

**Transcription of the podcast episode *Private analysis, private Bach* from the podcast *Alongside rifts and other shapes* - an audio-zine by NPP 2023.**

My name is Maja Hannisdal, I am a dance artist from Norway, and now I want to share with you a little bit about the Norwegian municipal workforce, and a little bit about my artistic research. I will also read a score for movement I am developing within that artistic research. But first I'd like to tell you about my father.

My father is a retired cellist. He was a highly renowned soloist in the Norwegian Radio Orchestra for 30 years, and won many high hanging awards with his contemporary ensemble Cicada. Whenever I introduce myself to someone in the contemporary or classical music field in Norway, they recognise the Hannisdal name. When he retired some years ago he decided to become a bus driver. Sadly, bus drivers don't get a lot of credit for their skilled work, both in terms of pay and social status. Still my father enjoys every low paid, underestimated drive. He simply likes driving the bus. It seems to me that he puts just as much love and effort into his bus driving as he does into his cello playing. I admire my father's relationship to his social and economic status. It seems as if it is of very little relevance to him. This forms the base for my desire and need to spend time with ideas around how and what we value - as a society, as part of the art field, as fellow human beings, and in my own practice.

Even with his «high status» career, we didn't have much money growing up, so he ended up working three different jobs all through my childhood. My father has always been a very jolly man, despite his heavy work load. He is often smiling and singing and expressing how grateful he is for the people around him. On a particularly grey and rainy day on his way to his second job, when I myself was being extra cranky, I asked him how he managed to always be so jolly. He told me that he sets a goal to execute his plans with 100% quality and effort, but insists on being satisfied with everything that is completed above 40%. When under 40, he will reconsider how he organises his days. Everything above deserves a pat on the back.

I experience that in Norway there has been a deep sense of pride in the people connected to the very small economic differences in the population. I believe that this has formed an identity that aims to lift up the community as essential, and through volunteer work strengthen the caring fabric of the social democracy. Norway is a country where you can write letters to the king and he will personally answer. He might even invite you to a nice cup of tea to just hang out. But for the past years I feel the culture changing. The political landscape has taken a right turn and the social differences are getting larger and larger with a rapidly growing private sector. But even though the culture is changing, the sense of identity is still strong, an identity I think was formed strongly influenced by the rhetoric of a powerful labour party after the second world war all the way up until the 1990's. This strange disaccord between culture and identity leaves me wondering.

Next to my artistic practice I have a 10 year background from working in the municipality as a health care worker and kindergarten worker. I have a very strong sensory experience of doing indispensable work of the utmost importance and value, but receiving low pay, as well as minimal interest in my work from both politicians and overall society. The dissonance between the value of the highly skilled work being done in these fields and the low wages has had a deep impact on the direction I am going in my artistic practice and research. I am interested in artistically researching expressions of success and failure, and specifically what is being judged as mediocre.

My sister works as a nurse in the municipality. She shared her frustrations one day around Christmas time about how she saw these other parents at her kids school go on luxury team building trips to Dubai with their office before going on Christmas break, whilst she and her coworkers got the opportunity to self organise a two hour Christmas party they all had to pay for themselves, before getting to work normal shifts all through the holidays.

«It's not about me really wanting to go to Dubai with my fellow nurses, or even about the lack of money put into our field of work,» she told me, «it is the feeling of not being appreciated that is the issue. It feels like just because our work is not innovative, we are invisible. But if we don't show up at work, then our absence is very visible. I'm measuring babies heads and set vaccines, it is not inspiring work, but it needs to be done. Just because the work is boring does not mean it is not highly valuable.»

I talked to a friend the other day who told me that she had watched a TV-interview with a celebrity talking about what in Norwegian is called «the good girl syndrom» referring to a trend where young girls feel like their value is directly linked to how good and productive and smart they are in all aspects of life. They strive for perfection, and burn out at very young ages. And this celebrity shared that her way of wrestling with her own perfectionism was to practice being content with doing her best, no matter the result. She shared this to enthusiastic applause from the audience.

And my friend who is now on sick leave and currently dealing with her own burn out, told me that this didn't really sit right with her. Why can't we be content with just getting the job done? Why do we always have to do our best? That is a lot to ask for. Why can't we practice being content with taking responsibility for what we are responsible for, do the work that's required without being so concerned with doing our very best? Wouldn't that be more sustainable, my friend wondered.

A dance colleague said to me that in neuroscience they have found that you are much smarter when you for instance take a shower or sit on the toilet than what you are when sitting down trying to concentrate. She also said that as female dance artists in our mid thirties we only have a few years left to make waves in the field, where things are at stake and the pressure to impress is on, before we become invisible and irrelevant. And then, she said, we can do whatever we like!

I feel like there is a separation between what we are told to believe is successful by the capitalist system we are all trapped in, and our human experiences of ourselves and each other and our value, and this separation, no matter how obvious, needs to be addressed again and again.

In the arts as well. There is a lot of talk in my field about community and resisting productivity and caring for each other, but still we use hierarchical structures of validation, like the one I am in right now getting my MA, or just the art marked in general, in order to assess who is making «valid work». And we are all trapped in this trying to find solutions for survival.

And this *is* being wrestled with within the field, but it can be and should be wrestled with some more I think. There is something in the constant wrestling and questioning that I feel might be key to just appreciating each other more. To be more caring and kind to each other. And to see each other.

I have made a score for a group of dancers where the rules for movement are very rigid. It is a mediocre groove. The movements are regular, always shifting between two positions, they should hit the beat, but not too sharp. The shifting of positions needs to be gradual, almost undetectable, and constant. They must keep the rhythm. The energy needs to be both at full blast and very lazy at the same time. Precision is key. The face is concentrated, serious, calm. They form a landscape of movements with their fellow dancers, and they have to support each other in their choices. It should border on boring, but they must enjoy it. If they find themselves in a horrible spot, shifting between positions they would rather not be in, they must figure their way out of it within the set of rules.

Doing this score the dancers and I encountered all of these questions of how this should look like, using my movement vocabulary as the mould. But I couldn't answer any of the questions properly, so the insecurity became a part of the score. This constant questioning of «Am I doing it? Am I doing the thing now? Is this it? Is this the thing?» became a very fun tool to play with and generated a lot of rich movement.

I am wondering if this might be it. This open and honest questioning whilst doing the work, insisting on the mess that insecurity brings in order to create openings for wondering and new questions, insisting on the complexity in order to mess with the ideas of success and failure. Who even decide what is successful anyways?

Im not labouring under any illusion that what I'm busy with is original. If anything it is the opposite, it's the basics, but it is worth spending some time with.

I am also not in any way claiming to be separated from the mass myself. So rather than criticising what might be deemed "mediocre" in Scandinavian society, my exploration is if anything aiming to criticise how this kind of work and way of living is undervalued in line with waves of European neoliberalism.

I get a lot of pushback on my insistence on using the word mediocre, which I understand because it is a word loaded with so much negativity. But I don't want to let it go. We judge things as mediocre all the time, so why not stop and have a look at that. It is not necessarily good, but its not necessarily bad either. It is in the middle, and what's so wrong about being in the middle? Most of us are in the middle, depending on whatever kind of environment we are moving in. There is community to be found in the middle. And maybe a good starting point for shifting away from this kind of judging value all together.

What happens if I spend time with what is judged as aesthetically mediocre, and attempt to perfect it? This attempt has already failed, since once something is perfected it can no longer be mediocre. This already collapsed attempt does something to the way I approach the different textures and tones in my movements, as well as my approach to space and time.

This research is full of paradoxes, and so far it is in the tensions between the paradoxes that the artistic materials are forming, forcing binary judgments of value from contrary points on a scale into a messy web of complexity.

The skilful ordinary, the precise vagueness, the melancholic humour, the enjoyable boredom, the sturdy insecure, the complex mediocre.

\* Synthesiser Bach, recorder and maracas plays under the reading of the score \*

### ***The Molasses Collapse***

*You stand.*

*You watch.*

*Then your thoughts dissolve.*

*You can now only see the periphery, not knowing when that happened. You don't care about that. Actually you don't care about much. You are blank, content, suspending time through boredom.*

*Your jaw is the first to go. As it gives up you can feel the muscles very slowly disappear from the rest of the face. It takes with it the shoulders, but the rest of the face stays put. Only when it has reached the saturation point of curve in the whole of your back will the face follow the insisting neck. The knees starts bending but you hardly notice. The saliva that has gathered in your mouth is now giving in to gravity and pours down on the floor in slow drips. You see the puddle and know you will end up in it. «That's life», you think.*

*The thigh is beginning to take over the weight of your held, heavy, excruciatingly slow, curled up figure and your feet is giving space for the body to enter in between them.*

*After an eternity your shoulders reaches the floor and your bum the heels, and you can start to let go of the hold. Slowly you sink even further, into and through the floor underneath, your jaw still in the same open position. As melting meat your weight pushes the boarders of your body further and further away from each other.*

*You are wide and lumpy.*

*It's over.*

\* Synthesiser Bach, recorder and maracas plays us out \*

You have now heard an episode of the podcast Alongside rifts and other shapes - an audio-zine by NPP 2023. The music was a piece in progress called «Wachet auf!» by myself Maja Hannisdal and my father Morten Hannisdal.

Thank you for listening.