in spite of safety and comfort: Perforations Festival round up

NOV 29, 2017 By MAURA NGUYỄN DONOHUE (SHE/THEY) In DANCE

Maria Magdalena Kozłowska, Agnieszka Krysti, Robert Wasiewicz, Katarzyna Sikora, Ramona Nagabczyńska and Paweł Sakowicz in "Make Yourself" by Marta Ziółek's (seated behind mask)

In the middle of Bruno Isaković and Mia Zalukar's robust and poignant *Suddenly Everywhere*, the soothing sound of tinkling ice cubes in cocktail glasses sneaks into the space. The duet takes the psycho-sexual battle of George and Martha, made famous by Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor's portrayals in the film adaptation of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf*, into a stunning opening display of brutality and endurance. A center piece of the Perforations Festival, see my interview with curator Zvonimir Dobrovic, the work honors an ongoing thread through the week to share work that takes its performers and the audience beyond comfort, beyond safety and into the realm of friendly fire fatalism. Several works in the festival brought the audience into direct responsibility for the execution of artistic ideas and challenged the passive stasis of sideline observation in a mostly successful series of performances that ripped apart conventional norms.

Jasna L. Vinovrški and collaborative iPad in Staying Alive – Photo by Vojta Brinsky

Jasna L. Vinovrški's *Staying Alive*, in the Experimental Theater of the Abrons Arts Center, used a migrating book – passed among the audience members – to lightly focus us on the perils of romanticized pasts and a fraught present. Near the beginning of the book, Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" is quoted: *The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule.* Vinovrški's welcomingly pleasant demeanor masks the underlying crisis that unfolds in her evolving tasks. And while, most audience members probably missed the Benjamin reference – many were watched by the rest of the audience while trying to fan through the pages as Vinovrški commented on the book's border crossings from hand to hand – the framing of the performance work against this critique of historicism was pitch perfect. Benjamin's final and controversial essay has fed my own previous performance struggles with fixed notions of time. But Vinovrški portrays Klee's *Angleus Novus* (as described by Benjamin in his "Theses" as the angel of history), like a beleaguered press secretary facing the assault of progress in the midst of ridiculous accumulating responsibilities. There she is systematically increasing the speed as she repeats seemingly simple movement sequences, in pantyhose and with choreographed eye scans, and then adding the balancing of an iPad (the digital metronome) on her head while gliding high on the balls of her feet, or balancing the iPad and reading on top of a stack of books… none of it sounds astounding but the effort of keeping up and staying "alive" strengthened in resonance throughout the piece. That she also sang and danced to the Bee Gees also helped delight and distract us from the highly technical elements of her perfect execution. As an artist who grew up in Zagreb, Croatia but who has lived and worked abroad since the disintegration of Yugoslavia, she effectively amplified the absurdity of endlessly precarious battles for survival amidst unrelentingly mundane circumstances, and yet the hint of enormous historic atrocities was passed among us like neighboring countries.

Great Jones Rep brought our production of *Pylade* back to New York, after a premiere and run at La MaMa almost exactly 2 years ago and a tour to several European countries in the summer of 2016. In a world that has drastically changed, and for performances now situated in La MaMa's Galleria, the idea of art as radical activism/radical acts as artistic practice finally found a true home. Now a performance installation instead of a piece of traditional theater, the Artaudian principles that fed the development and performative ideology of our production manifested with a clarity we had only glimpsed in previous venues. The responsibility of the actors and the audience to inhabit a shared world, to wake up to the baseness of our environmental realities and to enter the lunacy of the righteous zealots matched the theological battles of will and might playing out, and spilling out, onto Great Jones Street. Through proximity and informality, the production found its new freedom and deeper meaning. The resounding call to be unreasonably passionate regardless of revolution's failure was articulated, literally – audience members who had seen us in New York and Italy finally understood what we were saying – and figuratively as we took it to the streets for a final defiant tragedy. The observations from my 2016 Furious Capitalism or Fascist Consumerism: Notes from Pylade, and even the company's more recent excerpted participation in the Not My President's Day actions, continue to evolve as we watch the world burning in the return of the Furies, goddesses of fear and hate, of the past and of vengeance. There is no longer any question that they have returned, that Athena's age of reason stews in the blood bath of capitalist greed and false idols. Pasolini's tragic prophecy on the fascism of consumption has been fully realized and a newly energized company took our Croatian director Ivica Buljan's commentaries on the global Trump effect to heart and into our bodies. Plus, Slovenian guest artist, Marko Mandić, as Pylade, fucked a turkey and was then strangled and left for dead in the street, like the prophetic seer who wrote the play 40 years ago.

Great Jones Rep in "Pylade" – Photo by Heather Parsons

Robert Wasiewicz whispers, as Glow, in the street

Polish choreographer Marta Ziółek's *"Make Yourself"* was a seductive, disorienting hallucination in La MaMa's First Floor Theater. Against the context that Zvonimir has described for female Polish artists, the anarchist spirit prevailed against the pervasive need to accomplish and produce. Five stoned-out, gorgeous, human mannequins wandered through the lobby and out into the street, occasionally whispering to the waiting audience and passers-by on East 4th St. Pawel Sakowicz as High Speed, in short shorts, gym bag, curled mustache and baseball cap told me with glazed-eyes: "They say that I am high and I am." Robert Wasiewicz, as Glow, found me in my seat to tell me the "Beauty is an open source." The press blurb described the work as "a kind of trip." I found it to be an ecstatic ride complete with psychedelic video from Krzysztof Bagiński. Agnieszka Krysti's "Beauty," Ramona Nagabczyńska's "Coco" and Katarzyna Sikora's "Lordi" were stunning fellow inhabitants of an automated window display of sorts, effecting with impressive precision the image of sex-bots caught in a display loop. I returned a second night to watch this opening sequence which (like HBO's "Westworld" actors) revealed the human ability to replicate machines. Android, cyborg, automaton… this was beyond "the robot." Kundalini Yoga (in stilettos, yasss) led to costume changes and singer Maria Magdalena Kozłowska roused the house. The dancers crushed the tightly executed constraints of vigorous cardiovascular sequences blending ballet, house, dancehall, and hip hop into a technoparty-mall boutique-fitness class wonderland where production and production and production must continue and continue like a rave, like a trance, like capitalism.

While all of the work's I encountered took artistic risks, two works took directives or, at least, direct influence from outside sources in order to achieve their performance ideas. In *One Hundred Toasts*, from Anita Wach/Via Negativa, audience members read various printed statements (sometimes about statesmen) and toasted artists, productivity (#47: "to all the sweat you've squeezed out of you through years of hard work"), and politics (the show was dedicated to George Washington) with wine (or juice). As we continued through endless free refills, Wach shifted costumes and soundscapes classical to early punk, while growing more enmeshed in the messes of guzzling increasingly more complicated cup arrangements of wine and devouring from plates of cake. In the end, she was in a state of complete disarray and the intimately placed audience around her, in La MaMa's Club, was well toasted. I was left ruminating on the ruins of parties both social and political, especially since my companion eugene de poogene refused to read #45, a number with a particularly sour sentiment in America now. Ina Sladić's *Penny/Audience* relied on pre-recorded instructions from downtown legend, Penny Arcade, to define the direction of her performance. In a negotiation with requests from Penny such as spending "15-minutes showing the audience her life via gesture and sign language," Sladić struggled with adhering to the improvisational scores and building something compelling to watch. In the midst of a festival so rife with performative gambles, I yearned for a more disobedient response to the directives.

Anita Wach with toasting audience member in "100 Toasts"

Bruno Isaković and Mia Zalukar in "Suddenly Everywhere"

By the time I finally saw Bruno Isaković's *Suddenly Everywhere*, we'd wrapped *Pylade*, I'd eaten my mom's turkey, and had started the final round of rehearsals with Italy's Motus Company, for *Panorama*, a new work by the Great Jones Rep Company for premiere at La MaMa and Under the Radar. Dashing over after 6 hours of rehearsal, I worried that I'd be too fatigued (and still in pie detox) to attend to the work properly, but Bruno and Mia Zalukar were already vibrantly dancing together to the music from the roadhouse (dance scene) in the film version of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf." The duet which seemed light, playful and improvised began to take more shape and increased in ferocity as we settled into our seats. The diminutive Mia Zalukar slapped Bruno with unabashed zeal and he responded with sly physical retorts, dropping her or pulling her up by the neck. That she is excessively friendly and smiling while forward facing, but unrelenting in her attacks and he is equally willing to tie her into knots serves as a terrific physicalization of the brutality of George and Martha's destructive repartee and riposites. She jabs and he parries. She stands on him, slamming his head into the floor with her foot and he pulls her toes. There are audible gasps emitting from the house. The violence is raw, but performed with calculated ease. I've made this dance many times, but only ever in my head. Bruno and Mia are well-paired inhabitants of a wasted landscape, where their skill, stamina and presence ring like a well-iced glass of bourbon. The dance is bold in its physical risks and sophisticated in its crafting. By the time the soundtrack of clinking glasses and banter arrives, we are thoroughly entwined in their web of negotiations. The dance slows and the stage dims, Bruno lights Mia with a flashlight and projected phrases about process and subjectivity appear on the back wall. When the two reconnect the dance slowly accelerates and the sound speeds up until we're back at the opening dance in an endless spiral. The most delicious tragedy.

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