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Radio Študent / Teater v eter, Ljubljana, 29. September 2015

Trust me, it is ...

Amongst the many performances at the Ex Ponto Festival that finished this weekend in its twentieth edition, on Tuesday and Wednesday of last week we were able to watch and experience on the stage of Kino Šiška's Katedrala the premiere of the Slovene performance Manipulations, conceptualized and directed by Bojan Jablanovec. Manipulations is the ninth in the series of the most current Via Negativa project entitled Irresolvable. The project hones in on the irresolvable tension between (modern-day) concepts and experiences that resist those concepts; or, put differently, it deals with the irresolvability of the fact that a term is a utopian and ideological construction, or – from another theoretical position – merely a temporary answer to a current issue, which, at the same time, is becoming a future issue.

Irresolvability thus becomes a potential transcoding of every process, a permanent state of openness, in fact a virtuality. Moreover, it is both an ontological and deontological motor, the skin of truth and ethics, but mainly the condition for manipulation. As Jablanovec himself had put it in a conversation with Pia Brezavšček following the performance, he does not take manipulation to be a method of falsification, but merely a technique of managing, literally transposing. Such a technological definition, we might say, is useful in that it opens up the Foucauldian problem of production of power, bypassing the simplified notions of false consciousness and power as repression; after all, Foucault spoke about power precisely in terms of technologies.

The fact that power is productive can and needs to be understood as manipulation of time that is yet to come. Power relations are manipulative in the sense that out of the present state they project one future at the cancellation of another. This human, even all too human situation Nietzsche described with the dispositive of debt. Debt is a promise of payment, and in order to be operative, there need to be persons capable not only of making promises and then adjusting their future according to these promises, but persons who can also be trusted.

This is the statement that emerges from Manipulations, which begins on the issue of debt only to pause along the way to consider the topic — or rather the irresolvable notion — of trust. Taking from the conceptualization of the performance itself: *“Trust is a weapon with which we combat fear, insecurity and indefiniteness in the future. Trust is fuel for power. And this is where manipulation begins. If there is no trust, there is no trade, no bankers, no politicians, no democracy, no love, no God. NOTHING.”* No theatre either.

What is theatre if not manipulation of the trust between the spectator and the performer, between seeing and enacting, between being a part of the theatre dispositive and the strategy of inclusion? This is the core of Brecht's stance. In the theatre of Jablanovec, Brecht has his ordained place. If nothing else, Jablanovec has stressed any number of times that the means of production and production relations determine both the mode of performance and the way of seeing.

That precisely is the crux of Jablanovec's method, which is processual and without a fixed or declared performative identity. The enacted vignettes that make up the performance are thus the product of an open relationship between the performer and the director, or, as Jablanovec himself has put it somewhere, his own confrontation with the performer.

Such a production method is relevant also for the Manipulations, since the performance is an outcome of an international coproduction cluster, encompassing alongside Via Negativa also the Teszt Festival from Temishvar in Romania, Theater Festival from Szeged in Hungary, Desire Festival from Subotica and Infant Festival from Novi Sad.

Even though the production and team situation were entirely new (the cast was made up exclusively of foreign performers), it did not avoid some similarities with the already familiar performative procedures from the spectrum of Via Negativa productions. Enforced throwing of plastic baby toys on the part of the audience, for example, reminded one of the throwing of balls in the final production Out of the project Seven Deadly Sins. Likewise the mimetic dog act from the same show can be compared to the mimetic monkey act in Manipulations. In short, the performative procedures, the constantly played-out issue of trust and its necessity, as for example in the dance of two women performers holding a knife between their breasts or the excessive drinking of water of one of the performers, typically exemplify Jablanovec's theatrical procedures.

The mimetic enactment of monkeys by naked performers does in fact have the status of a mythological transition from the animal to the human world. The transition from nature to society, from direct to postponed activity, to trust, debt, to money. On the large board, the word monkey, written next to the word people, changes to money.

This board, projected across the divided stage of Katedrala — the stage was made smaller, so that the tribune was effectively on the stage — as some kind of a wall is the element that turns the space of the stage into the space of the theatre. However, it does so in a very particular way: it creates a space that amongst other things allows also for questioning the dispositive of theatre knowledge, that is to say it works as pedagogy of theatre as a notion, a way of thinking and complicating the world. The start of the performance underlines this, since one of the performers writes the questions to the left side of the board/wall: *Why? Why not? But how?*, which can clearly be read auto-referentially: why do this anyway and how?

"Trust is a wall of questions that cannot be climbed over with rational answers", the creators furthermore say. The performance is thus enacted under the permanent school-like horizon, not to say university discourse, whereby the place of power is occupied by knowledge in a way that its power drive keeps eluding and is constantly masked.

The naivety of the equation that knowledge is emancipatory, which has today succumbed to the dictates of objective expertise guiding anything from how to brush one's teeth to how to lead a country, the performance Manipulations manipulate further still by writing out onto the stage floor a citation from a speech made by the former Hungarian premiere Ferenc Gyurcsany. At a closed session of his Hungarian socialist party, Gyurcsany namely admitted of not having a clue as to what they were doing; he said that they had been lying all along and that they had fucked it all up; the footage of the conversation later leaked into the public domain. However, for Gyurcsany, who was then succeeded by Orban, this did not mean losing his seat of power. The morale is clear, and can be encapsulated with the maxim (of cynical ideology): "Do not trust me, because I know what I am doing", or rather "Trust me, because I don't know what I am doing", or even, "Trust me, because I know that I don't know what I am doing". Trust is no longer a matter of knowing; it is not a matter of rationality, but of power relations or unconscious procedures by which these relations are formed.

I could say that Manipulations manipulate trust as one of the most unquestioned and irresolvable ideological kernels in a more or less familiar manner, although they go about it not too intensely. Piece by piece the performance negates trust, but it also negates negation itself, which is ultimately an affirmation within negation, a 'yes' within a 'no', or rather it is a 'yes' to a 'no'. More precisely:

trust is being demolished, but at the same time the trust in demolishing is being demolished, and yet there still remains some sort of affirmation (of the theatrical procedure) that may not be anything other than trust. One last crucial thing: it is simply good to see a performance that — at a time when it is modern, also within the theatre, to make pronouncements on resolutions at any cost, alongside creating spectacles, representing generations or what there is of a populist addressing of the indeed difficult spirit of the times — simply and quietly undermines that on which we have been sitting all along, whether we are watching the show or writing or ...

The author thanks Pia Brezavšček and Alja Lobnik for their insights that helped him sharpen some of the points.