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Pleasurable Travels of a Suspicious Theatre-princess

Ann Enström

In 1835 the famous Danish storyteller HC Andersen wrote a story that he named *The Princess and the Pea* (*Prinsessen på ærten*), and that sometimes is translated into *The Real Princess*. Regardless of whom the title is featuring the story itself is not directly about a princess, but first and foremost about a prince. It is about a prince who is looking to marry a real princess – and as such a typical example of how easy a princess, a woman, can be sidestepped and turned into an “other”, as Simone de Beauvoir put it in *The Second Sex*. The prince’s problem is that he is having a hard time finding himself such a woman, somebody that is real, that is an “authentic” princess. Having searched everywhere out there for HER the prince at one point gives up on the venture and resigns back to the royal castle where he is brooding about. On a late night in the middle of a rainstorm, however, it knocks on the big castle door and the old king finds a miserably wet looking young woman on the other side who despite her drenched condition has the nerve to claim that she is a real princess. The old queen, suspicious as she is, decides to put this supposed princess to the test and prepares a bed with 20 mattresses and 20 bolsters underneath which she puts a small pea. The next morning when the princess comes down for breakfast the queen asks her if she has had a pleasant night’s sleep. When the princess answers that she unfortunately has slept terribly and that her body has suffered to such a degree that it has turned yellow and blue, then finally the prince and his family know that they have found HER - - the real princess. The pea test has turned out positive, because, only a real princess bread and butter is such an extremely sensitive creature that she reacts in this way, becoming so uncomfortable that her body has turned into a bruise after spending one night on a small pea covered by 20 mattresses and 20 bolsters.

In this paper I am going to suggest that HC Andersen’s story about *The Princess and the Pea* can be used as a valuable methodological tool, as a twist on the frequently used hermeneutics of suspicion, when investigating the paradoxical role of feeling in contemporary Swedish acting practice. A paradoxical role of feeling where the common idea of the actor as an emotional labourer par excellence is pretty much treated and presented as an uncomfortable attachment.

While working on my doctoral dissertation on this particular subject, feeling in contemporary Swedish acting practice, I have increasingly often compared

myself to the character of the princess in HC Andersen's story about *The Princess and the Pea*. Along the lines of Paul Ricoeur's "school of suspicion" I have been sensing something hidden (Ricoeur 1970). When I first surveyed the field, reading in on textual material that could give me an overall idea of how contemporary Swedish theatre scholars and practitioners talked about and related to feeling, I found out that they seemed severely uncomfortable in talking about an actor's work on emoting feeling. More so, I learned that the typical opinion in the Swedish theatre community is that feeling is not something that an actor is supposed to pursue but it is solely a side product of action. To talk about feeling in relation to acting method and terminology in general, or, out on the actual working floor, is for this reason of minor importance to an actor, these practitioners seem to argue. Where the main attitude that is offered is that feeling is for the audience and not for the actor, at least not in any other way than as a messy private business that neither should or could be constructively articulated.

Now, this can seem a bit puzzling and even contradictory since there is also this recurrent idea where the actor is portrayed as an emotional labourer par excellence. Both in popular culture where for example it is not uncommon that a random TV host asks a visiting actor questions closely patterned on this very idea, but also, in the academic world of acting scholarship where for instance Dutch media scholar Elly A. Konijn in her book *Acting Emotion* and the Swedish sociologist Stina Blix Bergman in her dissertation *Rehearsing Emotions: the Process of Creating a Role for the Stage* correspondingly use this idea as the self-given starting point of their argument (Konijn 2000, Blix Bergman 2010).

The comparison of my own feeling of intuitively sensing something like a pea from underneath layers of mattresses and bolsters, just like the princess in HC Andersen's story about *The Princess and the Pea*, originated from the perplexing discovery that a large majority of those who wrote about acting in contemporary Sweden seemed so weary to talk about an actor's approach to feelings. They felt just like the princess in the story, uncomfortable! As for myself at that point, I didn't necessarily feel uncomfortable I felt mostly suspicious, somewhat like the queen in the story. But instead of hiding a pea for somebody else my suspicion lead me to believe that the sensing of something pea-like could be a sufficient zero-point of orientation, speaking to Husserl, to eventually be able to describe the pea phenomena itself. Thus far it was still the princess that I identified with, not the queen.

The sensing of something hidden was not at all about the severe feelings of bodily discomfort, rather the opposite, about how the idea of using the princess-story to make a funky twist on hermeneutical suspicion filled me with feelings of pleasure. The decision to see my dissertation as a digging down through historical layers of mattresses and bolsters in search for the hidden that could help me to illuminate why feeling was treated as such an uncomfortable topic to experts on acting practice in Sweden was indeed thrilling. Historical layers of influence such as the rhetorical theatre tradition, Denis Diderot and his *Paradox of Acting*, the implications of modernity on acting, and, the theatre's turn to psychoanalysis as an exclusive guide to knowledge about an actor's craft all at once seemed like a playful adventure to pursue.

To describe what kind of twist on hermeneutics of suspicion that the story of *The Princess and the Pea* is intended to be it is helpful to turn to Rita Felski's recent article *Suspicious Minds*. In this article Rita Felski wants to rethink hermeneutics of suspicion and she starts out by explaining that to interrogate hermeneutics of suspicion and to accuse it of paranoia is only to tighten the screw of a certain kind of interpretative logic. Instead Felski suggests that it would be more beneficiary to see it as a multiform and mysterious style of thought. What Felski is getting at is hermeneutics of suspicion's own affective and attitudinal register, which she thinks has received too little attention. This affective attitude Felski describes as a negative kind of scholarly detachment that among other things is aiming at political dissent. The prototype that Felski proposes is the mistrustful detective, whom asks questions like whodunit and is equally dependent on distributing guilt as the academic scholar that uses hermeneutics of suspicion as her/his mode of criticism. Phenomenologically speaking, repeated over time this attitude turns into a second natured orientation that determines how the scholar makes an imprint on the world.

Having exposed the negative profile of this particular style of thought, as a typical suspicious hermeneutic, Felski sees a possibility to change the affective and attitudinal register into something less mistrustful and guilt-ridden. In her view suspicious hermeneutics has the potential to be: "not just a cognitive exercise but a multi-leveled orientation infused with a *mélange* of affective and characterological components. Neither a purely solitary and sequestered activity nor a mere reflex of large-scale social or disciplinary structures, suspicious reading is a lived practice of interpretation that is both embodied and embedded, a multi-leveled engagement

between self and other”(Felski 2011, s. 3). In order to accomplish this type of interpretative style of thought Felski reminds the reader of Ricoeur’s distinction between a hermeneutics of suspicion and a hermeneutics of trust. Felski thus proposes that by switching the track from demystification to restoration critical scholars could devote themselves to suspicious interpretation in a differently affected attitude. An attitude that would not only offer kinds of knowledge but also pleasure, which Felski describes like this: “the satisfaction of detecting figures and designs below the text’s surface, fashioning new plots out of old, joining together the disparate and seemingly unconnected, acts of forging, patterning, and linking. It constitutes an art rather than a science, an inventive piecing together of signs to create new constellations of meaning; a patient untangling and reweaving of textual threads. Its conjectures owe much to inventiveness, leaps of faith, and inspired hunches; suspicious reading, at its best, is not an arid analytical exercise, but an inspired blend of intuition and imagination”(Felski 2011, ss 16-17).

Contrary to how hermeneutics is generally perceived, as skeptical of pleasure, Felski is claiming that suspicious reading nevertheless produces types of pleasures: “the gratifying charge of inciting surprise or admiration in fellow readers. The delight it engenders is in part an aesthetic delight, a pleasure in creating complex designs out of textual fragments, conjuring inventive insights out of humdrum or overlooked details”(Felski 2011, s18). These elements of creativity and play should not be neglected Felski argues, since they affect and encode the suspicious hermeneutic with an entirely different attitude.

The twist on hermeneutical suspicion that I want to perform by using the story about *The Princess and the Pea* as a methodological tool of intervention, while studying the role of feeling in contemporary Swedish acting, is an effort to work in this different attitude that Felski is describing in her article. To think of hermeneutical suspicion as an interpretative style of thought that in the name of creativity and play can transform suspicion into a generative and pleasurable force seems like a promising orientation when the subject of the criticism at hand after all is acting, which is fundamentally based on the idea of play. Moreover, the emphasis on the fact that the attitudinal register of hermeneutical suspicion is alterably affective, although it hasn’t perceived to be so before, might not be that far removed from the idea of the unaffected actor.

After embracing Felski's new attitude little had I expected that when I returned to the story of *The Princess and the Pea* to start thinking about the twist, then the sensing of the hidden pea would take on an embodied dimension and the uncomfortable feelings that had overwhelmed the princess in the story became my own. The feelings of discomfort transformed into a spreading bruise. I realized that I myself carried an uncomfortable attachment to the whole feeling business of the actor.

The immediate feelings of discomfort were prompted by memories flushing back from years back, memories of attending a four-year acting program when I was in my early 20ies. No matter how uncomfortable many of these memories made me, due to the fact that I had left the acting program in the beginning of my fourth year struggling with an indistinct awareness of something that I later in life defined as a stubborn refusal to be sexually discriminated against, these memories could still be of some guidance I reckoned with reference to Felski's model of the suspicious hermeneutic as somebody who was not afraid to use the personally affected to make unlikely connections.

After spending three years on the acting program I had turned yellow and blue, but no matter how sensitive I was nobody ever recognized me as a real theatre princess. It certainly must have been the wrong kind of sensitivity that I had displayed. Consequently, instead of leaving acting school as the theatre princess I had dreamed of becoming I left with a potent suspicion about something like a hidden pea, already back then.

In acting school, and beside all the discriminatory and sexist stuff that eventually made me throw in the towel, there were all these questions about an actor's work on feeling that I couldn't piece together and therefore asked my teachers about. Never at any occasion did my teachers give me a thorough answer other than something like: "in the tradition of the later Stanislavski we conjure emotion by devoting ourselves to as bald actions as possible and if this approach doesn't suit you I recommend that you go to New York and take a class on method acting". The thing was that I wanted a conversation, a dialogue, or even some experimentation around staging feelings - - but the discomfort that the teachers displayed, bordering on aggression, just blocked any initiative of that kind.

To identify with the princess from HC Andersen's story has helped me to bring memories of experiences like this one to a conscious level and to create playful

connections between situations of suspicion separated in time and space. What's more, these playful connections between situations of suspicion created a zone of time and space travelling that I needed a traveller to fill. This suspicious traveller I call the Theatre-princess and she can travel in and out of stories, up and down layers of affect and meaning, and, create unexpected connections to memories and dreams. She is the multi-leveled engagement between self and other that Felski is talking about made into a playful character that can help me go through 20 mattresses and 20 bolsters in order to describe the pea-phenomena feelingly. The material itself calls the Theatre-princess forth; she is a play with an actor's role-playing. In addition she is the pleasurable realization of my old dream of becoming a theatre princess one day, that is, without having to go through any sexist discrimination to achieve it. Most importantly, the Theatre princess is a solution to the problem of easily alienating non-academic readers from the acting context that would be intimidated by the style of thought that usually is characteristic of hermeneutical suspicion and academic writing at large; readers that my dissertation is a dedication to in the first place. As such she is the tease that makes them find it worthwhile to continue reading – somebody that reminds them of the artistic context they come from.

The big question though, is what kind of princess the suspicious traveller is? Is she a classic princess, like the princess from HC Andersen's story about *The Princess and the Pea*? On the whole I think not! When it comes to some aspects, like the overt sensing abilities, I think maybe.

What about these classic princesses? Lets look at the princess in the pea-story, which is recounted in the role of the other to the prince's role of the first no matter that the story is titled after her. In this story the princess only receives a voice of her own, of agency, when she is to give an account of her sensitivity, the uncomfortable transformation into a living bruise. This extreme sensitivity that extends beyond the worst kind of discomfort is the measurement of the queen's pea-test and the guarantee of a real princess's "authenticity" What is a real princess if not the stereotype of an ideal woman! At least the recipe is the same – sensitivity, and that is really the main moral of HC Andersen's story as well. If you want (to be) a real princess/woman then encode big time sensitivity as part of your lived body until it becomes a neutralized style of behavior, an attitude. The more the better if you want to be perceived as a real princess and woman.

At the same time that sensitivity is being advocated as something for women to strive towards if they want to achieve the ideal it is also seen as something negative when it is talked about as an innate quality in women's nature. In other words highly double-edged.

In *Power, Myth, Meeting* the Swedish scholar Ulrika von Schantz writes about the rootedness of gender roles in the education of actor's in Sweden. One of the major problems that she identifies is how the female students often are perceived as too sensitive, which is talked about as a problem by the male students and most of the teacher's (von Schantz 2007). This double edge of being expected to naturally act like a princess whose sensitivity is posed as a problem in the next breath is a source of feeling uncomfortable. Many actresses wrestle with the double-edged problem of the real princess – how to balance the mischievous ideal and to get around the uncomfortable attachment to it.

Like the real princess that the Theatre-princess is, she has felt the discomfort of the double-edge and now she is ready to describe this bolster layer to other princesses, women and actresses out there to make them aware of this hidden dilemma. With the aim of doing so she first has to bend some of the classic values of performing princess-hood and to distance herself a little from the identification with the pea-princess.

Inspired by two performance characters that entered the imagery of Swedish popular culture during the late 90ies, Miss Universe by Catti Brandelius and Cookie (my translation of Gynet) by Elin Ek, the Theatre-princess is by no means a classical princess but an unruly one. Even though Brandelius and Ek were not aiming for their characters to be exclusively associated with the tradition of classical princesses per se, they both in their own way deconstructed the ultimate ideal of womanhood in mainstream culture – to act like a princess. It is this ability to expose the norms of the princess ideal by creating a princess that acts in a different attitude that characterizes the Theatre princess.

As a twist on the frequently used hermeneutics of suspicion I have endeavored to show that HC Andersen's story about *The Princess and the Pea* can be used as a valuable methodological tool when investigating the paradoxical role of feeling in contemporary Swedish acting practice- where I use the Theatre princess as a

suspicious traveller that struggle to describe uncomfortable attachments – with pleasure and without mistrust.



Catti Brandelius as Miss Universe



Elin Ek as Cookie (Grynet)

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