharply. But since they all float in the same well-defined theatrical cosmos, a sort of atmospheric coherence is guaranteed. The performance is held together by its consistently followed rules, its recurring textual, visual, and musical themes, and its limitation to a minimum of theatrical means and techniques. The whole of the scenic texture offers meaning without fixing it. It demonstrates that a very few elements are sufficient to form a scene when they are brought into play with each other. For example, a wild chase is suggested as follows: while the row of

screens emits a grey-blue light, the whistling of the wind can be heard, then some tension-rhythm music on top of it. The head of one character appears in profile on screen, his running movements indicated only by the rhythmic up and down of his shoulders and his moving from screen to screen. With a panicked look in the eyes, the head turns around from time to time. It finally reappears at the other end of the row, while the music continues. Suddenly a scream, then only the noise of the wind can be heard. Gradually, pathetic, melancholy string music comes in, and slowly the screens turn black. The music continues for a while, opening the space to the audience's imagination of the inevitably accompanying events. One does become acutely aware of the intentional pressure on one's emotions. Sound is used as a major means of producing atmosphere and a sense of architectural space; the latter, for example, by the noise of running feet that circles the audience.

It is the principle of cut and montage that organizes the performance – a principle that more often belongs to the world of film. In *Truckers and Trackers* the different media penetrate each other structurally. The 'cut' technique is also used on the live performance situation, and is even emphasized: scenes suddenly break off, music suddenly stops, and screens flicker before they switch to a new image. The pauses between scenes are non-existent at times and extended at others. Furthermore, scenes can be repeated or 'looped'. There is another filmic peculiarity that becomes a major characteristic of the whole performance: the close-up. The facial expressions of the characters are extremely present, and the impact of the feelings they reflect is heightened to a maximum degree. On the vocal level, there is a very complex dialogue going on between the live and the pre-recorded dimensions. As the live player, Wach sometimes lends his voice to all of the present (live and video) characters at once, but at other times he shares the dialogue with the recorded voices, or leaves the talking entirely to them. Thus, he does not stick to a single role, but lets them all float through him.

Investigating the flux and friction between live performance and pre-recorded video material was a main goal when Frauke Havemann brought together Eric Schefter and Neal Wach in 2002 and ON AIR productions was founded. The trio created strategies to allow Wach to play live against his pre-recorded selves. From their first production, *Hotel Radio* (2002), to their most recent creation, *Truckers and Trackers,* the group has continually refined the timing and interaction between Wach and Schefter, who controls the videos and sound effects. This live interaction allows for flexibility and decision-making at the moment of performance; accidents and unforeseen events are integrated. Over the years, ON AIR has developed quite singular aesthetics, which are characterized by – the 'un-shown'.

The unknown is what the spectator is confronted with in *Truckers and Trackers,* and not only in the form of an unidentifiable alien being. The unknown also characterizes the huge space that is entirely left to the audience's imagination. Most of the action develops in between the fragments fed to the spectators. Although the main theme includes bodies being penetrated, violated and transformed, all we get to see is – the heads. While the characters' heads seem to be intruded by the idea of becoming alien, the audience members' heads are intruded by single phrases, sounds and images that force them to activate their archive of cultural knowledge to satisfy their hunger for sense. Nonetheless, despite the lack of onstage action, the 'actions' are extremely present and can be emotionally and bodily felt by the spectator. By isolating the elements which are essential for creating a certain atmosphere, and by

reproducing this atmosphere with such minimal means, the group manages to lay open the structural functioning of theatre and to integrate the production process into the performance.

The audience's experience in watching this performance mirrors what the characters within the 'story' face: the perception of phenomena as unconnected fragments. It is a situation in which the seeds of fear are planted. Interestingly enough, the alien never shows up. Is it just an outcome of the paranoia that forms in the minds of the crew? It never becomes quite clear who is infected and who is not. Suspicion and distrust arise. Anyone could be an intruder if - like its relatives in *The Thing* - the alien imitates the beings it invades. The 'Other' looks very much like oneself.

The piece scatters tracks for both crew and audience to follow – and that's all. The result is a constant state of irritation. Both groups take part in an elaborate game of implying. "What do we do now?" "Keep your eyes on them." "Whose eyes on whom?" "Just do it." The dialogue suggests that none of the characters knows exactly what anyone else is talking about. The short sentences collide with each other, and the reactions are never quite what one would expect. Suddenly a serious and urgent situation such as finding the right computer password takes on the character of a quiz-show. At these moments, when audience expectations are treated playfully, the scenes can become very comical.

The irritation caused here is also a product of the production's motif of playing with identities. It becomes impossible to categorize: who is human? Who is an alien that is imitating a human? And who is a human who is just imagining that he is an alien because he has had to imitate one too often? For example, at one point the crew decides to beat the alien at its own game ("it imitates, so we'll imitate"). However, since the alien does not actually present itself, what the crew imitates is only the appearance of the alien that each of them has created in his imagination. As if this wasn't enough inter-species confusion, suddenly a character is duplicated; his image appears twice on the screens. Later, someone else's voice splits up into two overlapping ones. For the audience, new questions arise: 'which voice belongs to which body?' 'What part is the live performer playing now?' In the end, it is always the same face the audience is confronted with.

It should be obvious by now that the performance's narrative takes on many forms. It is not the telling of a certain 'story' that is important in this production, so much as the experimentation with identities, with irritation and expectation, the questioning of narrative strategies, genre aesthetics, the working methods of film, and the creation of atmosphere. Perception becomes a significant topic; how does the consciousness synthesize meaning? Furthermore, how does paranoia manage to creep in? The spectator's head, actively seeking something to connect with, quite literally finds its mirror-image in the heads of the characters, who, facing the audience from the screens and stage, dialogue with it as much as with the other characters. The final words of the performance may be viewed as advice for characters and audience alike: "why don't you just wait here for a while, see what happens?"

References

Trucker and Trackers. Alien unmade, directing/ video- and textmontage: Frauke Havemann; live and video performance/ textmontage: Neal Wach; live and video cut: Eric Schefter; script: Mark Johnson; production management: Kerstin Schroth, Nina Thielicke; first performance: 21. September 2006, AULA/ Milchhof, Berlin (Germany)

www.onairproductions.info

Next performances of *Truckers and Trackers. Alien unmade*:
9./10./16./17. March 2006, TESLA, Berlin (please check www.tesla-berlin.de/index.php to confirm)

"… going with the narrative as much as against the narrative…"

A conversation with Frauke Havemann and Eric Schefter about *Truckers and Trackers. Alien unmade*

By
Wibke Hartewig

Have you been in any situation lately that you would describe as being 'alien'?

Frauke Havemann: *(laughter)* Probably constantly. More or less.

How did you arrive at the basic theme of your latest production, "Truckers and Trackers"?

FH: I think it had to do with the fact that there are questions that develop after each project, out of each project, so there is sort of a chain going on. Since *Leatherback* already dealt with elements of horror films, there were still questions open which interested us. But it was not 'Oh, it's gonna be *Alien*'. And then, when I saw *Alien* again, what was really interesting was that it seemed if we did *Alien* it would be absolutely over challenging us, the movie. Because it is a big movie. *Alien* is very, very visual. That is something we don't do at all. And what interested me also: There was a documentation part, where Dan O'Bannon talked about how he developed the script. And he talked about how he was accused of stealing from one specific source. There was an author who said 'This is not an original idea, it comes from blah blah blah'. And O'Bannon made a list of the people that inspired him and said, 'I hope, this will put to rest the notion that I stole *Alien* from a single source. I stole it from everybody'. Also, because in his original script he (O'Bannon) was thinking of a B-movie, a lot of the fear, the paranoia was done through spoken language, through the dialogue, and not through incredible visual effects. The film which I found even more interesting for questions we work with was "The Thing". The 'thing' enters the body and disappears, and this creates a situation of mistrust and paranoia. What you look at you cannot trust anymore. So the image of the person becomes very doubtful. They don't know: Are you already infected? Are you gonna change, are you gonna transform?

So in your performance, what is this alien for you?

FH: We don't define it, we don't even say it's certainly bad. We leave it open if it is something which is created from inside, or on the other hand it could also be something that has entered or is entering from outside. But we leave it open, we don't define what it is, and we never show it.

Eric Schefter: There is no literal alien in the piece. It is not even necessary for this piece to operate with a literal alien. What could have happened in that situation could have happened through the paranoia of the crew itself. Or through triggers that come

from outside like the transmission, but not necessarily through any alien or virus. It all comes from inside the characters.

How do you deal with the narrative? Your piece has a very fragmented character…

FH: It is not so much about deconstructing the narrative. I like the effort of going with the narrative as much as against the narrative. What that means is that the elements in relation to each other have to make sense within this context. But that doesn't at all mean that it is a linear narrative with a middle and an end and that it has a plot. For me it is more about how we use the narrative element to create a situation. So the situation becomes actually more important than the narrative.

Did you have some kind of storyline in mind at the beginning?

FH: No, we didn't have it in mind. One important aspect of our work is to create a live situation. We have to montage what we get as a script, and during the process we find out how we can use the elements. We basically find out how we can work with the story and against it at the same time, to create a situation that has to do with perception. We shift the text from the original characters as it was originally written by Mark and give the words to other characters, or other players you could say, to bring in another challenge within the live situation.

Could you describe how the script by Mark changed throughout the production process?

ES: The process informs the script as much as the script informs the process in the sense that first of all it is not a typical film or theatrical situation where you get a script and you interpret it. At the very first research stages we look at materials that relate to the theme, in this case the films *Alien* and *The Thing*, but also for example, things on parasites.

FH: We look at a lot of different sources surrounding the ideas.

Have you done that together with Mark?

FH: He does a lot of research by himself, and in this case I collected something like a proposal, which was a montage created from three or four different scripts. It also included sections of Mark's own work. We sent this to him, and then he started working on the script. And we talked on the phone, we talked by email, and exchanged about the process of the script. It would be great – but we haven't achieved it so far – if the script could be called 'finished' when we start. Because if it is fully developed we can redevelop it. I make a first edit because, in this case specifically, the script was very long. And then, because Neal does all the characters, we have to find voices for them, which means accents: The French guy, the Jewish guy… Who plays whom? In the course of that decisions are also made how we change lines from one character to another. For example, from Standardman, the captain, we gave more and more of the text to Mother, the computer. There was a large shift. We changed whole sections. So basically we laid out the whole script, we divided it into individual sections, and then we started shifting them around. So sections would appear in totally different places than in the original script.

But you do have a final version of the script before you start shooting?

ES: We had about half the script, I think. We started shooting and rehearsing with that material. At the same time Mark was sending us new material. It was an organic evolution, I suppose. It was constantly shifting. And up until almost the last week of rehearsal, it was still shifting, even though we had all the material at that point. And we even went back and shot scenes we had taken out, and extracted scenes we left in.

FH: The first edit was a very extreme one, a very reduced version of the script. And then we noticed it was not working like that. And then we actually went back to the script, and Neal and I both did several reedits of it. It is not enough to just take the script and translate it directly one to one, because then we are on too secure ground. It is also about knowing and not knowing. There has to be a challenge in the live playing. And if it is just one character you play through and develop, there is no question on what this illusion, this fiction is built. Therefore the question 'Is it live, is it not live? Who is speaking?', these shifts, become really important. And therefore working with the script within the live situation goes through such an extreme process.

How did you produce the video films?

ES: The biggest problem that arises is that as soon as you change a scene you have to reshoot it, and you either find a way to work within what you already shot, for example by taking out a character and giving the lines to a character who is not on screen, or you reshoot the entire sequence. We want to be flexible with this video playback option. We split the whole up into as small as possible sequences which I can then rearrange for rehearsal, so we can be flexible in the ordering of the sequences. And also that I can react to Neal and Neal can react to me. In fact the timing of the interaction between Neal and me is totally flexible. We don't just hit a button on the DVD player and it goes on for 45 minutes. It is really broken down into individual beats almost. I use the same program to run the DVD player and to run the music so that I can quickly make changes.

In your performance you play a very peculiar game with the different voices. Sometimes the live player speaks all the parts, synchronizing his video-selves, sometimes he is in dialogue with their pre-recorded voices, and sometimes only the recorded voices talk to each other. Why did you decide to do it this way?

FH: We didn't want to get stuck with one character on the stage. For example, in comparison with "Leatherback" where the live player plays a very strong character all way through, here we were interested that it was not one character he is playing. We took the idea of transformation and shift which is in the material and played with it in the live situation. We connected it a little bit to the story; for example, when the first character gets killed, the live performer takes over another character and gives him his voice. And then, when things shift more, when there is a so called 'technical failure', he steps in and plays them all. We developed it out of tasks. So for Neal it is not 'I am this character', no, he is giving the voice, like a voiceover artist. It's a very clear job for him, in that moment.

Why did you choose to show only the player's heads on the screens?

FH: For me it is interesting what you need to add. And it has a lot to do with movement, with the choreography of each image in relation to the others. With the heads I have the option of communicating movement which continues on where I don't see the body anymore. So I can work with very simple in and out, turns of the heads, with enter and exit, and create the rhythm of the scenes through that. If you saw the whole body, that would be a totally different perception of the situation.

ES: We initially worked with monitors, and monitors are approximately the size of a human head. A body on a monitor is very small and has a totally different impact. When you work with close ups of heads, you can do very little things that have a very large impact in terms of the performance.

Could you give another example of how you transfer the structural characteristics of one medium to another?

FH: I think for example the aspects of music and choreography are really important for the editing process. It goes back and forth, one informs the other... I have learned a lot from experimental films for my choreography, in terms of hard-cut editing of movement.

Speaking of music, what are the sources of the music and sounds you use?

FH: They come from lots of different sources. We looked at *Alien* and took little bits and pieces out. And then we use sound effects…

ES: …To create an atmosphere. If you cannot see it, but you hear it and it works, it doesn't have to be the sound that you would expect. Then we also used lots of music sources, often film music, but not only, also more experimental music…

FH: But we only took very small bits. We had sessions where Neal would sit down and listen to a bunch of music and make a list, and then I would just take a second or two seconds, and Eric looped it. And maybe it just appears at one point, while other elements are also used for the structure of the overall performance, so there are certain themes we bring back.

ES: We didn't reference *Alien* and *The Thing* through any music. We took about three sound effects from the films. It is also part of the process finding the sounds, which in this production came fairly late. That helps determine the structure, because once you find the theme that might bridge two sequences for example, that changes the timing dramatically.

FH: And there the 'play' starts, really: Does Eric start a bit earlier, or does Neal start the scene? That is also where they react to each other.

ES: Finding a balance or a non-balance between activity and non-activity on stage – these sort of balances are informed as much by the video and the performance as by the music. The timing of the piece is very much influenced by finding the right sound to create space.

FH: Yeah, one aspect of the sound is to create a space which expands beyond what you see. We play with it, and the audience can play with it.

Do you think your audience needs a profound knowledge of the genre you used to 'understand' your piece?

FH: I don't think so, necessarily. Certain people had fun with the reference points and how they transformed. They had fun with how the context changed. But on the other hand, I think you can look at it on a different level. And you don't need to understand it all; it is not made to be 'understood'.

ES: I think the audience members that came hoping to see a translation of *Alien* or "The Thing" would be thoroughly disappointed in so far as the piece has entirely it's own life now, and it's in no way a literal translation of the original films. I don't think it is necessary to know the films or any of the sources at all to enjoy the piece because I think Mark's writing and also the atmosphere that is created are something that stand outside of the original work. The narrative that we created does not hinge on understanding of the story of *Alien* or *The Thing*.

FH: They talk about food, for example. A lot of people can relate to how they talk about food… and other elements which in the original *Alien* are just very small parts of it, which Mark expanded.

Why do you like to play with popular culture?

FH: Oh, I think it's great. *(laughter)* How can you get around popular culture? What interests me is the 'within-each-other' of things. There are lots of trivial original things that we find and that we like to play with – not to make fun of them, but to blow them up, and then to put them again into very complex systems, or to connect a lot of contradictory points with each other.

ES: The perception of science fiction is that it is kind of a B-genre. But I think that these films are very much representative of the time they were made. They are extremely good films. They just deal with the issues they deal with in their very direct manner.

FH: That is very different from our work. We don't make a B-movie, but I think the emotion, the drama – *Leatherback* is very melodramatic – it is working with these aspects and saying 'Yes, they are there'. Of course they are illusions in our work, but illusions create an emotion. At the same time we try to make that transparent. So it is this fat blown-up stuff we support just by using a simple piece of music. But on the other hand it is also transparent because we have a single person sitting on stage, at a table, playing against himself. So there is something paradoxical about that, too.

ES: Genre also allows you to start with a base that many people already seem to think they know the rules of. And then you can twist that as you like.

FH: We don't stay in the genre. We actually do a lot of stuff that doesn't belong in the genre at all.

ES: I think Mark, in his writing, is playing very much with the genre. Often he says things very directly; he has the characters come out and say the things, which would never be said in a genre film. They would be implied.

FH: Yes, that would be the subtext. There are interesting aspects of human relations, of language and misunderstanding which have a lot to do with the question of codes. And then we come to popular culture again. How can we raise questions and still have fun with it?

Berlin, 10. November 2006

Wibke Hartewig

Wibke Hartewig has studied theatre and dance theory, literature and art history, and has also worked as a performer, choreographer and critic. She recently received her Dr. Phil. for her thesis on William Forsythe's work and the 'reading' of movement. She lives in Berlin.