

UŠPONI I PADOVI, DOMAŠAJI I PROMAŠAJI... I ONO ŠTO SMO ZABORAVILI

O tempora, o mores!

The year is 1982, it's Bitef time, third week of September, as always. Atelje212's old dingy basement is fully packed, way beyond its capacity, an interesting mixture of hippies, activists, and college kids. And it is not even a live performance – it is "Bitef on Film" and the black and white film cranking from the old projector in the back belongs to The Living Theatre. I am watching *Paradise Now* in disbelief: skeletal Julian back is prancing around city streets naked, smoking weed, cursing wars and capitalism, and burning his US passport. Borka (Pavicevic) sighs with pathos. What I could not witness in person as a six year old in the late sixties, I am absorbing from the projector screen with my eyes wide open and my jaw dropped. This is the theatre I always wanted to make; this is the theatre Antonin Artaud was writing about! Alas, we will not be studying it in school until the senior year in Prof. Selenic's (Slobodan) course titled 20th Century Dramatic Tendencies (Dramski pravci XX veka). I already have the coursebook and have read it cover to cover. (I have just passed the entering exam at the Academy and my freshman year is about to commence in a couple of weeks.)

That night, I can't sleep, I'm memorizing The Living Theatre's mission as if it were my own:

*"To call into question
who we are to each other in the social environment of the theater,
to undo the knots
that lead to misery,
to spread ourselves
across the public's table
like platters at a banquet,
to set ourselves in motion
like a vortex that pulls the
spectator into action,
to fire the body's secret engines,
to pass through the prism
and come out a rainbow,
to insist that what happens in the jails matters,
to cry "Not in my name!"
at the hour of execution,
to move from the theater to the street and from the street to the
theater."*

After *Paradise Now*, a ritualistic, rebellious, passionate cry for action, they showed us *The Brig*, the old show from 1963, a piece much closer to new formalism than to Artaud's theatre of cruelty. I am watching in amazement again.

The new formalism has arrived in a shape of *Einstein on the Beach* by Robert Wilson, music by Phillip

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Glass. I still have lots of catching up to do and haven't seen it live few years earlier. I am watching it in 1983, "Bitef on Film" again (I think, not sure, I don't remember any more, it might have been elsewhere). Hours of painstakingly precise stylistic exercise with performers becoming just a part of an infinite artistic perpetuum mobile. The audience is mostly younger folks, many visual artists, dancers, philosophers, tons of turgs. Jovan (Cirilov) sighs with pathos. There it was in plain sight: a masterpiece of Gesamtkunstwerk in the height of modernism, theatre transcending the pitfalls of dramatic literature and confronting the madness of the world with the discipline of the form.

I remember trekking home after the show rather than catching a bus, I don't remember walking on my own two legs; I must have levitated all the way to Zvezdara somehow. *Einstein on the Beach* came to me as an epiphany what my life's work was supposed to be.

From that point on my whole artistic and pedagogical career will oscillate between these two extremes: on one hand changing the world through a polemic, engaged, socially conscious theatre; on the other – changing the theatrical narrative through eliminating the artificial supremacy of the word while reeducating and redefining our spectator and performer at the same time.

During my short tenure as assistant professor to Prof. Hristic (Jovan) at the Academy's Dramaturgy Department, in the wake of the ex-YU civil wars, I am smuggling video tapes of Wilson's contemporary European followers and showing the recorded performances to our students as a crash course of non-literary theatre. At this point the borders are closed, the students, less than ten years younger than me have no chance of seeing anything like this live. There is only one VCR in the whole school, it lives in a heavily guarded, heavy iron cage, chained and locked when not in use. The tapes are also locked in my desk at the office; they are somewhat of a treasure.

More than thirty years have passed – the year is 2019. I now live in the country which birthed both these extraordinary theatre phenomena, although on the opposite, West Coast. On no notice I am jumping in to help Prof. Draper (Paul) at Sonoma State University, and take over a few of his Theatre History classes while he is out on a family emergency. Despite the enormous class size of more than 50 students, and only three 1.5 hour sessions in which to cover the whole 20th century world and US theatre, I am looking forward to the challenge. Even the textbook which colleague Draper uses is a word play on one of my two idols: "*Living Theatre: A History of Theatre*" (Edwin Wilson and Alvin Goldfarb). It is accompanied with the whole media package – every lecture comes in a Power Point edition that can be presented to the students in the classroom, the class becomes an easy slide projection gathering.

My excitement is short lived. The Living Theatre occupies one single slide in chapter "*Postwar Eclectic Directors: Off-Off Broadway: Haven for Experimental Theatre.*" Robert Wilson doesn't even have a slide of his own – he is sharing his with Richard Forman in chapter named "*Postmodernism: Alternative American Directors.*" They are barely more than a footnote. I'm spending nights altering the copyrighted slides, adding my own photos and comments. US students ought to learn more about US authors who

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have shaped 20th century theatre in other parts of the world. I doubt my efforts have any lasting effect – The Living Theatre reads to young people in American theatre just like a bunch of hippies high on mushrooms and acid. The students have already learned in critical theory four legs good, two legs bad (Orwell be darned) that the images are bad, they are loaded with deceit, the word is however good and truthful – nothing can beat a fine play, magic realism preferred, naturalism more likely. They've heard of Lucinda Childs' *Einstein on the Beach*, some have even seen her dance portion on tour, but have no idea that there's more to that show than just the choreography. Interestingly enough, Lucinda Childs was not even involved with Wilson's 1976 production; she was invited to do the choreography for the 1984 revival.

I understand the times have changed: Bob Dylan tours the country singing Frank Sinatra's songs. I also understand the underlying urgency in the US theatre – as a young country and young literature, everybody's primary concern throughout the last century and even still today has been to create a body of literary dramatic work, diverse and vast as the country itself. Playwright reigns supreme on every stage, mainstream or otherwise. As a long term associate with Playwrights Foundation I have actively participated in that endeavor myself. Yet, I am still trying to nudge the effort, at least for a millimeter, toward a different direction, hoping that young US theatre artists will learn from their own theatre history as much as I did almost 40 years ago on the other side of the globe.

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