

THE CODE TO THE SLOVAK THEATRE

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‘kød – konkrétne o divadle’ in English

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Dying Function of Relationship

At the present, there are not many artists in the Slovak theaters who can bring to viewers such a personally touching theme that would pull them into the intimacy of personal experience. This despite that one can encounter such experience in neighboring countries quite often (one of the examples was performed during this year’s Festival Theatrical Nitra by the Polish actor Wojtek Ziemilsky in his performance *A Small Story*, where he recapitulates his past).

When one person of the couple leaves, it is as if that person has died. He/she has to be mourned, buried and forgotten eventually. The theme of parting and separation recurs regularly, but it is often not interpreted earnestly and in an inspiring way. And this is just how Sláva Daubnerová and Pavel Graus decided to interpret the sickened relationship in their latest stage performance *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*.

Both artists are known for their cooperation within the P.A.T. Association. Both were inspired by the same range of visual and literary impulses: by the book of the photographer Francesco Woodman, bearing the same name as the production, the short story *Obituaries (Die Todesanzeige)* by Heiner Müller, as well as by his poems, interviews, autobiography and the poetry of his wife Inge.

Based on their research or “expedition” to the roots of the relationship, all the way to its last stage which is dissolution, the authors created a scenario full of fragments, indications of situations or just moments that depict both partners during the process of disintegration of their relationship. Their testimonies which are delivered in spoken form, by music and songs include accusations, sadness, nostalgia, but also a subtle relief – memories in a form of short holiday videos shot by the home video camera.

Working with documentary materials becomes the method of P. Daubnerová, starting with her first project *The Cell* in 2006, followed by the documentary monodrama *MHL* in 2009, where she cooperated in dramaturgy with P. Graus. She is using authenticity and spontaneity which enables her to transform the documentary into a powerful theatrical experience. The value of the diary, the autobiographical nature of the document, depends on emotions, or what emotional mark it can leave. As we were able to see in Daubnerová's productions, the power of the motivation "to get rid of" the past trauma, has remove the great emotional potential for reaching the audience.

The production *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* is powerful by its theme, but the intensity is limited by the dramaturgy of the story. The story is free in its character, full of associations, moving forward very little, nearly missing gradation. The very topic denies the possibility of rich, evolving story and expectations of the audience in this regard. The disintegration of the relationship must end up in a departure; it usually does not end with anything else. All events are progressing with the hope that the death of the relationship would affect both partners who would die and therefore there will be no one left to mourn.

Sláva Daubnerová works a with similar vocabulary of movement as in her previous projects: a sudden change of gestures and their efficient and accurate use. Commemorating and burying the relationship is based mainly on musical outputs. Short statements on how the relationship started, emotions and their extinction are alternated by musical sequences. It resembles a kind of "musical" undressing from loneliness, lethargy and nostalgia. Musical testimonies reminds us of style and content of the "Cave-style" personal confessions, but in a lesser torn-apart form. By atmosphere, they are not very different. They interpret the emotional state of ending the relationship by permanently bringing up memories as if asking the same question: Is it possible to turn it back?

Diaries play an important part in the performance; they are factual and full of impact, in sharp contrast with the cautious expressions of both performers. Their singing is reconciled with the state of mind in peace, despite the disruption of the internal equilibrium and geometry in the relationship, with resignation, and when sometimes pathetic tones are sounded, subsequently the singing becomes at ease, with a kind of detachment. This is particularly true about Sláva Daubnerová.

Songs by Pavol Graus gives the impression of fragility, which is also delivered by the interpreters. They play instruments timidly, as if lacking perfection. This is a technical matter which can improve over time, with a number of repetitions. On the other hand, it should be noted, that such interpretations makes the entire musical and visual testimony even more honest, adding a very personal touch.

Male-female perceptions of the relationship are stressed by the atmosphere, which both performers create on stage. A woman in Daubnerová's interpretation looks more emotional, more physical in actions, which is justified, since she is the subject that the man is talking about. Graus describes the situation from a distance, suggesting problems and cracks. He is commenting on the situation, he is a narrator, and the story unfolds from his perspective.

Similar to the scenario, the space is fragmented as well: there is the cuckoo clock, black tiles in one part of the scene, drums, guitar, piano, and two screens.

This is the space where one is supposed to forget, it requires time, and time controls the emotions, which start at the point where both partners realize that this is parting. All this lasts until the final emotional shock, when Daubnerová plays the drums, rewinds the cuckoo clock and leaves, while Graus lies down on the floor. This is the same scene as in the beginning – only in a reverse order.

Memories are visualized on two screens, showing holiday videos from different locations, with their relationship in peace, not yet affected by any problems. The illustrations of idealized memories are supposed to play a kind of “non-dramatic” function in the whole structure of the staging. You can see a happy couple on a small screen which is later, in a live action, transformed into the state of mind on the edge of crying. Unfortunately, in the same way as the sequence of rotating songs, words and projections loses the effect of surprise, the insertion of images becomes finally too obvious and explanatory.

The project has been realized at the Bratislava Elledanse Alternative Theater, which has a chamber character suiting such type of performances well. However, the viewers could benefit more had the visual effects, which are not that many as compared to the excessive scenographic ideas, been put in a greater distance from the audience. There are no props in the true sense, only some tools which performers use to express their inner pains and feelings.

Some Disordered Interior Geometries is so far a unique and remarkable performance presented on our scene (not only in the alternative theatre) and it is very

different from other Slovak productions. Comparison with other productions cannot be made, not even with the previous productions of the P.A.T. The name could be paraphrased in a way that it is a dramatic disruption of established patterns of stone theaters (becoming kind of fossilized). The only comparison that can be offered is with the non-verbal statements used in the past in theatres Stoka and Debris Company.

The latest productions of Sláva Daubnerová and Pavol Graus strongly outlines many emotional thematic layers, which at the same time remain closed in a circle of its own inspirations, and progress can be seen in the following ones. So there is still a lot of room left for the viewer to ask – And what have I actually seen?

Instead of answers – strong feelings remain.

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Nothing else matters when suicide is performed

With its last project *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, the P.A.T. theatre, or more precisely Sláva Daubnerová, has taken up a theme often dominating the media, literature or photography. It is the theme of suicide, brought to theatre mostly through the new brutalism, more precisely in-her-face.

Not many performances have taken up this theme in Slovakia. Daubnerová however, as has already become her trademark, decided to walk a different path than that marked by the new brutalism. Her method is considerate towards the partners and people surrounding the future suicides, it is not one of showing the entire scope of their very fraught internal state in an expressive gesture – be that by means of naturism or physical theatre.

Some Disordered Interior Geometries utilizes new means of expression of contemporary theatre, as well as various scenic compositions. At its heart, it's an

intertextual and intertext work, but formally, it's a new type of scenic – theatrical – poetry.

Sláva Daubnerová, in collaboration with Pavel Graus, on the one hand works with two types of biographical material through references and diverse citations, on the other she synthetically links several art forms – “old” theatrical, television, music or dance – into a form poetically displaying the basic composition thread. The project's title is inspired by the book title of American photographer Francesca Woodman, who had committed suicide at the age of 23, whereas the script consists of a number of “memories” of the German playwright, prose writer, poet and essayist Heiner Müller and his wife Inge (who had committed suicide as well), and of an array of her poems. Everything is utilized in such way that every “splinter” of the Man's (Pavel Graus) memory of the Wife (Sláva Daubnerová) becomes part of a bigger emotional arc. This takes on rather disparate shapes – dance, movement, half-recitation, singing on the verge of blues or chanson, or even “plain” television clips and documentary theatre, but is always in essence communicating the pain and suffering of either spouse. A “storm” of fascinating images assaults the audience as if nothing else in the moment (time) or in the duration of the performance was important. Again, symbolically expressed by the symbolic naming of the project's characters – Man and Wife both silently sing, dance or, by speaking, scream about the pain of losses they have suffered long ago, but couldn't forget them until “now”.

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Forgetting death according to Daubnerová

The tragic death of an artist in a relationship of two equally loving partners is a timeless theme. This doesn't apply only to the usual partnerships of a woman and a man. Any partnerships disrupting the traditional, petty bourgeois, hypocritical geometry of correctness of whom and how to love, to be “successful” in society where one lives, no matter what the cost, become burdening and strange sociocultural

patterns. Tolerance for “other” partnerships is actually “really” only seldom to be found in our urban and “other” context. Not to speak of artists who have willingly decided to take upon their shoulders the status of a professional, who in our modern, post-communist, democratic society practically “doesn't exist” on an economic and legal level. But how are we to “look” at the reality of two loving partners who, by their own free will, have decided to walk “their” own path of an independent and free art? Are they fools or intentional suicides? What timeless and universal content actually relates to the concept of freedom in our local, democratic sociocultural context? Did this concept really settle down in our everyday stereotypes? Exactly what artistic freedom are we living in now, twenty-two years after red totality?

The performance artist tandem of Sláva Daubnerová and Pavel Graus drew inspiration for its latest world premiere, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, from the eponymous photo book by Francesca Woodman and Heiner Müller's short prose *Die Todesanzeige* (“Obituary”). Suicidal fragments, coming to terms with death and the memories of artists – who loved and were loved – became the subject matter of their visual-musical concept. Thus, the main dramaturgic line of this authorial concept is thus comprised of bleak testimonies of the two characters on stage – a Woman and a Man – trapped in their living space stuffed with musical and furniture props, above which hangs a cuckoo clock, tolling the last minutes of the female character.

Narrative speeches of the characters of a man and woman were constructed as layered, open literary-dramatic structures. The authors worked with fragments of prose, poetry, authentic autobiographical interviews etc. of the Müller couple so that the characters would not meet within the stage space. Physical actions of the performers, showing the relationship between the man and the woman, were characterized by tense emotionality. The only points of communication between them were the physical duets of an abandoned female body in the arms of the helpless man on gradually disintegrating black-and-white floor tiles. The man's Piety, with his back turned to the audience and holding the woman's body, tired of life, evoked the funerary art of Renaissance, a period full of art and joy of discovering new lifestyle alternatives.

Slow musical tempo and a rhythm marked by an overall introverted stagnation became the most contrasting segments to a clear visual, multi-media concept. Due to the employment of these impeding musical numbers, this performance work about forgetting the death of a loved person needlessly strays within the territory of stage boredom. The conceptual composition of the audiovisual partiture returns a number of times to the memory of suicide. This repeated audiovisual motive of an unhappy, tragicomic and struggling female artist in a consumerist and indifferent society was so clear and comprehensible that the authors didn't need to show it to the audience perpetually, without apparently resolving the memory of death. The accent of gradation has thus vanished somewhere, just like the love between the woman and the man on stage.

Chiefly mentioned among the strenghts of this unusual stage work is to be its visual and spatial design of the self-contained acts. These were dominated by the woman's performance – pronounced, introverted and endowed with female tenderness – who writhes between the unbearable reality of “today” and emotional fissures, causing her short-circuited actions. Daubnerová does not float on the surface of the character of a suicidal wife, duped by life. She portrays her with her typical womanliness, full of tenderness, understanding and ceaseless demanding of a life-awakening love. The man functions as a narrative and passive observer of a relationship headed to who knows where. Graus's understated physical disposition, spiced up by guitar songs only serves to complement the already lost struggle for a happy and successful life of people walking the path to knowledge and the enlightening beauty of art. Art has become more important for these unstable human geometries than the tragic death of an individual. Unsentimentally romanticizing, yet at the same time referencing lost, forgotten and neglected moral and social values of our everyday free and democratic reality. Those who want to Create and be “independent” has to willingly fit into the state bureaucracy of Art in spite of their convictions, of Art tragically dependent on the setup of present political, ruling ensemble of modern “comrades”. Artists become willing slaves of the state lest they want to perish alive. They should better accept the game of success with its well-paid subservience, or else they can be surprised by, for instance, a geometric formula of a spiritual death. And that is only too close to the physical one

Daubnerová's fragmentary imagination offers a complete, comprehensible visual and multimedia picture of a story of forgetting death. The characters of the woman and the man communicated through indirect speech, through scenic narrative devices employing music, text and media. Through these various art forms, the performance made ruptures in the realistic illusion during their stage time; rupture being a typical sign of postmodern writing. Daubnerová's performative artistic ruptures sounded like swift film cut, "from one situation to the next". Her recollection of death in this manner allows for an instant transfer of content to a different visual or multimedia layer of association, cursorily speaking about the life of a couple dealing with the literary, dramatic and visual arts.

This, too, is a way to build an unconventional dramaturgy for an educated and demanding audience. Staging a musical, narrative text with an interplay of visual and multimedia elements is one of possible artistic ways which the performers offer in their work. Daubnerová's means of expression are characterized through her openness to all art forms. She utilizes a visible and invisible live voice, physical action "captured" by the sensitive objective of a film camera, including swift psycho-physical ruptures, perked up with introverted humor and wit.

Questioning the ordinary lives of people on Earth is Daubnerová's attempt at an "everyday" transcendence of ingrained and conventional stereotypes of "how to live". Such artistically uncommon "swallows" on a local stage are a positive contribution and a promise that in time, theatre might become diverse and different... and perhaps a more "free" space for innovative projects.

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KRISTÍNA JURČIŠINOVÁ

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Müller finds a dead woman. Quality theatre is born.

Director Sláva Daubnerová's new project will be shown on the New Drama festival tonight.

Heiner Müller, one of the best-known German playwrights, did not have an easy life. His wife Inge attempted suicide multiple times. It was this strong story that the Bratislava-based P.A.T. theatre, under Sláva Daubnerová's leadership, decided to adapt.

It is Daubnerová herself, with her boyfriend Pavel Graus (also the project's dramaturg), who perform as the tragic couple. *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* is a performance about breakup and what remains afterward.

Acting is not a matter of course

P.A.T. is a small independent theatre founded in 2006. It stages one to two performances a year, and for the past four years it had repeatedly been shortlisted in competitions. "Performing surely isn't a matter of course. We are very glad we got picked, as this is an uncommercial and a very specific performance. Also, there aren't many opportunities for us to present ourselves. Performing is a luxury for us," Sláva Daubnerová points out. That's because in principle, this is not classic, dramatic theatre. "These are performances which combine multiple genres, we also work with music and text." As for the actual one, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, Daubnerová explains it as a performance between theatre and concert with original music score, primarily about relationships and that which remains after them: "This performance is about intimate relationships, about coming to terms with memories and objects that bind us to them."

Together with Graus, she has drawn inspiration from their own relationship and decided to bring up situations happening to everybody after a breakup, no matter what the form. To this end, they have picked out a short prose in which Müller describes the moment of discovering his dead wife.

Small history. At the beginning of the big one

Theatrolgist Zuzana Ferusová appreciates the P.A.T. theatre as well. Its trademark is a singular dramaturgy and thematic choices. Although her newest performance has a lot in common with the previous *M.H.L.*, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* is without a doubt a new development in Daubnerová's work. Existential solitude

remains, but Ferusová brings up the director's irony, present in spite of such somber theme as the death of a close person. "The performance intrigues me in a way which most of our theatres forgo. She chooses ostensibly small histories, peripheral personalities and their topics, intimate, introverted and small stories that remain in me for a long time," Ferusová adds.

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MARTINA MAŠLÁROVÁ

theatre critic

The New Drama Festival showed its true colours – and the colours were bright

[...] the last of the competing productions was *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* by the P.A.T. Theatre. Performer Sláva Daubnerová, who devised this show with Pavel Graus, provides a tangible piece of evidence that alternative theatre has its specific place in Slovakia. Even though P.A.T. does not have its own scene, which is why it performs this show in the *elledanse* theatre, its performers have been very successful in shifting the boundaries of their creativity, performance and theatrical perception. In comparison with the performance of *Experiment*, P.A.T.'s production shows an explicit opposition between the public and the intimate, just like we got to see during the opening evening of the festival. [...]