

## **BITEF BLOG - 50th BITEF FESTIVAL**

Interview with Igor Koruga,

one of the authors of the dance performance ONLY MINE ALONE,

Station Service for Contemporary Dance in Belgrade

Interview conducted by: Đorđe Živadinović Grgur

- **When the spectator enters and sits in his place, the first thing he sees are you two, almost the same dressed, with black hoods, in a huge orange box. At first it seemed to me, when the show began, that you might be two parts of one person torn in half, especially since the movement was basically the same with the repetition of a strong symbolic banging of the head on the floor and walls, but it soon became irrelevant to think about it because that physical, sensory examination of space became even more interesting when it was synchronized, and especially when you started to verbalize your thoughts and questions. What exactly are these questions for you? Do you really and how often do you think you are working against yourself, do you think that what you are doing has no value, in a creative immaterial or material sense? Do we really always chase something that doesn't come and we don't have time, none of us?**

I understand the symbolism that appears in the minds of the spectators at the beginning of the play - that we are two parts of one person - although that was not our direct intention. In this performance, both Ana and I are individuals for ourselves, just as every spectator is an individual for her or himself. We are together in that space, we live in it, we swing, we physically and sensually examine it, but each for oneself, not noticing and not touching each other... Sometimes I have the impression that we are two animals in a cage. The first part of the play is long, slow, minimal, challenging for the viewer and the viewer's patience, as if suffocating, hurting - which also embodies the state of "negative" emotion. The synchronization that then occurs between Ana and me is the moment in which we both notice that we are not alone in such states. Later it develops deeper through the performance. Questions and thoughts, with which we also verbalize the states of our 'negative' feelings, are our authentic self-questionings of the circumstances and realities in which we live today – capitalist realism, as the only political-economic system and living ideological framework present in all domains of modern experience, and given, rather than being a construction. There is a cruelly beautiful statement by blogger Mark Fischer, that today it is much easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. I totally agree with that. That is why all the questions we say during the performance mark today's dominance of capitalist realism in the lives of each of us, from the cultural, economic, political, social, and (for me the most shocking) angle point of view, affectively. And how often do I ask myself these questions? Literally - every 5 minutes! :)

- **You say that the world you live in is contaminated, capitalized, consumerist, etc. Can a human, and then an artist, and then a contemporary dancer remain inalienable in such a system, first of all from oneself and its instincts, and then from the other living world that surrounds him/her, and not speak exclusively the language of finance or make friendships only on facebook?**

At the core of the neoliberal-capitalist regime, which survives on the principles of commodification, corporatization, commercialization, consumerization of our reality today, defined are, of course, the circumstances in which every work of art is made. Thus, independent artists and cultural workers today are forced to be entrepreneurs with a market logic of thinking, working in uncertain or temporary labor relations, ready to exploit their intellectual and creative capital, balancing on a thin wire between double political and ideological arsins (self-governing leftism and party system), systemically individualized and responsible only for themselves. However, the play "Only Mine Alone" does not focus only on artists, but communicates to everyone who lives and works in these, above, uncertain conditions of capitalist realism, where feelings such as apathy, lethargy, depression, anxiety, burnout, aggression or sadness, consequently popping up at every turn. Success, competitiveness, self-realization or individualism are imposed values of today's neoliberal society that we all "must" achieve. Any weakness or manifestation of negative feelings is treated through the same values, especially through Western psychotherapeutic culture. Numerous affirmative phrases and mantras of the famous American therapist Louise Hey can serve as a great example, which are even branded in our country every day on the packaging of "Jana" water: "Learn how to deal with stress", "Nurture your creativity", "It's always the right time for happiness ", " I am willing to change and I make changes with ease ", " Life is joy and I choose to rejoice in it ", " All my relationships are filled with love because I choose to be like that ", etc.

Can we say this, for example, to a cleaner of a corporate company, who, due to lack of a permanent job, is forced to work for 121 Serbian dinars (1 euro) per hour, part-time, and to clean and maintain 550m2 every working day to support her family? Can we say it to migrants from Syria? Due to the growing evasion of state responsibility for the social protection of citizens, we remain forced and left to deal with this burden of our (emotional) lives, which is constantly increasing. *Our* stories are being systemically individualized and medicalized to be *only mine alone*, marked as "negative" (for society) if they do not follow the principles and values of the capitalist regime. Thus, we remain lonely, alienated from our instincts and the world around us, hidden behind the profile of social networks on the Internet, scared to indulge in building love or friendship, cynically and pessimistically indignant at any question of change... That's why the show " Only mine Alone "is one of the ways to support the public and collective recognition of negative feelings as a potential starting point for building new forms of community. It implies accepting that negative feelings are the basic social and cultural circumstances in which we live and work today, regardless of the fact that we are daily bombarded by the neoliberal regime of imposed happiness (through TV, commercials, billboards, internet etc.). By recognizing each other in front of and with each other, we open (at least) the possibility for thinking about a different world. Because in order to think about any socio-political changes at all today, it is necessary to first dedicate ourselves to rebuilding our interpersonal relations, and thus ourselves. Only there, I see a crack / crevice for some step forward. Or hope.

- It is also interesting that you are wondering how and why we fall in love without "falling" in love"? What is it in general human linguistics and physics that dehumanizes,

**frustrates and makes us anxious, depressed, that pushes us into the abyss of absurdity and / or aggression? What and what do you think about when you start the personal alphabet of problems and obstacles in this performance?**

Numerous applications and social networks for instant sex-dating, speed-daiting, selfie-mania and illusions / fictions of identity on the Internet, then 'masturdaiting', numerous beliefs that life is just a game of transient phenomena, that the most important thing is to maintain a suitable distance and not tie being too much for anything, nor taking life too seriously – are just some of the mantras and practices of a superficial consumerist attitude and today's way of life or maintaining interpersonal relationships. This constant indefiniteness, uncertainty, fluidity of interpersonal relationships ("everything is possible and nothing is necessary"), lead to the fact that we distance ourselves from the possibility of being honest with each other, and that we somehow expel sentimentality from the public, or that we lose the capacity to notice another person around us, or to relate to ourselves through a relationship with another person (or more other people), meaningfully. I like the thesis that "a person who cannot be with himself cannot be with any other person.

But if we have love, and we don't care about how other people around us live, then that is not real love (Srećko Horvat). That is why I think that in that uncertainty or alienation within today's social relations, we should think about a new body of love and empathy. But there is always the question of how to touch the body that touches other screens, today with love? How do we open up to empathy, when we must first deal with depressed, anxious, aggressive feelings or the body on a daily basis - because we have to stay in the race for our job, or for a new project, or for the visibility of our own work in the art market? The alphabet of negative feelings that Ana and I produce during the play is one of the creative suggestions of theorist Ann Cvetković (whose book "Depression, Public Feeling" was the basis of our artistic research and work) as negative emotions and states recognized / accepted as a social circumstance of all of us and provide space for their visibility. And even further, how to empathize with / towards such feelings? The words that Ana and I introduced into the alphabet are our personal choice of feelings that we face every day in different situations. The play we develop during the enumeration, repetition, or crossing of these words is our poetic / creative way of stepping out of the clear linguistic logic of naming these states (by question or just words). To open the space of their affective action on the viewer (with, of course, the physical movement we do), so that everyone can identify with the feelings that are mentioned.

- **And for everything you say is only yours, ie. just mine. And it seems to me that every viewer can say that at some point he was in a position that for everything you list (anxiety, apathy, apathy, pain, anger, awfulness, suffocation, depression, closedness, etc.) he can say that it is only his/hers. I see it as something only ours, which in a wonderful, honest and convincing way brings things to the level of the universal and to empathy. Do you think that your performance is really that communicative, despite the fact that it is based on contemporary dance and movement and how such practices communicate with the audience here and in the world today?**

The program book of our performance quotes Ann Cvetković: "If we manage to get to know each other through our depressions, then maybe we can use it to create new types of sociability that will lead us, not only to get out of our impasses, but also help us understand the impasse as a state that has productive potential. " Towards the end of the show, almost every viewer received an orange piece of paper with descriptions of the negative feelings of the two of us, our friends, as well as anonymous people from blogs on the net. The decision on the content of the post-its, the interruption of speech, the physical entry into the audience, the music - is a conscious and thoughtful decision with the goal or potential to achieve a direct opening of communication or a sense of community among those present, in the theater as a public space, not just a space of representation. We wanted to avoid our established approach of "paranoid" critique of systemic reasons for such conditions, but to try to move to "reparative" critique, more precisely, to enter into sharing emotions in practice, not to leave everything only on a declarative, representative level. Ann Cvetković herself says: "I may wake up every morning on the wrong side of capitalism, but just saying that capitalism is a problem does not help me get up in the morning. Such a decision, of course, carried the risk of pathos, but we bravely stepped on that slippery terrain, so some lay down, some did not. But there was a moment when at the very end of the show (during the performance at Bitef) a spectator from the audience spontaneously asked - HOW ARE YOU? It was a nice and (for a start) enough rounding of the empathic exchange. In the program book of the performance, there is also a blank orange post-it that gives the viewer the opportunity to write their own negation public feeling - maybe to him/herself, to us, to someone next to him/her or take it home with the knowledge that s/he has witnessed an experience in which s/he could see that s/he is not completely alone in this society with such a feeling. The choreographic approaches and methods that Ana and I use to question and interpret social topics have been present and available in the world for a long time (we were educated abroad to be choreographers). Unfortunately, in our country, like negative feelings in the public, they are still systemically marginalized and insufficiently visible.

- **In a conversation with German students, we learned e.g. that some of them had a problem that depression as a medical diagnosis, which was the main theme of the play. For me, this is a much more question of the individual when the system made him depressed, and it is not a clinical picture. So, I see this play as a very open and polemical work. Are you more of an advocate of open forms or are you always aiming at a particular question and / or answer and what is the case with the play Only Mine Alone?**

I understood that at the Bitef round table, we all agreed that through the performance we should clearly move away from questioning depression (and other emotions) as a medical diagnosis, and strive to see them as social circumstances of living and working. If it is about another conversation, it is great for me that controversies arise, because that means that there is a need to talk about that topic. In none of the performances I've done so far, alone or with Ana, have I strived to give the "right" answers to questions, but to search for suggestions. Towards stimulating public reflection and raising awareness of topics that concern all of us. I see this approach as a way to publicly expose, question and communicate on topics that are

not talked about publicly enough. To use, as artists in society, our power to make invisibility visible in public space. I see the artist as an interventional social subject whose function of creation is not only to express himself (his depth) but also to influence the value, ideological and other dominant systems he recognizes in the context in which he creates, ie the context in which he intervenes. For each work of art, including the one in the field of dance, the author / artist has a responsibility, although he cannot completely control how that work will function in public. That is why it is important to clearly determine the position of the creator from whom the work is created, as well as the position of the work itself within the context in which the work is produced. The play "Only Mine" is built on those values. Some of the performances that Ana and I have done before were participatory, or in the form of solos, duets... and each had a different experience and a different purpose according to the theme / content.

- **How far can everything that is *only mine* bring us and how destructive or constructive are all those accumulated negative emotions and states? Can art today be expected to be productive in terms of opening some kind of social controversy, and what can all this bring to authors, performers and society? In a tangible and intangible sense?**

For me, the 'aesthetic' (sensual, beautiful) is not the only criterion of evaluating (dance) art as a form of creation. It is also: the political, the critical, the technical, the pornographic, the psychoanalytic, the ethical, the economic, the feminist, etc. Today, there are numerous criticisms of conventional critics' beliefs that engaging in art can be more effective if distanings from the 'useless' domain of the aesthetic / the beautiful. New approaches theoretically and practically elaborate theses (Ranciere, Bishop, Groys) on the aesthetic as a contradictory combination of the engaged / political and the beautiful, whose function is to transform, or intervene in, the dysfunctional 'status quo' of the present. Therefore, for me, every work of art has the potential to be polemical, productive, excessive, and the extent to which it achieves all this depends only on the degree of awareness of the artist and his / her intention / goal with the application of that work in public. I believe that intellectual-conceptual and emotional-intuitive approaches are equally important and necessary for any creative process. This is quite frustrating, because as an artist, during the realization of an idea, one is constantly questioning oneself about artistic actions and decisions, the idea itself. But once realizing creatively the set goal, the feeling of satisfaction is unsurpassed.

- **Is there something only yours that you did not discover in the play, and it was very important in the process of creation and, if there is, what prevented you from verbalizing it in front of the audience?**

Yes there is, and that is the time when Ana and I spend in the box during the show, which for me is somehow healing, even meditative. The moment when we are both exposed to the masses in that space and with such feelings, and we deal with it together - for me it remains an unsurpassed empowering zone of friendship, empathy, support, collegiality, hope, and struggle... Maybe because the cube / box stands like orange the interspace or channel between fiction and reality, that experience of communion with someone in it, gained for me its distinct authenticity and strength. However, for a complementary whole and stable feeling of

togetherness, empathy and support, that beautiful feeling on the stage is contributed by the enormous effort and support of people who are constantly and maximally engaged in the survival of this cube (and the show itself), in extremely difficult working conditions. Here, I primarily emphasize our friend and long-term associate Ksenija Đurović, a cultural producer from the independent art scene. If it weren't for Ksenija and her professionalism, dedication or faith in our joint work, there would be no box / cube, no show. And with Ksenija, this includes the entire creative and organizational team of people who contribute to the joint work, and are often a stable support for the realization of this play. Although this feeling of strength and togetherness may not be verbalized linguistically in the play, I think that it is still transmitted / communicated to the audience affectively, which is even more valuable to me. Only this kind of joint effort and mutual support gives me the (political) meaning and responsibility to continue to deal with art in such cruelly limiting and frustrating circumstances of today's capitalist realism.