

INTERVIEW

D. 7. September 2012

Af Kristoffer Rom, record executive hos pladeselskabet "Tambourhinoceros"

You're a writer by profession, can you tell us a bit about your background and what you've written before?

I'm 57 years old and was born in the notorious Vangede, a suburb to Copenhagen, known for being the birthplace of the late writer Dan Turèll. My background is very middle-class, my father was in advertising, and my mother worked in healthcare and had office jobs. I have a brother who is three years my senior. I am married to Bente, and we live in a small village near Viborg in the Mid-Jutland region.

I started off in the 1970's as a director of a couple of plays, by Strindberg and others, during high school. Like many other young people I had been writing poems, but there was never any serious attempt to get anything published.

Over the years I developed a passion for Danish and English language and literature, and those two disciplines became the subjects of my studies at the universities of Copenhagen and Aarhus. I graduated in 1983 and after periods of unemployment and short term jobs I taught at high school and university levels until 2001 where I became a full-time writer. In 2010 I got my third MA degree, History of Ideas, at Aarhus Open University.

The university years had a major impact on my life. I became a rebel, an anti-authoritarian intellectual, and politically an extreme left-winger. I lived alone, in relationships, and in communes, and I developed a restlessness which was both a drive and a pest until 2000 where I met my wife-to-be. I tell you this because that life also became a fundamental inspiration for my writing. And still is.

After having poems and short-stories published in magazines and anthologies, I made my debut as a playwright in 1985 with "Drømmen om Hald" ("The Dream of Hald"), an outdoor play staged at the Hald manor near Viborg. I directed a few plays written by others, among them Beckett, and had roles as an amateur actor. From 1985 to 2001 I wrote and staged 16 plays, and directed 14 of them. In 2002 I made a trip to Los Angeles to pitch one of my screenplays, unsuccessfully I may add. My debut as a writer of literary fiction was in 2011: a collection of short-stories called "En måne af papir" ("A Paper Moon"). And this year, as you know, I wrote three songs for Kirsten & Marie's album. My next volume of short prose will be out this fall.

In your career you've done everything from scriptwriting over dramas to literary fiction. How has it evolved you as a writer to work in so many different fields?

It has done me a lot of good. In a play you have to narrow your language down to dialogue; apart from stage directions that's all you've got. You have nowhere to hide so to speak, everything is out there. As a writer this makes you aware of the wide range of possibilities and nuances in the language. In English a writer of plays is called a "playwright". This means that he is a craftsman, a professional who can put pieces of something together and make it work as a whole. The old expression for a man who builds ships is a "shipwright" for example.

The poetry that I write is a bit like that: The expressions have to be exact, no mistakes, no mumbling, no hesitation or unnecessary words. Prose is a different matter, but along the way I have learnt that the fundamental thing in any genre is to know your material through and through. A writer's material is the language. So my prose in the short stories bears the mark of the rest of the genres. It is short and precise – and it goes somewhere. In a screenplay everything must point in the same direction, everything must have a purpose. The audience will know if you fail. They don't see it when it happens, but something is not quite right. You can say a lot about Hollywood movies, and you should, but we all know that they are made by craftsmen, professionals who know their job. In my mind that's the main reason these movies are so popular. I don't think a lot about the readers when I write poems or short stories, but drama is another matter. You have to get it across to an audience who share a live experience.

It's all hard work, like making music, and most people don't think about that, because it seems so easy when the finished product is there. As artists we have to realize that this is not going to change. Never mind. We do this for our own sake, and we know when it's good.

You've been a long-time friend of Kirsten & Marie's family. How and when did you and the girls start to work together professionally?

I think we laid the ground pretty early. Sometimes I helped them out with their homework, and when they were in high school we discussed some of their subjects and projects. When they started their music career by touring different amateur concerts, I became curious as to how far it would take them. When we were together in their house or ours we talked about the difficulties with composing and working with texts. We shared the excitement when the EP with "My Dear" was released, and I felt it was both a joy and a privilege to be so close to that generation and its thoughts and creativity, and two representatives of it who were so focused and hardworking as Kirsten and Marie.

As it turned out none of us mentioned the possibilities of working together, because they were kind of too shy to ask me, and I didn't want to put any kind of pressure on them by offering texts. I don't remember who made the first move (they did I think), but from then on we worked together, and I'm sure we all benefited from it, and still do.

How was the work process between you and Kirsten & Marie during Newspeak? How do you go about writing lyrics for someone else's music?

In the beginning they merely asked if I had any texts or would write some for them, then they would make the music. We discovered that sometimes the process had to be a mix of text lines and music bits and pieces. It took a while before we actually sat down at the same table to make text and music become a whole.

Kirsten and Marie made me realize that at least two of my poems, which were being transformed into song texts, had to be changed in order to fit rhythms and chords. And at this point I had two major advantages. Number one was that as a playwright and screenwriter I am used to discuss possibilities within the text to obtain a certain goal or effect, to "regroup" if you want. And number two: I knew from experience that these two women were as engaged in the process of making our different approaches into a success as I was. Generally, I delivered a text, and they worked with it trying it up against some chords and tunes they were currently working on. Then they returned, we talked about it, and they let me listen to some of their attempts. We knew more or less where we were all going. At one point, in their family summer cottage on the island of Læsø, they took me completely by surprise by choosing a style and speed in the music for "Venus Descending" which was as far from my own sentiments around the poem as it could possibly be. They put some freshness into this quiet text which made it all turn out right.

You've written the lyrics to "Venus Descending", "Snowflakes From the Sun" and "Two Mornings". Can you tell the readers what these songs are about and, if anything, what else you want to convey with the lyrics?

As I said, "Venus Descending – Part 1" is, to me, a quiet, but rather intense declaration of love from a woman to a man. I wrote it long ago, but naturally the point of view was male then, and the title was "Icarus Descending". I changed it; we discussed the complexity of the text and the way the music challenged and sort of transformed it from something heavy with longing into a praising of love itself. It'll be exciting to see what is in store for us when they publish "Part 2". In Greek mythology the main story told about Icarus is his attempt to escape from Crete by means of wings that his father constructed from feathers and wax. He ignored instructions not to fly too close to the sun, and the melting wax caused him to fall into the sea where he drowned. So love can be fatal. The changing of the main character into Venus, who is the Roman mythology's goddess for love and beauty, was natural since it was a female voice or voices who would be singing the song. It also meant that a certain tenderness sneaked into the text as I revised it.

"Snowflakes in the Sun" first appeared on my facebook profile as twelve independent Haiku poems. They were written in the Japanese tradition with the 5-7-5 pattern, meaning three lines with 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively. The tradition says that the motif should be from nature, the scene should be limited, and that the last line of each poem should contain a kind of point, a quiet climax or surprise, or a change in tone. That was my original idea, but again these two young people surprised me by putting them together as a song with twelve stanzas! These haikus don't have an intention; they are pictures, scenes, or just examples.

I rarely write messages for the audience; I don't have an agenda to preach. "Two Mornings" is an exception to this. It's about a pregnant woman who takes her husband to the airport to say goodbye to him as he goes off to war. He is killed there, and as she once again goes to the airport, it is in order to receive his coffin. But there is hope in the song, because she now holds her little child's hand instead of his, and thus he is still with her, and the future looks a little brighter. At first Kirsten and Marie rejected the idea of including an anti-war song in their material. My thought was that Denmark being in Afghanistan (after Bosnia and Iraq) as a nation in war, gave an opportunity to describe a new experience as a Dane and as a person in the modern world. I

waited a couple of weeks and presented them with this small quiet, but rather emotional text. I only had to rewrite it four times – ha!

All of Tambourhinoceros' artists are Danish (except one) and they all write lyrics in English. Over the years there's been a lot of talk about whether this approach is devaluating the potential quality of Danish song lyrics or not. What are your thoughts on the matter?

That's an interesting question. There is always the risk of devaluation. We know that today Danish song writing is about Danes writing in Danish or English. If it's done badly in either language, the whole thing stinks. I mean, people think that they know the English language just because they spend hours, days, and weeks on the internet or watching movies or listening to music. It helps, but great songs are not necessarily the outcome. You have to learn, listen, make mistakes and correct those, take lessons if you have to, involve professionals and native speakers in the process, etc. etc.

The question is: What do you want to do? Pop songs which texts are drowned by the music, and which have no thoughts, no experience or poetry to offer? Be my guest. Like with literature I think it's necessary to ask: Do I want this to be satisfactory to myself, do I want this to be fulfilling and move myself in some direction, and do I want to put all the time I possibly can into it? If you want to be an artist who produces art, there are no shortcuts.

The devaluation takes place where talent has been replaced by noise and hyping. Happens all the time. If song writing in Danish is losing ground, there are many things to blame. First of all: The money and fame is with the English language worldwide. Then: it's easier to write in English than Danish ... which is a f**cking lie if you want to express more than "I love you" and "how is the weather?" – In DK it's easier to get away with bad texts in English than bad texts in Danish, but that's a whole different story ... or not! Maybe that's really the whole point. We have the songs we deserve, we have the song writers we deserve ... and what can you do if there's an audience who won't listen? Teach them? Bully them? The masses are never right, but are you willing to tell them and risk losing money and fame or the chance of getting it?

There's only one answer to it all: work as well as you can and keep on doing it. Risk everything, get blown away, and start over. It's not easy, but it's the only way.