

Muanis Sinanović: Große Erwartungen | Great Expectations

September 2018

Who took the words from little Branko?

From the moment one enters the new production by Beton Ltd., the established brand of the Slovenian off-scene, it's hard to lose focus. Hyped-up audience are packed on bleachers which take up most of the stage. Pushed to the sides, people are observing, recognizing each other, and at the same time gazing into the depth, cut across by a wooden frame, behind which its dwelling spreads out in the dark. At the very top, in the dark, there is a banner – "Welcome!!!". The black writing on a white canvas is somewhat reminiscent of some minor league match of a major football league – well, of such a match from times gone by, from the romantic times of football, whose charm could also lie in empty stands, small groups of faithful supporters and muddy pitches. But in Great expectations, this dullness is actually countered by visual luxury. In the corner sits a pleasantly illuminated band, as in some sort of American talk show. Bright lights illuminate the small space between the wooden construction and the front row of the audience. As if they were waiting for Oprah to enter the room, accompanied by standing ovation and hysterical cheering. Something's about to unfold down here.

However, Stegnar, Jordan and Bezjak are planning to seize the entire space and attack the audience as well. They make their entrance out of a small house behind the frames – a house that is apparent, both physically as well as symbolically. Their terrain extends far and deep. It rather resembles children's games and the work of imagination therein. Imagination that is capable of creating illusions, the aura and excitement of the endlessness through the techniques of building, negotiating and managing the view. And their performance is indeed infantile. All three actors appear either as children or as adults – perhaps as the children who play the role of adults in such games. The dialogues are plain and enforce a form of domination in family relations. There is a mystery. It is about something that the characters must not speak about. Infatuity becomes toxic. At some point, after a childish provocation of discussion, the performers charge at the audience with axes – and then offer heartfelt apologies. There is a lot behind all this infatuity. The culture of uninhibited children's instincts, which can be identified both in folk music as well as in (petty) bourgeois parties or in the management of political organizations. Infatuity in terms of being spoiled, privileged little mama's boy and daddy's girl, which sail comfortably through life with their neuroses. Neuroses that poison the relations on the scenes. At the same time, infatuity of modern culture, of the decaying modernity, which in its "toxic masculinity" calls for old chivalric tales, military myths and cheap binary oppositions in its lust for blood, for the ultimate clash of fictitious civilizations. But not only that – there's also the endless imagination of identity politics in their demands for ever new "safe spaces". And there's the Instagram culture of constant selfies and self-censored, narcissistic publication of biographies, where we are sweating for likes and for our share of the treasury of personal myths.

At some point, Stegnar reads from her childhood diary, reminding us of this forgotten form, which was no less self-censoring and self-absorbed, though; even in our diaries, we have been establishing our ideal selves for some future ideal selves. Throughout history, infantility has always been toxic, an antipode of civilization, something that had to be restrained. However, the present times no longer requests this: infantility, or childishness, is everywhere, rushing towards the destruction of civilization. Somewhere, after a moment of darkness, the actors emerge from behind the chairs wearing grotesque baby masks. They emerge from a space that was once intended for the audience, and observe the audience, the public, with eerie smiles on their faces. Another twist in the way towards destruction of modernity. All this transgression in, in fact, a new repression: when it is possible to talk about anything, it is not possible to talk about something; there is no more focus, the discourse becomes auto-referential, sliding towards the ultimate catastrophic silencing. When everybody is allowed to speak, nobody is allowed to speak, because everybody assumes the right to speak through the other. Multidimensional person is in fact a one-dimensional one.

The band, led by guitarist Janez Weiss, floats across desert soundscapes, across anxious pop-cultural imaginaries, where there was once hope, but where today remains only the relentless browsing through decades of garbage, through petabytes of sounds, images, declarations, emotions. The accompanying choir, which also cannot play, but which is capable of Dionysian sonority through the landscapes of decay.

And the tension is released through childish choreography, in a poem: we cannot speak, because we are white, fat, cosmopolitan, and heteronormative. *Shieeeeeet*, is heard from the audience. It was me. We have reached the point where something like this can be said in a non-reactionary context. Yes, it's all about the context. Yes, racism, class domination, heteronormativity pose a problem. But while we are devoured by racism, by class domination, and by the psychotic, auto-referential extreme conservatism, lost in binary contradictions, we are not creating a coherent narration, capable of standing up to unruly fascists. What's more, our narration is breaking up into thousands of gardens of suffering that we are proudly cultivating. Those who accuse us of being spoiled are perhaps – spoiled. While brown people in Germany are being haunted by Nazis, the Left is inventing isms. It wants to change the language. It wants to redefine the freedom of expression on the left. OK, but those who will feel a real danger will break away from the left and will begin to organise themselves on the streets. The auto-referentiality of the discourse practices will be replaced by the demand for the appropriation of tangible reality, demand for discipline and strong narratives, the conquest and defense of spaces.

Grosse Erwartungen | Great Expectations are a symbolic intervention in the imploding symbolic world. A small explosion in the midst of serial suicidal implosions. A call for the transfer of ambiguity and for reflection on our humanity: if the privilege stems from our circumstances, do they really define us? Are we allowed to overcome them, or does the time force us to remain within the privilege it criticizes? Is this a special type of sadomasochism of the Left? The true discipline of contemporary resistance is not to create major binary oppositions, but rather to abstain from ambiguity and to recognize humanity – not only of the marginalized groups, caught in their binaries, but to everyone, including the privileged. We will survive insofar as we will be able to overcome ourselves.

One again, the Beton Ltd. collective demonstrated their ability to preserve ambiguity, their political maturity, and their ability to overcome oneself, which does not imply giving up one's identity, but rather recognizing it and articulating it a universalistic way. With their aesthetics, fundamentally entwined with the symbolization and design of space, with their comprehensive set of classical stage elements, both visual and audial, and their use in alternative techniques and imaginative features, they remained faithful to their concept, their time, and at the same time, their own provocative spirit. Beton Ltd. is an ensemble that builds on a gesture. It's not a revolutionary theater, despite being innovative and political. It's a theater that we need here and now, amidst our mediocrity and entrapment, to push us in another direction at least an inch – or remind us that we should be heading there.