

Stage

It is not about the state

Connotations of the performance *If You're Happy*

February 29, 2016 at 9:22 a.m.

Ljubljana, MMC RTV SLO

The staging of the performance *If You're Happy* continues the local tradition of addressing the state through art, which is manifested as a syndrome – as a fascination with authoritarian levers of the existing, sometimes bordering on obsession. Neue Slowenische Kunst sets the standards of how to do this, how to criticize and how to capitalize on the critique from the safe and secured position of the liberal *art*. However, it is never superfluous to note that this *art* is but a part of a wider system based on spectacle, commodification, and thus on the dissection of critical thinking. NSK (the state) has thus ended up as a product offered to us by this or that gallery to explain how there was once a certain nice, although slightly difficult socialism, which is now sadly gone, but there was no other way, as it was effectively necessary to put ourselves on the map of the Western, colonialist art agenda. Only a few (of the chosen ones) have made it, a big bravo for them. It is perverse that this is seen as exactly what political art should be, an art that should also be financed by the state, thus proving to be democratic because it can afford to be (self-)critical.

Many protagonists of contemporary performing arts have tried to direct, conceive and produce various national celebrations in the past. This resulted in a series of collages of more or less ambitious directorial concepts and “protocolary” frameworks controlled by an invisible director. We are therefore dealing with the double or duplicated figure of the director: the one with the name and surname, track record and reputation, and the other, invisible one, who takes care of the order and properly delineates the whole matter (in fact, again in the conceptual sense).

The last time this directorial schizophrenia has proved to work flawlessly was during the celebration of Prešeren Day, where a clash occurred between the director's ambition to give a critique of the state through art and the usual task of the apparatus to pack the aesthetics of authoritarianism into – art. It should be noted that in such cases, realization of the critical potential of art, let alone (theatrical) emancipation of its protagonists, is not to be expected. If the critique occurs at all, its role is to integrate in one way or another itself into the concept of the celebration of the state, in fact, into the art that is nothing more than part of the cultural industry of the existing. And indeed, this is what happened at this performance. In this context, censorship is not a surprise but the rule. Why, then, direct the celebration and be part of in one way or another? This question also arises during the anti-celebration *If You're Happy*, directed by Andrej Jus and produced by Bunker Institute. Based on the establishment of unpretentious irony, it invites to reflect on the actual intentions of the people's representatives, who do not in fact represent the people, let alone their interests. It is the same reflection that was widely promoted a few years ago during the popular uprisings and a number of related public events with the desire to eliminate the corrupt representative system.

An oversized flag of Slovenia (and also Russia) descends from the ceiling and across the stage, with its coat of arms falsified and moved, hanging in the background in the form of hunting trophies. Much like in the performance *Überškríp* by Jelena Rusjan or at the Slovenian exhibition in Venice *For Our Economy and Culture* by Jasmina Cibic, reproduction of the NSK aesthetics seemed to be necessary. Does the safety of the canon come before the risk of experimenting? Microphones, portable podiums and flower arrangements form a comprehensive visual concept of the stage, which is, despite its actual depth, a symbolic plane where a flag is not fluttering but lying on the floor while at the same time reaching up, into the void.

Nataša Živković choreographs and performs a series of stylized, rigid, molded gestures of a politician during public appearances, thus stressing his fundamental personality traits: the lack of life. It is a way to demonstrate directly through body that what is usually called politics has absolutely nothing to do with the politics in the sense of cooperation, self-organization and interchange in a certain common space – i.e. in the sense of life. She later effectively intensifies her dance language in the scene with “the Big Black Wolf riding a horse with no name” which evokes the horror of a collapsing system and a hunch of the worst. “Save yourself, Oedipus, save me,” sing and play Ana Duša, Špela Frlic, Nataša Živković and Polona Janežič. The song is one of the comments on the oratory skills of party leaders that we are listening to on audio clips, whereas the second song with the verse “Juliana, where is our food?” is obviously alluding to the current Minister. Recordings of children’s voices provide a key reference, because – as usual – they completely destroy the illusion of the empty, demagogic statements of the people in positions of power. Such addressing of those in power functions mainly (solely?) in the sense of the humorous, ironic, sarcastic comments which establish the staging as a negative and a comment on the form and background of the celebration, while the lengthy satirical storytelling is not articulated with enough vigour in this concept. Namely, the gap between the effects of the linear storytelling and the stage presence is simply too wide to allow a more productive co-establishment of what we hear and the bodies, materialized in the aforementioned flat image of the stage. As a consequence, it becomes clear that the perpetuated stereotypical narrative of the state celebration “does not match” with such use of narration. This may achieve the impression of “bedtime stories” that we are often told by politicians, but would probably be more effective with a bit more dynamics. It was probably sensible for the director to avoid theatre play, but there was still enough room left for subjectification of the performers’ language, perhaps even for a reflection on the predictability of the event’s scenario.

The scenography depiction of the so-called technical barriers, or the state fence, has been removed from this year’s Prešeren Day celebration, but *If You’re Happy* dared to mention this invention, along with addressing some other stereotypical “political issues” (the role of “Brussels” and the EU) – again using a song – the cheap marketing trick “I am Slovenian – I am looking for solutions”. By these means, as well as by involving and deriding the statements by politicians, the creators translate their fascination with authority to a series of scenes reflecting a mix of anger, frustration, depression and understanding of the situation in a humorous way, thus creating one of the few theatrical interventions into the real that takes on criticism with gloves off.”

There are obvious reasons to attend the “anti-celebration”, in fact a theatre performance as a space-time utopia. It is precisely awareness raising and empowering of this quality of the stage that can be an incentive to move away from the obsession with authoritarian levers of the existing, which also function in their own theatrical context. The (anti-)celebration only reminds us that it is actually not about the state, about the fixation on the power structures (including its field of cultural production), but rather about an autonomous, self-organized scene. In other words, how and what does this scene celebrate?