

Menų faktūra, Vilnius

28-10-2010

Ramunė Balevičiūtė

Slovenian theatre today: time for the public

15-24 October Maribor, Slovenia's second largest city and the 2012 European Capital of Culture, hosted the 45th Maribor International Theatre Festival. The festival's programme was impressive, with performances from Poland, Hungary, Croatia and Serbia, a wide panorama of Slovenian theatre, student works and an international symposium of theatre critics.

Insecure audiences

Two things stand out when looking at Slovenian theatre: the artists have a lot of ideas (which they have the right conditions to realise), and they are simply obsessed with engaging the audience. In only three of the ten Slovenian plays or performances I saw were the audience able to enjoy a comfortable darkness in their seats. In all the others, they were subjected to a wide range of provocations: the most moderate case was that the actors addressed the audience by simply switching on the lights in the hall, and the most radical one was that you could even experience their violence (!).

The festival guests are an incredibly patient and tolerant audience. It was very accurately described by the actor Uroš Kaurin in his performance "Tonight I Celebrate": "You can endure a lot. We show up naked in front of you, masturbate, vomit, urinate, and you watch it all. Now you can give me a hearty pat". And the audience applauds. Of course, some are more benevolent, others more sceptical, but none of the performances collapsed when the audience refused to obey the rules. I was one of the four spectators who left the auditorium during Ivica Buljan's *Ma & Al* when Marko Mandić, the actor who had been monotonously tearing into the microphone for half an hour, fell with his whole body covered in sweat on the spectator sitting next to him and started shaking and pulling him, shouting "you're back", or "I've found you" or something like that. Some were delighted: "Their aim was to annoy you, and they succeeded". That's for sure. If he had touched me, I would have punched him in the heart. Later on, I had a discussion with colleagues about violence in the theatre. I think in this case the violence was simply out of helplessness, because the actors couldn't achieve any effect other than bad acting (probably largely dictated by the director).

A theatre that pays money

Before Sebastijan Horvat's happening Manifesto K., which, according to the festival catalogue, is based on Marx and Engels' communist manifesto, we were asked to come early because we had to sign a contract with the artists. According to the contract, we undertook to obey the artists' demands unconditionally and to participate in the event "as actively as possible". In addition, it was written in small letters at the bottom of the sheet that the worker (all the spectators of Manifesto K. had been "transformed" into workers) would have no complaints if the employers of the company Šalabai (which had "employed" us) destroyed (!) our personal belongings. We were paid five euros in advance for our "work". Several fellow Westerners refused to take part in this adventure, and we were allowed into the huge ornate hall of the National Theatre.

It all started with finding a couple and making out with them, according to the numbers of the wardrobe. Then everyone was divided into sectors and set to work - making sandwiches that were nothing like Soviet reality. Everyone got a euro for their work, which they had to use to buy one sandwich. That was pretty much the end of any association with communism. The "employers" treated the "workers" to wine, and then the real fun began: one had to classify oneself in a group according to the colour of one's hair, the number of husbands one had had in one's life, the size of one's penis, one's monthly income, one's intelligence quotient and so on. For almost two hours (in a bit of a simulation, I have to admit), we did all sorts of tasks, which were really difficult to relate to each other and to make sense of. They actually destroyed our belongings (the ones we agreed to give up), they ripped up euro banknotes and, at the end, before opening the door to a 'bright tomorrow', they treated us to moss by knocking the glasses into which it had been poured onto the floor.

This game, the only rule of which was to obey, brought to mind an episode from the Estonian play 'How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Rabbit', which had just been shown at Sirens, when a businessman or a normal person gushed about how he would not pay his own money for the crap displayed in the jar. It is really surprising and admirable that the Slovenian Ministry of Culture supports experimental projects so generously. "Manifesto K." - a truly expensive "pleasure". In addition to the audience's "earnings", a lot of food was bought, piles of copies of the Communist Manifesto were printed, dozens of cups were broken, etc.

Taking a very benign view of all this, one can appreciate the efforts of the Happening's conceivers to link the communist regime's imaginings - there is no other way to put it - to the practice of theatre as a communal experience. Unfortunately, everything was presented as a joke, a harmless and quickly becoming obsolete game, revealing a rather primitive perception of a powerful system. Manifesto K. "1984 - A Drama of Survival", initiated by Rūta Vanagaitė and directed by Jonas Vaitkus, is not even remotely comparable in its impact, even though the goals of the Lithuanians and the Slovenians are not exactly the same.

The avant-garde renaissance?

A group of young theatre artists from Ljubljana, under the Grotowski-proposed term "Via Negativa", openly declares their interest only in the interaction between actor and audience in real time in real space. This interaction is a constant change of points of view, assumptions, decisions, the audience's confrontation with its own expectations, prejudices, stereotypes, tolerance, etc.

In the three performances presented in the Via Nova series, actors Marko Mandić, Katarina Stegnar and Uroš Kaurin demonstrated different strategies of audience engagement. The first one was called "Viva Mandić". On stage there were two screens, between them a table with a single empty glass. When Marko Mandić appears, he climbs on the table, undresses and collapses into a plastic bag he has brought. Meanwhile, on the screens, we see different images balancing between documentary and video installation. The first frames present Mandić's truly impressive acting career in a matter-of-fact way. This is followed by excerpts from the plays in which he has acted. These are interspersed with the actor's own narration, in which he gives exotic statistics: the number of nude performances he has appeared in, the number of times he has had to masturbate on stage, the number of times he has had to make love, etc. He tells all this with a serene, innocent expression on his face, while his hand is making rhythmic movements behind a white sheet of paper... The most unexpected thing for me was that the episodes of Macbeth, Phaedra, The Brothers Karamazov and others, in which Mandić - the same Mandić whom I was genuinely ready to slam just the day before - makes me believe that he is a really good actor. It is difficult to understand from his anonymous narration what he himself thinks of his unusual 'amplitude'. Especially since the next screen is showing a completely pornographic exhibitionist video with Mandić in the leading and only role.

In an essay on the history of American performance, Bonnie Marranca presents shocking examples on the verge of upheaval and considers what we would refuse to look at when there seem to be absolutely no taboos. The artist's own terminal illness, the decaying body, the death of a loved one, etc. are transformed into performance. "Viva Mandić also, in one way or another, forces us to think about boundaries - first of all, the identity of the performer himself, then the spectacle, and then what is called spectatorship - the position of the spectator, his role. Mandić himself experiments dangerously with his own physiology. In one episode, caught on camera, he shoves pencils into his mouth, one after the other, until he begins to gag and vomit. He is no more pleasant to look at than he is in a blindfolded transparent bag. When he emerges from the bag after an hour or so, about half a litre of sweat remains in the bottom. The whole sadomasochistic act is crowned with an appropriate pathetic gesture: after filling a cup with his own sweat and exclaiming "viva Mandić", he drinks it. And finally, as if thanking the audience for its tolerance, he shakes hands with everyone.

The other two performances, *Nobody Should Have Seen It* and *Tonight I Celebrate*, not only provoke the audience, but also provide an ambivalent self-reflection: why do the actors themselves need this kind of action and what do they bring to the audience? Katarina Stegnar invited the philosopher and theatre theorist Bojana Kust (replaced during the festival by the charming Alja Predan, the artistic director of the festival herself) to participate in her performance. The latter is simply giving a lecture in which she tries to theoretically prepare what the *Via Nova* actors are doing by using complex philosophical paradigms. And Stegnar constantly interrupts her, travestying the philosopher's thoughts: "What, do you think it's normal for an educated woman in her thirties to urinate on stage in her own urine?". "*Nobody Should Have Seen It* vividly demonstrates what happens when the theory of theatre is out of touch with practice, or grows out of academic assumptions rather than the direct experience of art.

"The desire of the artists of the *Via Negativa* group to prevent theatre from being a museum is more than evident. But what it should be, the performances have not provided an answer. Analysing the communication between actors and audience can be an interesting and useful phase of creative work, but if one focuses too long on activating these interconnections, the question may arise: what do you have to say that is so important that you demand maximum vigilance from us? In other words, there is a danger that such happenings could turn into hollow, narcissistic self-referential actions, a shadow of the experiments of the historical avant-garde. I think it would be interesting for our own *Sad Dragons*, *No Theatre* or other young groups whose relations with the audience resemble an innocent flirtation to get acquainted with the experience of "*Via Negativa*".

Viva entertainment theatre!

Among the "traditional" - in terms of audience participation - Slovenian productions, I would single out Diego de Brea's *When I Was Dead*, an adaptation of an early silent film by German-born Hollywood director Ernst Lubitsch. Watching with pleasure this entertaining and simple but not bad play, a vaudeville story about the vicissitudes of the relationship between husband and wife and servants, accompanied by a lively tap dancer, I was thinking about our National Drama Theatre declaring its loyalty to an audience of lesser sophistication. Yes, it is an entertainment piece, but it is impeccable in terms of aesthetics and performance. It is a farce par excellence, demanding from the actors virtuosity in acting, incredible pace, and extremely precise and expressive reactions. It is a performance that makes both the intellectual and the worker gasp, and not cry with shame. Rough but lively theatre, to use Peter Brook's terms.

I am not going to make any generalisations about the state of contemporary Slovenian theatre, but it is clear that the theatrical processes in this country are alive and dynamic, that artists do not shy away from taking risks, and that the government supports this. Maybe something really interesting will crystallise from this.