

Review of *A Piece Of Work* by Annie Dorsen for Theaterkrant.nl
– 27 september 2013 - Rotterdamse Schouwburg, Festival De Keuze

Computer cuts up *Hamlet* into new meanings

By Joost Ramaer

The curtain raises on a heightened stage floor with a hole in the middle. At the left side hangs a piece of white cloth. At the rear there is a huge black screen. Suddenly it lights up at the bottom: 'syst.begin.' It is the onset of a cascade of green letters and figures, after which the screen goes black again and a metallic computer voice announces 'Act 1, Scene 1.' What follows, is a – literally – cut up version of *Hamlet*. Played by a computer, with an actor reduced to a ventriloquist's dummy of the machine.

A Piece Of Work by the American maker and director Annie Dorsen is based upon Markov- or N-gram-chains. The show premiered in the Netherlands at festival De Keuze by the Rotterdamse Schouwburg. Markov-chains are computer programmes scouring texts for repetitions and similarities, using them to create new texts. Their main characteristic is a lack of memory; each evening they make new discoveries in *Hamlet*, and each evening these discoveries lead to new inventions.

Dorsen fed the computer with five different models, analogous to Shakespeare's division of the play in five acts. The first assignment: reduce the play to 5 percent of its original length, meanwhile remaining true to the five-act-division. The audience only hears and sees the computer voice and the texts it pronounces, also shown on screen in primal digital print. 'Enter', 'exeunt': Hamlet, Fortinbras, Gertrude, Horatio, Ophelia, knights, soldiers and courtiers come and go at bewildering speed. The computer closely follows the instructions of the Bard. His command 'Flourish' sets off some flickering lights and feeble synthesizer trumpets. During other moments a cannon thunders, or the white cloth starts to flap pathetically in fake wind. When the ghost speaks, the hole in the stage floor emits white smoke.

For the second assignment the computer screens the full text for words that keep coming up or are like each other. During the first performance in Rotterdam this led to a comical flood of sentences beginning with 'O ... !' The abundance of such sentences in *Hamlet* is striking. The third assignment is the manipulation of a real actor. Suddenly a man dislodges himself from the darkness of the first row, seated in a desk chair on wheels. He swings towards the audience and is marked out by a spotlight. Enter Scott Shepherd, one of the stars of The Wooster Group.

Quite apart from human speech Shepherd is also fluent in computer language. He programmed the Hamlet-machine himself, to bully him around as an actor. Shepherd has no text, it is fed to him by the computer via a tiny speaker lodged in his ear. He looks at us, but his eyes betray that he is mainly concentrating on what the computer is whispering to him. The great actor goes with the flow masterfully; when the commands come too quickly, you see and hear his diction stumble ever so slightly without truly disturbing the seamless delivery of his feed. His nerve-wrecking play with 'and' and 'or' was one of the highlights of Thursday's performance in Rotterdam.

The following day it could be something quite different. Nothing is fixed, apart from the time allotted to the computer for each assignment.

The computer allows Shepherd only a narrow window of opportunity; suddenly, the actor obediently returns to his place among the audience, where he will stay during the remainder of the show. Blunt transitions like these mark the utter dedramatisation of *Hamlet* by the computer. Dorsen gives us more than enough in return. Like the non-intentional comical effects of the language sequences the computer discovers and invents. Beside Shepherd's brain it also activates ours. It is the arbitrariness of its inventions that leads us to new discoveries. It is simply astonishing how many bits and pieces from the computer-generated language sound familiar; proof of how deeply the text of *Hamlet* has penetrated all world languages.

Sometimes the Hamlet-machine produces phrases that are without meaning, yet vie with the original in poetic beauty. Add to that the associations and references. The black screen with the green letters reminds the audience of the computer in Kubrick's *Space Odyssey*, and of the first, wildly user-unfriendly personal computer by IBM – machines that seemed to be manipulating us, instead of being tools to our benefit. That gives *A Piece Of Work* a sweet nostalgic quality, but also imbues it with an implicit message. The supercomputer in the palm of our hand, the smartphone, makes us think that we are the boss now – an illusion, maybe?

During its last assignment, the computer is allowed to rearrange the words and sentences of *Hamlet* into new scenes. The result is a bloodbath without precedence. Everybody dies, without a sound or image. The audience is reduced to a herd of CIA-nerds during a drone attack, only without the joysticks. The end is as unceremonious as the slaughter: 'sys.exit.'