

23. 11. 2013

Katarina Stegnar, Primož Bezjak, Branko Jordan
**The story about an elite hotel, bunnies,
graduation and actors in their time**

We step into the Old City Power Station, we step into the past, into the year 1977: we step into a bar, a cabaret, for a moment we step into the lavish hotel located at the island Krk, the largest showbiz project of former Yugoslavia, where a disco ball is spinning at the ceiling with penthouse pets strolling around – project investor Bob Guccione's bunnies, flexible waiters serving champagne, stars in silver glitter dresses singing French schlager music... When we step into the year 1977, we step into the birth-year of the acting band members, known by the name Beton Ltd.

Vesna Milek, foto Jure Eržen

In coproduction with Bunker (lead by Nevenka Koprivšek) and Anton Podbevšek Theatre (lead by Matjaž Berger) they created a fresh, playful, witty performance (third in the row) with a needle-thin critical edge, which you don't notice at first until it hits you where you're most vulnerable as an individual. About big dreams and the twofaced, sly, megalomaniac nature of the former state, about big hopes in the new country, and about the generational and small country identity crisis, about the big disillusion following. Yet in truth, they say, it is most of all a performance about themselves.

Katarina Stegnar, Primož Bezjak, Branko Jordan. The three of them combined their sweat, saliva, and hormones working with Matjaž Pograjc, symbolically they've met working on the performance The Meeting Room, as Betontanc they've learned how to "co-create", they've learned to dance, write, research until they formed the theatre collective Beton Ltd. In their first performance entitled *So far away* (2010) they tackled global warming and polar bears, their second performance *I Say What I Am Told To Say* (2012) dealt with Bruxelles' interpreters, their bizarre and witty socio-critical style is recognisable by now; here they're thinking about their newest performance *Everything We've Lost, While We've Gone on Living*.

What have we lost, while we've gone on living then? What have you lost particularly?

Primož: Already when we were brainstorming for the first time we've asked ourselves one single question. Where were we, when all the socio-political changes were occurring since the independence, transition, economic-political shifts until the recession and the All-Slovenian uprising? Where were we then, when all others were investing their certificates and taking care of their existence? The answer is: We were at our rehearsals. This was our first realization from which we started to develop the story.

Katarina: The basic premise of the performance was: Where were we, while all others made big money? We were at rehearsals, at the stage and now we're left with empty pockets. Meanwhile we thought that we were doing something important.

Branko: Meanwhile we believed that we're saving the world with our performances.

Primož: The worst thing is, we still believe that. (*smile*)

Katarina: We're at that moment in life, when we should be at the top of our strength, rule the world around us, know how to handle it. Yet we constantly have the feeling that this world is managing us.

Whose fault is this? Your own as well?

Katarina: Probably it's our own fault, yes.

Primož: Because we haven't been rational enough and responsible enough, because we haven't thought about results and rather created performances. And for so long now we've been living in some false freedom where others make decisions. What will become of us in near future, desperate individuals or emigrants?

Branko: When we began asking these questions, we all found ourselves at the starting point, at point zero. And we basically asked ourselves: Who am I? Winner or loser? The feeling we've detected within the three of us was that we're losers.

Katarina: Underdogs.

Shouldn't an actor be asking himself about "being Vicont de Valont or Hamlet or Caligula?" rather than "being a loser or a winner"?

Katarina: This is a question concerning particular generations, yes. Previous generations could be more concerned about their repertoire, their parts.

Primož: Considering older generations, they could really live art, they had the possibility to live it; they told a verse by the way, pulled a quote by some Slovenian poet or playwright out of the hat... Sure, this is true for a certain generation. The world around us is changing very fast. If some common denominator of our generation exists, it is being open.

So – why did you come to the point of being losers?

Branko: In our "analysis" we've come to the conclusion that others actually see us as winners in spite of us feeling as garbage sometimes. This means that there is something wrong either with our own perception or the societies' perception. When we started working on this performance, what we were dealing with a lot was time, the time we were born into, which from a temporal distance seemed full of infinite possibilities.

Katarina: As always, when you look back. Everything that has passed always seems more beautiful. Subjectively.

The seventies in the former state were an era of cultural bloom also objectively. By reviving the memory of the luxurious Palace Hotel at the island Krk you've created a metaphor for the big luxurious state, where an artist could also be a God, where epic movies like The Battle of Sutjeska and The Battle of Neretva were shot, and where money was never a constraint.

Branko: Of course we tackle this Yugoslavian chapter in our performance, although it shouldn't be mistaken for some sort of Yugo-nostalgia.

Don't worry. For legitimate nostalgic feelings you were born a few years to late.

Branko: (*smile*) To clarify, the Palace Hotel project wasn't a representative Yugoslavian project. It was a Yugoslavian project kept secret. So, Yugoslavians weren't allowed to enter this artificial paradise unless they worked there. The Hotel is a primary example of elitist capitalism and perversion in celebrated socialist Yugoslavia.

That's how a porn-mogul, editor, Penthouse owner Bob Guccione comes to the socialist state, meets Tito and says to him, come on, let's erect a gambling place, real entertainment for western millionaires, with bunnies...

Primož: Or rather *Penthouse Pets*, as they were called, with a lot of sex, booze and luxury...

Katarina: And not just that. Bob Guccione calmly tells Tito: I'll come there, if you build a bridge and an airport for me. The bridge to the island Krk was built because of Bob Guccione.

How did you even come across the hotel in Haludovo?

Primož: When we got a green light for this project from our producers Bunker and Anton Podbevšek Theatre, we said to ourselves: We can only create the project, if we lock ourselves into an apartment for ten days and brainstorm. Because you can never do this at home.

Branko: Our first starting point was a play by Eugène Ionesco: *The Killer without Cause*, a quite well known play, which was first staged in Slovenian at Nova Gorica Theatre. We came across this text by coincidence last year.

A story about utopia?

Branko: The story is simple. Bérenger, an everyman character that Ionesco already developed in his play *Rhinoceros*, some sort of a Kafkaesque antihero, gets on a tram one day and arrives at a part of Paris, where he has never been before. It strikes him that he has entered a utopia, a sunny city, some sort of Corbusier's *Ville radieuse*. He decides to live there, but it soon turns out that something isn't right. There is a serial killer plundering and slaughtering in the district. Bérenger starts to inquire, if anybody tried to stop him already. The answer is: No. And he replies: Well, then I'll do it.

An analogy to the current socio-political climate.

Branko: Yes, the three of us, born in 1977, well, sorry 1976 (*gives Katarina a wink*), enter this wonderful utopia, which is called Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and then full of hope we dance at the prom and in the new small country, until we realise that there's something wrong. Does anyone do anything? No. And we naively said to ourselves: Well, then we'll do it.

And you made this performance?

Branko: And we made this performance. (*all three smile*)

Katarina: I think the most important thing is that the killer in Ionesco's play is in fact the killer of ideology. The killer of the wish. While the more I think of it, we don't have an ideology. Our country still doesn't know, what it wants to be, if it's something at all. It doesn't know. Even if this country would decide that it's something absolutely stupendous, it would be great, because then we could say: This is not ok. We want something else. But as we don't know, what this country is, we're incapable of fighting the ideology, which isn't there.

Therefore, the Killer without cause.

Primož: We found the inspiration for the "big utopia" in this text. We went to Krk, locked ourselves into an apartment, put all papers, books, all material on the table, looked at each other and said: In fact, we don't have anything. Then Branko remembered that a few weeks ago he heard an unusual story about some hotel. Go on, Branko.

Branko: Long story. I was just recovering from a larynx surgery, which meant that I was forbidden to speak for a month. Therefore, I could listen more carefully. It was rather a coincidence that in Zagreb I learned about some hotel at the island Krk, where there were bunnies dancing about and where Josipa Lisac used to perform. The only thing I remembered from all that was that this hotel was located at the island

Krk. And when the three of us happened to be at Krk, I said to myself: We're actually at the crime scene.

Katarina: The Penthouse Palace Hotel was actually ten minutes away from our villa.

Primož: We had no other choice but to walk to the building, our performance.

Literally, in this case the content of the performance called us.

I imagine stories whispered by the forsaken hotel premises, which were once the centre of western, even porn, jet set. What was your first impression, when you stepped into the hotel?

Katarina: This hotel is actually a ruin, the nature protruded inside, so, it seems like a film set, even a very romantic one.

Primož: Something built but vacated. Like crushed illusions, like a huge scam. But it still feels so magnificent, you feel like you're in some James Bond movie. There's a two-story fireplace in the lobby, everything made of stone, and everything is still there.

Katarina: When you step into the hotel lobby, all the glass walls are facing the sea, with booths all in white, big swimming pools. It still looks magnificent. Meanwhile everything was taken out ...

Primož: During the war there were Bosnian refugees settled there.

Is it true that the architect Boris Magaš, whom you're embodying in the performance, Branko, didn't know for whom he was building this paradise?

Branko: According to our information he supposedly didn't know that the hotel resort was for the owner of the Penthouse porn magazine. He was instructed to make something modern, luxurious, and extraordinary. Everything else was left to his own imagination and creativity. Just two weeks ago we found out that Boris Magaš passed away. Big architect. Among other things he drafted the famous stadium Poljud in Split.

Primož: Even at the beach there were booths, so that famous and wealthy guests could enjoy being a bit hidden away, intimate, without anyone glancing at them.

If I understand this correctly, the hotel was supposedly opened in 1972, five years before 1977, the year of your birth, where we as the audience step in?

Primož: When we were born, the hotel had already worked for five years; we also point that out in the performance. The interesting thing is that Tone Stojko, a famous Slovene theatre photographer, was at the opening, but unfortunately he doesn't remember anything else but glamour, glittering gowns and bunnies. What a pity.

Bunies?

Katarina: Bob Guccione brought his own *Penthouse pets* to the hotel, the pets from this gentleman's magazine; mostly they were students who had to speak at least three foreign languages. The very same bunnies were also instructing Yugoslavian girls. There are quite some women at the island who were working as bunnies in the seventies.

Branko: Who got married later and became good housewives.

Katarina, in the performance you embody a porn pet, Elizabeth Taylor, but also the star Bisera Veletanlić... And Nevenka Dundek.

Branko: And Nevenka Dundek is a real person! That's one hell of a story. Nevenka Dundek stepped into the Palace Hotel, an actress of Croatian origin who lived in Germany; Bob Guccione had an affair with her. When we were digging into this matter, we found out that she was also shooting with the Slovenian actor Boris Cavazza among other things, but he doesn't seem to remember her. (*smile*) But she became the first Yugoslavian girl, who made it on the Penthouse magazine cover. *Pet of the month.*

Primož: We ordered an original issue of the Penthouse magazine from 1972 online, with the naked Nevenka Dundek on the cover page. Bob Guccione himself took the photograph with a special, so-called *soft touch* camera. Penthouse was the first magazine to actually show a female crotch, which was a bit misty.

In the performance you mention Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, Orson Welles, Saddam Hussein... Who among the famous and notorious was really staying at this hotel?

Branko: The story in the performance about a pool being filled with champagne for Saddam Hussein is true, a waiter from Krk told us, who was at the opening of the hotel. He told us that the first hotel rule was: "There will be no wish left unfulfilled in this hotel." The guest was an absolute king. He remembered a guest, who wished for a salmon from some fjord; when the waiter told him that they unfortunately didn't have that particular one, the guest pointed him to his pilot and his private jet. "Fly to Norway and bring me that salmon!" And that's what happened. Of course he paid for it through the nose but his wish was fulfilled.

Katarina: A really utopian world. Beautiful women, rich men, parties, gambling, drinking, salmon, caviar... A two-week package, *all-inclusive*, would cost two thousand dollars. The calculated value today would be around 10,000 dollars.

Primož: And that happened in the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia, which had been waving the motto of fraternity and unity. (*smile*)

Branko: Every Thursday there would be charter flights from Miami to Krk; the Rockefellers, for example, who were sailing there directly from Venice, had their own yacht quay.

Katarina: There are three parts connected to key periods of our lives and also our interpretation changes accordingly in the performance. In the first part we are these characters, stars, bunnies, glamorous singers, in the second part we're representing ourselves in the season of 95'/96' at the prom dance, wearing our own original prom outfits... If the first part is tackling pornography and its mogul of the time, the second part is some sort of documentary pornography.

Why? Because it's perverse to look at yourself in your prom gown from fifteen years ago?

Katarina: We chose the prom dance because for each one of us it represents a particular turning point. We watched our prom dance videos with Branko and when we spotted ourselves, we both felt... sick, to put it mildly. When you see yourself, how you were twenty years ago. (*rolling her eyes*)

Branko: The worst thing is that at the time you thought you were really cool, but when you see yourself from some time distance, you just see a confused stupid high school kid who thinks he's cool. You unintentionally ask yourself, if the situation today isn't somewhat similar. (*ironic smile*)

Drunk graduates at the stage speaking rhymes... Is it a copy of the prom dance by a younger generation, which made its rounds on the Internet a few years ago?

Branko: This is another postmodern layer of the performance. (*ironically*) Our authorial approach fits its time: written by others, signed by us.

Katarina: If Houellebecq can do it, why shouldn't we be able to?

In the third part of the performance we're in 2013, in the present: three Slovenian actors are attending a quiz; they're answering questions like: Where did you invest your certificate? Or In Slovenia almost every fifth person is living below poverty line. How do you look at that?

Katarina: In the third part we're actually ourselves, without masks.

And yet you're uttering sentences, which are in fact quotes of your fellow actors from yellow press.

Katarina: Yes, we're saying nonsense on purpose. Since it's almost impossible to answer such questions. And at the same time there's a twist in that.

Primož: And we said to ourselves that nobody would really believe that we would answer these questions like that.

In contrast to the statements you took from yellow press, you're all quite socially engaged. Katarina, like a year and a half ago, you've given actors, musicians, and artists golden Jewish stars with "artist" written on them, as part of an artistic action. What does it mean to be an artist in Slovenia?

Katarina: That was one of the few non-theatrical politically active actions I also carried out in the end.

And that was almost one year before the All-Slovenian uprising last year?

Katarina: Yes, because the situation was unbearable. At that time I had a feeling that culture was perceived as something nobody needs, that artists are parasites sucking taxpayers' blood and emptying the treasury for our excesses. This feeling only got more intense; it struck me most, when I heard a similar argument stated by people from our generation, who maybe work in more profitable areas as culture.

Primož: That was the period when every anonymous person could share his valuable opinion on the Internet via comments, which were most of the time very offensive, accusing culture workers for the state our country is in. Saying, that's the ones who don't work at all, who are parasites of the country...

Katarina: At that moment I just had enough. Artists publicly became most handy culprits for the whole situation. That's why I made these David stars and started to hand them out. Something started to move. But when in December 2012 the uprising happened at a higher level, I suddenly felt it's nonsense for culture workers to talk about how poor we are, while facing a general crisis, and separate ourselves from other citizens, because in the end we all have the same goal. That's why I didn't pursue it anymore.

And attended the uprising?

Katarina: Of course, together with everybody else. Now I have another action in mind: to turn the pavement in front of the parliament into a red light district, where Slovenian theatre actresses stroll around dressed as whores. I'm quite curious about what would happen.

Uroš Grilc, Slovenia's Minister of Culture, said in a recent interview for the Saturday Supplement of Delo newspaper that he would focus especially on people self-employed in culture. Primož, you're actually the only one of the group being employed, Branko is in transition, and Katarina has been "free" for a long time.

Primož: I'm employed, but I still partly perceive myself as being freelance, because I had been living and working as a self-employed actor for such a long time. Eight years. And in a way I'm still fighting the same battle.

Katarina: On one hand I find freedom in the artistic sense very clean. As an actor, performer you create something and you can only get the next offer based on how good you've done something before that.

Is it possible to say that your generation has some sort of privilege being in a position where it doesn't have to worry about basic survival because of what it already created (and lost meanwhile)? Which could be the opposite case for a whole lot of young actors, just finishing the Acting Academy?

Katarina: The main difference is also that in the period when we finished the Academy most interesting things were happening at the off-scene. Matjaž Pograjc, Sebastijan Horvat, Jernej Lorenci, Bojan Jablanovec... Some of them went to work for institutions, the independent scene started to sink, there is less and less funding for it.

Primož: It seems to me that it's being erased on purpose.

Compared to 1977, when an actor had a big state at his feet, it is also utopian to talk about stars in Slovenia. Do we have star actors?

Katarina: I think that the Slovenian national character plays a crucial role here. Being a star is not so much about material value, everybody knows that, it's more about the status you grant somebody and by that make it possible for the person to create. And by that the person also gains moral authority. Well, actors don't usually have that.

Primož: Just look at the difference between Slovenia and Serbia, at least what theatre is concerned: an actor there has a godlike status, in Slovenia the only God is the director, at best.

Branko: Like Katarina says, I see the Slovenian character, which Miha Mazzini often writes about, which is: as a community we can hardly bear somebody being taller, bigger, better than us. We can more easily acknowledge that in foreigners, while inside our own community, guild or association we're betting on false equality. We don't allow anybody to stick his head out of the crowd even a little. We proclaim him traitor or we assign him some characteristics, he actually doesn't have, or we lynch him in the press, just because we feel bad facing his success.

Primož: In short: Slovenia can't put up with extraordinary individuals.

Except, thank God, sportsmen.

Branko: They're an exception. Although, even there it was sometimes proven, how hard it is to acknowledge extraordinary achievements. Only if somebody has a forty-year-career behind him, is already weak, then we say: well, now we should give him something... You have to progress at snail speed and wait 40 years for recognition.

Katarina: We're becoming more and more Jansenist, that's it.

Branko: Even if Primož has a leading role in the most successful Slovenian film (of that time), the excitement will only last a few months, and then somebody will soon hit him with a huge mallet on the head.

Katarina: With a huge mallet, with huge pleasure.

Did you make this performance also to face the passivity and emptiness of your own generation?

Branko: First, we actually made this performance from ourselves, for ourselves and by that we hope it will appeal to others. If not for Matjaž Pograjc, who, pho, more than fifteen years ago, gathered us, if not for Nevenka Koprivšek from Bunker, who was the first to make us possible and gave us this initiative, and Matjaž Berger, who gave us the *carte blanche* for Novo Mesto, we wouldn't be able to afford doing this.

Primož: It's important that there's no hierarchy in our band, therefore, it takes so long to make certain decisions. We always start from our own position – in the world, in time, in the social-political situation.

Again: What is your position? On one hand you say that you feel like losers, while at the same time you're privileged to be able to create, to be able to "create a performance about yourselves"?

Primož: Of course we're creatively privileged. There's no doubt about that.

So what's the thing you've lost in the meantime?

Katarina: I think we've lost some idealism. We've lost the capability to believe that it's worth to fight for something. Except for a performance. For theatre, for writing, for your situation, for your own little garden. And what I'm saying is the result of very sincere, unrelenting self-confrontation.

Branko: I remember that theatre director Mile Korun asked me once, when I had no work: Is there still the spark for doing art burning inside you? Is there still some of that inside you? Now I would answer, of course there is, but the glow is quite quenched.

It is obviously not that quenched, Branko, if you've decided to become a freelance actor in this critical time and to gamble your existence by doing that.

Branko: Of course I know, where I'm going and why. But I can say that an employed prostitute, whom Katarina was metaphorically talking about earlier, can be prostituted just like a freelance one nowadays. Because of all the austerity measures, because of budget cuts in the public sector, the situation is becoming unbearable. And at the same time you're constantly told to be grateful for being employed at all, to have a salary at all. So, it's easy to control people with fear, while at the same time the little glow, we were talking about, is being destroyed.

Primož, you've travelled around half of the globe only with the Mladinsko Theatre performance Dammed Be the Traitor of His Homeland directed by Oliver Frlić; not long ago you've received standing ovations in France, like before in Portugal, in Russia and so on.

Primož: Sure, also because of the theatre institution I work for, I have more choices as other employed actors.

Have all of you been touring a lot?

Branko: Yes, I can say that this is a nice privilege. And it's sad that not more people have this privilege. I've noticed how in the past ten years the opinion about somebody who is employed and also happens to make a project let's say in an independent group or for another theatre institution has changed.

Only directors are allowed to do that nowadays.

Branko: Ten years ago a person like that meant a jackpot for the theatre. Look, our person is so good that others want him. Now, ten years later, it is considered "theft of taxpayers' money", a phrase, which has spread its tentacles deep into everyday conversation. The perception has changed entirely.

Katarina: Actors are turning into slaves more and more, they have to be quiet and they have to do what they're told, and at the same time artistic integrity is demanded of them, since actors "are co-creating a performance, right".

Branko: For good art you need people who are a little naughty, who are daring. Now everybody is forcing us to be as obedient as possible. It doesn't happen over night. But after ten years you become aware that there are more and more people, who are trying to obey, to behave well.

Primož, considering the success of the film Rooster's Breakfast and considering that this year was a good film year in Slovenia compared to previous years, you should have been in at least one Slovenian film this year.

Primož: It would be nice to have been invited to at least two auditions. (*smile*)

Branko: That's why we've decided for the next project, according to the Mohamed and mountain analogy, that the mountain will come to Mohamed. We're thinking about inviting four directors...

Primož: ... who would want to work by our instructions (*smile*). More about it some other time in some other performance. When we'll already know, what we've lost, while we've gone on living.

Katarina: When we'll maybe find what we've lost. *(they laugh)*

