

REFLECTIONS ON

FEED

BACK

Freedom of choice²

DOOR KARLIEN DE SAVOYE



WHAT

do you want to hear? What kind of feedback do you want? I was somehow surprised when one of my circus colleagues asked me these two questions. It was in a feedback session right after one of the very first informal showings during the creation of my latest piece *Lyubov*. It must have been somewhere near the end of 2022 or so.

I was like “Oh okay, eehhm... well, ehmm... maybe just tell me what you’ve seen? Or what you’ve felt?” And then she said

“Je vois une femme qui souffre, mais sans tristesse”
Or, in English “I see a woman who is suffering,
but without sadness”

I instantly fell in love with this phrase and it stayed with me during the entire two years of creation and during every single performance of the piece. Sadly, we only performed *Lyubov* twice, so the informal showings and try outs and feedback sessions by far outnumber the actual number of performances.

I do prefer the French phrase to the English one, or to any other translation, just because that is the exact way my colleague pronounced her feedback. It was verbal feedback on a mainly physical form of expression. This specific case leads to my first observations and question marks in these brief *memoires to feedback*:

- First of all, Why do we mainly opt for verbal feedback? Why not a drawing? Or a song, a dance? Or a walk in the park? Or a hug or a kiss???
- Secondly, words carry meaning, so if we deliberately choose to give and receive feedback in a verbal way, maybe words should be chosen deliberately as well.
- Thirdly, there is a certain amount of freedom of choice regarding feedback. If you don’t want feedback, you can also choose to not ask for it. If you don’t want to give feedback, you can also choose to not do so.

KARLIEN DE SAVOYE

nam als circusmaker deel aan het Traject Circuskritiek. Op VITRINE PERPLX in oktober 2024 gaf dat een boeiend *conflict of interest*: ze ging er met haar nieuwe creatie *Lyubov* in première voor het oog van de hele groep. Als critici maakten we van de nood een deugd: we kozen meteen na de voorstelling voor een alternatieve wijze van recenseren, in de vorm van een collectief feedbackgesprek. Met behulp van de associatieve woorden die daarbij vielen, brouwde Karlien vervolgens een speelse beschouwing op haar eigen voorstelling.

About the hugging and kissing by the way, it actually happened to me later on in the creation. I think it was in spring 2023, or maybe 2024, I’m not sure. It was after another showing that one of the audience members, a complete stranger to me, an elderly lady, short white hair, this tall more or less *my shoulder height*... She walked towards me, smiling brightly and maybe even with a tiny teardrop in the corner of her left eye, and she asked:

“Mag ik u ne kus geven?” Or, in English “Can I give you a kiss?”

I was sweaty and not wearing so much clothes because often my costumes are just cheap underwear, so I was a bit confused and hesitating but I agreed and enjoyed anyway. It was only afterwards that I found out that that lady was the lesbian music teacher of my musician when she was a teenager.

Maybe she was just trying to hit on me. Anyway, on the hindsight, I truly appreciated her sincere way of giving feedback.

At a certain point during the creation I was fed up with feedback in the classical sense of question and answer because often it leads to too much talking and thinking and hard questions and sleepless nights trying to find answers to hard questions and emotional breakdowns because of sleepless nights and so on. For example:

“Maar wat wilt ge nu eigenlijk zeggen? Or, in English “But, in the end, what do you want to say with this piece?”



Whenever this question pops up, my brain would start cooking and I would hear myself uttering a stream of words that somehow form a relevant answer to this question but to be honest, actually, I feel more like: What the fuck? I don't want to say anything! If I would, I'd rather write a book or hold a lecture, you know. I always wonder when Vivaldi came up with his Four Seasons, would people also ask him: “Hey, Antonio, what do you want to say with all those violins?”. Winter is cold, summer is hot, maybe?

So let's say in the second half of the creation, I kindly asked the audience to write down just one word when leaving the black box or rehearsal space – and only if they felt like. As I said, we had many more try outs then actual performances so we ended up with a very long list of words – some of which you can read over here. And, I must admit, I've learnt a lot by implementing this strategy.





© Heroen Bollaert (voor PERPLX)

- First of all, I learnt that some people cannot count until one or at least, they have another conception of 'one' and also some people adhere to a very personal way of spelling.
- Secondly, words carry meaning, and maybe also the amount of words matters. The more words you put onto something, the less meaning they have.
- Thirdly, I found out that this method was waaaay more digestible for my brain than endless blablabla so in terms of freedom of choice, there is definitely something to say about choosing the format that works best for you.

Lyubov premiered in October 2024 in Kortrijk, during Vitrine PERPLX (big shout out to PERPLX for supporting me!!!). On beforehand I was asked by Circuscentrum whether or not I was willing to participate in a feedback round with my fellow 'circus reviewers' as part of the program around circus criticism. Yes, of course, sounds fun. I must admit, I don't remember much of it, I was still super high on adrenaline of performing and rushing to get dressed and get my aerial silks down and moreover, I got up waaay too early that morning so by the



time I arrived in the Irish pub in front of Budascoop I felt a bit like this *pointing at the picture*. Empty. I just gave birth to my baby. I was still trembling and bleeding and not sure whether I would be a good or a bad mother.

I do remember that I had a terrible headache and that there was not enough time. Partly my fault, because on my way to the Irish pub I bumped into Rinus and we started chatting while the circus reviewers were waiting for me around the big massive wooden table in the private room in the Irish pub. Also partly because the feedback plan was too ambitious to fit in in between two shows. Before I knew time was up and we were sitting in the theatre for the next show and Lyubov got washed away. Maybe I was disappointed because just like any mother I believed that my fresh newborn deserved a great amount of attention and I just wanted to hold her in my arms for a little longer.

There were fourteen programmers who saw the premiere of Lyubov, not bad hey?! In the weeks that followed, I was in contact with every single one of them. Some just very briefly by mail or on the phone, with some I had an on line meeting and with others I had a live chat with tea and cookies.

I think if ever I'm bored I want to make a sliding scale and rank these conversations from highly motivating to completely demolishing and almost humiliating. Although I am totally convinced that most programmers have the best intentions, they don't always know how to bring them across.

Suddenly my piece of art, my dearest baby becomes a commercial product. At the same level of a random box of chocolate chip cookies from Aldi. Imagine you're selling cookies with



© Heroen Bollaert (voor PERPLX)

exquisite dark chocolate but the programmer only fancies milk chocolate because that's what they believes the majority of the audience prefers. Then you're fucked. Well, I got fucked several times.

I have plenty more stories like these so if you want to hear them, please call me, I'll give you my number, but now I'll take a shortcut to my conclusions and I apologize on beforehand for making them sound like heavy life lessons:

- First of all, There is no such thing as THE TRUTH, only millions of personal versions of the truth. Therefore, feedback I receive from a school friend of my five year old son is as valid and valuable as feedback from the most important programmer in the world.
- Secondly, One can also choose to not listen to feedback or simply not use it. It's not only about how to give feedback – it's also about how to receive feedback, it's a shared responsibility.
- And last but not least “Art reveals more about the spectator through their opinion of the work, than it reveals about the maker.” ●

“Art reveals more about the spectator through their opinion of the work, than it reveals about the maker.”