

## Beton Ltd., Collective of Authors: Beyond Spotlight and Smoke Screen

Tomorrow, Mladi levi festival will feature a premiere performance of the new play by Beton, Ltd. collective, produced by the Bunker Institute. In the play entitled *Great Expectations/Grosse Erwartungen*, the core members of the collective – actors Katarina Stegnar, Primož Bežjak, and Branko Jordan – are dealing with the question of how to speak when it seems that one has already said everything as a theatre creator.



Members of the Beton, Ltd. collective: Primož Bežjak, Katarina Stegnar and Branko Jordan (Photo: Matjaž Rušt)

### Gregor Butala

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**It seems that in your projects, you have been gradually shifting from broader social issues towards intimate ones, perhaps most noticeably so in your previous performance, *Ich kann nicht anders*. What is the aim of *Great Expectations* in this respect?**

*Primož Bežjak:* Great expectations are all around us. Also, as artists, we expect a lot from ourselves, as does our audience.

*Katarina Stegnar:* And the play mainly deals with our relationship with the audience. Not so much in terms of the theatrical situation itself, but rather in connection with a certain trend in recent years. Over time, theatre has been evolving from drama to post-drama and performance, that is, towards a kind of self-staging of an artist; and for some time now, the focus has been on personal stories of people who are not theatre people, but rather stand on the stage as a sort of *ready-made*: it is their life story, or their distinct identity that makes them interesting. For this type of theatre, we as persons are not really interesting: we are neither very young or very old, we are not poor, we did not experience war or any other disaster – everything that defines us is that we work in theatre.

*Branko Jordan:* What's more, we do not belong to any vulnerable social group, quite the opposite: we are white middle-aged people, quite well off, with no particular problems, and thus part of the overrepresented group, which is also viewed as a group of great social power. Once you realize this,

you get the feeling that you should actually be apologizing for your involuntary status, you are but a step away from becoming silent and giving the floor to those who deserve it more. The foundation of our work as a collective is self-orientation in one way or another, but the spotlight is now facing elsewhere. And you wonder if you can talk consistently and credibly about anything anymore.

*Katarina Stegnar:* As if there is no more place for us: for twenty years, we have been talking about ourselves, and somehow we can't do it anymore; nor we can talk about what is expected in the theatre today.

*Branko Jordan:* Of course, you can always lend your voice, as a sort of mediator, to the topics that are more important than those that concern us. But this causes an additional problem: when speaking about the other, you can quickly find yourself in danger of becoming a parasite that exploits someone else – someone already marginalized – to maintain your own privileged position. That's why we insist so much on ourselves.

**Isn't inducing collective guilty conscience of those who do not hold real social power, even though belong to majority section of the population, also a kind of mechanism of suppression?**

*Katarina Stegnar:* Of course it is. And even with the mentioned trend of inclusion, where practically everyone can participate in theatre with their own personal story, the question arises whether this is true inclusiveness or just a sort of trick in which one unwittingly participates and which only offer an illusion of involvement, with no real power. In short, there is a sort of smoke screen which conceals the true nature of things through apparent inclusion – that holds not only for theatre, but for society in general. We think that we have a voice and that we can participate in decisions, but the power relations remain the same.

*Branko Jordan:* By focusing attention to disadvantaged groups, the basic distinction is blurred between those who are rich and have power, and those who are poor and have none. Of course the situation is awkward – after all, you are against all exclusion on a personal level, you defend social equality, but ultimately, you find yourself between a rock and a hard place. Similarly, we have been happily and sincerely involved in the development of theatre towards a situation where once could put oneself on stage instead of some drama character; but in the meantime, the train that we had been pushing so eagerly has departed towards groups of non-professional actors who can offer even more directness and authenticity on stage than we can. And at this point, you must ask yourself whether you inadvertently participated in some kind of engineering, in implementing a certain agenda. You thought it was an expression of your genuine intimate need, but later you find out that it may all have been just a part of some wider external developments.

**If I understand it correctly, the performance is based on the attempt to reflect on one's own artistic position.**

*Katarina Stegnar:* Given the current trends, it is obvious that our way of doing things is out of fashion. Being actors, we are not authentic enough, and we are not useful as *ready-mades*. Our current audience is out of fashion, too – the problem is not just us but also those who watch us.

*Primož Bežjak:* European theatre production is increasingly focused on acquiring new audiences, as they say. A lot of research has been made and studies written, but nobody knows exactly who and what these audiences are. We only know what kind of projects we supposedly have to invest in in order to get them. Therefore, we set ourselves various thematic bases, such as cultural and social engineering, but also our childhood as the only starting point from which even we could perform authentically, as *ready-mades*. From these bases, production material slowly began to emerge, which eventually resulted, for example, in our decision to use as simple a theatrical language as possible.

*Branko Jordan:* In the past, we were often lucky to have come across material that enabled concrete staging solutions already in the early stages of the process. This wasn't the case here: we had a conceptual framework, but at the same time material was coming together which was completely

autonomous and was not telling a story of anything that we conceived as an equation of or staging strategy, but appeared very interesting on the stage. For some time, we were even wondering whether the show would speak about something completely different (*laughs*).

*Katarina Stegnar*: And whether we could even afford it. Could we say, for example, that the play went its own way and that it is simply what it is. It namely goes against today's capitalist logic, when one is expected to design the performance as a product for which it is known in advance what it will be about, how it will address it, and what is its target audience.

*Primož Bežjak*: Often, you are ultimately defeated as an artist precisely by compromising because you want everything to be nice and coherent, integrated, easy to understand. We are fighting to allow ourselves for the performance to take us with it, regardless of expectations.

**And have you succeeded in confirming the legitimacy of your work?**

*Katarina Stegnar*: I think we have. We talked a lot about what we can still offer – as actors, as artists, as people. If I think about what attracts me as a member of audience, I would say I'm interested in the input, energy, in all that someone is prepared to do for a performance and for the audience.

And I am not talking about any extremes, but simply about what someone is prepared to give on the stage. And no matter what, I have a feeling that we are giving a lot in this performance. And we also get very tired (*laughs*).