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theatrologist and theatre historian

Sláva Daubnerová

Untitled

# The original route of Sláva Daubnerová or the magic of theatre Ingenious way

**“The realists do not take the photograph for a “copy” of reality, but for an emanation of past reality, a magic, not an art”. Roland Barthes’, *Camera Lucida*.**

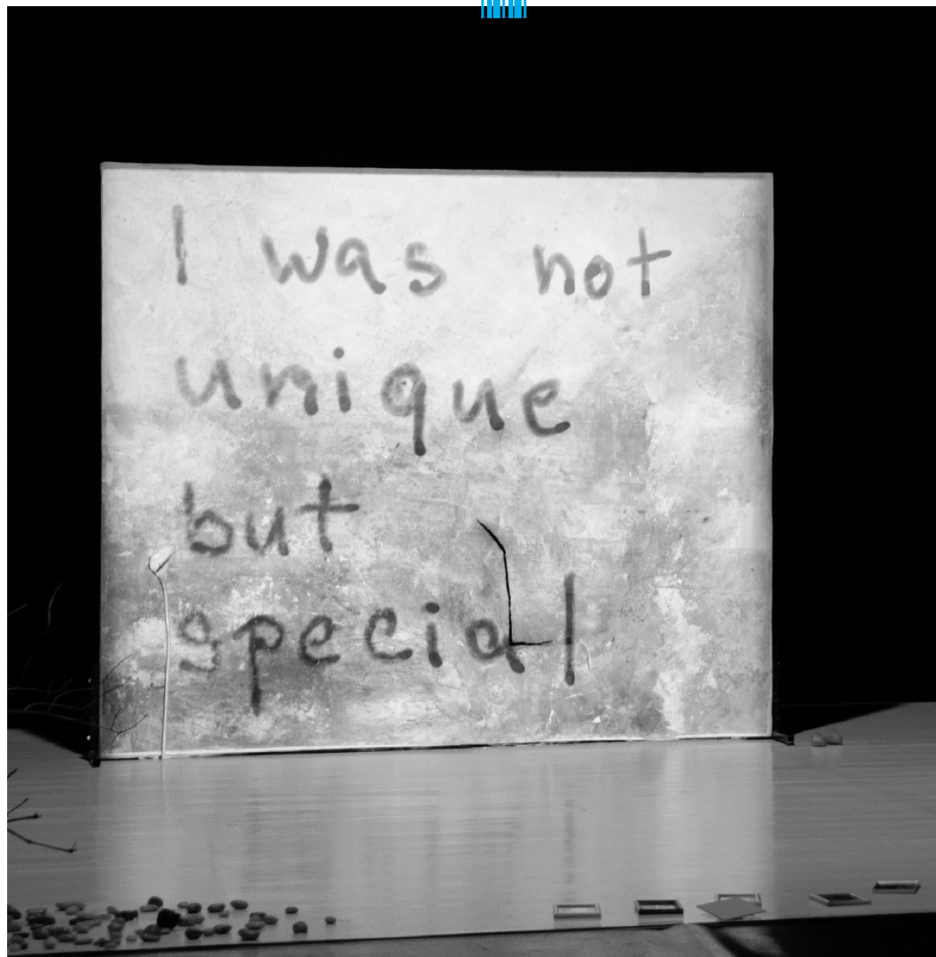
Rather than moaning that with regard to contemporary art production, we can still be considered as slightly lagging behind the western world as a consequence of the slow cultural development since the communist years, we shall celebrate the positive examples that defy this reading. Among them is Sláva Daubnerová, the founder of the PAT collective (Platform for Contemporary Theatre). Typically, her productions take the form of autonomous solo performances, but she also works collaboratively, most recently in *Polylogue*, *Some disorder interior geometries* or *Illuminations*.

Whilst traditionally, in a narrower sense, performance art takes as its subject matter one’s own, original material, Sláva Daubnerová has forged her own way of working within this

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(P.A.T. - Platform for  
Contemporary Theatre)  
photo by S. Trnka





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performative art form. Her performances do not take as departure point her own personal experiences, traumas and desires, but they access them through delving into the life and work of others, artists living and working before her.

Often they are fellow artists, such as the French-American artist and sculptor Louise Bourgeois in *Cells*, the Norwegian painter Lars Hertevig in *Polylogue* or most recently the American photographer Francesca Woodman in *Untitled*. Or prominent cultural figures, such as the wife of German playwright and poet Heiner Müller, Inge Müller, whose fate was served as an inspiration for *Some Disordered Interior Geometries*, or Magda Husáková-Lokvencová, the first lady of Slovak Theatre direction, whom Daubnerová immortalised in her production *M.Ľ.L.*

Having graduated from Cultural Studies at the Comenius University in Bratislava, rather than studying drama and acting, Daubnerová can be seen as an autodidact in terms of her own art practice. Perhaps, hence the fascination with the destiny of fellow artists. It is as if

she conducts a dialogue with fellow artists, looking for the answers for her own agonizing questions around creativity as well as human existence as such. Inspired by their artwork, she articulates her own outlook, through authentic means of expression. Through her performative compositions she queries and explores the notions of identity, the limits of life, our relationships, loneliness, being an outsider or the redeeming power of art, in a moving and innovative way.

Her practice and working method seems to be rooted in a ritual, as she enters the realm of her own through the medium of others. Her performances afford at once a space for a form of therapy as well as an experimental laboratory. To get a sneak peek into this space is always a reward for those who enjoy discovery and the poetry of space.

Her most recent solo performance, inspired by the work of the talented young American photographer, Francesca Woodman, is characteristic of Daubnerová’s method of seeking the maximized cohesion of expression through an original form. An insight into Woodman’s life immediately reveals some affinities with the author. Has Daubnerová found her alter ego? This proposition sounds grim as we know that Francesca Woodman decided to end her life at the age of 22. Can experiencing the trauma of others, though only on an imaginary level, serve a form of ‘exorcism’, or rather, to face one’s own demons? An incentive to overcome the life hurdles they had succumbed to? A transformation of a negative experience into a positive one..? To be more specific, into an intense and aesthetically powerful artwork..?

It feels strange, almost disturbing, to recognize the face of Daubnerová on the photographs of Francesca Woodman. But this is still only a visual affinity, on the level of similar

physiognomy. Looking closer at Woodman's photographs and through secondary material we find deeper and more personal correlation between the two artists. The art critic Sean O'Hagan, reviewing Woodman's show at Victoria Miro, in London in 2010, commented: 'It is as mysterious and elusive as any of her later nudes or performance photographs, and tells us that, even at 13, Woodman had found a way to hide in front of the camera, and, in doing so, had also found her abiding theme. Nearly 30 years after her death, she is still hiding from us in full view, as elusive and beguiling as ever.' <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/nov/21/francesca-woodman-photographs-miro-review>

The will to expose oneself to the pervasive camera view, and the desire to escape, to take refuge are two opposite gestures, both paradoxically deeply rooted not only in our social behaviour but also within the act of artistic expression. We can see how Daubnerová plays out this dichotomy in various mise-en-scènes: first the photographer adjusts the camera on a tripod, then she enters the frame, undressed, crouched in an embryonic position, making tiny movements she shifts around the space. The cautious, minimalist movements serve as innocent means to protect her naked body from the gaze, whilst enabling her, though painfully contorted, to reach the small canvas screen on the other side of the stage, to hide behind. However, the panel flips over and we can see her again. She continues to struggle to conceal her body from the gaze of the audience and the camera's viewfinder, but various events keep thwarting her efforts and keep exposing her and shed light on her body. The body that she strives to hide, is a beautiful one, a body of an art model, as becomes obvious in an uncontrolled, fleeting moment.

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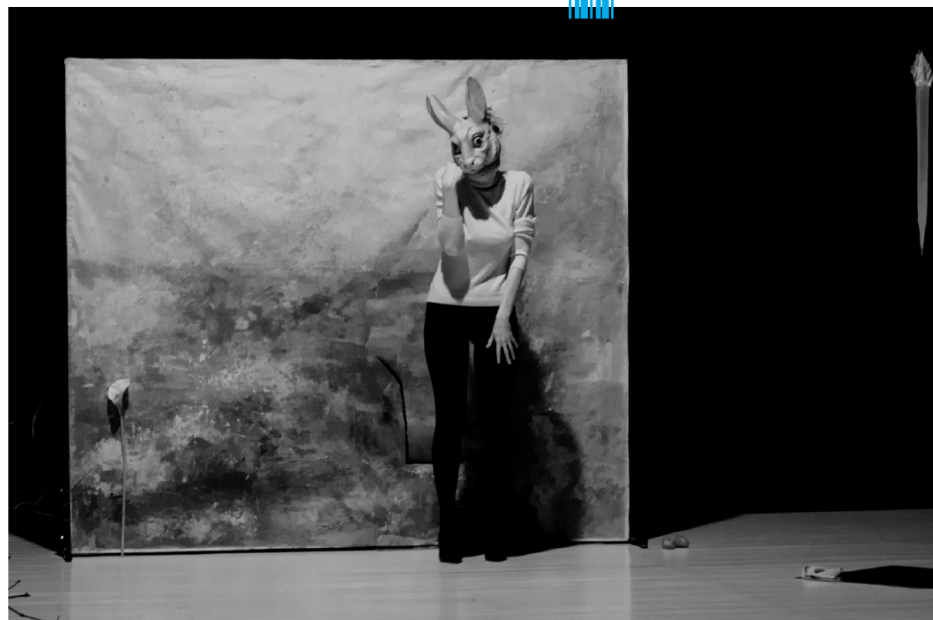
This game of hide and seek is played out on the stage in many different ways. It is perhaps the wittiest and formally most sophisticated when the performer is standing in front of the canvas using the back video projection she veils herself in the virtual layers as they offered a protective cover. Her effort to cover herself is finally successful thanks to this playful technical trickery.

A whole sequence of the performance, which has a very well paced/balanced dynamics, is dedicated to the play with clothing, and getting dressed and undressed in the most unexpected ways (with the use of projection technology again). *I wish I could change my mind as easily as I change dress*, we read on a side board panel, the place providing the only textual element of the play, in the form of projected simple comments, in an uncomplicated English, reminiscent of comic strips speech balloons.

There are many fine and powerful performative details to be appreciated and enjoyed within the overarching composition of the performance as a whole with its clear structure. Daubnerová masterfully conjoins her roles as a performer and director, creating visually

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fascinating and emotionally charged mise-en-scènes filled with meaningful action. Every day gestures, actions and moves are organically developed into dance, in the style of modern and post modern choreography (devised by Stanislava Vlčeková). In regular intervals these moments punctuate the fluid dynamic of the sequences of individual mise-en-scènes.

These sequences are contrasted against each other, thus contributing towards an interesting dynamic and rhythm of the performance. Some of them are based on the female nude, whereby the performer exercises in front of our eyes familiar positions observed from authentic prints, created with the use of long exposure. At other moments, the play of objects takes centre stage, elaborated to the level of shadow theatre. When we see a pair of nylon stockings hanging on the line, waving in the air. Or when the performer creates various natural scenes with stuffed birds, a fox in the genre of *natura morte* and then prostrates herself to sleep there, on the beautifully red lit scene.

The pensive photographer, continuously playing a game of hide and seek, does however reveal her various faces. And that is what

the performance captures so well. Alongside the favourite, uptight Victorian likeness, suddenly we get to glimpse different types of images of women, as we know them from famous works by Edgar Degas, Toulouse-Lautrec, prostitutes with their hair tied up in a bun, wearing lingerie with garters as the only piece of clothing. *‘Woman is a mirror for a man’* reads aptly one of the statements on the panel. In this context it is clear why the performer then enters the stage dressed as a bunny with long white ears and hops across the pink-lit stage.

Whilst at the beginning of the performance, shyly curled up in a fetal position, at the end we see the performer, having proceeded through various scenes and guises, parting her legs clad in black underwear, like arms ready to embrace the audience. Then she makes her way from the proscenium towards the screen at the back, and she slides in through the cut opening as if into the mother’s lap. Or, perhaps like Alice through the looking glass. Who knows.

This performance reveals Slava Daubnerová’s unique voice and tells us a lot about the roots of her very own creative gesture. We get a glimpse of her motivations to merge with her subject matter. Delving into the personalities of other artists, she finds a refuge, a perfect place from which she can express herself authentically. As for the viewers, they are offered an opportunity to witness an ingenious form of exploring existential issues driving artistic creation at its best. ♣

**Sláva Daubnerová: Untitled**

concept, director, performer **S. Daubnerová**  
choreography **S. Vlčeková** dramaturgy and technical  
cooperation **P. Graus** light design **S. Šmálik**  
production: **P.A.T. platform for contemporary theatre**  
premiere **10th December 2012, S’UK Theatre**