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Theatre lives far from the center, too

Even though critical assessments on stagnation of the Slovak theatre have been plentiful for the last two decades, nothing changes. If anything does after all, it's something of a miracle.

Concealed behind the mysterious brand of P.A.T. theatre from Prievidza is an ambitious explorer of expression in modern, anti-illusory theatre, Sláva Daubnerová. First as an amateur, since 2006 as a professional, she pursues attractive themes – mostly outside of dramatic literature – to take up in her minimalist stage productions.

Such were *Cells (Cely)*, based on French-American artist Louise Bourgeois' autobiography (2006), as well as Heiner Müller's variation on a Shakespearean theme, *Hamletmachine* (2007). Both are intriguing performance monologues of Sláva Daubnerová herself.

Old subject, new look

For the third production of P.A.T. theatre, she found inspiration in Norwegian author Jon Fosse's novel *Melancholy (Melancholia)*. A fragmentary puzzle of feelings, observations and outlooks of an authentic protagonist, Norwegian painter Lars Hertervig (1830-1902) reminds of a relatively well-known pattern – analysis of a mentally unstable introvert, unable to naturally communicate with his surroundings. A drama text, although dealing with a rewarding and reliable subject matter of an asylum, offers a new insight into the world of a special individual – thanks to Daubnerová's development of dialogue and scene sequences out of the novel's fragments. With these, she and the other performers articulate a suggestive atmosphere. Essential to the performance is its visual concept. Experimenter scenographer Dušan Krnáč, hung pieces of furniture on the exposed stage, out of which the performers create the stage spaces. This mechanism of object manipulation is in line with the motif of manipulation as theatrical expression.

Well manipulated

The three performers carefully avoid psychologizing. What they concentrate on primarily is the demonstration of an exposure mechanism of the protagonist's mental states, while mechanically manipulating the scenic elements. Even with a bare minimum of expression instruments, they manage to fill the performance with a thick atmosphere. With its latest production, P.A.T. theatre offers an

unusual, yet easily comprehensible opus; an alternative in the most flattering sense.

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Fosse's Melancholy as Polylogue

In Slovakia, the vast oeuvre – mostly its dramatic part – of contemporary Norwegian author Jon Fosse is relatively unknown, while its bigger part has not even been translated to Slovak. Fosse isn't staged often here, in spite of the scope of his work. In 2002, his *Autumn Dream* (directed by Juraj Nvota) was premiered in the Astorka theatre and in 2006, the same play was staged in Komárno's Jókai theatre (directed by Adina Lévy). *Polylogue* (written and directed by Sláva Daubnerová) is another attempt of Prievidza's P.A.T. ensemble to bring the absent genre of experimental theatre to the Slovak theatre scene.

Polylogue is based on Fosse's two-volume novel *Melancholy (Melancholia, 1995)*. His prose is experimental, it refers to the legacy of the so-called New Novel, and in 2001 Fosse received a nomination for the Norwegian government's prestigious literary award for the work. Fosse's style may be interpreted as a tribute to Joyce's *Ulysses* or Thomas Bernhard's work.

From the standpoint of dramaturgy, which P.A.T. has been opting for since a few years ago, the selection of this title and genre is a precisely aimed step towards the realization of their program. The same thing can be said about their theatrical method, to which the subject matter and structure of *Melancholy* are very close. Protagonist of the story is the Norwegian painter Lars Hertervig (1830-1902), who has studied at the Arts Academy of Düsseldorf under the tutelage of the famous Hans Gude. In his own time, Hertervig was considered a mentally disturbed person with leanings towards schizophrenia, and was even institutionalized in the Gaustad asylum due to his melancholia. Despite this historical context, *Melancholy* is not the artist's biography. It is rather a monologue of a lonely, insecure and abandoned person about his search for the meaning of life, love and God. This monologue becomes the carrier of a melancholy atmosphere, which, however, shatters inside the sentences in a cyclic sequence of disturbed emotions – from the first disillusionment up to the melancholia, directly accompanying such explorations. Fosse's novel has been compared to a painter's canvas – sentences in

minuscule variations, like repeated brush strokes, compose the big picture, the overall mood: fatigue from a certain artist's obsession, and grief caused by the fact that despite his enormous talent as a landscape painter, Hertervig could never touch upon this world.

The script's author and director in one person, Sláva Daubnerová, decided to make use of the novel's form for her play. The painter's life is looked upon from two perspectives. One is that from inside the painter, before and after the mental crisis he experienced in Düsseldorf. The other one is a record of the thought process of Vidme, an author who sets out to write a book on Hertervig. A scene of Vidme writing opens the performance, then he gets lost, only so that we can realize at the end that the writer – in third person – entered the fragments of events and divided himself between precisely phased metamorphoses of the stylized characters.

Daubnerová has dubbed *Polylogue* a scenic concept revolving around cyclic repetition and modification of sentences, thoughts, scenes, dialogues, situations, all happening in the course of one autumn afternoon in 1853. Fosse's record of the artist's shattered thoughts and reflections inspired her to create a reconstruction of key events, leading up to his mental crisis: the (in)ability to create; I can (not)/I (don't) want/I am (not) able/I (don't) have to paint; we are (not) lovers. Considering that all three of *Melancholy's* parts do not deal with very lengthy or protracted events – on the contrary, plotlessness and a certain flatness is characteristic in this case – Daubnerová directed her attention only to those with pivotal meaning to the life and thinking of protagonist Hertervig (performed by Emil Píš). In the first place, this was an unfulfilled love for the young Helene (performed by Sláva Daubnerová), examinations and landscape painting studies under Hans Gude, as well as the stance of Helene's father towards Hertervig (both performed by Vanda Mesiariková).

The entire performance consists of an uninterrupted flow of recurring and revised sentences, repeated by the performers mechanically, monotonously, but in a fast tempo, thus setting the performance's pace. The expressed thoughts are hectic in speed, sometimes confused, with occasional stops and returns. Here and there, the performers literally abandon themselves to the words and diligently recite them over and over again in excitement, only to swiftly return back to an almost emotionless state. Exactly as when thoughts float in our heads, our minds stubbornly reviewing, then suppressing or simply stop analyzing them, let them flow freely. The lexical sparsity (a very limited vocabulary) and deliberately stylized, hyperbolized, even mechanical movements and repeated actions (exaggerated imitation of walking, affected sitting on a chair, pronounced suggestion of hitting on a door, jumping on a box-spring with hands down, imitation of the male sexual act...) are the performance's fundamental means of expression. The cold, literally clinical stage design and costumes (by Dušan Krnáč) comply with this. In accord with the spoken words and performed actions, a table, chair, sink,

bed, suitcases, an empty frame of a metallic door, hanging on chains repeatedly descend upon the stage, strips of mirror glass panes come together and apart. Helene is dressed in a glossy pink dress, her hair once pinned up, then freely flowing. Hertervig wears black trousers and a wine-red, double-breasted jacket. Vanda Mesiariková in the role of Helene's father, Hans Gude and other small characters from Hertervig's memories, wears a tail suit, white shirt and a top hat with a cane. Props assist her to visually designate the character she currently portrays, and which is always labeled verbally.

The only time the performance strays from this flow is Hertervig's dance with a massive necklace of Styrofoam pearls. Very graceful, soft and unstylized movements, alternating with tedious attempts to free himself of the necklace and shut it in the suitcase, as it were, reflected the condition of his soul – once fondly toying with melancholia, then succumbing to it completely. From a conceptual standpoint, the dance interlude was somewhat distracting, but the intention is clear and the performance is more or less stylistically pure.

It is a bit of a shame that one of *Melancholy's* themes is lost in *Polylogue*, although it is often mentioned by the characters. It is Hertervig's native Stavanger, which became a source of inspiration for his dreamlike landscapes, as well as his artistic inner turmoils. On the other hand, the motif of his being a son of a Quaker – therefore being a Quaker himself – was played out intensely. Quakers were a protestant movement whose members believed that all humans are led by an inner light of God's voice. Hertervig, as one can see in the performance, gradually started to entertain doubts about his talent. The hopes put in him and his artistic talent by the people from his hometown turned to feelings disappointment and personal failure in light of his insecurity, fear and his own abandonment. How and where does then the light of God's voice lead? Why him? Is he damned, unworthy, forsaken? The scene in which Hertervig squats in a ray of light and tries to get hold of it, as well as the following chase after the rays and circles of light by all characters, the constant doubts addressed to the artist, Hertervig's dragging of the bulky necklace among these circles was emotionally powerful, visually monstrous and precisely articulated.

Melancholy is a novel about the search for meaning of life, love and God. *Polylogue* is a performance trying to penetrate the inner world of the novel's protagonist. Formally interesting and unconventional, it released a probe into Hertervig's most intimate interior, as if photographing or scanning it. Yet sometimes it lacked the poetry and visuality of the novel, where it would hide behind the seemingly familiar, periodically repeated verbal combinations.

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Festival Nová dráma/ New drama 2009
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New Drama 2009 – so what's new?

[...] Remarkable, although by no means revolutionary was P.A.T. theatre's *Polylogue* directed by S. Daubnerová, also the (co)author of its script. Dramatizing a Fosse novel naturally brings about great complications – Fosse himself utilizes the dramatic form in his plays in a very idiosyncratic way – but the director ultimately managed to construct a visually arresting scenic composition on stage, markedly inspired by the principles of absurd drama. Mechanical repetition of stage actions and an almost geometric structure of the scenic space with vertically moving objects may be nothing new, or provocative, but they still manage rather successfully to create a theatrical world in which questions of (mis)understanding, polyphonic (mis)communication and human (non-)relationships become its central themes. In its own way, it is a fragile, lyrical scenic poem, with no easily comprehensible language, but offering multiple layers of reading. [...]

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Festival Nová dráma/New drama festival 2009
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Leathery New drama

[...] The P.A.T. theatre from Prievidza presented itself with a formally striking project. Its dramatization of Jon Fosse's novel *Melancholy (Melancholia)*, dealing with the life of Lars Hertervig – once an outsider and dreamer, now a respected Norwegian painter – and his unfulfilled love to the young Helene was titled *Polylogue*, distinguishing itself with a cold, even technician form, from the outset carefully reflected in its performances: the performers would speak strictly emotionless, facing the audience, they would delay their entrances, which divided the scenes significantly. Of note was also

the mise-en-scène, allowing for unexpectedly radical transformations of stage by utilizing its own construction, which often brought about the feeling of watching a well-functioning machine. What was ultimately missing was a consistent narration and molding of the themes. Also maintaining the elaborate form and linking it to the subject matter. The cold, mostly monologic acting unreasonably turned into badly acted psychological-realistic dialogues, unnecessary and not exactly best performed dance numbers appeared, and at once the magic and provocation that might have been brought by a performance with a very slow, but formally perfected action, disappeared. In the end, Lars Hertervig's story even came across as one of an immature loony, hopelessly falling in love with a young brat unable to requite his love – if she is even capable of understanding what love is. It was probably supposed to be a tragedy of human uniqueness, cursed by its surroundings to its denunciation and ousting, but ultimately, unwanted tragicomic, even grotesque features would creep in. [...]

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Festival Nová dráma/ New drama 2009

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New Drama 2009

[...] The title, replacing *mono* with *poly*, provides the first and most important key to decipher *Polylogue's* secret. But gradually, we realize that with each new key, we find ourselves in the same room with many doors. In its center lives Lars Hertervig, his soul, and all “doors” to it look alike. We are led to them by the characters' “polylogues”, often almost identical. A subtle change in word order, in speech first confuses, maybe deceives, softly manipulates, and the meaning exposes itself only little by little.

From the get-go, we feel as if we found ourselves in a non-space. Cold, mystery, even uncertainty of the situation come across not only through the stage design, but also through the performances. The performers move about fast, urgently, they shape their characters to the utmost detail. What we watch is not a classic story with dialogues, only some sort of fragment from Lars Hertervig's life. Doubling, even tripling of lines takes us within the character after the early confusion, and the deeper we go, the

more gloom we feel. The naïve landscape painter becomes a man on the brink of madness. He is losing himself, within himself.

Fragmentedness, reducing the plot to recurring sentences, which remind of commands rather than lines with their simplicity, elaborate mise-en-scène and seamless performers' transitions from one character to the next – such could be a short description of *Polylogue*. But it would tell us very little. It could be called the world of Lars Hertervig, though that would also simplify things too much. We find ourselves in a very strange, restless, intimate, cold, maybe even dreamlike world opening up before us. Whether we enter it and abandon ourselves to it is only up to us. [...]