

Sláva Daubnerová and her Path to her *Masterpiece*

by Katarína K. Cvečková, *Kód - Konkrétne o divadle*, 12/2020.

Countless people have said and written that Sláva Daubnerová is a peculiar and unique phenomenon in Slovak art context. Not so just because she concentrates within her various occupations - she is a director, author, performer, and often the creative mind behind the artistic concept of her pieces. Towards the beginning of each piece's creative process is a meticulous research of any available sources relating to her chosen subject matter that she then combines with stimuli from other artistic fields. Daubnerová then translates the resulting material into a theatrical form by combining various approaches, such as documentary theatre combined with principles from physical theatre, approaches from visual art and performance art. The outcome is generally a confrontation of the performer's live body with the stage (or objects on stage) and projection technologies. Daubnerová's characteristic mode of acting is defined by her cordial tone of voice and efficiency of artistic tools that often purposefully employ monotony and distance or detachment. In terms of physical expression, Daubnerová tends to draw upon approaches from contemporary dance while employing abstract and metaphorical movements for their apparent illusionary quality. Many critics have noted (as did Daubnerová herself) that she does not portray or embody particular characters but rather she presents them, comments on them and contextualises them within her own author account. She uses her body as a medium to convey this account.

A key component within Sláva Daubnerová's work is her solo performance practices inspired by strong women artists such as the French artist Louise Bourgeois (*Cells*, 2006), Slovak director Magda Husáková-Lokvencová (*M.H.L.*, 2009), or American photographer Francesca Woodman (*Untitled*, 2012). One could even say that these pieces together with her solo performances such as *Hamletmachine* (2007) and *Solo Lamentoso* (2016) have defined Daubnerová's creative signature style that she deploys in various forms and with various intentions within her directorial approaches to theatre and opera.

Artistic Agenda of a "Woman/Artist"

Daubnerová has noted on several occasions that her choice of specific artists' lives as her subject matter was intuitive. Even so, they are connected through a certain inner and outer similarity (not only between the artists' themselves but also between the artists and Daubnerová). All of her chosen artists occupy an important place in art history - each artist has had a particular influence on her artistic field. Louise Bourgeois is one of the extraordinary personas of the 20th century visual art scene. She experimented with new types of materials and explored the ways of combining them in novel ways. Moreover, Bourgeois was one of the first artists to engage with art installation as an artistic form. Magda Husáková-Lokvencová was an actress and a pioneer of professional woman theatre directors in Slovakia. Francesca Woodman is considered one of the most original American artists of the 1970s and is a part of the American feminist postmodern photography movement.

By deploying their art practices, Daubnerová continued the phenomenon of uncovering women's narratives and removing taboo around women's contribution to various social spheres (such as the art sector in this case). This trend was at its most intensive in 2008/2009 and 2009/2010 theatrical seasons in domestic context when *M.H.L.* and three other productions inspired by lives of notable women were created.¹ As theatre scholar Nadežda Lindovská asserts, 'It did indeed take a long time for Slovak theatre to take up women's narratives and for it to understand that audiences have been ready for a long time to explore and empathise with women's lives from their own country.'² We could mention another analogy related to women's narratives when it comes to Daubnerová - the topic of searching/exploring "symbolic mothers, predecessors". This aspect is present in all three of her solo performances, most markedly in *M.H.L.* in which Daubnerová identifies herself with the life of Husáková-Lokvencová and her complicated path to her long-time dream of becoming a theatre director, as well as her inner conflict between career aspiration, self-realisation, and private life. These women become proverbial more teachers,

¹ Z. Palenčíková, K. Žiška: *A budeme si šepkať* (2009, SKD Martin); P. Pavlac: *Červená princezná* (2009, Divadlo ASTORKA Korzo '90); I. Há: *Napísané do tmy. (Ne)známy osud Slovenky Hany Gregorovej* (2009, Štúdio T.W.I.G.A. Bábkové divadlo na Rázcestí). Teatrologička Nadežda Lindovská o týchto inscenáciách písala v štúdiu *Ženy z minulosti v zborníku Podoby a premeny hrdinu v súčasnom divadle*. Bratislava: Ústav divadelnej a filmovej vedy SAV, 2011. s. 46-60.

² LINDOVSKÁ, Nadežda: *Ženy z minulosti*. s. 51.

examples, and authorities rather than symbolic mothers - Daubnerová learns and at the same time explores and develops her artistic style by engaging with their art.

All of the lives (and works) of these artists were affected by certain fateful twists, turnabouts, past traumas, and relationships with male authorities. When it comes to Bourgeois and Woodman it was their fathers, in the case of Magda Husáková-Lokvencová it was her husband Gustav Husák.³ Daubnerová's solo pieces are also connected through a similar range of themes: the topic of identity and testing one's own abilities and limits - the inner world of an individual in contrast to their relationship with their environment, community, or system.⁴ Additionally, by deploying specific artists in the context of reflecting upon her own inner processes, Daubnerová simultaneously creates a universal model of a woman-artist that comes to terms with her intimate traumas while managing her personal and professional life.

The French artist Louise Bourgeois engaged with construction of her memories as an artistic outlet in her series of installations entitled *The Cells*. She used the process of reliving her experience to come to terms with her traumas - it was an act of recouping herself. Daubnerová also uses this method of reconstruction in her work. By reliving the intimate moments of others, she uncovers both their destinies and at the same time her own inner processes. She studies the trio of artists from the outside (they are the subjects of her comprehensive research) and simultaneously from the inside (through herself, her experience, opinions, and emotions). Her artistic self is evidently present in her pieces - she puts it in the fates of the artists she portrays and at the same time uses it to translate her research interests. *Cells*, *M.H.L.* and *Untitled* can be understood as a concept of "theatre/performance as a confession", the confession being a multi-layered one. Confession of a specific artist is enacted by Daubnerová who uses it to confess as herself at the same time. Simultaneously, however, the pieces can be understood as a dialogue - Daubnerová in dialogue with artists that enables her to lead a dialogue with herself.

Even though Daubnerová did not intentionally define herself as a feminist artist and performer towards the beginning of her artistic career (she even disproved such claims in

³ [TN: Gustav Husák was a Slovak communist politician most well-known for his reversal of the Prague Spring political thaw and establishing the 'normalization' period between 1969-1987.]

⁴ These topics are also present in various variations in two of her other solo performances, *Hamletmachine* and *Solo Lamentoso*.

interviews before), several years with of experience, especially her positions in theatre institutions, have changed her mind: 'I was primarily exploring my own identity and my self-expression. I gradually started noticing, however, that the set-up of official structures is truly immensely patriarchal. (...) With hindsight, I started noticing a lot of connections with gender themes in my performances. I did *M.H.L.* ten years ago and playing it felt completely different towards the end than it did at the beginning. (...) Today, after all of my experience, I can finally feel through every single sentence differently and understand what Magda Husáková-Lokvencová actually meant'.⁵ This interview demonstrates Daubnerová's constant self-reflective effort and at the same time a certain processual quality of her solo pieces. Despite the structure of her performances remaining firmly set, each re-run changes her motivations, her acting nuance, each confession develops together with Daubnerová's existential and professional experience - and increasingly so, since she is the interpreter, author and director of her pieces at the same time.

Intermediality as an Artistic Approach

Sláva Daubnerová's creative process is defined by its intermediality in multiple aspects - "mixmedial" in terms of combining different types of art as well as in terms of "high tech theatre" and her deployment of projection and other technologies. She draws inspiration from visual art in terms of form as well as theme in *Cells* and *Untitled*. She re-constructs the work of Louise Bourgeois or Francesca Woodman and contextualises them within her own biographical events and emotional states. Costumes and objects that occupy the stage are direct references to the work and lives of the artists being examined. Set design within Daubnerová's work gains the status of an art installation or a museum exhibit. In *Hamletmachine*, projection technology becomes the performer's direct acting partner as well as its digital copy, a method that talks directly to the central topic of doubling of identity. In *M.H.L.*, Daubnerová utilizes approaches and principles from documentary theatre to a larger extent than in her other works - she uses authentic documentary material and projection technology, which is in this case a homogenous part of the set

⁵ CVEČKOVÁ, K. – DAUBNEROVÁ, S.: Sláva Daubnerová: *Sóla zostali mojim prístavom*. In *Taneční zóna* [available online].

design as well as the piece's art concept as a whole. These approaches together produce the effect of watching a "live" documentary movie. Something similar happens in *Untitled* as well, where Daubnerová explores the processes behind artistic photography and deploys a performance structure based on the tempo-rhythmic process of taking a photograph. She actualizes the moment of capturing an image with a camera by using light changes and sound backdrop (a short flash and click similar to a camera flash). Part of the aesthetic is portraying certain body parts in various visual frames (accomplished through light design) that are reminiscent of as framing as seen through a camera lens or the subsequent photo as an art artefact. Daubnerová always freezes an action in time and space and by doing so allows the audience to experience a 3D action instead of an apparently 2D image.

Despite indubitable intermedial character of Daubnerová's artistic work, the artistic processes she employs are consequently not her primary creative approaches but rather their deployment is contingent on the topic/theme/content of her chosen topic and are closely related to the topic's inner concept rather than spectacular effect and theatricality of her performance making processes.

The Role of Projection and a Digital Body

One of the coherent parts of *Hamletmachine*'s structure and concept was a projection from a web-cam stream that was capturing what was happening live on the stage and projected it back from different angles onto a glass showcase encased by four blinds. Another important aspect of the performance was the apparent semiotic manipulation of sound by using microphones and various voice modulation effects. The manipulation with cameras and microphones mirrored the key themes of the performance - playing with identities (the technology allows Daubnerová to "transform" into Hamlet, who then transforms into Ophelia during the performance). Daubnerová's goal was to interpret Heiner Müller's play in audio-visual terms 'as a labyrinth of image and sound'. The digital presence of the performer's body was linked to the topic of communicating with her self: self-identification/non-identification with an image of her, seeing/non-seeing herself in a mirror's reflection, doubling of identity. Daubnerová used four webcams that were purposefully mediating an imperfect image - it was slightly grainy and would come with a slight delay, which allowed the performer to create a technical, mechanical effect.

Simultaneously, the imperfection highlighted the coldness and lifelessness of a digital body. Theatre scholar Dáša Čiripová noticed similar aspects in her article: 'Zoomed up video feed of Hamlet/Sláva Daubnerová's face does not act merely as an aesthetic effect but also asks questions about identity, playing with reality and illusion, and evokes a feeling of isolation, non-communication and coldness'.⁶

Daubnerová also used video as a medium and its associated technologies in various ways in *M.H.L.* On one hand she deployed it as a creative principle - she used the processes of editing and documentary movie effects, she also used projection as a part of her set design and visual concept that contextualises the time period and actualises Lokvencová's work. At the same time, she employed a digital doubling of her body - she created a virtual copy of herself that became her direct acting partner. Together with the video-artist Lukáš Kodoň, they decided to use a translucent tulle fabric as their projection screen - a principle similar to *theatergraph*⁷ that was also employed by the interwar Czech avant-garde theatre maker Emil František Burian. The screen was used as a projection screen for images and photographs that documented Magda Husáková-Lokvencová's time period and by doing so allowed access to her artistic work. The images being projected were not merely documentary in character. Daubnerová used the principles of live cinema again - the translucent screen would show close-ups on her hands for instance (always in a different action - setting a table, writing on a typewriter, gluing a broken plate together, making coffee, etc.), that were being captured by a camera positioned in a lamp on a small table. The second projection screen were doors in the back of the stage that were used to project videos evocative of the paternoster lift carrying the artist. In the first phase of the performance, the performer goes up the paternoster, in the second, she goes down. The videos are accompanied by audio-recordings of authentic reviews about Husáková-Lokvencová's directorial successes and failures. The performer's digital body seems trapped in the paternoster, she goes down or up without any agency of her own - her trajectory is dictated by circumstances and reviews. This projection screen was also used to project real-

⁶ ČIRIPOVÁ, Dáša: Nová divadelná komunikácia. In *Vlna*, 2007, roč. IX., č. 33. s. 99.

⁷ Theatergraph is a scene making and theatre production technique that uses projection on translucent and see-through screens, which allows perceiving both a video and diapositive simultaneously with the 3D action happening on stage.

time close-ups of the performer's face (her voice was amplified by a microphone) that were meant to evoke the impression of a documentary movie.

Set Design as an Installation/Installation as a Set Design

Daubnerová's concepts are predominantly based on visual principles. She is simultaneously a costume designer and set designer in all her performances and her artistic concepts are always closely connected with her subject matter - a specific artist and her work, as well as the formal processes that her work requires.

The Cells art installation series by Louis Bourgeois was created towards the end of the 1980s. The artist used large rooms with authentic prison walls connected through doors and windows. They were furnished with various pieces of furniture, mirrors, every-day personal items, etc. that represented specific documents of the artist's memories. The rooms seemed like an inescapable prison, a biological cell, but also an isolated space where intimate stories take place. The stage in Daubnerová's piece was stylised after one of those cells. The stage was demarcated with white tape and divided into two parts. The back of the stage had a white wall that the artist wrote on with a piece of charcoal, a glass showcase with pickling jars, and two metal chairs with no seats hanging in the space. The space in the back represented the artist's memories and traumatic childhood experiences and at the same time each object served as an analogy to specific pieces created by Bourgeois. The second part was the front of the stage that the performer used to position items from the showcase and install them around the space. This technique as if allowed her to recycle the French artist's works, to read it out of its original context and reposition it into a new one. Daubnerová intervened into the installation, actively re-made it and re-assigned new meanings to objects and materials - not only new meanings in relation to Bourgeois but also to Daubnerová herself.

Part of the stage design in *M.H.L.* were all the particularities of Studio 12's stage (massive double door that looked like paternoster lifts, two pillars that framed the stage space, or hardwood floors) - there was a tripod with a camera on the left side and a period microphone on a stand on the right-hand side. The only thing between the two pillars was a projection screen and a director's desk (an essential part of Lokvencová's occupation and simultaneously an object in several photographs of her). Another important part of the

artistic concept was the costume - Daubnerová tried to capture both Lokvencová's elegance as well as the spirit of her time. She created twelve unique outfits that she changed into during her performances - they were supposed to chart the director's transformation from her youth all the way to her maturity. As opposed to other Daubnerová's performances, *M.H.L.* was unique in its comprehensible theatricality - the performance bore more evident signs of documentary theatre and the stage met more conditions of a theatre set design than an art installation, even though the performer once again gradually introduced various items on stage that symbolised a part of Lokvencová's life or her character (folders represented the part of her life when she worked as a clerk in the Bank of Moravia, broken plate that she glues together shows her carefulness, precisions and could be interpreted as her attempts to "glue" her family together).

Untitled was based on the principle of a stage image map composed out of Francesca Woodman's specific photographs and the structure of the performance was similar to assemblage. The stage space could be explicitly interpreted as a photo studio or more symbolically as an image of the young photographer's disordered soul, of her mind full of inspired imagery. At the same time, it could be viewed as an art installation or a museum exhibition composed out of various artefacts from the photographer's life and work. In the middle of the stage was a divider that looked like a derelict dirty wall that was in many of Woodman's photographs with a white calla lily propped up against it. The divider was also used as a projection screen that showed quotes from Woodman's diary that was published as a book entitled *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*.⁸ On the right-hand side in front of the divider were an old vintage camera on a tripod and a white spinning piano stool with some framed photos. Under it was an empty picture frame with a spotlight illuminating it. On the front left side was a still-life composition of rocks, dried up branches and a stuffed bird. Daubnerová would also later bring various pieces of clothing (that she would put on and take off), tights, or a stuffed fox. All of these objects were direct references to Woodman's photographs and simultaneously contributed to the surreal installation emerging on stage. They were art exhibits and the performer treated them as such - when she was carefully setting up framed photographs on the floor or when putting on white

⁸ The book title (and the topic of suicide) inspired Daubnerová's later piece *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (2011) that she created together with dramaturge Pavol Graus. The piece was not, however, inspired primarily by Francesca Woodman's life but also by the life and work of Heiner Müller and his wife Inge Müller.

vintage gloves. The most significant object in the piece was the performer's body. After all, most of Woodman's photographs are auto portraits that predominantly capture Woodman's body in various positions - naked, dressed in Victorian dresses, reflected, fragmented, deformed, bent into unnatural positions, hidden, or even ostensibly displayed.

Daubnerová's performance-making approach of employing a host of visual stimuli is also apparent in her creative movement vocabulary. She sought inspiration in pictures and photographs from newspapers and magazines when creating *Hamletmachine* to help her find strange poses and gestures. Her approach was similar when it came to *M.H.L.* as well - in this case, however, she based the performance exclusively on authentic photographs of Lokvencová and paid attention to even the smallest details, expressions, clothing, accessories, or atmosphere. They influenced the costume design process of the twelve dresses used in the performance as well as her movement representation of the character and the structure of the *mise-en-scène* as a whole. When it comes to *Untitled*, the choreography was created in collaboration with Vlčeková inspired by specific motives from Woodman's photographs. In the case of *Untitled*, however, Daubnerová's focus was not merely gaining inspiration from poses or expressions but rather she attempted to animate and activate Woodman's photographs. It was as if she developed her own individual deformed poses from the photographs, or as if she tried to embody mood, atmosphere or emotion of the image through her movement. The choreography was marked by Stanislava Vlčeková's dancing movement vocabulary that was defined by continuous and graceful motions that prioritized abstraction and emotionality as well as notable gestural expressiveness. Daubnerová deploys her body and movements to explore the line between subject and object, between an artist and her oeuvre, between reality and art (and between photography and theatre/performance).

Finishing her Solo Practice

When it comes to critical discourse around Daubnerová's work, terms such as "monodrama", "performance", "multimedia production", "new theatre", or "postdramatic theatre" keep on coming up. Critics predominantly avoid defining her work within a certain genre or art field, or they purposefully hint at its fluidity. Daubnerová's wide-spectral understanding of scenic art (and art as a whole) that can be seen in her perpetual search for

different methods of expression and translation of her artistic account could be one of the primary reasons for the critical ambiguity. Many of the terms listed above could be used to catalogue her solo pieces - for instance monodrama, theatre of one actor, monologue theatre, or solo performance, while the decidedly personal character of her work steers it towards performance art forms.

When trying to define *Cells*, *Hamletmachine* and *M.H.L.* in her PhD thesis, Daubnerová herself proposes the term “individual stage performance” as an identifier in reference to Kostelanetz’ idea of *stage performance*. The term offered by the artist combines an emphasis on performativity as one of the main performance making approaches but also admits employing principles from stage art forms (be it straight theatre or dance/movement/physical theatre). The word “individual” then suggests the solo character of her performance practice.

Daubnerová’s solo performances allow for a reading of a clear development arch - from intimate personal traumas to a general question of a personal revenge, a fight of a woman individual against society; from art stylisation somewhere between installation and performance art all the way to movement-focused documentary theatre. At the culmination of this “solo saga” is her newest piece in which Daubnerová reflects upon her inner world directly through herself for the first time rather than through another artist’s life (a key visual component in this piece is a realistic bust of the artist herself). The name of the performance is also significant - *Masterpiece*. To quote Daubnerová about her relationship to her solo pieces: “Solo pieces remain a private place for me, a harbour I can come back to and lick the wounds I will suffer when fighting on big theatre stages. Even though that type of work puts a person on the chopping block and forces them to go through themselves. That’s the most difficult and sometimes even the most dangerous part of it all”.⁹ Nonetheless, Sláva Daubnerová is leaving this harbour, at least for now, but she does so with graciousness unique to her. And so in the end *Masterpiece* becomes only a showcase in a museum of her solo pieces.

⁹ CVEČKOVÁ, Katarína – DAUBNEROVÁ, Sláva: Sláva Daubnerová: Sóna zostali mojím prístavom. [2.6.2020]. [*Solo performances remained my port of call*]