

In a vacuum of preserving bare life

Author: NENAD JELESIJEVIĆ, TEATER V ETER (Radio Student, Slovenia) Beton Ltd.: Ich kann nicht anders. 19. International festival Mladi levi (Young lions), Sports hall of the Sports Club Tabor, Ljubljana, 26. 8. 2016. Photo: Toni Soprano.

Does the retreat into privacy as an answer to the permanent crisis of the world necessarily generate freedom? What should focusing our attention away from the surrounding phenomena to the phenomena we produce ourselves bring? How do we place ourselves into an everyday community context, how do we influence it, what are we ready to invest into a community, how much are we willing to risk? Is the need for survival an excuse for our indifference towards the events we are witnessing?

"The bridge between being principled and practical is called survival" reads the description, of the performance *Ich kann nicht anders*, while its title simultaneously states: "I can do no other". These famous words by Martin Luther, who did not want to retract his stated principles and was therefore declared a heretic, load the performance with a meaningful burden. The question of the survival itself is a big challenge already, but the simultaneous adventure of practicing a critical stance that considers inequality a driving force towards revolutionizing social relations is an even more demanding task. "I can do no other" in this context can mean two things: I must resist or I can do no other but to surrender and accept the given circumstances as self-evident. Therefore, the protagonists perpetually swing between the poles of those two meanings of the title-giving quote.

To undermine the structural grounds of inequality means refusing to play a game according to the rules of the already existing. However, precisely this is the essential role of the critical art, which is in words by Zygmunt Bauman, "the most mercilessly punishable crime", and the punishment is, in the final instance, most often financial. The rebellious individuals and groups are not powerless as they can achieve the emancipatory effect through empowerment in a certain self-organized action and at the same time encourage broad socialization. For example, through carrying out various activities to help refugees, which surpasses the banal humanitarianism and is organized horizontally, beyond the exclusivity of

the state mechanisms.

We live in a world where the rebellious attitude, both collective, as well as individual, is being marginalized, punished and ridiculed. After all, it is being mocked by the protagonists of the performance themselves. On the stage, they try to structure resistance in a different way, through focusing from the global topics on the completely personal - for those who live in somewhat less comfortable circumstances even minor - dilemmas.

Among the variety of scattered meanings, connotations and associations it is precisely this turn that opens the key question: the question of socialization. It is enormously challenging to make a good contribution to creating of the functioning community of equals. From the safe, self-referential position, there is a long way to the honest coexistence in the community and it easily ends in despair.

On the horns of this dilemma, caught "somewhere in between" Primož Bežjak, Branko Jordan and Katarina Stegnar create a variety of interwoven contexts, connecting their own reflections of social conditions, exhibitionism, acting as well as performing as themselves. During the extensive talk that in some segments depicts the emptiness of the modern "pop-talk" the performers constantly switch between the general and the specific. In doing so, the connection and the qualitative difference between the external and the deeply intimate is shown, even though this tension remains "unresolved" at the end. This discursive variety visually matches the revealing, perhaps even very attractive "graphic" scenography, indicating some dystopian space and time, marked by a lack of resources, a sort of aestheticized shelter, where plain survival is the most important.

Authors become intensively absorbed in their intimate worlds and therefore put the audience in the position of voyeurs, as they keep ignoring their presence, despite the small spatial distance between them. They additionally stress this almost complete isolation through occasional sudden escapes - they resort to the hiding places from some danger, only perceived as such by themselves. This gesture well as the stains of blood on their bodies probably reflect certain personal fears, perhaps even unresolved psychological distress and injuries that they, as well as the audience, live or have to live with.

An association to the basic survival instinct is confronted with the comments on the provincial everyday life, with the so-called global questions and with excerpts from the everyday life of the performers. The message is therefore twofold: on the level of what is seen, we are in a hot air balloon, preserving our bare lives, but at the same time, especially on

the level of what is heard, we are in a prosaic, even bourgeois *Mise-en-scène*.

The potentiality of this staged duality, that functions as a metaphor for marking time, for preserving a status quo and as the anaesthetized will to live in designer clothes, additionally stresses the key question: Where - if anywhere at all - does the seen and heard lead us to? Or, in words used by the protagonists: "Shall we do something or not?"

The answer to that question is of course neither easy nor unambiguous and this fact is also demonstrated by the authors as they honestly express their own fear, uncertainty, the typical powerlessness of being trapped into a paradigm of the existing; which is, according to Pierre Bourdieu, demonstrated in the field of cultural production, in which authors are active themselves, as muffling of political activity, self-censorship and making pragmatic compromises at the expense of a wish for more radical critical interventions into reality. Interventions into reality are often connected to a certain danger, to sacrifice own comfort while risking the loss of the hard-fought position. In order "to do something" we have to step out of the "safety zone" that we created ourselves and with the help of others.

To do something and to step across the border therefore always means a heresy. In art, stepping across the border is a heresy on a symbolic level, another name for a critique of an institution. The words "I am frightened by these sacred spaces" in the description of the performance allude to the theatrical institution. "I am unresponsive and stiff as soon as I leave them. In the end, I am not worth anything". Admitting your own impotence to yourself, which stems from the involuntary need for confession, evoked by superior ruling power, is the starting impulse of the emancipation. To deny the power of the institution is certainly that what is required to realize personal autonomy.

Ich kann nicht anders leaves an impression of staging some fundamental existential fear, powerlessness and the feeling of uneasiness that still remain with the spectator after the performance ends. The form of the performance is built on the dramatic, and is based on the excellent acting skills of the three authors/actors/performers but the focus of the position of the statement remains dispersed. This blurring of the idea can be understood from the subtext as a reflection of the accumulated frustrations that do not manage to be articulated as specific (symbolic) actions but encourage the escapism and the feeling of being lost. However, also as an attempt of an unpretentious confession that puts babbling on relevant trivia into a function of the agent of the spectators' feelings and their potential engagement.

The starting point of the authors is that we are not exempt from the liberalism machine, which exists precisely due to the involved human capital and it is correct. However, rebellion against this is clearly possible. To exclude oneself, to be and to go beyond the existing is a lot easier in the community based on self-organization and perpetual concern for eliminating any kind of hierarchy. To contribute to building such a community, especially in the context of the production of the modern art, is a tremendous challenge nowadays. Even though the retreat into intimacy is affirmed as an island of freedom, we could feel that the Beton Ltd. collective misses this kind of community. Retreat into privacy is also a unique phantom of freedom since it also means a retreat from the challenge of the concept of freedom for all. This was also evident at the end of the performance as for a moment somehow sinister sounds from the outside could be heard. These effects stressed very well the fact that we were in the theatre, in a certain kind of vacuum. In the vacuum, of preserving bare life.