Interview with B. Jablanovec about Just the Beginning
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The backside of the voting body is red-hot from all the slapping

In conversation with director Bojan Jablanovec, discussing the president, total devotion and the meat mincer.

Doesn’t matter if it’s not Number One or Flash Gordon and therefore hasn’t got all mighty powers; it suffices that he’s the president of the country. The theatre group Via Negativa with the artistic director Bojan Jablanovec at its helm is not too bothered about whom we the voters garland: “We are happy that you are what you are. No doubt about it.” At least in the performance.

Can you be more precise: are you saying we don’t need the institution of the president of the state, or are you disappointed with the concrete embodiments, or is it something else altogether?

The premiere of the performance happened to coincide with the presidential elections. Any other time, the address would have been exactly the same, since it is intended for every president of any state, government or party, in other words of any democratic institution. We are primarily thinking about the role we citizens play in a democratic system, about the role of the voting body. In a representational democracy the voting body is a motor which drives the motor. Its motor, its flesh, its food – all of them together. It’s summoning us to vote all the time.

Don’t be a slacker, we like to help, right?

It summons and we vote. The content has long been unimportant. It’s merely keeping up the form. We can choose only between the options given to us. Even if you choose not to choose, you are counted in. Democratic system is very intelligent machinery that crunches everything. It feeds and renews itself. Democracy is a meat mincer. Your voice is not about expressing your will or meant for anyone to hear.

Is that why the theatre must listen to these quiet voices so as to transfer them on more loudly?

The artist is part of the machinery. His right to create and critique is part of the mechanism. The more his voice is heard, the more it is included in the fundamental value of democracy – the freedom of expression.

Which seems like shooting with empty cartridges?

In a democracy all of us citizens, be it real or virtual, have the right to express our opinion, that’s why opinions no longer carry any real content. Every protest is already formalized and a priori counted in as a right to express your opinion.

And still: is it possible to imagine a people without a leader?
No. A people can only be constituted through a leader. This is pure instinct, not something democracy has imposed on us. Somebody has to make decisions in the name of the majority. It’s just that it seems to me that the system of representative democracy has emptied itself of any content. The more it draws on the discourse of change, the more I detect its desire for the status quo.

**So we have what we unreservedly deserve?**

I agree. Our democratically elected representatives are a reflection of their voting body. We need to be self-critical about this: they are what we are. They do what we are prepared to tolerate. That is why the poster for the performance has naked bottoms. We are both, I am sorry to say — asses.

**And do you still insist the performance is not a critique?**

It’s more a reflex. The backside of the voting body is red-hot from the excessive slacking. We are not performing from a position of a critique, but uncompromising support. Total support.

**But which is not total obedience?**

In expressing our support for the democratic platitudes we push at the limits of what is still physically endurable. We exhaust the voting body completely for the empty phrases.

**And what conclusions do you draw?**

That we are exhausted. And though nobody likes it, and though we all know that it is quite pointless, we go on doing this all over again. From one election to the next we play this game with the system in which there are no winners.

**You address these questions in the theatre which, although a public space, it is nonetheless closed. Wouldn’t you rather step out with the performance onto the streets?**

We are not street activists or protesters. We don't want to be designated critics of the current government. What we do surpasses the banal concreteness of any given government.

**Have you anticipated the possibility that the president could visit you?**

We have eliminated this possibility, that's why we have ensured his presence with the concept of the performance.

**And what expectations do you have of the spectator? Should he be the recipient or should he pass on the message?**

I wish for the spectator to recognize him or herself.

**Will this shake him/her up?**

I hope s/he’ll be able to at least laugh a little at his/her own absurdity and pointlessness.

**It doesn’t seem we lack a sense of humour?**
No. But it's true that our jokes can also sometimes have a sting.

If this is only the beginning, judging by the title of the performance, what's to follow?

The next beginning, always the same story. At every election the intimate and social expectations return to the point in which we hope that everything will fall into its right place. We always have only beginnings. Which we fail to see? And forget too readily that we have more than once found ourselves at the beginning? An apt diagnosis. Every time we invent ourselves anew: as individuals, a nation or a system. Our historical memory is really incredibly short.

And where does everything fall into its right place? Or, put differently, where don’t you fall into the trap of perpetual beginnings?

In truth it's impossible to escape this logic. Also in art. With every new project you must return to the beginning. Art is a game you play with the awareness that as an artist you must keep asking yourself questions, all the time and anew, to which there are no answers.

You create art, but you also enjoy it.

My enjoyment comes primarily from creating, from the feeling that regardless of the system it is still possible to create. And that no one can take this away from you. And there are plenty of interesting and intelligent people who are creating in Ljubljana, the city is even too small for everything we do. That's why the audience are very demanding and expect us to reinvent ourselves every time anew.

Don’t the foreign artists ensure a good enough soup?

Yes, but the audience is always the same. The independent scene has about 1500 spectators. We simply don't have enough power to extend our circle of spectators, because this would demand a lot more than the production of interesting shows. In Ljubljana the production goes as far as the product, a more serious positioning into the cultural supply of the city is for us sadly – financially as well as from the point of view of manpower – impossibility.

In other words, we can’t change the audience, we can’t change the citizens...

We have created a state for ourselves and we have learnt what kind of a nation we truly are.

Would it be appropriate to try and get the voter to be more engaged? Or to rouse him in any other way?

Voter’s engagement depends on the engagement of those who address him. In truth no one is sleeping, though we are sleepy, because the addresses we listen to cannot rouse anyone. Nobody is prepared to bang their heads against the wall for what we hear. We are somehow content that this wall of democracy is even standing. Even though it's a pretty shabby copy of everything we could quickly copy, we nonetheless feel safe behind it. The main thing is that it stands. The fear that behind it is only a black void has very big eyes. And all our presidents love to play on this fear.