

Daubnerová's Ninth: *Masterpiece*

by Jana Wild - Svět a divadlo, Issue 6, 2020

The title of Daubnerová's latest independent production *Masterpiece* is meant to be inevitably ironic. The audience at the premiere undoubtedly realised that. Simultaneously, however, judging by the numerous immediate, and one could even say moved, reactions from her colleagues (and namely women colleagues), the audience embraced Daubnerová's performance as a true pinnacle of her work - as a masterpiece. Even numerical symbolism offers itself to this: performance number nine, the peak, after which, similarly to symphonies, it is both mentally and physically impossible to continue.

The facts seemingly contradict that, however. On one hand, Sláva Daubnerová still seems like a youthful middle-aged performer (40), and on the other hand, solo performance can seem like a microgenre that in no way meets the criteria nor the vastness of a symphony. Indeed, if we are to stay in the realm of theatre, the scale of a symphony is much closer to that of an opera and Daubnerová has done several of those as a director and is yet to do some more. So - why the pathos? Why the sadness? Why the irony in the name?

Daubnerová intended, thematized and conceptualised *Masterpiece* as her farewell from the very beginning - a farewell to her solo independent original projects of the singular union of an author, performer, director, artist, and producer. It is worth mentioning that she was creating independent performance art projects every year from 2006 to 2012: *Cells*, *Hamlet-Machine*, *M.H.L.*, *Polylogue*, *Illuminarium*, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, *Untitled*, after three years *Solo Lamentoso* (2015), and after five more her final *Masterpiece*. Daubnerová emerged on the theatre scene from non-theatrical circles (she graduated from cultural studies at the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava) and shined like a star straight away. She brought and continuously developed a completely new understanding of theatre in domestic context. Understandings of performance art as a mode of self-expression, self-transformation, oscillation between the theatrical and the visual, even conceptual art and time-based installations; of work with new media; of a performer 'freed from the dominion of a character'; of a performer as a medium. Additionally, she introduced a type of absolutely unique perfectionism whereby every millimetre of movement, whether of the performer herself or the space (including lights and sound), is predetermined, prepared and followed, because through Daubnerová's vision we

do not see a reality on stage but rather images in space and time. Her focus on staging (similar to the photographer Cindy Sherman) and construction that is based on Daubnerová's conceptual and analytical approach was perceived by several theatre critics as 'coldness', absence of 'passion for theatre', 'sterility' (Vladislava Fekete), and some have even attested to the artist's absence of 'genes to handle emotions' (Vladimír Štefko).¹ *M.H.L.*, which the critics have described in such terms at the time has in the meantime been included in 'the golden collection of professional Slovak theatre'.²

Over fifteen years, Daubnerová built herself up to be the foremost person accepted domestically and invited to produce internationally (directing operas in Prague, Brno, Mariinsky Theatre in Sankt Petersburg, or Karlsruhe). However, Daubnerová's unquestionable "know-how" and that which seemingly nicely supplements each other in her professional CV (her independent solo performances and directing in institutionalised theatres abroad) are incompatible in real life circumstances. As a dedicated author/performer, Daubnerová cannot survive in this country. After her "ninth symphony", she is leaving - and that is what *Masterpiece* is about.

Did I spoil the point? That would be oversimplifying it. The poster in which Daubnerová can be seen in a tight-fitting black leotard with a sword in one hand and a model of her own head in the other automatically suggests Hamlet. So: to be or not to be? Internal struggle. Doubt. Loneliness. Woman Hamlet. Ready to fight with her own head under her arm. Blue shadow that is cast on the backdrop by her body reminds me of an expressionistic motif: Hamlet and his/her shadow double.

Ingrid Hrubaničová once wrote about Daubnerová that 'her programme [...] is not to "chew up" her own experience, traumas and themes and then artistically translate them, but rather to "find herself" in [...someone] else and through someone else show herself as a small part of a bigger whole'.³ Hrubaničová referred to the fact that the performer reflected on herself through the personalities of the artist Louise Bourgeois (*Cells*) and the director Magda Husáková-Lokvencová (*M.H.L.*) at the time. Today, we could also add the poet Inge Müller (*Some Disordered...*), photographer Francesca Woodman (*Untitled*) and the bizarre

¹ A discussion at Dotyky a spojenia, Dekóder, Kód č. 7, September 2010, 40-41. [Translator's note: Dotyky a spojenia is an annual theatre festival in Slovakia. Kód is a journal published by the Theatre Institute.]

² zlatakolekcia.theatre.sk

³ Daubnerová's PhD viva, (Bratislava: Academy of Performing Arts, 2012), unpublished, unpaginated.

and infamous citizen of Štúrovo (*Solo Lamentoso*) to her array of mental projection screens. In her latest *Masterpiece*, Daubnerová employs self-expression in the opposite direction. She is the main character here, there is no doubt about that, and even though her predominantly dance-movement-visual-based performance seems very personal from the very beginning it is simultaneously grounded in a wider mythological and cultural framework. That is suggested even by the names of the individual scenes. There are nine of them (!): *Signature, Narcissus, Argonaut, Orpheus, Olympus, Prophet, Hamlet, Medusa, Museum*.

Nine stations on the road of Sláva Daubnerová as a performer:

In the opening signature choreography, she introduces herself as a mechanical puppet flung out by the expansion of the universe. In the moving light patterns and the musical sound design of Marin Burlas that sounds like screaming or the winds of the universe mixed vibrations, electrical short circuiting, and an unsettling jerky mixture of an abrupt drum and Kalashnikov rifle, the performer examines the spaces and her body within it in through jerky mechanical motions - backwards, forwards, up, down, battle stance, stepping into a strip of light, a challenge to fight, carrying a burden, finding a balance, unsheathing of a sword, imaginary blindfolds on her eyes, defence... A male voiceover (always in English - the translation in Slovak is projected onto the backdrop) recites the words from Marina Abramović's manifesto and repeats the mantra: 'Sometimes it is difficult to find the key' (to language). The sounds start dying out, the performer slowly relaxes her muscles and, as if surprised with herself, she finds out that the mechanical motions were learnt. The route that guided her own speech and articulation ceases to be directed by the outside and becomes open.

The second scene, *Narcissus*, which is a glimpse into her own inner self, is choreographically shaped as a search, realisation and defence of her face within the space. The performer holds her head from the sides with both of her hands near her eyes, she shifts on her back around the floor, she rocks and when she gets up, she is as if magnetically pulled in different directions. While doing somersaults and almost acrobatic positions, she keeps on holding onto her head while being pulled forwards by outside forces, jerked backwards. She huddles, stretches and contracts into herself. The voiceover, again from Abramović's manifesto, plays: 'An artist should look deep inside himself[...] The artist is universe'.

In the third scene, *Argonaut*, Daubnerová seems like an explorer of new worlds in a cold universe or the bottom of the ocean. With a spotlight that she carries on her chest, she explores the terrain and investigates the direction of her walk. A slightly enlarged lifelike copy/model of her head lies on the floor, blonde hair combed and tied into a knot, her lips painted bright red. The head keeps on drawing her attention like a new trinket she found. She illuminates it, approaches it, turns her back to it; uncertainty: what is that lying there? My head? Unknown anxiety from autoscopy. The voiceover directs the artist to be alone, far away from home, family and friends: 'An artist has to give up his self to create himself again' (Abramović).

The fourth scene, *Orpheus*, is underscored by continuous meditative music. A mixture of short texts by Marina Abramović and Michel Houellebecq is an invitation to suffering as a source of creativity. 'An artist should suffer', 'accumulate frustrations in great number', 'from the suffering comes the best work'. 'Do you really want to suffer? Do you really want to change the world?' These quotes are recited again like mantras until they are interrupted by uproarious canned laughter of an anonymous audience. It is not the laughter of ironists that would relativise the self-centred martyr but rather a voice of an ignorant disconnected world. The performer then moves from the intricate dance style to a more static mode of expression, from neck-breaking position on her back, through shaking while tiptoeing with her back bent forward, huddling into herself in fear, slowly getting up and straightening her spine all the way to simple grandiose pacing in a diagonal while slowly dragging the head behind her on a string. When she reaches the edge of the stage, she skilfully picks the head up and pours out glittering confetti. In the final ninth (!) part of the scene, she sits down huddled on the floor with a bust behind her. When she builds up the courage to look at it, darkness.

The fifth scene, *Olympus*, brings in an erratic musical tempo accompanied with a lightning design that creates a dynamic chess board in a square on the stage. The rhythm of the music compels Daubnerová who is carrying the bust in her hands to a physically demanding exertion: sidesteps, acrobatic exercises with the head, wading on her knees and even pirouettes. At time, she stretches her hands with the model of the head as an offering while on her knees, other times she holds it triumphantly, shields it away, carries heavily, tiptoeing lightly, overcomes difficult obstacles with it, hides behind it, or rhythmically jumps around it in a ritualistic or even humorous fashion. The voiceover says: 'You have to give

everything you have, your entire being'. Rustling sounds and noises start mixing in with the music and the performer lets us feel that she is fatigued, that she is only moving mechanically in the fading rhythm.

The sixth scene, *Prophet*, is defined by the artist in the programme: 'artist's route as a labyrinth, prison of her own demands, and the demands of her surroundings'. Slow kaleidoscopic images (all in grayscale) slowly flowing from one to another and continuous electronic ambient techno music create both a feeling of peace as well as a feeling of a cold, empty, infinite space. Four screens on thin tall stands are set around the stage and the performer with a sleeping mask on her eyes, high-heel shoes and a spotlight attached to her back like a backpack moves slowly through the space while blinded. Daubnerová's rotating head on the screen lip-syncs the text from the voiceover again (still a male-voice): 'an artist should be erotic', 'an artist should not repeat himself', 'an artist should avoid his own art pollution', 'the artist should not have self-control about his life', 'the artist should have total self-control about his work', 'so many women are great mothers, you are not one of them', 'you wanted to be an artist', 'you really wanted to be an artist'.

The seventh scene, *Hamlet*, is a choreographic variation on famous imagery of Hamlet and the skull (or a bust of Daubnerová's head, in this case) and his ritualistic stances and fencing manoeuvres in a constantly moving cross of light. The artist as a warrior: 'an artist has to conquer new territory', 'the goal of the society where you live is to destroy you', 'the weapon that it will use is indifference', 'Attack!', 'put your finger on the wound, and press down hard', 'speak of agony, of frustration, of fear, of death... Be abject, and you will be true' (Abramović, Houellebecq).

The eighth scene, *Medusa*, gives a voice to a woman. The lines written by Hélène Cixous for a change (still voiced by a man) sound urgent: 'Write your self', 'your body speaks true', 'your body must be heard', 'write your self', 'break out of the snare of silence!' The performer covers her chest with a corset/shield/armour shaped like a naked woman's body. Madonna's melancholic POP ballad *Live to tell* starts playing and Daubnerová's face lip-syncs with her from four screens spaced in a semi-circle around the stage. In a short interruption of the music, Daubnerová speaks herself at last - for the first time in this performance. 'I am swimming around the orbit in a space suit/.../I want to establish a connection/.../Who am I?/.../Who is supposed to understand me?' Madonna's song continues. The performer unties the hair on the model of her head and hangs it upside down resembling a Medusa.

The scene continues as a cordial confession lightly accented with continuously droning music while a stage designer walks around in the background and sets various objects around the stage. Daubnerová, still wearing a corset shaped like a naked body, sits down with her legs apart and her hands rested calmly on a director's chair and confides in the audience. Her ordinary-sounding monologue is a combination of personal confessions ('I love Madonna', 'I gained weight too', 'I'm sweating awfully, by the way. In this lycra costume'), scolding of the stage designer, exemplary reading of texts that she allegedly wanted to put in this performance (written by Heiner Müller and Elfriede Jelinek). But, in the spirit of Müller's *Hamlet*, she asserts at the end that 'my drama is cancelled; I'm not playing along anymore'. Daubnerová subsequently literalizes and self-ironically grounds this postmodern statement by 'telling the truth', 'writing her self'. She has fulfilled her intellectual capacity in the context of Slovak environment (by winning DOS-ky,⁴ performing at festivals), but what she is missing is a man. (On the backdrop, a Facebook link to her profile pops-up as a personal ad.) With a disarming openness and humour, she comments on her situation as a performer ('what would that potential man think about a woman dancing with her own head?') and a strong woman ('I can carry a stage light') that men are afraid of. She ends her reflection (and her career): she allowed us to look inside her, she said something personal. 'I promise I will never do it again'.

The final, ninth, scene, *Museum*, symbolizes the final deadening stage of clearing up her artistic life. Daubnerová installs key objects from her artistic practice (such as two DOS-ky) and her past performances (tripod, flowerpot, taxidermy fox, red shoes, miniature of a family house, model of her head, corset, or blouse) around the stage. The voiceover starts reading lines from Michel Houellebecq's *To Stay Alive*: 'you must attain the point of no return', 'as you approach the truth, your solitude will increase', 'fundamentally, you are already dead', 'you are now face to face with eternity'. The screens go staticky, the voiceover becomes distorted until it is unintelligible, and the performer who was mute throughout all of this, puts on a bunny mask. The white rabbit does not symbolize curiosity or the urge to discover the unknown anymore as it does in *Alice in Wonderland* or *Matrix*. In this case, sitting in a chair on the side of the stage, she assumes the position of a disinterested spectator or a museum guard. The end.

⁴ [TN: DOS-ky is a prestigious annual theatre award in Slovakia.]

This purposefully descriptive recollection seemed necessary in order to approach Daubnerová's *Ninth*. Fifteen years of the creative route of the performer who wanted to be present as herself on the stage and who self-transformed through her creative process is contained within the scenic sequence. The bust of her head in *Masterpiece* does indeed reference Hamlet and the skull scene in which the prince explores transience. In this case, however, it reminds us that the performer constantly produces her own self; that this performance is an auto-biographical self-exploration. As if she was always and again producing a state of autoscopy similar to the experience of a doppelgänger. She sees herself as someone else but simultaneously feels all her actions in her own body. Heiner Müller in his play *Hamletmachine* described this obsolete relationship between the object and the subject as a state of a person standing 'on both sides of the front, between the fronts, above them'. Finally, *Masterpiece* quotes Houellebecq in a similar sense: 'you are the grave-digger, and you are the cadaver'. And so we see Daubnerová both as Hamlet and Yorick, both as Orpheus and Eurydice.

The key to *Masterpiece* is hidden in the mythological references in the name of each scene. Daubnerová does not want to perceive her route as an individual pained story of searching for and losing of ideals. By positioning her story within the framework of other famous narratives, she legitimizes her own mythological validity and self-critically relativizes her own value.

I will not be interpreting every situation in the context of its mythological blueprint here. I will, however, stop at the gendered origins of those references. Up until now, Sláva Daubnerová was almost exclusively investigating women. In *Masterpiece*, however, this female element is verbalised only in the *Medusa* scene. Every other situation is projected into the stories of men - Narcissus, the argonauts, Orpheus, Hamlet; or they remain seemingly gender-neutral. She could certainly have supported her performance primarily through mythological stories of women but that would have hypothetically dealt with the role of a victim more often (Kassandra? Medea? Eurydice? Ophelia?). Daubnerová does not see herself as the victim. Her self-reflection is similar to that of Narcissus, her bravery to voyage into the unknown is similar to that of the Argonauts, her readiness to suffer and go to the edge of the cliff is similar to Orpheus; she is accepted onto the Olympus and chewed up by its rules. Brave, lonely, strong, fighting, and curious. It is as if she did not care about gender at the beginning of her adventure's expedition. In purely social terms, she went on

her own exploration of her vision of art the same way a man would have, as an Argonaut would have. That is not to say that she self-identifies as a man but rather that she views the exploration in gender-neutral terms. At a certain moment on top of Olympus while carrying her bust in her outstretched arms, we could even see in her both Salome and John the Baptist. And when in the eighth scene Daubnerová sits with her arms rested on the chair, the audience could even think of Velázquez *Portrait of Innocent X.*, or its interpretation by Francis Bacon from the 20th century. If such associations emerge in your mind, then Daubnerová's re-figuration of Innocent (sic!) cannot possibly be called blasphemous - incidentally entirely in Madonna's style as well...

The woman question, same as the question of the object/subject paradigm, surfaces towards the end of the *Prophet* scene. The male voice presents a controversy between the decision to be an artist and motherhood in a stream of simple clauses. At that moment, the artist takes off the black sleeping mask that had covered her eyes and, in contrast, covers the bust's eyes with her hand. As a woman of flesh and bones, she must face this question; as a bust-object she can/must be blind towards it. It is a strong prophetic gesture of the scene. Her place is on both sides. An unsolvable dilemma.

In the penultimate scene entitled *Medusa* (the name of a mythological woman that endangered men) intersects Daubnerová's intimate storytelling with Madonna's work that will elicit its own associations with the audience. For instance: Madonna as a pop-icon, a perfect dancer that goes full speed and all the way, a rebel, a blasphemer that denies prescribed gender identity, breaks taboo and outrages, a strong woman that unfalteringly follows her vision, and a woman that "always looks good". The performer describes this scene laconically as 'putting my skin in the game, woman art'.

I can imagine that Daubnerová's shift towards a cordial mode of a reality show and a private confession in *Medusa* can seem far-fetched and improper to some. Her emotional striptease when she says 'I am looking for a man' and 'I am looking for a sophisticated non-smoker' can shock more than staging actual physical nudity. It hurts. It disrupts the artistic experience. Especially if it is clear that up until now we were watching a dance, movement, visually-acoustic-technical, performative and even directive mastery and that her "performance" was "artistic" in every way. And now this. Banal? She comments herself that 'what isn't in postdramatic texts, is this/.../But tonight is different. Tonight I will say whatever I want'.

Daubnerová showed a perfect piece of performance in her *Masterpiece*. And yet the whole show headed towards its final point, which is to end - confessing a feeling of personal failure; towards that everything that she had attempted to achieve with her whole being loses its meaning and only belongs in a museum, if anywhere at all.

How does one “measure” a masterpiece, then? What is the position of a first-class performer when she sees no point in her own profession? Her environment feels like a cold impersonal universe to her that she only revolves around as if in orbit. Any interaction is minimal. An audience from a sitcom laughs inappropriately. Her stagehand disrupts. She herself has already had a show at every major Slovak festival and the lady at her local council office still does not understand her job description. Those are the facts of her life’s world. An alien. Nonetheless, Daubnerová mainly questions herself and her own standards. She can no longer fulfil her moral imperatives that attack her from all around and most of which - we can only suppose so, anyway - she has adopted as a person with an outstandingly responsible approach to both work and life. ‘I simply have criteria for breaking points, she said recently in an interview for Denník N.⁵ Sláva Daubnerová is a perfectionist and she creates theatre that is completely different to the mainstream (from the very beginning she found better reception with visual artists than the theatre community). Creativity leads to frustration and not to a feeling of fulfilled life or to an integral personality in such a setting and environment. Similarly, no matter how much she wanted to transcend this environment as a performer within the Slovak cultural space, her gender assignment has pushed her against a proverbial wall (even though she constantly and intensely questioned women’s fate). Not because her effort was subpar but because alongside her effort, she still has the needs and wants of a woman and those, as she shows, don’t quite match together. The audience is touched; female spectators identify themselves in her story.

Some other lines from *Masterpiece* also seem key to me. ‘The goal of the society where you live is to destroy you; the weapon that it will use is indifference’ - they were written by Michel Houellebecq. They describe a situation of an independent woman artist (with an emphasis on female gender) so accurately that any commentary seems arbitrary. And then ‘I am from a country that looks like a seahorse. But it doesn’t have a sea/.../I speak

⁵ [TN: Denník N is an independent broadsheet newspaper. The interview was published both in a written form and as a podcast.]

a clumsy, Central European language. Who is supposed to understand me?’ Elegant, poetic, comprehensive. A claustrophobic country with no growth or openness. And its language? It’s a trap. Many of us feel that way. Viliam Klimáček characterised himself in a similar fashion: ‘a strange author in a strange language of a strange little country’.⁶

One could say more about the texts used in *Masterpiece*, about the excellent choreography (by Andrej Petrovič) and the excellent dance performance, about the sophisticated light and sound design (by Milan Slama and Ľuboš Holík) and music (by Martin Burlas), or about suggestive visual elements into which one could read many references. (Other than some obvious quotations and self-quotations, I noticed for instance *Maison-femme* and *Fillette* by Louise Bourgeois; or the bust that was recently shown by Marina Abramović in her exhibition at the Krinzinger Gallery in Vienna; or actions by Vallie Export and images by Birgit Jürgenssen.) And the leathery corset shaped like a naked female body seems to me exceedingly phenomenal - it references a tied up and bound female body and simultaneously appears shameful and provocative and acts as a variant to masculine armour or a battle shield - it is supposed to protect; even though it also exposes in this case.

The different horizons of mental fatigue in relation to Daubnerová’s *Ninth* have now been explained. It is then also important to mention both the physical and “existential” aspects of the performer’s life, even if they fall under the “trivial” category. The performer, who is a winner of two DOS-ky and many other awards, does not mention these aspects publicly but they are still present. For instance, the absence of a stable space to practice, perform or store set pieces in (which are currently in her flat - her head sitting on a shelf in her living room is just an amusing *pars pro toto*), the inability to build a stable team, or even the apparatus to do PR or fill grant applications. In sum, they make her unable to achieve existential and professional continuity. What an asymmetry compared to state-sponsored artists.

All of this comprises the bedrock of *Masterpiece*. The microgenre of independent solo performance is after fifteen years and in nine “items” deposited at the museum. Daubnerová will continue as a director mostly in bigger and large-scale productions in institutionalised theatres predominantly abroad. For a country with no sea, it’s a mixed blessing

⁶ Jana Wild, ‘Divný autor v divnom jazyku divnej krajinky’, interview with Viliam Klimáček, KÓD, 2015, issue 1, pp 3-10. [‘Strange Author in a Strange Language of a Strange Little Country’]

The Artist's Universe

by Martina Mašlárová, 30 October 2020

A figure in tight-fitting black coveralls moves through light corridors in a battle stance, avoiding snares, and crawling on her back while a dynamic electronic song is playing. She is reminiscent of the action computer game heroine Lara Croft. 'Sometimes it is difficult to find the key,' comes out of the sound system three times. The words do not belong to a virtual character from a computer programme. It is a quote by Marina Abramović from her *An Artist's Life Manifesto*, which is one of the main sources of inspiration for Sláva Daubnerová's latest performance *Masterpiece*.

It's not a coincidental connection - there are certain similarities between Abramović and Daubnerová. Both are artists from Eastern Europe that have fully dedicated their lives to art. One is probably the world's best well-known pioneer of performance art, the other is considered one of the most distinctive creative-performer in Slovakia. Both even share some physical features. But, most importantly, both share a search for a key. A key to a specific piece, production, to an artist's life. An artist can often feel like a hero from an action movie or a computer game that wants to progress to the next level during this search, or like a cosmonaut on a difficult expedition with a whole unknown universe in front of her.

One could think that Sláva Daubnerová, who is considered a unique phenomenon on the Slovak theatre scene by many, has her route clearly set. Her "life in art" is an example of how one can go from reciting competitions to an outstanding artistic practice. Daubnerová has graduated from Cultural Studies, holds a doctorate in Theatre Studies, is a two-times recipient of Dosky award and is one of the few contemporary Slovak directors that managed to shine on the international theatre scene - in metropolises such as Karlsruhe or Saint Petersburg. One of the reasons for her decision to conclude her solo practice that made her known in Slovakia were calls from abroad for her art direction. And so she brings one chapter of her career to its conclusion.

Despite her successes, however, the artist does not mean to demonstrate an excessive self-confidence or provoke with egocentrism when calling her latest piece a "masterpiece". The opposite is true - she questions everything and honestly acknowledges her dilemmas. *Masterpiece* is about the perpetual uncertainty that accompanies an artist's creative process; about everything an artist is or is not, about what kind of image of herself she

creates, and about what her hidden reality is. It is an overwhelmingly eloquent commentary of our society, especially at a time when, due to Coronavirus, many artists experience one of the worst human and social periods of their lives, when their role in culture is questioned and slandered. After all, the feeling that she does not belong to this cultural environment anymore is also one of the contributing factors to Daubnerová's decision to walk away from it. Moreover, it's not by an accident that many of the images that create the inner structure of the piece carry the name of mythological characters. An eternal cycle of struggle accompanied by sorrow is a topic as old as cultural itself.

Daubnerová uses unequivocally contemporary methods and her characteristic humour in order to translate her struggles to the audience. In a scene entitled Argonaut, for instance, she takes a spotlight into her hands and, accompanied by a musical noise that is reminiscent of underwater silence, she explores her environment like a scuba diver surveying dangerous, mysterious corners. 'Silence is like an island in the middle of a turbulent ocean,' Abramović's quote from her manifesto plays again from the recording and we can see an artist in front of us that sets sail for a wild voyage on an angry sea of failures, disappointments, and a competitive battle in an unattainable ambition for the mythical golden fleece. All the while, the artist is destined to long patches of solitude - 'away from home, away from the studio, away from family, away from friends'. Daubnerová gradually develops these metaphors scene by scene, image by image (*Narcissus, Medusa, Hamlet...*) at the same time as she illustrates Abramović's manifesto with a slightly cynical distance - an artist has to suffer the way Orpheus did, for happiness is not productive. She must dance to a point of complete exhaustion and then strain to climb to Olympus; but she cannot die and she definitely cannot commit suicide while doing so, for 'a dead artist does not create'. An artist should also be a prophet, not own anything ('an artist should have more and more of less and less'). Yet the price for complete devotion to work is high - for instance, one reference to an interview with Abramović opens the topic of the (im)possibility of combining motherhood with an artistic career.

Daubnerová does not use many props towards the beginning. One of the few she uses is a model of her own head that symbolises detachment - prisms - through which the artist reflects upon her own life and work. The artist's head becomes Hamlet's skull, a way to lead a dialogue with oneself, but also a weapon, for 'an artist has to be a warrior'. It is also a

metaphor for a duality of viewpoints - on one side is an artist and artist's work as an object to be observed, on the other is a lone artist as an authentic being.

Masterpiece seems like a formally complicated and very meticulously planned performance towards the beginning - perhaps even too distant and calculated, considering the deeply personal subject matter. If it continued this way, one could say that it is a very well-done production but it would probably leave an impression of a cold construct. The turning point arrives when the performer sits in a chair in the middle of the stage (quoting Madonna's music video) and starts singing Madonna's song *Live To Tell*, lyrics of which describe the existential feeling flowing from the performance. The music playing from the amplifiers starts skipping after a while and the artist, who was silent up until then, starts speaking. The amplified music is replaced with an authentic confession - 'I am swimming around the orbit in a space suit... Who am I? I guess I am lost. I am from a country that looks like a seahorse but does not have a sea. I speak a clumsy, Central European language. Who is supposed to understand me?'

All of a sudden, the artist herself starts parodying an intellectual collage of intertextual references, bombastic light, visual and sound design, and movement sequences. Her allusions to Heiner Müller's and Elfriede Jelinek's postdramatic theatre set those of us in the know off laughing. Suddenly, we see an ordinary woman standing right in front of us rendered naked both in a literal and emotional sense by a corset shaped like a naked torso. She jokes about how despite claiming that she listens to *Einstürzende Neubauten* because of her environment, she has loved Madonna since she was little. She admits that she watches the television, that she gained weight, that she wanted to meet a man through a social network for cyclists, for instance, or she jokes about her inability to explain the essence of her profession to a potential suitor. The self-mocking monologue is further interrupted by a stage technician hauling various objects onto the stage. The high ideals and sanctity surrounding the art making process is suddenly confronted with the pragmatism of reality. Daubnerová's "stand-up" is a genius contrast to the first part of the performance and a prologue to the final scene entitled *Museum*. Daubnerová sets a collection of props from her past productions around the stage as if they were exhibits. This recapitulation becomes a symbolic full stop at the end of Sláva Daubnerová's career as a solo performer.

'An artist should avoid his own art pollution', Abramović writes in her manifesto. Bad mouthers say she did not quite achieve that herself. That she institutionalised herself as an

art term that lost its power over time, that she became a part of the art market, and that her politically radical gestures have been pushed out by showbusiness. Sláva Daubnerová has also become an art term in Slovakia but she is leaving to stand up to new challenges before the term becomes overused. And so, we can remember her performances nostalgically and talk between each other about the masterful crowning jewel that was her farewell piece. Hopefully, she will still visit this little country shaped like a seahorse during her space voyage.

The Various Identities of Sláva Daubnerová

by Miroslav Zwiefelhofer, 11 September 2020

Slovak theatre scene has offered only very few stories since the year 2000 that could compete with the uniqueness of Sláva Daubnerová's professional resume. *Masterpiece's* premiere marks the end of the performer's life's chapter in which she wasn't "merely" a director, but also a co-author and the cast. This opens up an opportunity to analyse both a specific piece and the wider context within her practice. *Masterpiece* is composed of nine parts. *Signature, Narcissus, Argonaut, Orpheus, Olympus, Prophet, Hamlet, Medusa, and Museum*. It shares its number with the amount of original performance pieces that she (co)created at first under the label of Theatre P.A.T. and later under her own name. It is important to state in the very beginning that these nine parts together create the shape of *Masterpiece* and demonstrate her exceptional attention to details, preciseness, and virtuosity while working with dramatic signifiers in several semiotic dimensions. A good example of semiotic complexity of the art piece is choosing SĽUK Theatre as the venue *Masterpiece* premiered in, even though further reruns happened within studios of the cultural centre A4 - Space for Contemporary Culture. One of the many themes of the performance is the exploration of identity - it is precisely this aspect that makes the space in Rusovce an integral part of Daubnerová's work. It was there that she said her farewell to her old label Theatre P.A.T. when she produced *Untitled* (2012) and started creating her original work under her own name with the following *Solo Lamentoso* (2015). I mention the border between the work by Sláva Daubnerová and Theatre P.A.T. because it is not an entirely formal matter. Even though the current tendency is to convolute these artistic entities, Theatre P.A.T. was a project based on a long-term partnership of Sláva Daubnerová, Emil Píš (now Emil Leeger) and later Pavol Graus as well. At around the same time in 2012 and 2013, she gradually shifted her focus on opera and theatre direction both domestically and internationally.

Route of Art, an Artist, and Sláva Daubnerová Herself

When it comes to *Masterpiece*, Daubnerová's attentiveness to theatrical motives becomes increasingly interesting since it blends with an equally elaborate multi-layeredness and

interpretational formal ambiguity. The piece can be primarily read through three main lines of enquiry that complement and blend together. I have already hinted at one of them - Sláva Daubnerová's primarily professional but also personal development from her first piece *Cells* to her final *Masterpiece*. It is possible to perceive *Masterpiece* as a process of Daubnerová's artistic and personal development, then. The beginning is the process of creating and defining her signature art style. It is followed by the conception and gradual development of a dialogue between various identities, or between an identity and entity if you like. The final stage is a closing confession and symbolic "putting aside" of her stage self into a museum that houses Daubnerová's work as a "mere" exhibit rather than a living and constantly evolving entity. Nonetheless, *Masterpiece* is equally a testimony about the life of an imaginary artist in a broader kind of sense. The performer offers a story without any gratuitous pathos or egocentrism in which an artist's existence is a world with no limits between the personal and professional. She offers a whole universe in which an artist has to inevitably come into conflict with society and herself. The interpretational line of enquiry built on tracing the female in the narratives of Western art history is also significant. This aspect of the piece is fully explored in the penultimate part entitled *Medusa*. Daubnerová suddenly ties a corset shaped like the front of a female torso over the mostly mannish-looking tight catsuit that she performed in up until then. Significantly, the sequence happens in the only part of the performance that bears the name of a female character while the song *Live To Tell* by Madonna is playing. For the most part, however, the scene references Hélène Cixous' manifesto *The Laugh of the Medusa*. The essay by the French philosopher, literary scholar and writer in relation to other signifiers within the piece positions *Masterpiece* into another/new perspective. The piece suddenly becomes a centuries lasting battle/process for recognition of women's relevance in art and art criticism. A battle with society, feelings of loneliness and ignorance, or inner uncertainty about the validity of one's chosen path suddenly ceases to be a story of an individual. It is a story of many generations of women makers who were unable to access the exclusive world ruled by men. Daubnerová thus declares her current social identity as co-created by swathes of her women predecessors. Her work (both in terms of this specific performance and her work in general) expresses respect and lays claim to their legacy.

Harmony of Semiotic Purity and Theatrical Allure

Positioning the symbolism of Medusa towards the end of the performance could also allow for a reading in relation to her death that gave rise to Medusa's children Chrysaor and Pegasus. One can thus arrive at an interpretation in which the children of the only mortal gorgon are the pupils/followers of an artist. Concluding an artistic practice is not merely the end of an artistic career but also a permission for another artist to begin theirs - an artist whose existence is also the continuation of the message of their maker. I draw attention to this also because it allows various parts of the audience to read the performance as well. The piece's effect is not limited to the audience's knowledge of Daubnerová's work, local contexts, or comprehension of specific cultural contexts. The creative team did not limit themselves to a theatre form full of self-serving parade of symbols that would be accessible only to a certain type of audience but rather they created a piece that has a large dose of fundamental theatrical mastery and purity supported by a creative approach to form and content. Seven out of nine scenes essentially use only three signifiers. Light design, mainly in the form of light projections on the stage floor, spotlight that is used mainly as a prop, and a realistic bust modelled after Daubnerová's head made of plastic. The artist's movement is framed by thin strips of light in the first two scenes (*Signature* and *Narcissus*) while the rest of the stage is plunged in darkness. Daubnerová moves on a diagonal across the stage, in the shape of the letter L, or in a line but always in a space defined by light. The world of the character portrayed here is still limited and the uncharted and mysterious parts of the stage that are still shrouded in darkness feels particularly intense. The artist is being born but is not ready to comprehend the complexity of the world and herself quite yet. The gradual process of being born is beautifully visible in *Narcissus*. Daubnerová focuses her gaze at a metaphorical mirror the frame of which is created by her hands. At a first glance we see a/the narcissist infatuated by her visage. However, the relationship of the head and the face start shifting gradually. It does not seem like gazing into a mirror towards the end. Her hands do not make up the frame of a mirror but instead try to contain some sort of abstract energy that wants to wiggle free of the physical body. That is when a spotlight shines on the real-life replica of Daubnerová's head for the first time. After the initial phase of the artist's journey, a new identity is born and hand in hand with it a new reality with new avenues of exploration as well. The lit-up space that defines the artist's movements now spreads to most of the stage. The artist's existence suddenly gains a new dimension. Nothing will be as

it was before. And so begins the *Argonaut* scene and Daubnerová takes the spotlight lying on stage into her own hands for the first time. She lights up the way in front of her so she could explore the unknown and new territories, she gets to explore and experience new paths as well as herself. The presence of a second identity on stage is intensified throughout the *Orpheus* scene during which the performance space is divided into circular spots of light. At that point they are still separate - they are yet to get connected into a singular entity in order to achieve the complexity of the real world. Similarly, the performer has yet to fully connect with the prop shaped like her head. The moment of the connection is also a transition into the following scene entitled *Olympus*, during which the prop becomes fully recognised. The outcome is another development - within the life and work of an artist as well as Sláva Daubnerová in particular. Another new dimension of the world comes to life - this time with the aim of attempting to do as much as possible in as little time as possible. The excessive pressure resulting from creative forces could, however, be self-destructive. That is why the *Prophet* scene arrives and with it the second deployment of the spotlight. This time around, Daubnerová carries it on her back. The light is not for exploration anymore but acts as a symbolic point of reference for those who would follow. The various identities multiply again later in the *Hamlet* scene. It is not just one prop of her head anymore. Several displays set around the scene allow another identity to start speaking both to the world as well as the performer herself. Identity is deconstructed into several distinct parts that form one whole. That is why *Masterpiece* offers several layers for interpretation. That is to say, Sláva Daubnerová is not just a performer or a private person, she is also a woman and a director. She masterfully manages to deconstruct her various identities in a profound way during the *Medusa* scene when she switches to a cordial speech and starts confiding in her audience in a personal confessional monologue. This part of the performance is indeed mainly meant to lighten the dramatic mode of the performance and entertain the audience. Yet the funny story about how she tried to complicatedly explain to a tax clerk that she belonged in the freelance category is not just intended to entertain the audience. Daubnerová also uses it to remind them that in a tax-managed world she truly is just a VAT number. When she mentions her social network profile so that potential suitors can send her a message, she does so because that is her identity in an online space. The same is true about the final part of the performance entitled *Museum* during which Daubnerová symbolically gives her farewell to props from all her past performances. They

are all on the stage. The performer uses each prop for one last time and then she adds herself to them and by doing so she finally bids farewell to one part of her identity. An identity that will remain a mere artefact after the final performance of *Masterpiece*. An identity that represents a decisive moment in Slovak theatre - in terms of reading and creating scripts, in manipulation with artistry within the theatrical form, in skilled erudition, in the ability to communicate fundamental philosophical stances in a legible way, and in many others. Farewell, Sláva Daubnerová, the performer.

Sláva Daubnerová and her Path to her *Masterpiece*

by Katarína K. Cvečková, *Kód - Konkrétne o divadle*, 12/2020.

Countless people have said and written that Sláva Daubnerová is a peculiar and unique phenomenon in Slovak art context. Not so just because she concentrates within her various occupations - she is a director, author, performer, and often the creative mind behind the artistic concept of her pieces. Towards the beginning of each piece's creative process is a meticulous research of any available sources relating to her chosen subject matter that she then combines with stimuli from other artistic fields. Daubnerová then translates the resulting material into a theatrical form by combining various approaches, such as documentary theatre combined with principles from physical theatre, approaches from visual art and performance art. The outcome is generally a confrontation of the performer's live body with the stage (or objects on stage) and projection technologies. Daubnerová's characteristic mode of acting is defined by her cordial tone of voice and efficiency of artistic tools that often purposefully employ monotony and distance or detachment. In terms of physical expression, Daubnerová tends to draw upon approaches from contemporary dance while employing abstract and metaphorical movements for their apparent illusionary quality. Many critics have noted (as did Daubnerová herself) that she does not portray or embody particular characters but rather she presents them, comments on them and contextualises them within her own author account. She uses her body as a medium to convey this account.

A key component within Sláva Daubnerová's work is her solo performance practices inspired by strong women artists such as the French artist Louise Bourgeois (*Cells*, 2006), Slovak director Magda Husáková-Lokvencová (*M.H.L.*, 2009), or American photographer Francesca Woodman (*Untitled*, 2012). One could even say that these pieces together with her solo performances such as *Hamletmachine* (2007) and *Solo Lamentoso* (2016) have defined Daubnerová's creative signature style that she deploys in various forms and with various intentions within her directorial approaches to theatre and opera.

Artistic Agenda of a "Woman/Artist"

Daubnerová has noted on several occasions that her choice of specific artists' lives as her subject matter was intuitive. Even so, they are connected through a certain inner and outer similarity (not only between the artists' themselves but also between the artists and Daubnerová). All of her chosen artists occupy an important place in art history - each artist has had a particular influence on her artistic field. Louise Bourgeois is one of the extraordinary personas of the 20th century visual art scene. She experimented with new types of materials and explored the ways of combining them in novel ways. Moreover, Bourgeois was one of the first artists to engage with art installation as an artistic form. Magda Husáková-Lokvencová was an actress and a pioneer of professional woman theatre directors in Slovakia. Francesca Woodman is considered one of the most original American artists of the 1970s and is a part of the American feminist postmodern photography movement.

By deploying their art practices, Daubnerová continued the phenomenon of uncovering women's narratives and removing taboo around women's contribution to various social spheres (such as the art sector in this case). This trend was at its most intensive in 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 theatrical seasons in domestic context when *M.H.L.* and three other productions inspired by lives of notable women were created.⁷ As theatre scholar Nadežda Lindovská asserts, 'It did indeed take a long time for Slovak theatre to take up women's narratives and for it to understand that audiences have been ready for a long time to explore and empathise with women's lives from their own country.'⁸ We could mention another analogy related to women's narratives when it comes to Daubnerová - the topic of searching/exploring "symbolic mothers, predecessors". This aspect is present in all three of her solo performances, most markedly in *M.H.L.* in which Daubnerová identifies herself with the life of Husáková-Lokvencová and her complicated path to her long-time dream of becoming a theatre director, as well as her inner conflict between career aspiration, self-realisation, and private life. These women become proverbial more teachers,

⁷ Z. Palenčíková, K. Žiška: *A budeme si šepkať* (2009, SKD Martin); P. Pavlac: *Červená princezná* (2009, Divadlo ASTORKA Korzo '90); I. Há: *Napísané do tmy. (Ne)známy osud Slovenky Hany Gregorovej* (2009, Štúdio T.W.I.G.A. Bábkové divadlo na Rázcestí). Teatrologička Nadežda Lindovská o týchto inscenáciách písala v štúdiu *Ženy z minulosti v zborníku Podoby a premeny hrdinu v súčasnom divadle*. Bratislava: Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy SAV, 2011. s. 46-60.

⁸ LINDOVSKÁ, Nadežda: *Ženy z minulosti*. s. 51.

examples, and authorities rather than symbolic mothers - Daubnerová learns and at the same time explores and develops her artistic style by engaging with their art.

All of the lives (and works) of these artists were affected by certain fateful twists, turnabouts, past traumas, and relationships with male authorities. When it comes to Bourgeois and Woodman it was their fathers, in the case of Magda Husáková-Lokvencová it was her husband Gustav Husák.⁹ Daubnerová's solo pieces are also connected through a similar range of themes: the topic of identity and testing one's own abilities and limits - the inner world of an individual in contrast to their relationship with their environment, community, or system.¹⁰ Additionally, by deploying specific artists in the context of reflecting upon her own inner processes, Daubnerová simultaneously creates a universal model of a woman-artist that comes to terms with her intimate traumas while managing her personal and professional life.

The French artist Louise Bourgeois engaged with construction of her memories as an artistic outlet in her series of installations entitled *The Cells*. She used the process of reliving her experience to come to terms with her traumas - it was an act of recouping herself. Daubnerová also uses this method of reconstruction in her work. By reliving the intimate moments of others, she uncovers both their destinies and at the same time her own inner processes. She studies the trio of artists from the outside (they are the subjects of her comprehensive research) and simultaneously from the inside (through herself, her experience, opinions, and emotions). Her artistic self is evidently present in her pieces - she puts it in the fates of the artists she portrays and at the same time uses it to translate her research interests. *Cells*, *M.H.L.* and *Untitled* can be understood as a concept of "theatre/performance as a confession", the confession being a multi-layered one. Confession of a specific artist is enacted by Daubnerová who uses it to confess as herself at the same time. Simultaneously, however, the pieces can be understood as a dialogue - Daubnerová in dialogue with artists that enables her to lead a dialogue with herself.

Even though Daubnerová did not intentionally define herself as a feminist artist and performer towards the beginning of her artistic career (she even disproved such claims in

⁹ [TN: Gustav Husák was a Slovak communist politician most well-known for his reversal of the Prague Spring political thaw and establishing the 'normalization' period between 1969-1987.]

¹⁰ These topics are also present in various variations in two of her other solo performances, *Hamletmachine* and *Solo Lamentoso*.

interviews before), several years with of experience, especially her positions in theatre institutions, have changed her mind: 'I was primarily exploring my own identity and my self-expression. I gradually started noticing, however, that the set-up of official structures is truly immensely patriarchal. (...) With hindsight, I started noticing a lot of connections with gender themes in my performances. I did *M.H.L.* ten years ago and playing it felt completely different towards the end than it did at the beginning. (...) Today, after all of my experience, I can finally feel through every single sentence differently and understand what Magda Husáková-Lokvencová actually meant'.¹¹ This interview demonstrates Daubnerová's constant self-reflective effort and at the same time a certain processual quality of her solo pieces. Despite the structure of her performances remaining firmly set, each re-run changes her motivations, her acting nuance, each confession develops together with Daubnerová's existential and professional experience - and increasingly so, since she is the interpreter, author and director of her pieces at the same time.

Intermediality as an Artistic Approach

Sláva Daubnerová's creative process is defined by its intermediality in multiple aspects - "mixmedial" in terms of combining different types of art as well as in terms of "high tech theatre" and her deployment of projection and other technologies. She draws inspiration from visual art in terms of form as well as theme in *Cells* and *Untitled*. She re-constructs the work of Louise Bourgeois or Francesca Woodman and contextualises them within her own biographical events and emotional states. Costumes and objects that occupy the stage are direct references to the work and lives of the artists being examined. Set design within Daubnerová's work gains the status of an art installation or a museum exhibit. In *Hamletmachine*, projection technology becomes the performer's direct acting partner as well as its digital copy, a method that talks directly to the central topic of doubling of identity. In *M.H.L.*, Daubnerová utilizes approaches and principles from documentary theatre to a larger extent than in her other works - she uses authentic documentary material and projection technology, which is in this case a homogenous part of the set

¹¹ CVEČKOVÁ, K. – DAUBNEROVÁ, S.: Sláva Daubnerová: *Sóla zostali mojim prístavom*. In *Taneční zóna* [available online].

design as well as the piece's art concept as a whole. These approaches together produce the effect of watching a "live" documentary movie. Something similar happens in *Untitled* as well, where Daubnerová explores the processes behind artistic photography and deploys a performance structure based on the tempo-rhythmic process of taking a photograph. She actualizes the moment of capturing an image with a camera by using light changes and sound backdrop (a short flash and click similar to a camera flash). Part of the aesthetic is portraying certain body parts in various visual frames (accomplished through light design) that are reminiscent of as framing as seen through a camera lens or the subsequent photo as an art artefact. Daubnerová always freezes an action in time and space and by doing so allows the audience to experience a 3D action instead of an apparently 2D image.

Despite indubitable intermedial character of Daubnerová's artistic work, the artistic processes she employs are consequently not her primary creative approaches but rather their deployment is contingent on the topic/theme/content of her chosen topic and are closely related to the topic's inner concept rather than spectacular effect and theatricality of her performance making processes.

The Role of Projection and a Digital Body

One of the coherent parts of *Hamletmachine*'s structure and concept was a projection from a web-cam stream that was capturing what was happening live on the stage and projected it back from different angles onto a glass showcase encased by four blinds. Another important aspect of the performance was the apparent semiotic manipulation of sound by using microphones and various voice modulation effects. The manipulation with cameras and microphones mirrored the key themes of the performance - playing with identities (the technology allows Daubnerová to "transform" into Hamlet, who then transforms into Ophelia during the performance). Daubnerová's goal was to interpret Heiner Müller's play in audio-visual terms 'as a labyrinth of image and sound'. The digital presence of the performer's body was linked to the topic of communicating with her self: self-identification/non-identification with an image of her, seeing/non-seeing herself in a mirror's reflection, doubling of identity. Daubnerová used four webcams that were purposefully mediating an imperfect image - it was slightly grainy and would come with a slight delay, which allowed the performer to create a technical, mechanical effect.

Simultaneously, the imperfection highlighted the coldness and lifelessness of a digital body. Theatre scholar Dáša Čiripová noticed similar aspects in her article: 'Zoomed up video feed of Hamlet/Sláva Daubnerová's face does not act merely as an aesthetic effect but also asks questions about identity, playing with reality and illusion, and evokes a feeling of isolation, non-communication and coldness'.¹²

Daubnerová also used video as a medium and its associated technologies in various ways in *M.H.L.* On one hand she deployed it as a creative principle - she used the processes of editing and documentary movie effects, she also used projection as a part of her set design and visual concept that contextualises the time period and actualises Lokvencová's work. At the same time, she employed a digital doubling of her body - she created a virtual copy of herself that became her direct acting partner. Together with the video-artist Lukáš Kodoň, they decided to use a translucent tulle fabric as their projection screen - a principle similar to *theatergraph*¹³ that was also employed by the interwar Czech avant-garde theatre maker Emil František Burian. The screen was used as a projection screen for images and photographs that documented Magda Husáková-Lokvencová's time period and by doing so allowed access to her artistic work. The images being projected were not merely documentary in character. Daubnerová used the principles of live cinema again - the translucent screen would show close-ups on her hands for instance (always in a different action - setting a table, writing on a typewriter, gluing a broken plate together, making coffee, etc.), that were being captured by a camera positioned in a lamp on a small table. The second projection screen were doors in the back of the stage that were used to project videos evocative of the paternoster lift carrying the artist. In the first phase of the performance, the performer goes up the paternoster, in the second, she goes down. The videos are accompanied by audio-recordings of authentic reviews about Husáková-Lokvencová's directorial successes and failures. The performer's digital body seems trapped in the paternoster, she goes down or up without any agency of her own - her trajectory is dictated by circumstances and reviews. This projection screen was also used to project real-

¹² ČIRIPOVÁ, Dáša: Nová divadelná komunikácia. In *Vlna*, 2007, roč. IX., č. 33. s. 99.

¹³ Theatergraph is a scene making and theatre production technique that uses projection on translucent and see-through screens, which allows perceiving both a video and diapositive simultaneously with the 3D action happening on stage.

time close-ups of the performer's face (her voice was amplified by a microphone) that were meant to evoke the impression of a documentary movie.

Set Design as an Installation/Installation as a Set Design

Daubnerová's concepts are predominantly based on visual principles. She is simultaneously a costume designer and set designer in all her performances and her artistic concepts are always closely connected with her subject matter - a specific artist and her work, as well as the formal processes that her work requires.

The Cells art installation series by Louis Bourgeois was created towards the end of the 1980s. The artist used large rooms with authentic prison walls connected through doors and windows. They were furnished with various pieces of furniture, mirrors, every-day personal items, etc. that represented specific documents of the artist's memories. The rooms seemed like an inescapable prison, a biological cell, but also an isolated space where intimate stories take place. The stage in Daubnerová's piece was stylised after one of those cells. The stage was demarcated with white tape and divided into two parts. The back of the stage had a white wall that the artist wrote on with a piece of charcoal, a glass showcase with pickling jars, and two metal chairs with no seats hanging in the space. The space in the back represented the artist's memories and traumatic childhood experiences and at the same time each object served as an analogy to specific pieces created by Bourgeois. The second part was the front of the stage that the performer used to position items from the showcase and install them around the space. This technique as if allowed her to recycle the French artist's works, to read it out of its original context and reposition it into a new one. Daubnerová intervened into the installation, actively re-made it and re-assigned new meanings to objects and materials - not only new meanings in relation to Bourgeois but also to Daubnerová herself.

Part of the stage design in *M.H.L.* were all the particularities of Studio 12's stage (massive double door that looked like paternoster lifts, two pillars that framed the stage space, or hardwood floors) - there was a tripod with a camera on the left side and a period microphone on a stand on the right-hand side. The only thing between the two pillars was a projection screen and a director's desk (an essential part of Lokvencová's occupation and simultaneously an object in several photographs of her). Another important part of the

artistic concept was the costume - Daubnerová tried to capture both Lokvencová's elegance as well as the spirit of her time. She created twelve unique outfits that she changed into during her performances - they were supposed to chart the director's transformation from her youth all the way to her maturity. As opposed to other Daubnerová's performances, *M.H.L.* was unique in its comprehensible theatricality - the performance bore more evident signs of documentary theatre and the stage met more conditions of a theatre set design than an art installation, even though the performer once again gradually introduced various items on stage that symbolised a part of Lokvencová's life or her character (folders represented the part of her life when she worked as a clerk in the Bank of Moravia, broken plate that she glues together shows her carefulness, precisions and could be interpreted as her attempts to "glue" her family together).

Untitled was based on the principle of a stage image map composed out of Francesca Woodman's specific photographs and the structure of the performance was similar to assemblage. The stage space could be explicitly interpreted as a photo studio or more symbolically as an image of the young photographer's disordered soul, of her mind full of inspired imagery. At the same time, it could be viewed as an art installation or a museum exhibition composed out of various artefacts from the photographer's life and work. In the middle of the stage was a divider that looked like a derelict dirty wall that was in many of Woodman's photographs with a white calla lily propped up against it. The divider was also used as a projection screen that showed quotes from Woodman's diary that was published as a book entitled *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*.¹⁴ On the right-hand side in front of the divider were an old vintage camera on a tripod and a white spinning piano stool with some framed photos. Under it was an empty picture frame with a spotlight illuminating it. On the front left side was a still-life composition of rocks, dried up branches and a stuffed bird. Daubnerová would also later bring various pieces of clothing (that she would put on and take off), tights, or a stuffed fox. All of these objects were direct references to Woodman's photographs and simultaneously contributed to the surreal installation emerging on stage. They were art exhibits and the performer treated them as such - when she was carefully setting up framed photographs on the floor or when putting on white

¹⁴ The book title (and the topic of suicide) inspired Daubnerová's later piece *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (2011) that she created together with dramaturge Pavol Graus. The piece was not, however, inspired primarily by Francesca Woodman's life but also by the life and work of Heiner Müller and his wife Inge Müller.

vintage gloves. The most significant object in the piece was the performer's body. After all, most of Woodman's photographs are auto portraits that predominantly capture Woodman's body in various positions - naked, dressed in Victorian dresses, reflected, fragmented, deformed, bent into unnatural positions, hidden, or even ostensibly displayed.

Daubnerová's performance-making approach of employing a host of visual stimuli is also apparent in her creative movement vocabulary. She sought inspiration in pictures and photographs from newspapers and magazines when creating *Hamletmachine* to help her find strange poses and gestures. Her approach was similar when it came to *M.H.L.* as well - in this case, however, she based the performance exclusively on authentic photographs of Lokvencová and paid attention to even the smallest details, expressions, clothing, accessories, or atmosphere. They influenced the costume design process of the twelve dresses used in the performance as well as her movement representation of the character and the structure of the *mise-en-scène* as a whole. When it comes to *Untitled*, the choreography was created in collaboration with Vlčeková inspired by specific motives from Woodman's photographs. In the case of *Untitled*, however, Daubnerová's focus was not merely gaining inspiration from poses or expressions but rather she attempted to animate and activate Woodman's photographs. It was as if she developed her own individual deformed poses from the photographs, or as if she tried to embody mood, atmosphere or emotion of the image through her movement. The choreography was marked by Stanislava Vlčeková's dancing movement vocabulary that was defined by continuous and graceful motions that prioritized abstraction and emotionality as well as notable gestural expressiveness. Daubnerová deploys her body and movements to explore the line between subject and object, between an artist and her oeuvre, between reality and art (and between photography and theatre/performance).

Finishing her Solo Practice

When it comes to critical discourse around Daubnerová's work, terms such as "monodrama", "performance", "multimedia production", "new theatre", or "postdramatic theatre" keep on coming up. Critics predominantly avoid defining her work within a certain genre or art field, or they purposefully hint at its fluidity. Daubnerová's wide-spectral

understanding of scenic art (and art as a whole) that can be seen in her perpetual search for different methods of expression and translation of her artistic account could be one of the primary reasons for the critical ambiguity. Many of the terms listed above could be used to catalogue her solo pieces - for instance monodrama, theatre of one actor, monologue theatre, or solo performance, while the decidedly personal character of her work steers it towards performance art forms.

When trying to define *Cells*, *Hamletmachine* and *M.H.L.* in her PhD thesis, Daubnerová herself proposes the term “individual stage performance” as an identifier in reference to Kostelanetz’ idea of *stage performance*. The term offered by the artist combines an emphasis on performativity as one of the main performance making approaches but also admits employing principles from stage art forms (be it straight theatre or dance/movement/physical theatre). The word “individual” then suggests the solo character of her performance practice.

Daubnerová’s solo performances allow for a reading of a clear development arch - from intimate personal traumas to a general question of a personal revenge, a fight of a woman individual against society; from art stylisation somewhere between installation and performance art all the way to movement-focused documentary theatre. At the culmination of this “solo saga” is her newest piece in which Daubnerová reflects upon her inner world directly through herself for the first time rather than through another artist’s life (a key visual component in this piece is a realistic bust of the artist herself). The name of the performance is also significant - *Masterpiece*. To quote Daubnerová about her relationship to her solo pieces: “Solo pieces remain a private place for me, a harbour I can come back to and lick the wounds I will suffer when fighting on big theatre stages. Even though that type of work puts a person on the chopping block and forces them to go through themselves. That’s the most difficult and sometimes even the most dangerous part of it all”.¹⁵ Nonetheless, Sláva Daubnerová is leaving this harbour, at least for now, but she does so with graciousness unique to her. And so in the end *Masterpiece* becomes only a showcase in a museum of her solo pieces.

¹⁵ CVEČKOVÁ, Katarína – DAUBNEROVÁ, Sláva: Sláva Daubnerová: Sóla zostali mojim prístavom. [2.6.2020]. [*Solo performances remained my port of call*]