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**Collective as a substance, not a form**

**Theatre collective Beton Ltd. celebrates its tenth anniversary – They remain committed to finding intuitive methodologies**

Andreja Kopač

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| *The performance* Everything We've Lost While We've Gone on Living*, which is full of glitter, song, and champagne, takes place in the bittersweet light of the ousting of middle generations, lost time, and the devaluation of values. PHOTO: Borut Peterlin* |

This year, theatre collective Beton Ltd., consisting of actors, **Katarina Stegnar**, **Primož Bezjak** and **Branko Jordan**, is not only celebrating its tenth anniversary, but is also trying to reflect and chart the path forward, looking for new performance formats arising from topics, contents and atmosphere as it is felt by the artists, both as a collective and individually. In times of restricted movement, repression of free thought, and the rampage of hierarchical, offensive, authoritarian communication of the authorities, a limited liability company (Ltd.) is the right address for thinking a different co-operation as developed in their joint projects between 2010 and 2020 and as they will develop in the future in their commitment to finding intuitive methodologies.

**Omen est nomen**

*SO FAR AWAY: Introduction to ego-logy, I Say What I Am Told To Say, Everything We've Lost While We've Gone on Living, Revolting Man, Ich kann nicht anders, Große Erwartungen/Great Expectations* and *Mahlzeit* art the titles of seven performances, each with a unique substantive basis, as well as experimenting with the staging form and acting style. Katarina Stegnar, Primož Bezjak and Branko Jordan were first brought together by their studies at the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television, and then by their long‑standing collaboration in the Betontanc group led by director Matjaž Pograjc. In 1999, Katerina Stegnar and Primož Bezjak performed together for the first time in *Secret Sunshine Schedule*, then in *The Meeting Room* (2002) with Branko Jordan.

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| *The performance* Große Erwartungen/Great Expectations *seems like a remnant, a sediment of public speech, of logic and meaning. Photo: Nada Žgank* |

Since then, they have performed together (with other artists) in six Betontanc performances, mostly in collaboration with foreign co‑producers (Dutch group Jonghollandia, Latvian group UMKA, French group EZ3kiel, Japanese group Original Tempo) and toured many countries. The result is their special bond, directness in communication, and plenty of anecdotes. During this period, the Betontanc group became highly international and developed more complex and diversified poetics. It was the collaboration with the Dutch group Jonghollandia – which was later renamed to Wunderbaum (in *Everybody For Berlusconi*, 2004) and which operated as a collective of actors without a director – that motivated the trio to develop their own formats and set up the Beton Ltd. limited liability company. The latter has operated within the Bunker Institute from the beginning, with three projects created at the invitation of the Anton Podbevšek Theatre.

**The dogs bark, but the actor keeps acting**

Already in the first performance, *SO FAR AWAY: Introduction to ego-logy* (2010), they introduce a level of reflection that combines global problems (melting ice, endangered animal species, disappearance of natural habitats) with a symbolic reference to the place of man in the system, which they “place” a little closer in the second performance, *I Say What I Am Told To Say* (2012): in the exhausting environment of European interpreters, into the grey machinery of bureaucracy and babble. In doing so, they are exposing the crisis of language in a Beckettian sense, the absence of escape, and the erosion of thought. In the first two performances (actress Daša Doberšek also took part in the second one), they set the coordinates of their work, which is characterized by references to social issues, commitment to transforming a concrete situation into a theatrical form, and the technique of devised theatre, and mostly they are all authors of the texts as well. Their language is also very kinetic.

Primož Bezjak: “Corporeality is not only used as a tool of transformation, it is primarily about opening up the associative field and abstraction. Coming from physical theatre, this is one of our primary means of expression. In general, corporeality, or physicality, depends on the concept of the performance; in each project, we decide at the beginning whether we will ‘break a sweat’ or not.” In the third performance, *Everything We've Lost While We've Gone on Living* (2014), they sweat a lot in general, as it is an intense intertwining of three genres as excerpts from the end of 1970s (birth), graduation as the time of coming of age, and the present situation, exposing the issues of the position of an individual during social transition, who grew up in one system and lives in a different one. The performance, full of glitter, songs and champagne, takes place in the bittersweet light of the ousting of middle generations, lost time, and the devaluation of values.

The latter are structured in a distinctively different performative manner in the next performance, *Revolting Man* (2015), with the time perspective shifting to the future (they are transformed into old men with decorations), and the medium is expanded with film ((in collaboration with established film directors from Novo Mesto: Rok Biček, Žiga Virc and Klemen Dvornik) and a dog on stage. From here, their performance format turns to intimism and they start experimenting more with space (**Toni Soprano Meneglejte** and Sonda/**Miha Horvat**), sound (Dead Tongues/**Jure Vlahovič**, **Janez Weiss**), stage atmospheres, and the perspective of the spectator.

**Apocalypse before Apocalypse**

The German Cycle consisting of three performances is defined primarily by a form of collective intimism or intimate collectivism in the sense of double coding, in which critique of the system, internal relations, and the protagonists’ private views of the world peel off or turn inside out. In *Ich kann nicht anders* (2016), such a procedure is perhaps most structured and precise. The audience is placed in a post‑apocalyptic situation in which the events unfold as in a kind of abandoned bunker and a stalker‑like sense of the struggle for survival, with the actors skilfully acting out the discursive waves between personal communication, critique of the outside world, and inner inability to get out or escape from it all. In this context, the next performance, Große Erwartungen / Great Expectations (2018), seems like a remnant, a sediment of public speech, of logic and meaning. The audience is addressed with children’s words, the choreography is simplified, and the theatre space is turned "upside down"; the stage is newly set up with seats for the spectators, while the usual seating area is transformed into a monumental theatrical scenography that is on the verge of collapse. It is all a chilling prediction of the devaluation of everything set and known.

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| In *SO FAR AWAY: Introduction to ego-logy*, the artists symbolically combine the reflection on global problems with the place of man in the system. Photo: Urška Boljkovac |

The speech is disappearing and becoming increasingly loose; the way the audience is addressed turns into infantilism, the actors change from characters to caricatures, while visual effects, music and costume design come to the fore. A picture of adult children in alpine farmer outfits. Rural bullies? Outcasts? Theatre activists? White capitalists? Or all of us, from the standpoint of how the system views us? Watching the performance feels discomforting and makes one want a break from history. The last performance, *Mahlzeit* (premiere December 19, 2019) brings just that, as it promises a break, a snack, a time for dining and socializing. It is a turning point within the collective, in the sense that the elements that are usually in the background (music, visual appearance) come to the fore, and the performance turns into a concert where the actors find themselves on stage together with the musicians as singers and interpreters, while the audience is “fed” with a hot dog and a bun under the stage at a huge table, where we can listen, think and marvel in peace. And it seems as if the German Cycle foretells the political and corona cataclysm of public life, where the only place one can have a snack in peace is home.

**Collective(ness), truth and a headfirst plunge**

According to the Russian literary historian Mikhail Bakhtin, the role of carnival has become so loose since the 17th century that it is no longer a place of freedom and Dionysian instinct, but is becoming an everyday, institutionalized, and not very special phenomenon. The concept of carnival today manifests itself as a fragmented, marginalized and sublimated form, and continues to function as such, but has a universal meaning for human society, just like theatre. If, in a sense, Beton Ltd. is testing the limits of theatrical language through a changed form of carnivalism, there is also something universally Bakhtinian in their language, especially in connection with the concept of philosophy of action, ethics and aesthetics. Among other things, this concept presupposes the unique nature of the individual (in a collective) only to the extent to which this unique nature can be concretized. For Bakhtin, the individual is a never‑ending, ever‑changing entity that is constantly under the influence of others, but at the same time a voice that speaks for itself and allows us to think a polyphonic concept of truth, which is always a cluster of mutually addressed, though conflicting claims within the framework of a real event.

Beton Ltd. also acts out different positions of view in its performances, in the sense of a common identity that does not belong to the individual but is shared by both members and associates of the collective. Their language is alive, present, piercing, sharp, incisive. Both during rehearsals and in performances. So how do they work together? Branko Jordan links their work to Jacques Ranciere's concept of *The Emancipated Spectator*, highlighting the emancipated actor, whom he understands as a creator who wants to take on more responsibilities in the process of creating or even a part of artistic life, and is also ready to exercise, test and face this responsibility. “I see him as an actor who does not distance himself from decisions and consequences and does not only invoke the fact that he is just an actor playing a (socially and artistically prescribed) role," says Katarina Stegnar. »Beton Ltd. has a rather loose, open, intuitive methodology in which the freedom to create is also a pressure. Failure to determine the methodology is an integral part of our process."

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| *A scene from* Everything We've Lost While We've Gone on Living. *Photo: Borut Peterlin* |

At the same time, it seems that in order to achieve the truth of the performances of the Beton Ltd. collective, one has to grasp them as a whole; to see, hear, experience, think them. Only by doing can the spectator, often in retrospect, open the channels to think the different modes of truth of staging the moment through the regime of collectivity. Everyone thinks that the more they talk, the less rational ballast there is and the more accurately they achieve the feeling they want to establish. Different ideas are intertwined until a form comes out that everyone agrees is right. But there is always a pinch of irony, humour and grotesque, too. So, how to proceed from here?

Primož Bezjak explains: “In the future, I would like to see more interdisciplinarity within projects, not just performances, more cooperation or joint creative work with a wide range of Slovenian and international scientists and experts.” Branko Jordan adds: “I see two directions in the future: an attempt to open up the collective in terms of cooperation with younger, young artists (creating opportunities), and on the other hand, preparing the ground for more interdisciplinary projects and a shift away from traditional stage machinery.” Katarina Stegnar says: “Our (my) wish is to expand the non‑hierarchical way of working to more collaborators, especially those that will share the stage with us. We will have to make this headfirst plunge soon.”