

Leja Jurišič and Teja Reba, dancers

## Laughter is a tornado that breaks things apart and stops at nothing

*A long and winding road has led Leja Jurišič and Teja Reba to dance. For Leja, it was after finishing her career in professional gymnastics, where she won the title of a Yugoslav state champion in 1991. Growing up between Slovenia and France, Teja got involved in dance after finishing her Arts degree at the Sorbonne University and undergoing further training in India and Japan. Today they form part of a milieu, composed of the most exciting Slovenian dancers of the younger generation and they are, without a doubt, the boldest of them all.*

Not enough confrontation takes place amongst artists either, even though it is precisely art that should emerge as the only landscape of freedom that allows for a normal life – in close mutual relations, in sincere confrontation of ideas and in resistance against the established modes of being and hypocrisy.

### **Mojca Kumerdej**

As they intertwine dance and theatre with performance, they loosen the borders of extreme physical states and relentlessly tackle contents, related to collective and intimate resistance against the world that marginalizes the majority of people. Leja says that she seeks to transform resistance into art: the kind of art – adds Teja – that would allow for existence standing opposite to the established manners of functioning as well as hypocrisy. In addition to their own projects and their collaboration in various performances of other choreographers and directors, they have also been forming acclaimed duets during these past six years, which earned them the Ksenija Hribar Award for perspective choreographers at this year's Gibanica festival. In the performance *Sofa*, staged at the opening of U3–Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia that took place in the Museum of Modern Art, we saw the artists sitting on a sofa, dressed in real fur and wearing vegan stiletto shoes, as they were passing and hitting fragments of thoughts they call dualisms to produce not only funny nonsense, but also a rather inconvenient truth here and there.

**How did you two get involved in dance? You, Leja, crossed over to dance from gymnastics and Legal Studies and you, Teja, from studying the Arts at the Sorbonne University and after returning back from India.**

Leja: To be quite honest, after ten successful years of a professional career in sports, I crossed over directly to sofa. There was no human or divine creature that could have forced me to take on any kind of physical action, deviating from a normal teenage everyday life. At last, I could go out partying during the weekends, because I didn't have to get up at 7 a.m. But a true encounter between me and dance happened when I was 21, while studying for a Law Degree and it happened more or less by chance. I got involved in dance professionally thanks to Matej Kejžar, who had at that time just finished his training in Amsterdam and brought new contemporary dance aesthetics to Slovenia together with techniques fairly distinct to what existed in the national dance scene at that time. I knew straight away that this was it – a dance which doesn't dictate the form of movement from the outside, but allows the latter to arise from the bodily structure and functionality, from physiological laws of the bones, muscles, ligaments, internal organs and their codependence in motion, which slides from sensation to contemplation and back to sensation, from inner muscle tension to emotional state, from privacy of a body to externality that we all share, and then reabsorbs back into intimate tissue. From here on anything is possible and no limits exist any longer. I did in the end actually earn that Degree in Law, but there was simply no way back any longer. Law as a science still fascinates me, but I have my doubts about how it's actually put into practice.

Teja: Many artistic professions exist within our extended family. I was involved in dance in my childhood, but it was my cousin, a film director Andrej Žumbergar, who most influenced me by contaminating me with literature, art and film. These affinities only gained momentum in time, but the decision to devote my life to the stage live arts instead of film came somewhat later. I wanted to study film direction at the film institute La Fémis in Paris, but since one of the entry conditions was a finished two-year university course degree, I enrolled in the Art History course at the Sorbonne University. I was given the opportunity during my studies for a student exchange at a university in India and then ended up staying longer than planned there, as I finally switched to the Academy for Dance and Theatre in Bhubaneswar. After that I also went to Japan to train in Japanese performing arts.

**Ever since the beginning we have seen you melt together dance and performance in your own projects as well as projects devised by other authors. How do you perceive the difference between staging a dancing body on one hand and a performing body on the other?**

Leja: My very first solo *R'z'R* is a dance performance, because it involves extreme physical situations that cannot be performed by a body untrained in dance, even though I do remember that your review at the time was titled *A dance without Dancing*. Out of all my performances, I'd say that the solo performance *Ballet of Revolt* most clearly belongs in the arena of dance performances, because it is the most rhythmical and almost entirely performed in dialogue with music. However, I believe it is time for contemporary dance to somehow rename itself into a different entity. From how I see things, it's not about a split between dance and performance, it's about codependence. Regardless of whether I perform a dance combination, a text, or whether I literally vomit and piss all over stage – it's about the fact that first a sensation in the body arises, which then instigates a thought and as soon as I become aware of that thought, I translate it back to the body and this process goes on over and over again. This manner of functioning allows me to maintain control while performing and, more importantly, it allows me to lose control, which is crucial on stage in my opinion.

Teja: More than anything else, I try to ask myself what it is that I need in order to communicate a certain content: what means will I have at my disposal and in what kind of form – in relation to the theme – will an artistic work come into being. This process is influenced also by creative relations between coworkers and project collaborators. Me and Leja use the body as our basic medium, which allows us to work and communicate in the most tangible manner possible. Which is why instead of focusing on a dancing or a performing body, we prefer to pay much more attention to the body and the corporeal as the issue of marginalized discourse in our society. By doing this, we also touch upon feminisms, a feminine body and relevant social issues.

**Leja, you gave your last year's solo the title *Ballet of Revolt* – resistance against who or what?**

Leja: *Ballet of Revolt* was conceptualized in co-authorship with Petra Veber from February 2011 to November 2012, in the period of Arab Spring, during the Occupy Greece movement, and

after its premiere, protests of national format emerged in Slovenia. Resistance was in the air and, more than anything, there were many ideas flowing in the air about what would be the most effective manner of resistance ... Me and Petra contemplated these issues within our own medium by forming references also to Julia Kristeva, who understands resistance as rejection and re-appropriation of authorities in one's own dictionary of art, and to the futurist Valentine de Saint-Point, who proposed a transformation of passion into art in her Manifesto on passion in response to Marinetti. And so we made an assertion when conceiving the performance that at this moment in time, resistance should be transformed into art. This is exactly what our entire team did, and we did it with passion. Throughout the performance we see the body driven to the extreme, where – due to its existence in the state of impossibility – the body begins to resist and produce a new performative time or material.

**Teja, you also made a reference to the avant-garde in the performance *650 Experiences*, which was set up in collaboration with your partner, actor Loup Abramovici, whereas in the project *Welcome to Paradise* you intervene into the arena of nature through art.**

Teja: In the performance *650 Experiences* – created in 2011 together with Loup Abramovici and Petra Veber – the content required much historicizing, a lot of reconstructing had to be done. We were predominantly interested in memory gaps and associative approaches while looking for a dramaturgy that would emanate from the tension between the Artaudian and the Genetian body, between a poetic word and a convulsive scream. These relations were constantly translated from a written word into physical strain. The body simultaneously inhabited the role of pure medium, of a trace and of a history reporter, which is also why the boundary between dance, performance and poetry was undergoing a series of constant erasures. The O-jej collective decided to adopt a more exploratory approach in the project *Welcome to Paradise*, presented at the U3-Triennial of Contemporary Art in a fragmentary and documentary manner, by deconstructing dance onto its most elementary premises. We performed dance as our vocation while setting up a garden and it was as if we literally danced away the arrangement of the garden, thus the garden itself together with the growth of plants and their fruits became a performance in constant duration and it subsequently also emerged as a place of encounter, a place for community practices and events. We gradually turned the theatre completely upside down, replaced culture with nature, replaced dysfunctional dance with a functional tool, transformed an artist into a scientist, changed theatre time – existing independently from reality – into a biological and thus so very dependent time. Speaking in a conceptual manner, the body

thus became a »landscape« and so these were the elements that led us to the initial convention of anatomic theatre, namely bringing the body completely to the forefront in such a manner that it becomes invisible.

**How did you two actually meet as artists? If I am not mistaken, the duet *Between us* was your first project together.**

Teja: Leja and me knew each other briefly from our high school Gimnazija Poljane and then a decade ago, we started meeting each other at various contemporary dance workshops and got involved in a creatively romantic relationship, based on similar interests.

Leja: We simply liked each other. I could share my every idea with Teja regardless of how »silly« it might have seemed without feeling awkward about it. We've been trying out various minor stage ideas about two years at experimental platforms DanceLab, Plesni Teater Ljubljana and at Miniaturke in Glej Theatre.

Teja: Complimentary attitudes in how we see things and put them into practice have triggered a lot of energy between us, which has served as a medium for our artistic work and experimenting. In this spirit our origins were born – a cycle of performances *Interventions*, where we've been intervening without prior notice into artistic, festival and conversational contexts by performing a critical response to their contents. For example, at the IETM debate titled *Rehearsing freedom*, where the honorary speaker was the then Minister of Culture Vasko Simoniti, we were squeezing out shirts with the aforementioned title, sneaked ourselves on stage during his opening speech and performing a contemporary dance class right next to him. Then came a guerrilla trash performance *Pre-christmas dinner party*, made in cooperation with my colleagues in my own apartment with a ready-made set design due to the project funding from the Ministry of Culture and the Municipality of Ljubljana being denied. The performance brought forward the issues of provincial and incestuous nature of the Slovene artistic scene, whereas direct closeness of a spectator was a pivotal experience for our further performing work. On the basis of this newly formed alliance we created our first full-length performance *Between us* in 2009.

Leja: ... which found itself under the auspices of Nataša Zavolovšek from Zavod Exodos, who had already produced my previous performances and somehow intuitively knew that me and Teja make a good team.

**How would you describe the dynamics of your art process given the fact that each of you has her own poetic expression – yours Leja is somewhat closer to dance and yours Teja to theatre?**

Teja: The search for common language is a process instigated by mutual trust, which also allows us to critically confront each other without growing distance. We can start with a piece of text, with a part of set design, with an object, with a physical state or a life situation, and then the performance is slowly coming together while watching us, and we use mutual reflection and intuitive complementation to go on encountering spaces for cooperation, which we perceive as the arena of misunderstanding, confrontation and friction. Such relationship is rather strenuous in a public and professional context alike, and undesired in our society. Not enough confrontation takes place amongst artists either, even though it is precisely art that should emerge as the only landscape of freedom that allows for a normal life – in close mutual relations, in sincere confrontation of ideas and in resistance against the established modes of being and hypocrisy. The contents we open in close connection with initial premises normally tackle the relationship between two physical, emotional and political bodies that always move up and down the edge. This edge is actually referred to in an aesthetic sense and in terms of implementation, standing as an expression of courage in terms of surpassing the conventions when necessary, while it simultaneously embodies sincerity and vulnerability.

Leja: In the projects we do together, dance as a medium is being increasingly placed in the background, standing behind the elements of performance and theatre. For me, most performances feel like I've traveled a decade or a century in them. Performance is something immanent to my very being, but the question of what is contemporary dance today still represents a great challenge for me.

**How do you as appearing performers inhabit the performances by other authors – choreographers and directors? How do they in turn influence the projects that you two create?**

Teja: Me and Leja performed together in the performances by Janez Janša, Sebastijan Horvat as well as other Slovene directors and choreographers. We'll be heading off to Germany this August to work with the English theatre director Tim Etchels and his group Forced Entertainment. By doing such things, we nourish the bond we have and our articulatory ability, since we get to know each other in different contexts and in relation to different aesthetic approaches.

Leja: Regardless of whether I work alone or in a co-authorship, an idea becomes clear and posits itself somehow above me in an exploratory period or, better yet, above us; as if during the process, the project had acquired its own needs and laws of functioning, which an author will be forced to follow rather than dictate, and thus one surpasses his own needs and expectations. But it's never easy; heated debates are always a part of co-authorship. When cooperation in works of other authors is at stake, the perception of one's own body and movement gives way to a detailed study of the system and ideas conceived by these authors. Responsibility towards the entire idea is smaller, but responsibility towards one's own material in the creation is still more or less the same as it is in one's own project.

**Your last co-authored performance, premiered this June in the production of Bunker in Stara mestna elektrarna – Elektro Ljubljana, was given the title *The Second Freedom*. How would you define the first freedom in that case?**

Leja: We wanted the title to distance itself from the ancient been-there-done-that political postulates, such as free choice, freedom of speech etc. and open space for individual thought and a sense of freedom, and most importantly, for bringing the sense of freedom into being. For us, freedom means practicing art, staging one's own ideas without censorship of what is socially acceptable. There's no space for exclusion here, no space for self-sacrifice, but there most certainly is space for assuming the responsibility to think with one's own head out loud.

Teja: *The Second Freedom* designates the arena of collision between two basic concepts, defined in the title – the Other and Freedom, shedding light on the concept of hierarchical, from a relationship to a dominant contemporary discourse on equal opportunities, to »anything goes«, the question of gender and the related problematizing of the feminine body, to consumerist freedom of choice with regard to different relations we choose to enter, and regulation of biopolitical bodies...

Leja: The basic premise of *The Second Freedom* is a feminine principle of thought, which may be close to non-existent in the public discourse, but it steps into the spotlight in a performance without trying to be either submissive nor feminist, avoiding the use of conventional ways of (the patriarchal politics) without caring one bit for whether it is seen as adequate and acceptable or not. It is about confrontation with social consensuses that have very little or nothing to do with reality and it is also about treating authorities with complete ignorance.

**Leja, what exactly did you have in mind with non-feminist feminine principle and complete disregard for authorities?**

Leja: I don't place any equations between femininity and feminism. More importantly, as long as many artists will define their artistic statements as feminist, while acting in a completely submissive manner towards the patriarchal mentality or their partners in their private lives, I have no intention of declaring my statements as feminist. Certain statements in the performance itself, such as: *God's blessing on all coochies who long and work for that bright day, when o'er earth's habitations, no man's dick shall hold its sway ...* provoke feminism as a political idea. If a grown human being cannot express her desires and passions due to being trapped in some sort in system, she has no one else to blame but herself. If you're a grown person still acknowledging some external authority, it is probably time for you to grow up. Authority designates everything familiar, acceptable and rational, which is why it gives us a sense of security. However, I for one am interested in the unimaginable in art, in the jump forward.

**Why, when devising *The Second Freedom*, you decided to choose the philosophy and »Professor Mladen« as the knowing subject, the arena of which you seek to penetrate with bold questions and comments as if asking him to hand his desire over to you two?**

Leja: We're familiar with Mladen Dolar through his texts, some lectures and briefly also in person. The entire team approached this project in a rather studious manner, exploring one of the most interesting authors in Slovenia. Just as Mladen studies theatre, we as choreographers study him. So it's about a symbiosis of some sort and also a profoundly sincere tribute.

Teja: In *The Second Freedom* we put several procedures into practice that were actually introduced no sooner than in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – from transfer, replacement, deconstruction,

absurd etc – and simultaneously make references to history, philosophy and feminisms. However, with one single difference, which is what we actually perceive as the other freedom that neither theatre nor public discourse succeeded establishing – the principle of thought and action completely unconcerned with social propriety, emanating from a woman as such. Catherine Malabou talks about how it was actually philosophy that orchestrated the impossibility of a woman as a subject. The dominant discourses of feminism based on the criticism of essentialism and claiming that no such thing as inherently feminine exists paradoxically lead back into symbolic violence. The urgency of acknowledging an entity specifically feminine or a woman as such (who would always form itself through violence it was subjected to) also designates the search for a certain new definition of resistance. This is a dangerous thought indeed and it is within this double-edged sword that we posit ourselves in relation to Mladen, Professor Mladen Dolar and in relation to his philosophy. We only chose Mladen inasmuch as he himself had entered our own lives and had in turn become irreplaceable, not to mention the pains he put us through with translations of his texts and staging abroad. Mladen Dolar is most certainly nothing personal, even though it's true that I ask him in the performance, if the curtain of rhetoric would have waved with a wilder zest, should we stand behind it together. I'm not a philosopher myself, but I nevertheless find philosophy just as exciting as theatre. *The Second Freedom* represents a step towards elementary contemplation about freedom, which each individual in the society is bound to perform in an individual as well as collective manner: we must ask ourselves the question of what life is, how we wish to live it and what for. Now, the decision may be individual, but it becomes a political act within a social process. Redefinition of life is the very basis and should remain a constant arena of perpetual return for us as individual and social entities.

**How did you choose the themes for individual stagings of the performance *Sofa*, where you two pass and hit fragments of thought or dualisms, as you like to call them? To what degree do you actually prepare in advance and how much room is there for improvisation, how do you perceive the responses coming from audience?**

Teja: The performance *Sofa* is a very specific performance contextually speaking, which means we always write it and perform it anew and thereby make references to the current social, political and artistic action ...

Leja: About a week before staging the performance, each of us writes the text separately. And then we normally melt both texts together in some bar, which means that we also perform it there for ourselves and for our coincidental audiences and end up laughing our heads off for a couple of hours, regardless of whether we find dualisms actually funny or not. It's for pure exercise. This is how we get to the final version of the text.

Teja: We help ourselves with newspapers, books, the internet, with conversations or confessions in the process. Then we remake and polish both versions and determine dualisms together, whereby the text stands as a performance framework, since we leave space also for unforeseen communication with the audience and for free mind flow. Time also plays a relevant part in *Sofa* – we performed both, performances lasting no more than ten minutes as well as performances lasting no less than three hours.

Leja: In the original, at least two hours long version, the ready-made dualisms constitute two thirds of the performance at the most; the rest is improvisation on a chosen subject, depending on specific situations together with the level of our mental and physical exhaustion. It's about persistence that will in the best-case scenario lead to many unuttered truths, and in the worst-case scenario to collapse. Our next challenge is an edition of *Sofa* lasting six hours, which we'll probably perform at U3.

**Which one of the spontaneous dualisms surprised you the most? Were you ever uncomfortable after having uttered something particular, did the audience ever react loudly, given the fact that you also deal with the names of public personalities?**

Teja: *Sofa* has got two faces, it's a riddle. It also provokes by demolishing the conventional relations and surpassing the system of binary thought. At the opening of U3–Triennial of Contemporary Art in Slovenia where we performed *Sofa*, Peter Mlakar walked out in an angry and mocking manner. The London audience members were extremely shocked because more than anything else, they found the act of signification as such highly violent. The reactions were fantastic, because we've tackled the issue of authority, hierarchy, respect and stereotype.

Leja: The most radical and at the same time also the most difficult gesture was staging the performance *Sofa* in the Museum of Modern Art when Maks Soršak passed away. Laughing at death somehow doesn't go along with the Western culture. But judging from the responses of

the people present, it had a cathartic effect. And surely, the performance would never have happened if once Maks wouldn't have ask me why we don't stage this performance at funerals. And so we did. Just for Maks. But generally speaking, I must say that it truly rarely happens for a dualism to give me "exquisite pleasure" when I perform *Sofa*. Nevertheless, the dualism *Cmeen Elisabeth II. – Diana A Dead Slut* has just recently provoked gales of laughter in London. At this year's U3, the somewhat difficult dualism was for example *The new Collectivism – the day of old age*. And on the other hand, lovely and somewhat sad at the same time was the dualism *Neoliberal subject with a good heart - a tramp artist - Mark Požlep*.

### **What does the laughter after each dualism mean?**

Leja: *Sofa* is an incorrect political and social dialogue, where each of us utters her own thing, and then we laugh together out loud. The gesture of laughter is an essential part of life. There's no *Sofa* without laughter and life is unbearable without it. It's not so much about the comical content of what was sad as much as it is about the fact that laughter opens a space for the mind to take a big breath from the excessive character of a statement. What goes on here is also a subversive gesture, since we don't apologize for an inadequate statement, but respond to it once again in an inadequate manner. Laughter transforms the threat of what was articulated into sympathy and the hostility of the statement into friendship.

Teja: This laughter is a tornado that breaks things apart, leaves out no one, stops at nothing and has no specific target. It sheds light on absurdity and establishes duality, which it then breaks apart in the very next moment only to establish it once again.

### **You're both self-employed artists with the status of professional dancers. How do you direct and choreograph art and family life with children?**

Leja: Together with a wider team of collaborators we run our own production organization Pekinpah. I do have the status of a choreographer and dancer, but it seems that there is nothing more left, apart from the open market together with private and nationalized debts for the so called younger generation that I myself am a part of. I ran into the director Jernej Lorenci at the seaside this year while we were both jogging in the morning and then after a ten-kilometer run we both agreed on how important it is to do something for your soul before your child wakes up in the morning.

Teja: Having the self-employed status in culture in translation means being without status and without any rights. Self-employed people in culture such as myself are normally (too) highly educated, forming the vital part of creativity in Slovenia while constantly working overtime. We belong in the second salary grade, which means that we can expect our pension to add up to €350. We don't have any such thing as sick leave, or a labour period with bonus, or an option of retraining (which is essential for a dance professional). The only thing saving us at the moment is creativity, but the latter is also our enemy, because it keeps us bound to precarious lifestyle (she'll be fine, she's a creative individual, she'll find her way around things). I've got three kids and the relations between work and home are a constant source of discontent, I live and work amidst such circumstances. The source of additional anxieties that I feel and share with my generation are the relations between my own experience of motherhood, motherhood as an institution, the fact that procreation is free labour and that the issues of civil productivity and education of the future generations go on disappearing from the collective public arena in the society. And this is exactly a junction of themes I wish to tackle in my new performance next year.