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Lilla Proics

Hermes three times

“You have to tell a story that people can’t understand –
but would like to understand it.”

Joseph Beuys: KUNST HEUTE, 1989

The Balkan Connection was maybe the strongest event of this year’s nine-day-long Thealter Festival. The Via Negativa’s performance consisted of three parts – body, mind and soul – if I can say. And also an experience of theatre-theory and cultural history in a personal manner. Contemporary mentality and caring awareness of the performers and the director – with a deeply humorous approach.

The title of the first part (as we can read the projected translation at the beginning of all three parts): WHAT JOSEPH BEUYS TOLD ME WHILE I WAS LYING DEAD IN HIS LAP. Boris Kadin came on stage with smooth and strong attention and elegantly, precisely and effortlessly presented an understandable and exciting train of thought on art, the chosen topic, the artist and the power of action. This prepared the audience for the following part of the performance: The artist deserves a topic if he is able to identify with it unconditionally and can testify that with his full body. The body is the only place where the topic can reach its honor. Kadin explains with the help of modern theoreticians: The artists can be put in three categories: those who deserve, those who might deserve and those who surely don’t deserve a given topic. After that he asked the audience to contemplate a bit on the members of these categories. After the first category of those who deserve he made a pause and ordered us to follow him to calm down our minds. A slight laughter ran through the intense attention of the audience in the old synagogue of Szeged. Next day on the discussion with the two performers and the director it turned out that up to now nobody ever happened to laugh at this point of this perpetually developing, continuously varying production since 2007.

The second category is of those who might deserve their topic, but it doesn’t leave any mark. Now we listened quietly – and these interactions really were and are still exciting and worth thinking about. It was an unusual experience as a strong performer showed openness

and tenderness to deliver a simply composed speech on theatre theory and the audience listens with restrained excitement. Beyond the text's own power and its objectively interesting content, Boris Kadin propagated perfectly what he was talking about: such inner and outer harmony deepened our senses as audience members. Kadin's excellent physique and flexible mind "came through" to the audience members' undivided attention. This obviously was not a new invention of 2013 or neither of 2007. The theatre aims for this effect at all times (just as the spoken text also suggested) – but on 22nd of June in Szeged we experienced that even if a tidal wave broke in to the synagogue the performance would still go on.

So it went on: Boris Kadin turned into a rabbit (perfectly accordingly to the playful yet prophetic temper of Beuys). At this point he already only wore underpants and a stitched sackcloth rabbit-head with floppy ears, beady eyes (how could he see?) and lips Butick-painted mouth-hole. He is talking about Beuys, as a sculptor of great influence, as a performer, as a theoretician – who's socially concerned thoughts, expanded art-definition and curious research of creativity is still strikingly important. Following these questions we have to re-think the controversial question if one is born to be an artist or not. Beuys' astrological analysis with symbolic and mythological arguments puts our attention on trial.

But all this mess was not the result of some kind of momentary aberration – rather a detailed reflection on the works of Beuys completed with substantive statements on art history. For example: Joseph Beuys was the first to explore the power of action in artistic creation. He dissolved the borders of performing arts. He showed that animals can be equal participants of a performance. He believed that everyone is an artist. He was not far from stating: everyone is born to be an artist. Kadin spoke with covered face and applied certain text pieces into his speech with the purpose to loosen up the attention of the audience – so one could deliberately start thinking about the reasons why it is such a great revelation to get in touch with a so strong field of force and why does it cause such a joy to take part in an event like this. As nothing more is going on than at some other times, more or less frequent: we are sitting and watching a piece, at the end we clap and then go home. While everything happens in the most casual manner we are aware of the fact that a miracle is going on – that our lives are happening – and all the world is rotating (round and round) – all this because we can experience through one and later two performers that there is some kind of sense in it, because there is reflection, there is beauty. Obviously this rather can be experienced than objectively described.

So I will hang on to Gadamer's terminology of "feast" [1]. In the sense that -as Gadamer says- a piece of art is not a finished product by itself but it gets its meaning and certain qualities by the course of reception – just how the Via Negativa took us receivers into the course of creation. According to Gadamer the meaning of a piece of art "is not what the author, the

creator originally said, but what he would have said if I was his conversation partner". This implies that everything what I state here is just one single interpretation, one truth, one feeling among many others that were born in that moment and later in the audience. This gadamerian "feast" is some kind of self-serving time-stopper which rives away everyone who is able to take part in the game and get into the world of the performance. The goal of this game is to demonstrate the work of the performer (the performer or actor here means the artistic work being done by one, not the status or the education.) in a classical and plastic way. And as seen this game can throw some people into real fever!

The dramaturgy is sharp as a razor, so after that comes the well prepared second part under the title GAME WITH TOOTHPICKS. Boris Kadin introduces his partner with some more flirting with theatre theory: Novelty cannot be expected by anyone, new means originality, so it falls from the sky, so we can't count on it... The novelty and the originality are so fatal and terrifying that no one really wants to face them... We are researchers who are not terrified by the immersion for novelty. We are not afraid to start to work. We know what we have to do: dig, dig, dig. We have to know where to dig. The Balkans is the source-field of not only corpses but also of originality. The originality is so rare nowadays that if we hit one we can hardly recognize if it's original or not, because just the moment when a sparkle of originality is found it's taken away by bad hands. But that can not happen today. Today we have a Syrian-Serbian artist in our circle, a real bone-and-flesh poet from between Novi Sad and Dubai. The alchemist of the impossible, a trained performer, who got several wounds into the hand fight against the new and original. Sounds impossible and unreal but believe me everything, I mean, everything is possible: Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you the new Marina Abramovic!

And then from the right back comes Kristian Al-Droubi as the new Marina Abramovic. Kadin evaluated the results of the fight for originality: Kristian couldn't find out anything else than to shave his body and dress up like a woman. He knows that it's senseless, but he hoped that maybe something would still turn out of it. The terrific smooth sense of humor comes from this duality, how casually Kadin tells their method how the next part of the performance was made but at the same time how it worked as theatre, happened as a "feast". The clever and witty introduction ingeniously anticipated the relationship of the two. It is obviously personal-professional on the one hand. Actors sometimes speak about this when asked about their profession, but not often to be seen so sharply – as this time it's being shown with the help of knives between their fingers. On the other hand the second part of the performance accentuates the fact that they were born in the same country which later split up into several nations. Wonderfully cross-referencing model – the Balkan Connection is a viral problem. In the following moments we get to understand a meaningful sub-layer of the performance: the Croatian and the Syrian-Serbian performers were working with the Slovenian director, Bojan Jablanovec.

So Kristian Al-Droubi stepped on stage wearing female clothing and it was not funny and not awkward because he didn't turn into a female in the decently tight, lace-collared dress and the red pumps. He was not playing a woman but filled the clothes with meaning. With himself. Carefully – as it takes serious practice to walk in those shoes – he was walking bravely like a man and filled the theatre with his powerful mental and physical truth in his well-done entrée. (That got even more evident in the third part when he undressed during a conversation.) His body functioned not as a sign but operated the performance with his presence. Did not mimic or act, didn't use any unrecoverable technique, didn't want any wild thing, but took position next to a table in the right third of the scene. He faced Boris Kadin with determined tranquility, and they started to play with knives.

After placing the Serbian and Croatian flags (like ones from an ice-cream cup) on their chairs Boris Kadin and Kristian Al-Droubi continued the famous game from the performance of Marina Abramovic. Obviously sassy for multiple reasons, if adding the imaginary role of the Slovenian director to the situation. The table – the Balkan emerald table – holds two knife-collections on two opposite corners, at both performers' right hands. At the same time a video projection starts to show pieces of the performance from 2007 (documentary theatre inside the theatre) to demonstrate the audience reactions. I would have fainted too if I had to watch this – says Kadin and starts to tell some more stories from previous performance-audiences, and with the following short introduction they started to play the game on each other's hands what was played by Abramovic on her own: The Slovenian critics and theoreticians found out that to get into the history – let it be either political or contemporary theatre history – it regards blood and war. They found out that in the theatre still the living body has the strongest influence and in body art, politics are continuously written into the living body... Kristian still couldn't find his way into the modern European theatre-history. The only thing he succeeded in was to get into the news in connection with scandals and strange rumors. Opposed to us he is not afraid of the new and the original. He is more than sure that you want to see blood tonight. And I am honored with the task of cutting him. There was a lot more blood on the projected video than on the 22nd of June in Szeged.

It was the end of the first act. Just when we tumbled out the extra-interaction started as a half-loud rumor started to spread: one of the actors is hardly bleeding so me and my critic companion fast introduced ourselves as professional first aid providers (which was really the truth). So we showed up with the first aid kit provided and started to dress the wounds in the dark – as an interesting circumstance as we didn't have the slightest doubt that those were real wounds. Today I am not sure about that any more – I don't know but maybe I would say they were real. Up to that point as critics we already caught many interesting and instructive details from the performance and then finally we got into this situation when first time in our lives our role got really important: we could undoubtedly serve the theatre. To produce a

critique it's not enough to be a rationalist, but one must turn into an intuitive receiver, so it's in this case the term of objectivity is meaningless. However, this does not imply being biased if the critic is truly independent – precisely because we can only rely on our own intuitions.

The second act began, the third part under the title: INTERVIEW WITH AN ARTIST. Kristian Al-Droubi was questioned by Roland Orcsik (just how in the original production by Bojana Kunst) who said a few sentences about the group's previous works before asking his first question – such as: All the eight performances of Via Negativa are dealing with the acting strategies of visualization; with a strong focus on the different forms of presence and new pathways to find connections with the audience... Then he asked: The stage is full of the actors treasured private life and their intimacy and then it takes the shape of traditional presentation forms. Kristian, don't you think these tools are a little bit outdated?

Kristian Al-Droubi: For me the biggest quest is to pinpoint the moment what I have to pursue to the infinity and the moment when I should stop... I need to feel the realness of the situation. For example if I experience the audience as a woman in black tights, high boots and thong panties then I know that we managed to produce a strong performance and I imagine that the woman waits for me in the buffet and says to me: "oh, you are that young man from the performance" and orders me a drink, undresses me, we have a chat, she brings me to the dressing room, puts her leg on the heater and allows me to penetrate her.

Orcsik Roland: And now how do you experience the audience?

Kristian Al-Droubi: It wouldn't be bad if someone (for example you) after the performance would really do so.

Standing up from the table he came closer and said among some others this clearly understandable banalities – pointing at me. Next day a familiar man from the festival asked me, why didn't I stay after the show to avail the reformative offer – and really, why didn't I? After all, these terrible words were able to move me so much that I started to come to my senses only a week later. And I am totally sure that all the other members of the audience had a similar experience. See, how the precise theoretic and practical knowledge of theatre and the presence of the performers happened to work: stunning calmness, dignity, great courage and strength.

To end this interview on the mostly empty stage they played with the naked body with natural confidence. They didn't just illustrate the text but visualized certain parts. The text elevated the actor's propaganda: from the intimate details of private life they turned to modern philosophical references of intellectual epicureanism and then to the nonsense of introducing the performers genitalia to the audience. Some sort of slight media-criticism showed up when the genitalia overacted it's owner (it didn't). He worked against himself with systematic

ambivalence: The whole Via Negativa project circles around the single question if the performer can be real and genuine on stage. For me it took seven years to understand and accept that it's impossible.

Even though Kristian Al-Droubi's former acting-demo – when he sat across the table with his colleague who was wearing a sack on his head, calling himself a rabbit and talking – convinced me about his greatness as an actor-chemist. Mentally and emotionally delighted by what happened on the stage I was not alone: I felt that the majority of spectators experienced the evening similarly. This is not wrong because the arts have to be understandable for everyone. If only the underlying ideas were the art piece itself, why to have a sensitive theatrical scene at all. One obvious purpose of this performance is – to focus attention on Beuys' oeuvre – certainly a social work. The phrase said out loud in the performance “he believed that everyone is an artist” is to be considered crucially important, with regard to the social problems of the present and the near future. The performance ordered us to shape the closest and broader environments of our lives with awareness – with euphoric and liberating joy. Because of the frenetic level of involvement – what else you can do: you've got freedom to live responsibly.