

PRIKAZI

METICULOUS AND INTRIGUING

Barbara Orel. *Prekinitve s tradicijo v slovenskih uprizoritvenih umetnostih 1966-2006*. (*Breaks with Tradition in the Slovenian Performing Arts 1966-2006*). Ljubljana: Univerza v Ljubljani, Filozofska fakulteta i Akademija za gledališče, radio, film in televizijo, 2023, pp. 295.

After Branislav Jakovljević’s ambitious study *Alienation Effects. Performance and Self-Management in Yugoslavia 1945–91* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), which frames Yugoslav – predominantly Serbian – second wave avantgarde theatre from historico-ideological, and methodological perspective, and owing to the performative turn in the humanities in general, the field of ex-Yugoslav and post-socialist performing arts history has welcomed a new study. It is Barbara Orel’s survey of the Slovenian contribution to the field. As the book’s title suggests, her study places a very different, indeed a purely avant-garde emphasis on the same topic, accentuating its “breaks with tradition”, and with it, I would add, its breaks with the official aesthetics and ideological discourse, rather than, as Jakovljević maintains, manifold and intriguing ways in which “alternative theatre” strangely corresponded, or was to a certain extent analogous to, the so far invisible performative impulses that permeated political-economic imagination of the socialist times. This allowed Orel not only to stick to the primacy of (redefined) aesthetic considerations without losing sight of theatre’s oppositional stance

regarding the changing ideological horizons and social arrangements from the 1960s to the beginning of the 21st century, but also to broaden her field of inquiry, especially given a relative tolerance that Slovenian mainstream theatre and cultural politics exhibited when faced with the challenges coming from the so-called experimental (“alternative”, “non-governmental” or “independent”, depending on the decade) theatre scene. This is contrary to, for instance, continuous misunderstandings and half-baked antagonisms that continue to plague the situation in Croatia, including all noticeable parallelisms. I can hardly recall any pre-1990s Croatian example of what Elinor Fuchs calls “performance theatre” and what Patrice Pavis recently christened “*mise-en-perf*” or “*performise*” – that is, significant intrusions of performance art strategies into the classical field of stage directing, which is a characteristic of the late 1970s and early 1980s Slovenian performance strategies. These strategies include the names of such renowned stage directors as Dušan Jovanović and Ljubiša Ristić. Later proponents of the so-called “theatre of images”, such as Vito Taufer and Tomaž Pandur, followed by dance and physical artists and stage directors, only made the task of discerning mainstream theatre from the subcultural inputs that informed many performance innovations more challenging. Judging from Orel’s meticulously researched study, the already existing impression that the alternative scene in Slovenia was not only more diversified, more internationally recognized, and therefore more politically subversive, but that it also left a more consistent and lasting mark on the entire theatre culture than any other ex-Yugoslav space, seems to me to be now largely justified. It would therefore be unfair not to mention some of the more obscure

but still impressive groups and names of this early burgeoning landscape. Those are the Group 441/442/443 (later called Theatre Pupilia Ferkewerk), Experimental Theatre Glej, Student Actual Theatre, Nomenklatura and Literary Club Branik, which organized a whole range of events, from body art to literary readings, or Pekarna (The Bakery) and the stage directions by Tomaž Kralj with the Theatre Pupilia Ferkewerk, which explored ritual theatre. From the 1970s, it is worth mentioning Pocestno gledališče Predrazpadom (The Street Theatre Before Disintegration) and the Ana Monró Theatre, or Ema Kluger, with distinct feminist-emancipatory intent. When in the early 1980s an important new venue, Cankarjev dom, opened to host some of these "subcultural" artists, after the "political theatre" had already started to invade major theatre institutions in the capital, the process of mutual influence was in a way sanctioned, despite later protests against "the inappropriate content" which thus contaminated the sacrosanct space of the established culture. If we add thereto all ambitious theoretical circles that from the very start supported and actively contributed to the new artistic tendencies challenging the cultural and political pressures of the ex-socialist and then, in the 1990s, mostly right-wing oriented democratic regime, we get a picture of a small but vivacious, if not downright explosive performative developments right next to Croatia.

The choice of the two important dates that mark the beginning and the end of the period under study – 1966, when the first events by the OHO group were organised, and 2006, when Janez Janša (alias Emil Hrvatin) performed a re-enactment of the groundbreaking performance *Pupilija, papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki* (*Pupilia, Papa Pupilo,*

and the Pupilceks) – is another proof of the consistence of Orel's aesthetics, rather than, say, sociological-political approach to theatre periodisation. Her choice of important events additionally reveals her wish to integrate different strands of Slovenian performance practice, since the latter title was initially directed in 1969 by Dušan Jovanović, a playwright and director, and performed by Slovensko mladinsko gledališče (Slovenian Youth Theatre). Although that period is characterised by turbulent political events, including an entire war – which, however, definitely did not affect Slovenia in the same manner as Croatia, Bosnia and Serbia – Orel's chronological boundaries have nothing to do with any seminal political events; rather, they signal her willingness to situate Slovenian, as she says, "liberal and rebellious" explorations of a performing alternative to the inherited fixation on drama and conventional stage-audience communication in the context of international performative poetics, theoretical discussions and technical terms. These include Erika Fischer Lichte's "aesthetics of the performative", Hans-Thies Lehmann's "post-dramatic theatre" and "the irruption of the Real", or Michael Kirby's "non-acting". However, the more Orel delves into particularities of the Slovenian response to global movements – from the revolutionary 1960s to the more recent neoliberal capitalism with mediatization of the communicational landscape and the influence of informational technologies – the more these concepts prove to be insufficient for the exciting diversions of the Slovenian performing artists from the predictable developments visible in other cultural contexts. There is nothing, for instance, that could have anticipated the shock of the spectacular Nazi socialist realism aesthetics displayed in 1986 by Sestre Scipion Našice

(The Scipion Našice Sisters Theatre), a branch of the art collective Neue Slovenische Kunst, which puzzled both cultural and political authorities of the epoch, and ensured a bizarre career of Dragan Živadinov, who is still active today as the proponent of the scientifically over-loaded concept of "post-gravitational theatre". What was the Western counterpart for the fight against the system of "self-management"? That question was one of the crucial reasons why the institutional theatre performed many deflections from the party line, from the institutional politics, as well as from the expected modes of everyday life. Moreover, in this region, the subversive impact of pop-culture did not have the same meaning as in the West. The official party policy was extremely conservative, one could say even bourgeois in its conceptions of "high culture" and "art", which was further promulgated through the school system and public media. Hence, the party's specific blend of bourgeois taste and class egalitarian propaganda produced a very peculiar type of hypocrisy that had to be fought against with quite exclusive and sophisticated means. The problem of incommensurable standards of western and eastern *avant-garde* also includes the recognition of chronological landmarks that are unknown to the West. For instance, the Group FV 112/15 promulgated the so-called *cool fun* poetics of postmodernist pastiche, multimedia, fragmentary, processual and serial "melancholy" dramaturgy much earlier than Hans-Thies Lehmann evidenced it in other European countries. In the same period in the early 1980s, bold challenges to the socialist sexual standards emerged. A women group Podjetje za proizvodnjo fikcije – PPT (Society for the Production of Fiction) performed their humorous feminist interventions in shop windows,

much to the surprise of their fellow citizens, while Linije sile (The Lines of Force) exhibited a whole range of counter-fashion statements within gallery premises. These included clothes exuding "black erotica" of sadomasochistic and fetishist provenance, instances of "military image" alluding to the suppression of eroticism in totalitarian regimes, as well as unusable clothing items that undermined the very idea of fashion, or even folk costumes as reminders of a wholly different, sacral understanding of "women's wear", heavily politicized within the official discourse celebrating brotherly oriented "nations and nationalities" of the former Yugoslavia.

It is, of course, impossible to pay equal attention to each and every memorable event described in this richly documented study, especially when the text moves to the transition phase, when all different strands of the Slovenian alternative scene gained its proper momentum in interdisciplinary, hybrid, and heterogeneous performative practices that marked the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century. This alternative scene constitutes some 25 per cent of the entire Slovenian theatre production (and, unfortunately, only 10 per cent of state funding). A relatively high and still increasing percentage was prompted by transformed conditions of production, that is, by changes in legislation, methodologies of documentation and general acknowledgment that the "non-institutionalised scene", as it was from then on called, received in daily press and professional publications. However, one thing should be emphasised: in the period marked by "post-socialist" transition, Slovenian theatre obtained international recognition, owing to its institutionally based authors, such as Tomaž Pandur and his "theatre of images", as well as independent groups and artists perform-

ing physical theatre (Matjaž Pograjc, The Betontanc Group), choreodramas (Damir Zlatan Frey), contemporary dance (Iztok Kovač, Matjaž Farič, The Fourklor Group) and radical, activist performance art (Marko Breclj, Duo Eclipse). With the awareness of quickly shifting and even contradictory poetics, aversion towards logocentrism has recently given way to the return to "post-dramatic textual landscape" by numerous stage directors, from Sebastijan Horvat to Ivica Buljan and Tomi Janežič's interest in psychodramatic aspect of Stanislavskian acting technique. Orel remains clear-headed and focuses her last chapters on several remarkable authorial "case studies" that are the best representatives of the crucial poetical trends: Matjaž Berger's deconstructive "aesthetics of the Real", Emil Hrvatin's/ Janez Janša's "terminal spectActor" management, Bojan Jablanovac explorations of what Michael Fried called "absorption and theatricality", Igor Štromajer's experiments with digital performance, and Marko Peljhan's performance "heterotopias" in information society. The study concludes with some objections regarding common aspects of these actual performative trends. Orel discusses them as the attempts to save performative "originality" and "liveness" from contaminating influences of mediatization. Finally, to round up avant-gardist paradoxes, she discusses them as concomitant endeavours to preserve performance histories through reconstructions and

re-enactments of anthological pieces. No matter how internally contradictory this trajectory may seem to someone who still clings to traditional theatre matters in practice as much as in criticism, the very fact that some of these renovations were envisaged by resident directors, let alone professors and students of the central pedagogical institution in the field – Slovenian Academy for Theatre, Radio, Film and Television – proves that Slovenian alternative, experimental, independent, non-institutional performing arts indeed do form an awe-inspiring tradition that many contemporary Slovenian theatre artists look up to. Barbara Orel's study contributes to a paradoxical canonization of this tradition which "breaks with tradition" by providing it with its own history. Of course, its boundaries are porous with respect to other forms of performing, other arts, media, and scientific practices, and with respect to its social, political, cultural, and economical conditioning. Placed in a pertinent theoretical framework and informed by substantial knowledge of its European context, her research of this period of the Slovene theatre and performance art, written with well-justified equanimity towards all the actants that contributed to its profiling, still impresses as much as the most passionate, manifestly oriented plead for sustained innovation, rebelliousness and indomitableness of avant-gardist interventions would.

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