

And so on and so forth – on the potential of death

And so on and so forth is a theatrical reflection on perhaps one of the most significant referential underpinnings of human life – death. The performance is an outcome of the collaboration between two groups of performers: Ljubljana's Via Negativa and Helsinki's Oblivia.

The concept of **Bojan Jablanovec** puts “his highness Stage” in the centre of the spectator's attention, with actors “offering themselves to it as if on a platter and hosting a regal feast in its honour – as it was stated in the announcement for the premiere.

The performance does indeed confront us with an unflinchingly powerful, expressive, even brutal presence of the *empty* stage, leading us to think about its provocativeness, alienation, artistry, magic, flatness, three-dimensionality, and so on and so forth, or, put differently, about its potentiality. In this case — though the actors are nevertheless present, but standing in the very last row of the auditorium, each with a microphone — the stage can be seen as empty in its full glory; the actors' presence at one end of the space only accentuates their absence in another. The freeing up of the stage can be understood as a desire to shift the attention away from any kind of visualization and performance, which, from the point of view of the radical critique of representation, easily falls prey to the discourse of the spectacle. The scene, breathing in its own rhythm, completely free of the weight of the performers or the burden of the performance, thus suggests that its territory might in fact be broader than conventionally thought; that it might in fact go beyond the physical border of the theatre.

Dramaturgically speaking, however, this marked only the prologue, a strategic enactment of contrasts. What follows is a vertical line of light that starts moving across the empty stage, “scanning” the space, accompanied by powerful music. This minimalist sound-and-visual intermission, suggestive of the apparatus for observing the beating of a patient's heart, turns out to be a vital intervention into the performance — according to Jablanovec, it practically amounts to the seventh actor.

Two perspectives on death

According to the media announcement of the performance, death, in itself a demanding topic constantly referred to in the narrative of the performance by bodily gestures of the performers — **Anita Wach** (Poland), **Anna Krzystek** (Scotland), **Grega Zorc** (Slovenia), **Magnus Logi Kristinsson** (Iceland), **Rok Kravanja** (Slovenia) and **Timo Fredriksson** (Finland) — is treated simultaneously from two perspectives: on the one hand through the common lens of the corporeality of the performative, and on the other through the discourse of the stage as an equally legitimate “subject” of the performance who also enacts some kind of an autonomous gesture. It is this hybrid quality to the performance — the fine balancing act between the active living bodies and the pronounced stage architecture, lighting and expressiveness in general — that is its greatest asset, a quality, which, no doubt, was not easy to develop.

The performers did indeed have to give their all to this demanding task; their task was to convince us, without fail, of the transient nature of the body and life itself. With a reduced grammar of their bodies, which, were, for the most part, in the position of corpses, they uncompromisingly alluded to all the weightiness of mortality. Meanwhile, by uttering fragments, they kept opening up associations with the absurdity of man's inordinate rush to tackle the everyday chores, despite the fact that (s)he is constantly

confronted with the inevitable, banal end to life. And so we get to hear (here only in paraphrase) excerpts from the various imaginary (or not) situations: *“As always the husband jumps into the sea, but is suddenly gripped by the waves, and cannot save himself ... his wife in the meantime is happily dosing, she had just had two glasses of bubbly wine. – The End. – Two Albanian construction workers come to realize that their boss is already dead, lying on the floor. – Looks like the end.”* Such paraphrases of more or less obscure examples of chores with a fatal outcome thus only reiterate the key motif: “This is the end”.

Amid the corpses

But the performance nonetheless continues until the end. For a while, one performer is arranging the dead bodies across the stage, the performers then haul each other, or rather they swap their roles as corpses and caretakers. This can be seen as a gesture of symbolic self-reflection by way of dragging around your own psychological freight; as an attempt at coming to terms with parts of your own dead self, as also a need to remove the dead bodies as fast as possible, given the undesirability of death in the Western cultural discourse. The dynamics of shifting bodies around gathers momentum.

Another performer addresses the audience with realizations and doubts: *“He is dead, and we are utterly appalled, totally shocked. — Where is the frigging action? — We are simply clueless what we should do! — I am scared; I don't know what happened...”* The subsequent spoken inserts are (probably ironic) attempts at investing optimism into a (literally) deadly serious situation — we have to be optimistic, laugh, so as to liberate ourselves of the excess of various predicaments, which, compared to the “last act” are seen as completely immaterial, not to say absurd.

The laughter of Rok Kravanja surfacing among the many previously heard comments and bits of advice belongs to the penultimate act of the performance, which — before it again leaves us at the mercy of the empty stage — underlines in fact the absurdity of death as well as life. At this point it seems, if only for a moment, that the stage is the actual “winner” in the allusion to the existential and psychological struggles (ultimately of every individual) — a stage as a co-signifier for the social framework of life, for it amounts to no more than the frame. In this connection we can understand the stage as a metaphor for the technician, bureaucratic, alienated coordinate system of society that in fact systematically reduces life to the practice of bare survival techniques, a career, to one role only, to only one formally valid identity of the individual. It can also be understood differently, however, as a possibility of a playful (inner) escape route from the mentioned absurdity.

The stage representation, at once accentuated and unmasked, poses an interesting tension or contradiction: in a way the stage devours the performers, who are (possibly) aware of its compromised nature and yet insist staying on its floorboards; can they then still establish a certain dispersion of the senses that could transcend the otherwise compromised system of artistic representation.

The stage that evades control

The stage as an autonomous set-up at times evades the usual control in this performance, something that is enabled and underlined by the (perhaps somewhat all too present) “seventh actor” — the already mentioned sound-and-visual intervention—, which, more than anything, supports the action rather than communicates with it. It is precisely and above all this very telling ability of the stage to evade control (discounting the few redundant segments of non-communicative “emptiness” hazily traversed by the line of light that would deserve further experimentation. In general this kind of exploration could contribute to the ever-relevant deliberation on what it is that we do in the deeply political sense when we pawn our bodies for the needs of stage representation (something that can be compared to the necessity of sacrificing bodies in rebellion).

Besides opening up this very broad question, the protagonists of *And so on and so forth* have, without a doubt, developed and enacted the symbolism of perpetuating the non-sense of existence alluded to in the title very effectively; a symbolism, which, luckily for us, is not hitched to the logic of *perpetuum mobile*, but is rather, despite the randomness, unpredictability and absurdity of death, a consequence, if we can call it that, of one's life's *play*. If this performance has enacted the potential of death, which can be socialised and opened up precisely through play (in this case situational humour), it has also justified its coquetry with the demonic, but also forever seductive stage.