

## Daubnerová's Ninth: *Masterpiece*

by Jana Wild - Svět a divadlo, Issue 6, 2020

The title of Daubnerová's latest independent production *Masterpiece* is meant to be inevitably ironic. The audience at the premiere undoubtedly realised that. Simultaneously, however, judging by the numerous immediate, and one could even say moved, reactions from her colleagues (and namely women colleagues), the audience embraced Daubnerová's performance as a true pinnacle of her work - as a masterpiece. Even numerical symbolism offers itself to this: performance number nine, the peak, after which, similarly to symphonies, it is both mentally and physically impossible to continue.

The facts seemingly contradict that, however. On one hand, Sláva Daubnerová still seems like a youthful middle-aged performer (40), and on the other hand, solo performance can seem like a microgenre that in no way meets the criteria nor the vastness of a symphony. Indeed, if we are to stay in the realm of theatre, the scale of a symphony is much closer to that of an opera and Daubnerová has done several of those as a director and is yet to do some more. So - why the pathos? Why the sadness? Why the irony in the name?

Daubnerová intended, thematized and conceptualised *Masterpiece* as her farewell from the very beginning - a farewell to her solo independent original projects of the singular union of an author, performer, director, artist, and producer. It is worth mentioning that she was creating independent performance art projects every year from 2006 to 2012: *Cells*, *Hamlet-Machine*, *M.H.L.*, *Polylogue*, *Illuminarium*, *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, *Untitled*, after three years *Solo Lamentoso* (2015), and after five more her final *Masterpiece*. Daubnerová emerged on the theatre scene from non-theatrical circles (she graduated from cultural studies at the Faculty of Arts at Comenius University in Bratislava) and shined like a star straight away. She brought and continuously developed a completely new understanding of theatre in domestic context. Understandings of performance art as a mode of self-expression, self-transformation, oscillation between the theatrical and the visual, even conceptual art and time-based installations; of work with new media; of a performer 'freed from the dominion of a character'; of a performer as a

medium. Additionally, she introduced a type of absolutely unique perfectionism whereby every millimetre of movement, whether of the performer herself or the space (including lights and sound), is predetermined, prepared and followed, because through Daubnerová's vision we do not see a reality on stage but rather images in space and time. Her focus on staging (similar to the photographer Cindy Sherman) and construction that is based on Daubnerová's conceptual and analytical approach was perceived by several theatre critics as 'coldness', absence of 'passion for theatre', 'sterility' (Vladislava Fekete), and some have even attested to the artist's absence of 'genes to handle emotions' (Vladimír Štefko).<sup>1</sup> *M.H.L.*, which the critics have described in such terms at the time has in the meantime been included in 'the golden collection of professional Slovak theatre'.<sup>2</sup>

Over fifteen years, Daubnerová built herself up to be the foremost person accepted domestically and invited to produce internationally (directing operas in Prague, Brno, Mariinsky Theatre in Sankt Petersburg, or Karlsruhe). However, Daubnerová's unquestionable "know-how" and that which seemingly nicely supplements each other in her professional CV (her independent solo performances and directing in institutionalised theatres abroad) are incompatible in real life circumstances. As a dedicated author/performer, Daubnerová cannot survive in this country. After her "ninth symphony", she is leaving - and that is what *Masterpiece* is about.

Did I spoil the point? That would be oversimplifying it. The poster in which Daubnerová can be seen in a tight-fitting black leotard with a sword in one hand and a model of her own head in the other automatically suggests Hamlet. So: to be or not to be? Internal struggle. Doubt. Loneliness. Woman Hamlet. Ready to fight with her own head under her arm. Blue shadow that is cast on the backdrop by her body reminds me of an expressionistic motif: Hamlet and his/her shadow double.

Ingrid Hrubaničová once wrote about Daubnerová that 'her programme [...] is not to "chew up" her own experience, traumas and themes and then artistically

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<sup>1</sup> A discussion at *Dotyky a spojenia*, Dekóder, Kód č. 7, September 2010, 40-41. [Translator's note: *Dotyky a spojenia* is an annual theatre festival in Slovakia. *Kód* is a journal published by the Theatre Institute.]

<sup>2</sup> [zlatakolekcia.theatre.sk](http://zlatakolekcia.theatre.sk)

translate them, but rather to “find herself” in [...someone] else and through someone else show herself as a small part of a bigger whole’.<sup>3</sup> Hrubaničová referred to the fact that the performer reflected on herself through the personalities of the artist Louise Bourgeois (*Cells*) and the director Magda Husáková-Lokvencová (*M.H.L.*) at the time. Today, we could also add the poet Inge Müller (*Some Disordered...*), photographer Francesca Woodman (*Untitled*) and the bizarre and infamous citizen of Štúrovo (*Solo Lamentoso*) to her array of mental projection screens. In her latest *Masterpiece*, Daubnerová employs self-expression in the opposite direction. She is the main character here, there is no doubt about that, and even though her predominantly dance-movement-visual-based performance seems very personal from the very beginning it is simultaneously grounded in a wider mythological and cultural framework. That is suggested even by the names of the individual scenes. There are nine of them (!): *Signature, Narcissus, Argonaut, Orpheus, Olympus, Prophet, Hamlet, Medusa, Museum.*

Nine stations on the road of Sláva Daubnerová as a performer:

In the opening signature choreography, she introduces herself as a mechanical puppet flung out by the expansion of the universe. In the moving light patterns and the musical sound design of Marin Burlas that sounds like screaming or the winds of the universe mixed vibrations, electrical short circuiting, and an unsettling jerky mixture of an abrupt drum and Kalashnikov rifle, the performer examines the spaces and her body within it in through jerky mechanical motions - backwards, forwards, up, down, battle stance, stepping into a strip of light, a challenge to fight, carrying a burden, finding a balance, unsheathing of a sword, imaginary blindfolds on her eyes, defence... A male voiceover (always in English - the translation in Slovak is projected onto the backdrop) recites the words from Marina Abramović’s manifesto and repeats the mantra: ‘Sometimes it is difficult to find the key’ (to language). The sounds start dying out, the performer slowly relaxes her muscles and, as if surprised with herself, she finds out that the mechanical motions were learnt. The route that guided her own speech and articulation ceases to be directed by the outside and becomes open.

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<sup>3</sup> Daubnerová’s PhD viva, (Bratislava: Academy of Performing Arts, 2012), unpublished, unpaginated.

The second scene, *Narcissus*, which is a glimpse into her own inner self, is choreographically shaped as a search, realisation and defence of her face within the space. The performer holds her head from the sides with both of her hands near her eyes, she shifts on her back around the floor, she rocks and when she gets up, she is as if magnetically pulled in different directions. While doing somersaults and almost acrobatic positions, she keeps on holding onto her head while being pulled forwards by outside forces, jerked backwards. She huddles, stretches and contracts into herself. The voiceover, again from Abramović's manifesto, plays: 'An artist should look deep inside himself[...] The artist *is* universe'.

In the third scene, *Argonaut*, Daubnerová seems like an explorer of new worlds in a cold universe or the bottom of the ocean. With a spotlight that she carries on her chest, she explores the terrain and investigates the direction of her walk. A slightly enlarged lifelike copy/model of her head lies on the floor, blonde hair combed and tied into a knot, her lips painted bright red. The head keeps on drawing her attention like a new trinket she found. She illuminates it, approaches it, turns her back to it; uncertainty: what is that lying there? My head? Unknown anxiety from autoscopy. The voiceover directs the artist to be alone, far away from home, family and friends: 'An artist has to give up his self to create himself again' (Abramović).

The fourth scene, *Orpheus*, is underscored by continuous meditative music. A mixture of short texts by Marina Abramović and Michel Houellebecq is an invitation to suffering as a source of creativity. 'An artist should suffer', 'accumulate frustrations in great number', 'from the suffering comes the best work'. 'Do you really want to suffer? Do you really want to change the world?' These quotes are recited again like mantras until they are interrupted by uproarious canned laughter of an anonymous audience. It is not the laughter of ironists that would relativise the self-centred martyr but rather a voice of an ignorant disconnected world. The performer then moves from the intricate dance style to a more static mode of expression, from neck-breaking position on her back, through shaking while tiptoeing with her back bent forward, huddling into herself in fear, slowly getting up and straightening her spine all the way to simple grandiose pacing in a diagonal while slowly dragging the head behind her on a string. When she reaches the edge of the stage, she skilfully picks the head up and pours out glittering confetti. In the final

ninth (!) part of the scene, she sits down huddled on the floor with a bust behind her. When she builds up the courage to look at it, darkness.

The fifth scene, *Olympus*, brings in an erratic musical tempo accompanied with a lightning design that creates a dynamic chess board in a square on the stage. The rhythm of the music compels Daubnerová who is carrying the bust in her hands to a physically demanding exertion: sidesteps, acrobatic exercises with the head, wading on her knees and even pirouettes. At time, she stretches her hands with the model of the head as an offering while on her knees, other times she holds it triumphantly, shields it away, carries heavily, tiptoeing lightly, overcomes difficult obstacles with it, hides behind it, or rhythmically jumps around it in a ritualistic or even humorous fashion. The voiceover says: 'You have to give everything you have, your entire being'. Rustling sounds and noises start mixing in with the music and the performer lets us feel that she is fatigued, that she is only moving mechanically in the fading rhythm.

The sixth scene, *Prophet*, is defined by the artist in the programme: 'artist's route as a labyrinth, prison of her own demands, and the demands of her surroundings'. Slow kaleidoscopic images (all in grayscale) slowly flowing from one to another and continuous electronic ambient techno music create both a feeling of peace as well as a feeling of a cold, empty, infinite space. Four screens on thin tall stands are set around the stage and the performer with a sleeping mask on her eyes, high-heel shoes and a spotlight attached to her back like a backpack moves slowly through the space while blinded. Daubnerová's rotating head on the screen lip-syncs the text from the voiceover again (still a male-voice): 'an artist should be erotic', 'an artist should not repeat himself', 'an artist should avoid his own art pollution', 'the artist should not have self-control about his life', 'the artist should have total self-control about his work', 'so many women are great mothers, you are not one of them', 'you wanted to be an artist', 'you really wanted to be an artist'.

The seventh scene, *Hamlet*, is a choreographic variation on famous imagery of Hamlet and the skull (or a bust of Daubnerová's head, in this case) and his ritualistic stances and fencing manoeuvres in a constantly moving cross of light. The artist as a warrior: 'an artist has to conquer new territory', 'the goal of the society where you live is to destroy you', 'the weapon that it will use is indifference', 'Attack!', 'put your

finger on the wound, and press down hard', 'speak of agony, of frustration, of fear, of death... Be abject, and you will be true' (Abramović, Houellebecq).

The eighth scene, *Medusa*, gives a voice to a woman. The lines written by Hélène Cixous for a change (still voiced by a man) sound urgent: 'Write your self', 'your body speaks true', 'your body must be heard', 'write your self', 'break out of the snare of silence!' The performer covers her chest with a corset/shield/armour shaped like a naked woman's body. Madonna's melancholic POP ballad *Live to tell* starts playing and Daubnerová's face lip-syncs with her from four screens spaced in a semi-circle around the stage. In a short interruption of the music, Daubnerová speaks herself at last - for the first time in this performance. 'I am swimming around the orbit in a space suit/.../I want to establish a connection/.../Who am I?/.../Who is supposed to understand me?' Madonna's song continues. The performer unties the hair on the model of her head and hangs it upside down resembling a Medusa.

The scene continues as a cordial confession lightly accented with continuously droning music while a stage designer walks around in the background and sets various objects around the stage. Daubnerová, still wearing a corset shaped like a naked body, sits down with her legs apart and her hands rested calmly on a director's chair and confides in the audience. Her ordinary-sounding monologue is a combination of personal confessions ('I love Madonna', 'I gained weight too', 'I'm sweating awfully, by the way. In this lycra costume'), scolding of the stage designer, exemplary reading of texts that she allegedly wanted to put in this performance (written by Heiner Müller and Elfriede Jelinek). But, in the spirit of Müller's *Hamlet*, she asserts at the end that 'my drama is cancelled; I'm not playing along anymore'. Daubnerová subsequently literalizes and self-ironically grounds this postmodern statement by 'telling the truth', 'writing her self'. She has fulfilled her intellectual capacity in the context of Slovak environment (by winning DOS-ky,<sup>4</sup> performing at festivals), but what she is missing is a man. (On the backdrop, a Facebook link to her profile pops-up as a personal ad.) With a disarming openness and humour, she comments on her situation as a performer ('what would that potential man think about a woman dancing with her own head?') and a strong woman ('I can carry a

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<sup>4</sup> [TN: DOS-ky is a prestigious annual theatre award in Slovakia.]

stage light') that men are afraid of. She ends her reflection (and her career): she allowed us to look inside her, she said something personal. 'I promise I will never do it again'.

The final, ninth, scene, *Museum*, symbolizes the final deadening stage of clearing up her artistic life. Daubnerová installs key objects from her artistic practice (such as two DOS-ky) and her past performances (tripod, flowerpot, taxidermy fox, red shoes, miniature of a family house, model of her head, corset, or blouse) around the stage. The voiceover starts reading lines from Michel Houellebecq's *To Stay Alive*: 'you must attain the point of no return', 'as you approach the truth, your solitude will increase', 'fundamentally, you are already dead', 'you are now face to face with eternity'. The screens go staticky, the voiceover becomes distorted until it is unintelligible, and the performer who was mute throughout all of this, puts on a bunny mask. The white rabbit does not symbolize curiosity or the urge to discover the unknown anymore as it does in *Alice in Wonderland* or *Matrix*. In this case, sitting in a chair on the side of the stage, she assumes the position of a disinterested spectator or a museum guard. The end.

This purposefully descriptive recollection seemed necessary in order to approach Daubnerová's *Ninth*. Fifteen years of the creative route of the performer who wanted to be present as herself on the stage and who self-transformed through her creative process is contained within the scenic sequence. The bust of her head in *Masterpiece* does indeed reference Hamlet and the skull scene in which the prince explores transience. In this case, however, it reminds us that the performer constantly produces her own self; that this performance is an auto-biographical self-exploration. As if she was always and again producing a state of autoscopy similar to the experience of a doppelgänger. She sees herself as someone else but simultaneously feels all her actions in her own body. Heiner Müller in his play *Hamletmachine* described this obsolete relationship between the object and the subject as a state of a person standing 'on both sides of the front, between the fronts, above them'. Finally, *Masterpiece* quotes Houellebecq in a similar sense: 'you are the grave-digger, and you are the cadaver'. And so we see Daubnerová both as Hamlet and Yorick, both as Orpheus and Eurydice.

The key to *Masterpiece* is hidden in the mythological references in the name of each scene. Daubnerová does not want to perceive her route as an individual pained story of searching for and losing of ideals. By positioning her story within the framework of other famous narratives, she legitimizes her own mythological validity and self-critically relativizes her own value.

I will not be interpreting every situation in the context of its mythological blueprint here. I will, however, stop at the gendered origins of those references. Up until now, Sláva Daubnerová was almost exclusively investigating women. In *Masterpiece*, however, this female element is verbalised only in the *Medusa* scene. Every other situation is projected into the stories of men - Narcissus, the argonauts, Orpheus, Hamlet; or they remain seemingly gender-neutral. She could certainly have supported her performance primarily through mythological stories of women but that would have hypothetically dealt with the role of a victim more often (Kassandra? Medea? Eurydice? Ophelia?). Daubnerová does not see herself as the victim. Her self-reflection is similar to that of Narcissus, her bravery to voyage into the unknown is similar to that of the Argonauts, her readiness to suffer and go to the edge of the cliff is similar to Orpheus; she is accepted onto the Olympus and chewed up by its rules. Brave, lonely, strong, fighting, and curious. It is as if she did not care about gender at the beginning of her adventure's expedition. In purely social terms, she went on her own exploration of her vision of art the same way a man would have, as an Argonaut would have. That is not to say that she self-identifies as a man but rather that she views the exploration in gender-neutral terms. At a certain moment on top of Olympus while carrying her bust in her outstretched arms, we could even see in her both Salome and John the Baptist. And when in the eight scene Daubnerová sits with her arms rested on the chair, the audience could even think of Velázquez *Portrait of Innocent X.*, or its interpretation by Francis Bacon from the 20th century. If such associations emerge in your mind, then Daubnerová's re-figuration of Innocent (sic!) cannot possibly be called blasphemous - incidentally entirely in Madonna's style as well...

The woman question, same as the question of the object/subject paradigm, surfaces towards the end of the *Prophet* scene. The male voice presents a controversy between the decision to be an artist and motherhood in a stream of

simple clauses. At that moment, the artist takes off the black sleeping mask that had covered her eyes and, in contrast, covers the bust's eyes with her hand. As a woman of flesh and bones, she must face this question; as a bust-object she can/must be blind towards it. It is a strong prophetic gesture of the scene. Her place is on both sides. An unsolvable dilemma.

In the penultimate scene entitled *Medusa* (the name of a mythological woman that endangered men) intersects Daubnerová's intimate storytelling with Madonna's work that will elicit its own associations with the audience. For instance: Madonna as a pop-icon, a perfect dancer that goes full speed and all the way, a rebel, a blasphemer that denies prescribed gender identity, breaks taboo and outrages, a strong woman that unfalteringly follows her vision, and a woman that "always looks good". The performer describes this scene laconically as 'putting my skin in the game, woman art'.

I can imagine that Daubnerová's shift towards a cordial mode of a reality show and a private confession in *Medusa* can seem far-fetched and improper to some. Her emotional striptease when she says 'I am looking for a man' and 'I am looking for a sophisticated non-smoker' can shock more than staging actual physical nudity. It hurts. It disrupts the artistic experience. Especially if it is clear that up until now we were watching a dance, movement, visually-acoustic-technical, performative and even directive mastery and that her "performance" was "artistic" in every way. And now this. Banal? She comments herself that 'what isn't in postdramatic texts, is this/.../But tonight is different. Tonight I will say whatever I want'.

Daubnerová showed a perfect piece of performance in her *Masterpiece*. And yet the whole show headed towards its final point, which is to end - confessing a feeling of personal failure; towards that everything that she had attempted to achieve with her whole being loses its meaning and only belongs in a museum, if anywhere at all.

How does one "measure" a masterpiece, then? What is the position of a first-class performer when she sees no point in her own profession? Her environment feels like a cold impersonal universe to her that she only revolves around as if in orbit. Any interaction is minimal. An audience from a sitcom laughs inappropriately. Her stagehand disrupts. She herself has already had a show at every major Slovak

festival and the lady at her local council office still does not understand her job description. Those are the facts of her life's world. An alien. Nonetheless, Daubnerová mainly questions herself and her own standards. She can no longer fulfil her moral imperatives that attack her from all around and most of which - we can only suppose so, anyway - she has adopted as a person with an outstandingly responsible approach to both work and life. 'I simply have criteria for breaking points, she said recently in an interview for Denník N.<sup>5</sup> Sláva Daubnerová is a perfectionist and she creates theatre that is completely different to the mainstream (from the very beginning she found better reception with visual artists than the theatre community). Creativity leads to frustration and not to a feeling of fulfilled life or to an integral personality in such a setting and environment. Similarly, no matter how much she wanted to transcend this environment as a performer within the Slovak cultural space, her gender assignment has pushed her against a proverbial wall (even though she constantly and intensely questioned women's fate). Not because her effort was subpar but because alongside her effort, she still has the needs and wants of a woman and those, as she shows, don't quite match together. The audience is touched; female spectators identify themselves in her story.

Some other lines from *Masterpiece* also seem key to me. 'The goal of the society where you live is to destroy you; the weapon that it will use is indifference' - they were written by Michel Houellebecq. They describe a situation of an independent woman artist (with an emphasis on female gender) so accurately that any commentary seems arbitrary. And then 'I am from a country that looks like a seahorse. But it doesn't have a sea/.../I speak a clumsy, Central European language. Who is supposed to understand me?' Elegant, poetic, comprehensive. A claustrophobic country with no growth or openness. And its language? It's a trap. Many of us feel that way. Viliam Klimáček characterised himself in a similar fashion: 'a strange author in a strange language of a strange little country'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> [TN: Denník N is an independent broadsheet newspaper. The interview was published both in a written form and as a podcast.]

<sup>6</sup> Jana Wild, 'Divný autor v divnom jazyku divnej krajinky', interview with Viliam Klimáček, KÓD, 2015, issue 1, pp 3-10. ['Strange Author in a Strange Language of a Strange Little Country']

One could say more about the texts used in *Masterpiece*, about the excellent choreography (by Andrej Petrovič) and the excellent dance performance, about the sophisticated light and sound design (by Milan Slama and Ľuboš Holík) and music (by Martin Burlas), or about suggestive visual elements into which one could read many references. (Other than some obvious quotations and self-quotations, I noticed for instance *Maison-femme* and *Fillette* by Louise Bourgeois; or the bust that was recently shown by Marina Abramović in her exhibition at the Krinzinger Gallery in Vienna; or actions by Vallie Export and images by Birgit Jürgenssen.) And the leathery corset shaped like a naked female body seems to me exceedingly phenomenal - it references a tied up and bound female body and simultaneously appears shameful and provocative and acts as a variant to masculine armour or a battle shield - it is supposed to protect; even though it also exposes in this case.

The different horizons of mental fatigue in relation to Daubnerová's *Ninth* have now been explained. It is then also important to mention both the physical and "existential" aspects of the performer's life, even if they fall under the "trivial" category. The performer, who is a winner of two DOS-ky and many other awards, does not mention these aspects publicly but they are still present. For instance, the absence of a stable space to practice, perform or store set pieces in (which are currently in her flat - her head sitting on a shelf in her living room is just an amusing *pars pro toto*), the inability to build a stable team, or even the apparatus to do PR or fill grant applications. In sum, they make her unable to achieve existential and professional continuity. What an asymmetry compared to state-sponsored artists.

All of this comprises the bedrock of *Masterpiece*. The microgenre of independent solo performance is after fifteen years and in nine "items" deposited at the museum. Daubnerová will continue as a director mostly in bigger and large-scale productions in institutionalised theatres predominantly abroad. For a country with no sea, it's a mixed blessing.