

The paper focuses on Beton Ltd., a theatre collective comprised of three actors, Primož Bezjak, Branko Jordan and Katarina Stegnar, established in 2010. Beton Ltd. emerged on the Slovenian performing arts scene with a collective approach to theatre-making and is thus a special case as far as non-hierarchical and collective production models in Slovenia are concerned. In the last ten years, Beton Ltd. has created seven performances: *So Far Away: Introduction to Ego-logy* (2010); *I Say What I am Told to Say* (2012); *Everything We've Lost, While We've Gone on Living* (2013); *Revoltin' Man* (2014); *Ich kann nicht anders* (2016); *Große Erwartungen/Great Expectations* (2018) and *Mahlzeit* (2019). Through introspective self-analysis, the paper elaborates on the necessary preconditions for the formation of a collective, as well as the conditions necessary for effective collaboration in performance making, combining a short historical overview of the case in question, including specific collaborative strategies developed by Beton Ltd. during the past decade.

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**Keywords:** Beton Ltd., Katarina Stegnar, Primož Bezjak, Branko Jordan, Betontanc, Matjaž Pograjc, Bunker, Anton Podbevšek Theatre, collective, collectiveness

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Actor **Branko Jordan** studied and graduated from the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television of the University of Ljubljana, mentored by Mile Korun and Matjaž Zupančič (1996-2002). During his studies, he already began to collaborate with director Matjaž Pograjc as an active member of Betontanc (2001-2014). He has worked with both repertory theatres and independent producers in the performing arts field. He has been a part of the ensemble of Celje City Theatre (2003/2004), Prešeren Theatre Kranj (2004-2008), the Drama of SNT Maribor (2009-2013 and 2016-2018) and SNT Drama Ljubljana (2014-2016 and 2019-). He has collaborated with Bunker, Glej Theatre, Imaginarni InSTITUTE, Cankarjev dom, Pandur.Theaters and Anton Podbevšek Theatre. Internationally, he has worked with Ulysses, Jonghollandia (Wunderbaum), New Lathwian Theatre Institute, Mittelfest Festival, Reon Theatre of Bologna and others. In his twenty-year career, he has created more than seventy roles for which he has received numerous awards. In 2018, he became an assistant professor of acting at the UL AGRFT. He is a founding member of Beton Ltd.

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# Beton Ltd.: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

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Even though collectiveness as a term and as an inevitable circumstance that dictates every second of our work is constantly present in our conversations, thoughts and (re)actions, none of the members of Beton Ltd. (individually or collectively) never tried to systematically explain how, why and under which circumstances we work or conceive our performances. Furthermore, during the entire period of the existence of Beton Ltd., there has not been a comprehensive investigation or study of Beton Ltd.'s unique approach concerning collective work in contemporary Slovenian theatre practices.

The title of this paper is *Beton Ltd.: A Case Study*. Perhaps I should more precisely call it *An Attempt of a Case Study*. It is important to underline that this paper is utterly subjective. It derives from my personal point of view, and even though I try to be objective to my utmost ability in explaining the basic points important for understanding our synergy, or even fundamental preconditions, which were (and are) necessary for establishing (and maintaining) a collective, the conclusions I will arrive at will simply be limited by my position as an exclusive insider.

Perhaps I should emphasise how difficult and/or even schizophrenic it is to talk about "us" when only "I" am the one who is writing to share this. Is this not a direct contradiction of the fundamental principles of collectiveness where something that "appears outwardly" (as statements in this paper) should result from a carefully built process through which all divergent opinions are transformed into a consensual statement? Does this statement exceed the bare sum of (in our case, three) different opinions instead of becoming something firmly, objectively binding? This dilemma: or a trap if you like, is not only a linguistic one; it is constantly present in every possible situation, which demands some sort of a decision. And we know that theatre is all about decision-making.

In Beton Ltd., we cope with this dilemma with the help of a simple measure. We call it code "red". "Red" is a signal, a stop sign that an individual group member uses to emphasise that *the other* has crossed the line, that what he/she is doing or saying is not shared, consented to or accepted by the other members. When code "red" is spoken, the one that received it for a statement or action knows that he or she is on

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his or her own, no longer part of the herd, since he/she presented or represented ideas that do not have any potential for development in the collective process.

So, what are we talking about when we talk about Beton Ltd.? We are talking about three actors, Katarina Stegnar, Primož Bezjak and Branko Jordan, who at a certain point ten years ago decided to start a theatre collective and have been sporadically, although continuously, working together under this brand ever since. Till now, Beton Ltd., in an exceptional collaboration with great artists and coworkers such as Jure Vlahovič, Toni Soprano Meneglejte, 004 (Miha Horvat), Janez Weiss, Andreja Kopač, Mateja Benedetti and Urška Brodar, among others, has conceived seven different performances, produced mainly by Bunker, an independent theatre institute, plus in some cases (co-)produced by Anton Podbevšek Theatre from Novo mesto.<sup>2</sup>

If we put aside any kind of critical judgement of individual performances conceived and performed by Beton Ltd., I believe that the most significant achievement of the collective is the bare fact that we managed to stay together, that we were able to ensure the continuity of our work during ten years and that we have been able to create the conditions for future perspectives as well.

Considering our approaches to the content of selected performances and techniques referring to the term of collectiveness, we can roughly divide Beton Ltd.'s opus into three phases:

1. The initial phase: 2010 (*So Far Away: Introduction to Ego-logy*);
2. The formative phase: 2012–2014 (*I Say What I am Told to Say; Everything We've Lost, While We've Gone on Living; Revolting Man*);
3. The "current" phase: 2015–present (the so-called *German Cycle: Ich kann nicht anders; Great Expectations/Große Erwartungen; Mahlzeit; Hoppla, wir leben*<sup>3</sup>).

The name of the group itself, its etymology and historical background, offers some key elements for understanding the collective Beton Ltd.: *Beton* ("concrete") is an abbreviation from *Betontanc* – the parent collective to Beton Ltd., established by the renowned theatre director Matjaž Pograjc in the early 1990s, in which the three of us

<sup>2</sup> Beton Ltd.: *Tam daleč stran: uvod v ego-logijo (So Far Away: Introduction to Ego-logy)*. Bunker Institute, 2010.

Beton Ltd.: *Rečem, kar mi rečejo naj rečem (I Say What I am Told to Say)*. Anton Podbevšek Theatre and Bunker Institute, 2012.

Beton Ltd.: *Vse, kar smo izgubili, medtem ko smo živeli (Everything We've lost, While We've Gone on Living)*. Anton Podbevšek Theatre and Bunker Institute, 2013.

Beton Ltd.: *Upor ni človek (Revolting Man)*. Anton Podbevšek Theatre, 2014.

Beton Ltd.: *Ich kann nicht anders [nemški cikel] (Ich kann nicht anders [German Cycle])*. Bunker Institute, 2016.

Beton Ltd.: *Große Erwartungen/Velika pričakovanja [nemški cikel] (Große Erwartungen/Great Expectations [German cycle])*. Bunker Institute, 2018.

Beton Ltd.: *Mahlzeit [nemški cikel] (Mahlzeit [German cycle])*. Bunker Institute, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> A performance currently in the stage of development.

continuously collaborated for more than ten years.<sup>4</sup>

During the establishing of the collective, all of us considered ourselves primarily as members of Betontanc; this was our common denominator. Yet, the absence of the figure of a director (the father figure) was so strong that we felt obliged to signal it in the name itself, hence *Ltd.* (“limited”). Limitedness was the circumstance through which we entered into a complex world of often utopian ideas of a true collectiveness in theatre. The Slovenian version of the abbreviation *Ltd.* is even more precise (*d.o.o.* – *družba z omejeno odgovornostjo*: a company or society with limited responsibility or liability). Especially because responsibility is the crucial point of discourse connected to collectiveness, it is fair to state that the very first version of the name of our collective was actually “Betontanc *Ltd.*”, and that the first performance *So Far Away: Introduction to Ego-logy* was signed as such and only after the fact and with the consent of the director Matjaž Pograjc we decided to use the abbreviated version of the name: Beton *Ltd.*

Evidently, in the beginning, the absence of the director, as it is practised in the usual organisation of theatrical work, was a crucial point of difference compared to traditional approaches. Yet, it was also the point through which we sought to establish this qualitative difference or even trigger a certain kind of originality.

Earlier this year, I had the opportunity to attend a public lecture by professor Janez Pipan from UL AGRFT entitled “Režija in njen konec” (Directing and its End), in which he stated in the very beginning that one should very carefully distinguish between the terms “director” and “directing”, however blasphemous it may sound. For me, this was a revelation of sorts. To simply envision that directing can autonomously exist without a director.

However, while we have got used to the fact that some sort of substitution of the director *is* possible through different strategies,<sup>5</sup> the collectiveness itself offered us

4 The three of us started our collaboration with Matjaž Pograjc in 1998. Primož and Katarina joined Betontanc after a successful audition in the spring of 1998 and immediately started with rehearsals for the performance *Secret Sunshine Schedule* (Bunker, 1999). I joined the ensemble for the performance *Who is Afraid of Tennessee Williams?* which Pograjc simultaneously directed in Mladinsko Theatre in the same period and had its opening in the beginning of 1999. We collaborated together for the first time in Betontanc’s performance *Maison des Rendez-vous* in 2001 (première in 2002, co-produced by Bunker and Mladinsko Theatre) and after then the three of us continuously worked together in Betontanc until 2014 (*Track of the World*, Bunker, 2014).

5 The strategies in the process of the substitution of the director refer above all to mechanisms of establishing an “external” objective gaze focused on the individual building blocks that form the performance as a whole. The most elemental strategy consists in filming rehearsals, combined with critical (self-)analysis. Another method is the systematic inclusion of collaborators and selected audiences for specific parts of the performance or scenes in progress, based on clearly elaborated question or dilemmas we are trying to solve in a certain phase of the performance’s development. But the most important procedure concerns the development of our own sense for contextualising the whole. This involves feelings gathered on stage, while playing specific segments of the performance, that we share, reflect and analyse with each other. Of great assistance in these endeavors were our numerous experiences with physical theatre, where we developed techniques which help to constantly check our performative presence, our performative actions in relations to the body of another (actor/actress, event or situation). This enables us to completely organically create, what is in classical, normative theatre known as *mise-en-scène*.

much bigger and greater challenges: how to practise collectiveness first among the three of us, then between other collaborators (set and costume designers, musicians, producers, etc.) and us and, in the final phase, also with the spectators.

The challenge derives from the phenomena of hierarchy. How do we understand it, how do we practise it? Does hierarchy exist in the case of Beton Ltd.? Of course, it does. But the main thing is that hierarchy between us is constantly fluid. It is not stable or permanent. It shifts. It has a limited mandate.

I strongly defend the position that in the creative process, the performance itself becomes an independent entity in its own right. It develops its own needs and demands specific decisions. And the crucial task of every artist (producers and the whole theatrical machinery as well in fact) involved in the delivery of a particular performance is to carefully listen to it, to be aware that a performance is not only a product of our intentions, wishes and desires (or *the objects of our desires*) but an existing entity. We can imagine a group of people bound to create particular performances similarly. There is a job to do, a process to start, and if we are aware of it, we can feel the responsibility to make certain decisions: to start the rehearsal, to open or close a discussion, to offer new material, to enter into the space, to write a text, etc. And if we all understand this, some of us eventually and temporarily slip into the decision-making position or take on the role of "director".

The decision-making process is similar: there is no democracy in the sense of voting and outvoting. Decisions that define the process itself or the gathering of material to construct a frame for a particular performance require a long and complex procedure. The variety of choices, opinions and points of interest circulate in endless loops among us until the right decision or statement is reached. Such a process requires a lot of time. And this enormous amount of time (combined with a lot of patience) is the main characteristic of working in a collective. The second characteristic, or shall I say fear, is connected with compromise. We had several discussions regarding compromise, whether we feel that our artistic choices are losing their sharpness due to consensus. However, we feel that, for the most part, we benefited from it because a particular idea is constantly observed or shaped through different points of views. And to be frank: you can attain a special sort of inner freedom when you are not obliged to constantly produce perfect ideas on your own.

Even the original idea for a collective collaboration was not our own. It came from an external source: the late Nevenka Koprivšek, the head of Bunker, suggested it. The gesture of establishing a collective was not a realisation of our own deep inner wishes or needs. From today's perspective, this was an essential extenuating circumstance because we never put ourselves in the position where we felt obliged to prove the correctness of our choice and (especially in the beginning) there was no inner

pressure of any kind. Instead, there was mere curiosity, how to deal with this unusual situation of which we were suddenly a part.

Furthermore, the decision for a collective was never ideological in the sense of the only possible choice. We never had any doubt in the role of the theatre director *per se* or in a common hierarchy that is present in theatres everywhere. As one review stated:

Primož Bežjak, [...], Branko Jordan, Katarina Stegnar have ventured into an experiment of physical theatre for a second time without a director; not because they perhaps didn't need one, but above all because their individual potentials, physical and performative skill, especially the necessity to critically articulate their points of view, represents an almost autonomous (and unique) performative practice in our local environment. (Dobovšek)

After all, the majority of our professional engagements as actors derive from these "normal" conditions. We were merely interested in whether and how it was possible to work in other conditions, in our case, in the format of a collective. And regarding our experiences, we strongly encourage the efforts to explore different approaches in contemporary theatre, which can coexist with one another.

Now it is perhaps time to turn to the decisive reasons why we held on to the idea of working in a collective. First of all, I think this was strongly connected with the idea of the emancipated actor, an actor who understands her- or himself as a true collaborator in the process of creating a particular performance and, even further, to have at least some sort of role in making artistic choices connected with the development of our skills, fields of interest, our position as artists, working conditions and so on.

The process of the emancipation of actors, in general, is a process that has its roots way back in history, while it simultaneously decisively impacted the evolution of the Slovenian theatrical landscape. To give an example, I will quote an observation by one of the most prominent Slovenian actors, Radko "Rac" Polič, concerning the established stereotype of the actor's role in normative theatre practice.

Since I came to the academy, I was also shocked by the fact that the actor is often understood as a tool guided by the director's hand. This was confirmed again and again throughout my entire career. I was always certain this should not be so. That our work is collective, but that we, together and on our own, can be successful only if we talk to each other and, if necessary, consult with one another. (Quoted in Pogorevc 136)

However, the process of an actor's emancipation is slow and sometimes barely visible, although it has something to do with the inner growth of each individual artist. Yet, the three of us were systematically exposed to an intense course of widening the narrow views concerning the actor's role in performance making since the early days

of our professional careers. Credit in this regard is due to the director Matjaž Pograjc.<sup>6</sup> By collaborating with him, we developed a sort of hunger for decisively questioning how we deal with personal, intimate or social, political and environmental issues that define us in theatre. So it was a desire to articulate contemporaneity, how to have a personal (artistic) influence on the content itself.

As mentioned before, certain preconditions have to be met to achieve a highly operative collective, a community that works effectively without a strong top-down hierarchal structure or without initially strongly defined obligations and responsibilities (which are in a certain sense the natural enemies of creativity). Beton Ltd. met those preconditions; they are specific and unique to our path. These perhaps contain certain truths.

### **- Common background**

I already stressed the importance of a common background. In our case, the parent collective Betontanc, with its director Matjaž Pograjc, is an excellent example. Besides the fact that we also share common experiences while being schoolmates at the theatre academy, but most of all: we spent an incredible amount of time together on and off stage before we started working together in a collective, which enabled two things for us: first, enormous trust in each other, tested in practice on numerous occasions on rehearsals, performances or on tours, combined with the mutual admiration of our capabilities and talents; and secondly, a wide field of shared referential codes (words, terms, images, experiences, etc.), which are necessary not only as a support in creating a common language, but also as efficient methods in coping with time. Common referential codes help us economise the time needed to arrive from a starting point to a particular result.

### **- The emancipated actor**

I elaborated on this position earlier, but it also includes a specific desire to take on a specific role of responsibility for making “executive” decisions. If one does not have this desire – if only for few minutes – collective work in theatre becomes impossible.

### **- A realised artistic personality**

The fact that we joined the collective without a particular desire to establish our individual artistic credentials is one of the reasons which prevents unnecessary exhibitionism and enables us to realise unfulfilled phantasies, which we are not able

<sup>6</sup> As well as Sebastijan Horvat, Bojan Jablanovec, Jernej Lorenci, among others, who practise different models of co-authorship and expanded collaboration in their own theatre projects with which we were involved.

to realise anywhere else. The reasons for working in a collective are, in our case, completely different, so to say: non-performative. We leave our individual acting ambitions to environments in which we act as individuals. In contrast, in our collective, we mostly occupy ourselves with content and phenomenological questions: Which themes to choose, which questions to raise and how to stage our point of view.

### **- Insight into widespread approaches in theatre**

Information and practical experiences with different organisation methods in the theatre are necessary for the development of individual forms of work. During the last two decades, Slovenian theatre has, unfortunately, to a certain extent, slipped into a kind of isolated, self-infatuated and self-obsessed community where the flow of information concerning global creative processes, ways and forms of work, is limited or even interrupted. The reasons for this reside partly in malnourished international festivals and exchanges, limited possibilities in international collaboration, and in an irrational, self-infatuated national character fuelled by the fear of confronting something better, greater and above all, something different than ourselves.

I can state with certainty that Beton Ltd. would never have come into being if we had not had the first-hand experience that such a collective of actors can exist in practice.

In our case, there was the crucial collaboration with a group from the Netherlands called Jonghollandia (today known as Wunderbaum), which formed from a much longer and systematically developed idea of theatre-makers, based on the suggestion of director Johan Simmons, who probably at some point recognised the necessity to invest in research of such forms of practice. Still, above all, he invested certain funds (which he had at his disposal) in an unpredictable endeavour. The result of this investment exceeded all expectations.

### **- Opportunity**

Opportunity is perhaps the most important precondition, which is often beyond our control. Because it is connected with the vision, the broad-mindedness and courage of individual artistic directors, as well as decision-makers and policies of particular institutions, etc., which enable a certain individual to recognise the potentials in particular artists or even to encourage conditions that can influence the development of new practices. In our case, such a vision or gesture was carried out by Nevenka Koprivšek, the director of Bunker, who realised we could form a collective before we knew it ourselves. Later on, it was Matjaž Berger, the artistic director of Anton Podbevšek Theatre, who gave us a three-year residency, which helped us to strengthen our relations, enabling us to consider ourselves as a

collective at all, something bigger and stronger, transcending the mere sum of three separate individuals.

The opportunity and support given and offered to us by Bunker during these past ten years is something that we strongly encourage for all artistic and operative decision-makers to practise as often and as systematically as possible.

Karolina Babič, in her article *Hierarchies among Equals*, describes the phenomenon of democratic self-governance as “a state of affairs which exists only when it is practised and ceases to exist when it is not” (13). This phenomenon goes for collectiveness in theatre as well. Regardless of methods, strategies, formalised and non-formalised practices, a successful collectiveness or a “fully-consumed” and durable collective depends solely on the fact that it is practised.

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