slovenian theatre news

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1976
The Doctor
Incubator

Article 55
Hamlet

my own
private*

Phaedra

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Preface

The second half of the 2024/25 season unveiled a series of premières marked by diversity and engagement. The selected reviews highlight productions that fundamentally and precisely address either the world and society around us at this moment or pivotal historical moments that have decisively influenced the present. In both the productions and the reflections, a high level of critical thinking is evident, spread across fields such as feminism, pacifism, auto-fiction, reinterpretations of classical works and the potentials of documentary formats. It appears that contemporary Slovenian theatre is largely quite political – in terms of both form and content. There is a thorough exploration of complex questions related to identity politics, the public and private spheres, fictionality and factuality and overlooked layers of history. These critics thus do not analyse events merely as such but also observe the current social climate, its political dilemmas and new theatrical strategies that simultaneously explore selected materials, deepen relationships with the audience and demonstrate theatre as an art form highly responsive to the current state of the world.

Zala Dobovšek, PhD
Dramaturg and Editor-in-chief
of the web portal *Kritika* for referential
reviews and reflection on the Slovenian performing arts

2

Jaka Smerkolj Simoneti

The Impressiveness of the Impresario

Devised project: *1976. Dodecalogy 1972–1983*. Slovene National Theatre Nova Gorica, Krušče Creative Centre, Mladinsko Theatre and ECoC GO! 2025 Nova Gorica – Gorizia, one-off event, 23 May 2025.

Illustration by Manuele Fiori/Archive of SNT Nova Gorica.

»The significance of this achievement is further demonstrated by the involvement of the local community (from extras, several choirs, the volunteer fire brigade, and majorettes to the extensive artistic and production team that was necessary to carry out such a complex production), by which the theatrical performance reaches beyond the classical understanding of a work of art as an independently formed product, turning into a living creation of a specific cross-section of a society, which not only addresses this same society, but also includes it into the process and the work of art itself.«

The fifth production of the *Dodecalogy 1972–1983* omnibus featured a one-off event at the Nova Gorica sports stadium. *1976* thus took the audience out of the theatre hall, beyond the interiors we had witnessed so far, and into the open air, where the narrative arc of moving into the exterior seems all the more natural to the annual-ticket holders of the *Dodecalogy* omnibus, who observed the panorama of Nova Gorica through the glass balcony of the SNT Nova Gorica in the performance *1975*. While in that episode, we were only able to look at the exterior, now we find ourselves in it. While in the previous productions, we have witnessed the impressive scenographic constructs of the set designer **Branko Hojnik** (in this episode, he is assissted by **Katarina Prislan** and **Lucija Zucchiati**), this time we end up in a real location, where theatrical scenographic interventions only fragmentarily (but effectively) enter the domain of architecture, for example, an isolated portal (a window with a transparent curtain) placed in the front – a regular feature of the *Dodecalogy* performances at the SNT Nova Gorica – and the recreation of a holiday tent and a pine grove surrounding the caravan in

which the *1972* performance for one spectator took place. In contrast to *1972*, *1976* was staged for an audience of almost a thousand people, and this multitude, along with the nature of the venue, dictated a particular spectacular element to the performance.

1976 also represents an upgrade of the intertwining family stories from the previous productions, for the first time bringing together on one "stage" the performers whom the audience already knows. Thus, the actors from SNT Nova Gorica (**Arna Hadžialjević**, **Žiga Udir**, **Marjuta Slamič**, **Maja Dvoršek**, guest **Anuša Kodelja**, **Matija Rupel** and **Patrizia Jurinčič Finžgar** as the recorded voice) meet the cast of the Mladinsko Theatre (**Damjana Černe**, **Nataša Keser**, **Robert Prebil**, **Stane Tomazin**) along with some newly introduced performers (**Denes Debrei**, **Mojca Madon**, **Sreten Mokrović**, **Renato Rinaldi**). On the night of 6 May 1976, they are together when a powerful earthquake strikes the entire region. The earthquake plays a focal role, as the Nova Gorica sports stadium is where some spent the night.

In a mixture of documentary and fictional elements, some of the protagonists of the *Dodecalogy* happen to end up in the stadium on that fateful night. The result is an impressive performative event that will surely go down in the history of Nova Gorica and is particularly significant for local audiences, as it opens up a space of dialogue about the events that have left a mark on the city, the region and the people inhabiting these locations, or rather, inheriting their history. Given the one-off nature of the event, its impact at the local level is of the utmost importance. The significance of this achievement is further demonstrated by the involvement of the local community (from extras, several choirs, the volunteer fire brigade, and majorettes to the extensive artistic and production team that was necessary to carry out such a complex production), by which the theatrical performance reaches beyond the classical understanding of a work of art as an independently formed product, turning into a living creation of a specific cross-section of a society, which not only addresses this same society, but also includes it into the process and the work of art itself. *1976* can thus be designated a spectacle as much by the nature of what goes on on the stage as by the sheer quality of such a rare phenomenon in the Slovenian performing arts landscape, when a large crowd of people gather to watch a theatre production, following it with enthusiastic cheers and applause, almost as if they were watching a football match. The creation of this "theatrical" community is thus the most important achievement of *1976*.

The grandiosity of the space and the emphasis on the unique nature of the event present a particularly challenging terrain in which to situate the staging procedures that have become characteristic of the *Dodecalogy*: skillful dramaturgical meandering between the comic and the dramatic in a collage of mediated intimate family stories; individual humorous music and dance acts, often underpinned by music selected from the titular year; astoundingly poetic silent scenes in which **Samo Kutin**'s evocative music comes to the fore; **Carlo Zoratti**'s video interludes. From a staging perspective, these strategies create a palimpsest of content which is at times confusing in its fragmentary nature; in other parts, it appears overly drawn out and somewhat haphazard or even superficial in its treatment of certain themes. In terms of staging, the more dense and atmospheric parts in darker emotional tones seem more effective that the characters' anecdotal accounts of the events in the days surrounding the earthquake, albeit very humorous (among which the omnipresent Nonna Marjuta interpreted by **Marjuta Slamič** on the phoneline in the first part acts as a particularly effective insert), as they create a kind of counterpoint to the action space, thus introducing a welcome tension into the action. The inclusion of the fire brigade, the arrival of the Bibliobus and the brief choreography of the majorettes do not function as inspiringly due to the context of the sports stadium, and come off more as a momentary attraction and display of production grandiosity rather than adding to the production's content, as they fail to find a quilting point with the actors, whose stories dictate their arrivals.

Thus, for example, Anuša played by **Anuša Kodelja** and Arna played by **Arna Hadžialjević**, who, as we find out from the performance, both used to be majorettes in their youth, do not perform together with the girls from the Twirling Majorette Company but rather wield their sticks dislocated from them, which is a sign of a contextual connection, rather than its staging. This reliance on signs, which is often based on humour or bare attractiveness (an example of the latter can be seen in the arrival of Stane Tomazin on horseback), can also be understood as a way of creating a backdrop for the stronger emotional charge of the more dramatic scenes, one of the strongest among the latter, which, among other things, also most seriously addresses the reality of the earthquake and the consequences it had on people's (emotional) lives, is the story of Mojca, portrayed by **Mojca Madon**, who for a whole month following the earthquake refuses to speak. The narrative takes place after a silent scene in which we once again witness the "tidying up" of furniture; this time, a metaphor for repairing the home after the earthquake. Most remarkable in this scene is the contribution of the music by Samo Kutin, who performs it live at this event, playing on the stadium itself, backed by the joined forces of the choirs. Robert Prebil's account of events in other cities, where stadiums are turning into public execution grounds, also resonates strongly.

Similarly, the comic element of jumping through windows during the earthquake, often linked to different love affairs (in *1976*, the focus is on Arna's lover Renato, a car mechanic played by the video sound editor and "sound engineer" of the stadium action, **Renato Rinaldi**), develops into a especially noticeable line of suicides, which concludes in the final part of the production with **Sreten Mokrović**'s account of his father's suicide. Among the multitude of evocative images that the event provided, certain lines remain open and unconcluded in their fragmentary nature, which is why some of the stronger visual images, such as the image of Nonna Damjana played by **Damjana Černe** wandering around the hazy stadium with a stilt, received less attention. Thus, *1976*, while connecting certain fragments, also opens up a multitude of new stories, the unfolding of which we will probably be able to see in future editions.

The presence of director **Tomi Janežič** (with assistant directors **Mojca Madon** and **Iva Olujić**) is particularly tangible this time, as the *Dodecalogy* continues the approach of alienation and deconstruction of theatrical mechanisms and illusions. In *1976*, he has created a complex and unique theatrical event that will surely be inscribed in the history of Slovenian theatre. The transposition of directorial strategies established in *Dodecalogy* to a site-specific venue leaves the audience with a curious excitement about where the cycle of performances will take us next and how it can still surprise us.

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3

Ana Lorger

A Tribute to the Fighters for the Autonomy of Our Bodies

Article 55. Mladinsko Theatre, première 24 May 2025.

Photo: Borut Bučinel/Mladinsko Theatre.

»The documentary celebration *Article 55* can be read primarily as a tribute to the struggle for the preservation of reproductive rights and as a reflection on the fact that capitalism might soon take away something that socialism brought us in 1974. The fact that Slovenia became the first country in Europe to legalise accessible and free abortion and contraception is not negligible.«

Documentary theatre is often understood as a form of political theatre, as it aims to reconstruct the political forces hidden behind historical and current events, thereby writing a parallel, unheard story of silenced voices. It primarily stems from the need for a deeper understanding of the present (or the past that is affecting the present) and manifests as a symptom of the current political and social crisis. The performance *Article 55* directed by **Tjaša Črnigoj** is a logical response to the growing repatriarisation of European society, where minorities are gradually losing the freedoms and rights received in the past (for example, the criminalisation of abortion in Poland, or the banning of the pride parade in Hungary ...). In Slovenia, it has been possible for several years to see opponents of legal abortion praying in front of the Ljubljana maternity hospital, while in Zagreb, men kneel every Saturday on the main city square to pray for unborn children (while women are not allowed to enter their circle). The performance *Article 55* attempts to remind us that the freedoms and rights we take for granted today – which some want to abolish – were not merely granted: instead, we had to fight for them.

As the title suggests, *Article 55* refers to the article of the Slovenian Constitution which grants Slovenian citizens the freedom to decide whether to bear children and obligates the State to provide the conditions for exercising this freedom. With chairs placed along both sides of the Lower Hall of the Mladinsko Theatre, the performance actually resembles the structure of a celebration (as can be inferred from its subtitle), with actresses **Tamara Avguštin**, **Anja Novak**, **Katarina**

Stegnar and **Miranda Trnjanin** walking along the central corridor and at one point also rolling out a red carpet. The combination of festive and casual clothing (costume designer, set designer and artistic consultant **Tijana Todorović**) marks out common transitions between theatrical mimicry and documentary narrative, where the actresses speak from a position of researchers of archival material, i.e., co-creators. All four of them begin their narratives with the phrase "This story begins ...", thus changing the years and the stories that take place during these periods. And even as the stories unwind, the phrase still reverberates repetitively throughout the space.

At the beginning, we first hear some personal stories of the four actresses from different periods: the story of a young woman who, as a student, took her body into her own hands and had a successful abortion and the story of our ancestor who did not have this possibility and had to resort to dangerous quack-doctor methods. At the same time, these stories are interwoven with the actresses' first-person accounts, as they talk about their own experiences of pleasure, their first menstruation, their first objectification by men and the sexualisation and shame that often sticks to the female body. The performance thus follows one of the feminist precepts: the personal is political. And although the bodies before us testify to a history of patriarchy that has erased female pleasure and reduced female sexuality to its reproductive function, the actresses on stage appear confident, relaxed and even with some comic interventions. This opening part of the performance attempts to show how the fates of individual women in particular places and periods might differ according to the laws and regulations that shaped their context; it focuses on Article 55, which the creators often clarify in their lines, thereby further emphasising it. Soon, however, the video projection on the left and right of the corridor starts to feature some facts about the resolution of the issue of illegal abortions in Yugoslavia, which led to free contraception and legalised abortion in 1974. This information is not unfamiliar to us, as it repeats the facts already presented in the *performance Sex Education II: Fight*. Additionally, the props and set design are reminiscent of the familiar aesthetics of previous performances (such as knitting needles, a water jug, a hanging cloth or linen, and blood); however, this time their handling is less detailed and consequently less magical. This is, of course, also due to the different (larger) space and the absence of the play of lights, reflections, transparencies and water reflections. This time, the performance does not leave us time to immerse in the details – it is much more focused on the pomp of the celebration and the course of historical events.

After mentioning the already known Yugoslav law from 1974, the performance also mentions the self-organised group Lilit that formed in the mid-1980s. According to posters and announcements on Radio Študent in March 1985, they promoted a women-only club night at the K4 discoteque. More than 200 women attended the party, and the disco night became a regular event held every second Sunday. The promotion included speeches by the organisers arguing why it was important to hold women-only nights, and the performance presented at least a small piece from the history of women's self-organisation in our country. It is the advocacy of the exclusivity of space be it for women only, for the queer community or for non-white people that remains a thorn in the side of many up to today. The distribution of fliers, protests and joint parties is also something that is still practised (the recent civil initiative "My Voice, My Choice" is also mentioned in the performance).

At the very beginning, the performance reveals the pivotal names of the key figures involved in the struggle for preserving Article 55 (Mojca Dobnikar, Vlasta Jalušič, Mateja Kožuh Novak, Sonja Lokar, Metka Mencin, Tanja Rener, Mirjana Ule and Živa Vidmar) and revisits facts already presented in the performance *Sex Education II: Fight*. At the same time, it fails to gradually reveal new information, with increasing tension or interruptions that would bring events to life and give the audience time to immerse ourselves in them. Thus, the first part of the play feels repetitive and monotonous. The second half, however, featuring archival footage of the final parliament assembly before the adoption of the constitution of the newly founded country – the Republic of Slovenia – diversifies the action on stage. The actresses watch a recording of the Constitutional Commission Assembly in December 1991, which was broadcast live on Slovenian National Television. They comment on the proceedings, thus adding a comedic element. The footage is followed by photographs from the mass protests in front of the Parliament, where people defended the retention of Article 55 of the Constitution. In fact, the performative documentary celebration only really starts towards the end of the performance, when the article remains part of the Constitution and the actresses celebrate by popping open some champagne, paying tribute to all the activists and their role in upholding the article.

The performance uses real audiovisual archives and combines fictional scenes with documentary inserts, shifting between the personal stories of the performers and fictional but entirely plausible people from the past, thus weaving a thread of historical reality that is often overlooked and actually represents another, less photogenic side of the story of Slovenian independence. The documentary celebration *Article 55* can be read primarily as a tribute to the struggle for the preservation of reproductive rights and as a reflection on the fact that capitalism might soon take away something that

socialism brought us in 1974. The fact that Slovenia became the first country in Europe to legalise accessible and free abortion and contraception is not negligible.

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4

Evelin Bizjak

Problematisation of Ideologies, Identities and Representations

Robert Icke: *The Doctor*. Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana, 17 April 2025.

Photo: Peter Uhan/SNT Drama Ljubljana.

»Kušej's cast thus, perhaps unintentionally but effectively, sheds light on how the theatre system in our country still reproduces a certain normative corporeality and how identity diversity often remains simulated rather than structurally embodied.«

In this production of *The Doctor* by contemporary British playwright **Robert Icke**, the central focus is a precisely articulated reflection on contemporary identity as a socially mediated construct and the identity politics that arise from it. The story of a female doctor – who, as a result of a decision based on professional judgement and the directive of protecting a patient's dignity, clashes with the institutional mechanisms of power and becomes a projection screen for society's divided notions of gender, religion, power and responsibility – gradually reveals the tension between personal ethics and politics. The doctor's professional and ethical act, which the institution interprets as an ideological gesture, triggers a wave of political and media lynching that gradually escalates into her public discreditation.

In the opening scene, the actors, wearing nothing but underwear, declare their identities (gender, race, religion), which do not match their visible physical traits and appearance. It becomes clear that Kušej has consciously abandoned psychological realism to expose the mechanisms of social perception and the arbitrariness of identity labels. He shapes the politically acute performance to offer the spectator the experience of identity as it is usually understood – as natural and immutable – albeit always mediated through language, expectations and social norms. In this way, the performance subverts the spectator's desire for a transparent identity, reminding us that visual images are never neutral but always declarative and thus subject to social interpretation, whether it be acceptance or rejection.

Director **Martin Kušej** is well-known for his politically articulate productions, and the performance stays true to his characteristic directorial language, combining cold minimalism, intense atmosphere and psychological precision. Together with dramaturg **Diana Koloini**, he sets the performance in a strictly geometric – almost sterile – empty space, reaching beyond a purely functional design. Set designer **Jessica Rockstroh**'s elaborate staging thus turns into an effective setting for a metaphorical confrontation of ideologies. While at first glance the choice of this sterile aesthetic may appear neutral, the overarching whiteness, geometric symmetry and clinical purity foreground the actors' bodies and expose them as the vehicles of a system that endeavours to appear objective but is imbued with ideology. In this way, the space becomes a visual catalyst for ideas that, through the interplay of diverse performative elements, prompt the spectator to reflect on the ideological tensions, social structures and existential cracks that the play reveals.

The dramaturgy of *The Doctor* is based on a carefully laid-out structure of gradually disclosed information, which allows the spectators to question and reassess their judgements about the characters and their actions at every moment. Robert Icke conceives the text so that the points of conflict are continuously upgraded with ever-new layers of information, retrospective insights and revelations of relationships that affect the interpretation of what we see. This creates an effect of constant perceptual destabilisation, one of the key dramaturgical features of Icke's writing. However, the director makes use of it to trigger a deeper reflection: the stage, conceived as a set of mobile walls, is designed to enable quick changes of perspective and transition montages between the two levels of the performance: the titular doctor's intimate and social lives. Following pauses marked by blackouts – which are filled with music by composer **Aki Traar**, who weaves different electronic textures to form a multilayered acoustic composition, creating a sense of tension and psychological unease – the varied compositions of the characters are revealed, with the doctor taking centre stage. The political dissection of her professional decision extends beyond the boundaries of discourse and cuts into the very topography of her self, from her public role to her private vulnerability. Our perception is further guided by the integration of the lighting design (**Stefan Pfeistlinger**), which does not follow a natural logic but instead creates psychological and dramaturgical accents that support the emotional states or mark the ideological breaks with sharp contrasts and nuanced colours. The saturated colour scheme that pertains to the doctor's intimate spaces condenses into surrealistic filters that serve to emotionally and associatively direct the undertones of the spectator's perception. In this context, the space itself functions as a material imprint of the doctor's isolation, which, through the deliberate use of contrasting light, mise-en-scène and sound accents, is transformed into a perceptual starting point that is only completed in the spectator's subjective perception.

The cast (**Timon Šturbej**, **Bojan Emeršič**, **Aleš Valič**, **Uroš Fürst**, **Saša Mihelčič**, **Saša Tabaković**, **Tina Vrbnjak**, **Marko Mandić**, **Maša Derganc** and **Irena Yebuah Tiran**) wear functional costumes in a restrained colour palette with variations in design (costume designer **Ana Savić Gecan**). They demonstrate a high degree of precision in interpretation and collective coordination. **Nataša Barbara Gračner** is outstanding in the role of the doctor, creating a complex, multilayered character in which authority, vulnerability, control and inner anguish intertwine. Torn between her principles, intense experiences and controlled diction, she unostentatiously embodies the inner deconstruction of her character, which is rounded off with layered and complex emotional accents.

In the final scene of the hearing, the protagonist appears before an ethics committee that transforms into a political arena divided along the lines of identity representations with the ideological positions presented in direct confrontation. The hearing disregards the circumstances of the act, focusing instead solely on its discursive effects. Through strategically placed nuggets of irony, the actors problematise identity politics precisely in its trivialised, formalist form: as a discourse that operates within pre-existing frameworks of legitimacy, where individual behaviour is interpreted exclusively through the prism of affiliation. The doctor's defence thus turns into a precarious, risky, politically stygmatised gesture that exposes one of the key paradoxes of the contemporary discourse of political correctness: how people acting as a moral corrective to society in the name of justice and protection of minorities create new forms of violence within their strictly codified language. The play thus reveals the mechanisms by which the language intended to protect becomes, at the same time, a mechanism for punishing, disciplining and, paradoxically, excluding in new ways.

By exposing the opportunistic positions of those who act as spokespersons for minorities but actually act in accordance with their own political gain (i.e., the priest), Kušej also demonstrates with surgical precision how public utterances of those in power no longer depend on their personal convictions but on the expectations of the identity groups they represent. In this vein, *The Doctor* highlights that no discourse is neutral, regardless of its supposed grounding in morality, as it is always already embedded in power relations, often serving to preserve or redistribute the symbolic capital in public space. In this

way, the performance does not instruct the spectator to adopt a particular ideological position, but rather to question it; not the right to having an identity, but the way identity is used in political discourse.

Kušej's *The Doctor*, however, successfully highlights one more fact. By fulfilling the author's request for disparity between the physical constitution of the actors and the gender or racial identity of their characters, it demonstrates an important reflection on the landscape of Slovenian national theatres. While many European theatres are capable of following Icke's stage directions through a racially and gender-identity diverse cast, in the case of Slovenian institutional theatre, an obvious limitation comes to the fore: the SNT Drama ensemble is predominantly homogeneous, comprising white, physically conventional cis-normative actors. Therefore, the play must address this lack of diversity in a different, more conceptual way – by consciously breaking the link between the actors' physical constitution and the characters' identity. Kušej's cast thus, perhaps unintentionally but effectively, sheds light on how the theatre system in our country still reproduces a certain normative corporeality and how identity diversity often remains simulated rather than structurally embodied. Although the production functions as a warning of what happens when the criteria of minority identity representations overpower the criteria of competence, it also reveals a concrete structural problem that must be understood as a symptom of the broader institutional, cultural and political circumstances in which it was produced.

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5

Lara Ekar Grlj

How To Be

Hamlet. Slovenian National Theatre Opera and Ballet Ljubljana, première 20 February 2025, attended reprise on 27 February 2025.

Photo: Darja Štravs Tisu/SNT Opera and Ballet Ljubljana.

»Another frequently appearing character pair is Cornelia and Voltimande. Although these are male roles in the original play, the choreographer has assigned them to female dancers. While the reasoning behind this decision is not immediately clear – perhaps it stems from the search for feminist themes in Shakespeare's plays – it is carried out consistently and effectively till the end.«

The Slovenian National Theatre Opera and Ballet Ljubljana presented the third ballet performance of the season. The first performance was a contemporary dance-oriented adaptation of *The Little Prince*, aimed at a younger audience, which was followed by a staging of the classical ballet *Don Quixote*. For the final première of the season, the house chose to stage a new ballet interpretation of Shakespeare's cult tragedy *Hamlet*, previously produced in coproduction with the Ballet Ensemble of the Croatian National Theatre in Zagreb Ballet Ensemble.

Shakespeare's play is certainly one of the best-known and most frequently performed pieces in the world of theatre, as well as on film and in dance. The play was first presented in ballet form as early as 1788 in Italy by choreographer Francesco Clerico. The first (and hitherto only) Slovenian ballet was staged in 1975, choreographed by Henrik Neubauer. Fifty years later to the month, this production is joined by the neoclassically inspired *Hamlet*, choreographed and directed by **Leo Mujić**.

Leo Mujić's ballet is an ambitious attempt to reinterpret one of the most iconic drama pieces in history. Mujić set out to transpose this complex and multi-faceted tragedy from verbal expression into movement and bodily expression.

Throughout the story, the performance endeavours to capture the spirit of Elizabethan times, the essence of Hamlet's inner experience and his subconscious, and then to connect it all to the time in which we live. The medieval plot serves as a framework within which the choreographer seeks to express all the featured characters. Moreover, this frame, inspired by the story, does not present the spectator with a reconstruction of the tragedy, but rather a different, deeper insight into its inner narrative. This can be achieved through a performative practice such as dancing. The movements that are consistently connected allow for a distinct, multilayered artistic expression, which creates an experience that words cannot convey. The unravelling of the story follows the original narrative by adding several more developed "sideline" stories necessary to establish the full complexity of the play. In this respect, the ballet interpretation focuses more on presenting the characters' psychological states and their unconscious aspects than on developing the philosophical layers of Shakespeare's writing, where it would be more difficult to substitute the meaning of words with dance. In this, the choreographer pays more attention to particular characters.

We can notice an emphasis on female characters, who are given considerable room for development. Thus, at the very beginning, we must mention the character of Gertrude, who is something of a constant presence throughout the performance. **Tjaša Kmetec** aptly develops all the layers of this female character, portraying her strong will through her dancing and emotional maturity. All her inner states are well depicted through forceful gestures, controlled facial expressions and precise execution of steps. She is joined by **Filip Jurič**, who effectively establishes the character of Claudius during his rise as the new king and up to his absolute downfall. In this, both characters remain firmly grounded. Another well-established character is **Lukas Bareman**'s Fortinbras, who remains somewhat subdued for most of the performance; however, he concludes the action with a simple gesture of taking the throne in the end.

On the other hand, Mujić skilfully uses the power of the ballet body to emphasise emotional climaxes. Hamlet's madness, his sense of betrayal and quest for revenge are conveyed through technically inventive choreographic solutions that evoke powerful visual effects and a spiritual connection between the spectator and the character's inner struggles. The ballet not only offers physical images but also skillfully intertwines movement with the spiritual and intellectual world. In this, the character of Hamlet becomes well established, wandering between being left alone on stage and chorus scenes. In the latter, both the soloist and the chorus work well together. **Kenta Yamamoto** proves his mastery in presenting emotional states on stage, filling the solo parts with his presence, but also constantly striving to draw out Hamlet's character during the group parts and position him at centre stage. This is when the most interesting scenes happen, with the appearance of the ghost (**Bálin Rauscher**, also the dramaturg of the production). The strongly character-based role leaves its mark, the elaborate character with recognisable gestures immediately establishes himself for the spectator, leaving a mark of presence even when he is no longer actually on stage.

Kenta Yamamoto once again proves himself to be an outstanding dancer, not only in the surreal scenes but also in all the duets he shares with both the character of Gertrude and the character of Ophelia as portrayed by **Emilia Gallerani Tassinari**. This dancer executes every step with perfection, passing between different emotional states with authority, she manages to use her evenly measured facial expressions and acting to show all of her natural states from being in love to the delusional depths (which resembles and takes inspiration from the depiction of madness in the romantic ballet *Giselle*). Throughout the performance, some side-characters appear who connect the action. Thus, the characters of Rosencrantz (**Gabriela Mede**) and Guildenstern (**Lukas Zuschlag**) are established, acting and dancing the famous mouse-trap scene with a strong acting presence. Another frequently appearing character pair is Cornelia and Voltimande. Although these are male roles in the original play, the choreographer has assigned them to female dancers. While the reasoning behind this decision is not immediately clear – perhaps it stems from the search for feminist themes in Shakespeare's plays – it is carried out consistently and effectively till the end. **Nina Noč** and **Neža Rus** perform the roles with precision and skill.

The overall image of the production is completed by the visual design, an interplay of set design (**Stefano Katunar**), costume design (**Manuela Paladin Šabanović**) and lighting design (**Aleksander Čavlek**). The minimalist set design is supported by good lighting. At times, the movement of the scenic elements is a bit distracting, as they create an intrusive sound when they collide with the ground, which breaks through the fiction by highlighting the physical reality of set design elements. In counterpoint to the set design, the concept of the costume design, featuring opulent dresses, adds a new dimension to the dance. The choice of materials is just right to provide it with a sense of floating. The choreographer's style constantly plays with the desire to levitate, to glide (which he achieves by extending the movements and using the points of the slippers, which recreate the appearance of gliding to good effect). The choice of materials and colours further highlights these visuals, despite the dancers at times getting caught and entangled in their own dresses.

The music also plays an important role in this ballet, although at times, slight incongruities between the choreography and the musical passages can be noticed, especially in the more dramatic moments, which was probably also part of the choreographer's vision. And while the selection of music is interesting, it is not particularly inventive. This time, the orchestra (conducted by **Ayrton Desimpelaere**) is well aligned, and the choice of music supports the gravity of dramatic moments, allowing the ballet to seem even more intense.

The ballet *Hamlet*, choreographed by Mujić, is undoubtedly a great artistic achievement. He has succeeded in transposing the themes of revenge, love, betrayal and death from words into movements. And going beyond mere transference, he has created an image of our times. The show is a composition of images that emerge and vanish. The speed of their disappearance varies from scene to scene, but this is precisely what gives it a sense of contemporaneity, subjected to flashes of momentary images, following the rhythm of short sequences that reach the human being. Often, however, it happens that these images vanish as quickly as they appear. This, however, is not the case with this ballet. Even when the vivacity of the images is gone, the feelings linger on.

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Ana Lorger

We Are All Part of This Nightmare

Oliver Frljić: *Incubator*. Mladinsko Theatre, première 16 May 2025, reprise 19 May 2025.

Photo: Matej Povše/Mladinsko Theatre.

»While this blend of images and feelings might resemble the structure of a nightmare, it feels all too real. We do not wake up from it but into it: when the performance is over, we certainly do not step out of the theatre as the same people who entered it.«

To describe the horrific state of the contemporary world, where some human lives appear to be worthless while capital and the war industry related to it are paramount, where a handful of individuals decide about the life and death of thousands and millions, and where, despite everyday news reports and images from war-stricken zones, people's deaths are perceived merely as statistics, we have to invent new ways for articulating these horrors so that the fact of their existence can even touch us. It is art, in relation to the media's information oversaturation, that has the power to address people differently. As the director of the *Incubator* himself said, theatre has to invent new forms of expression, to break down classical dramaturgy and linear narrative structures, in order to break through the thick shell of modern-day spectators. That is precisely what *Incubator*, directed by **Oliver Frljić**, manages to achieve.

As characteristic of Frljić's performances, *Incubator* confronts us with a multitude of brutal, direct and bloody images that unfold before our very eyes, brimming with external political references and juxtaposed next to each other not in a cause-and-effect sequence or linear narrative. Rather, they function as a condensed and direct outburst into which we are thrown without any gradual introduction. This eruption stems from the current geopolitical situation in which EU Member States (and the United States) still tolerate the genocide perpetrated by Israel against the Palestinian people; indeed, they even support it. The central motif of the show features premature babies in the incubators of the Al-Shifa Hospital, which

Israel has rendered inoperable by cutting off its power supply, thus endangering or interrupting the lives of premature infants. This motif and the connective tissue of the scenes at the same time demonstrate that the performance is not "merely" about war but about the structural and technological violence against civilians, even newborn babies who depend on a controlled and safe environment to survive.

Scenes of Israeli Defense Forces soldiers pointing their guns at babies in incubators and the penetration of the incubators' openings and precisely choreographed sequences of repeated death, violence and nudity – which take on the quality of performance art – are interwoven with documentary elements, for example, the raw facts about the situation at Al-Shifa Hospital, the number of organ transplants from deceased Palestinians to save Israeli lives, the number of exchanged hostages, etc., etc. However, beyond the documentary elements and moving, shifting images, the performance time and again evades mere representation by reminding us of its theatricality, the fact that we are, after all, contemplating the actors of the Mladinsko Theatre. By addressing the position of enunciation of the performance's creators, it turns towards the audience, undermining the safety of our positioning in the auditorium seats.

For the performance, Oliver Frljić effectively utilises the content that the actors have brought to the stage. By highlighting **Draga Potočnjak**'s 10-day hunger strike last year, the actors address the privileged position of white Europeans and the perennial counter-argument that supporting Palestine is not about disagreeing with Israeli and American militarism and genocide but about supporting Hamas – that is, terrorism – and anti-Semitism, which, of course, seems absurd when juxtaposed with all the other scenes and facts they bring. The comic scenes represent another effect that provokes the audience's introspection. For example, the jokes about Palestine and Israel, when **Lina Akif**'s laughter is extended into unbearable cackling followed by numbness, or the cooking show scene, in which **Vito Weis** and **Klemen Kovačič** are roasting meat – this time veal – with indifferent masculine energy and the characteristic Eurocentric view of "Eastern culture", which introduces a kind of self-referentiality, a scene from one of Frljić's earlier performances *Our Violence and Your Violence*, where a Muslim was force-fed pork meat.

Some of the scenes seem very poetic, aesthetically coordinated in movement or even musically compelling. The cast is coordinated and able to move between different expressive registers, thereby questioning the power of visual manipulation and artistic impact, as well as the disparity between form and content. The performance constantly plays with this relationship (the structure of the joke seems funny, while its content is desperate; the choreography of a scene is beautiful, while that which it depicts is brutal ...), and this challenges the spectator to take up a critical stance towards the the power of aesthetics and how quickly it can be misused for the sake of passivisation, political agitation or distraction. *Incubator* demands that the spectator reflect on their role, provoking discomfort.

The performance combines almost all the elements that constitute contemporary political theatre: a raw, direct dramaturgy that oscillates evenly between representation, self-referentiality, and the immediacy of performance art and documentary presentation, thus targeting the audience from different angles and demanding focused attention. The sequence of scenes evokes a whole range of feelings, from (physical) nausea due to the presence of blood, flesh and violence, to shame at the jokes told on stage, from anger at our own impotence when exposed to the numbers and facts, to feelings of guilt at the thought that together we do have the power but nevertheless do nothing about it. While this blend of images and feelings might resemble the structure of a nightmare, it feels all too real. We do not wake up from it but into it: when the performance is over, we certainly do not step out of the theatre as the same people who entered it.

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7

Metod Zupan

A Recording of What the Body Refuses to Do

Petja Golec Horvat: *my own private**. Flota, première 27 March 2025, Dance Theatre Ljubljana.

Photo: Toni Soprano Meneglejte/Flota.

»Thus, the film's motif of searching for home finds its derivation in the production of *my private own** in *being at home on stage* through the moments of apparent privacy, when Golec Horvat averts her gaze away from the audience and appears to be soft and *non-performative* in her movement.«

Strictly speaking, a debut is never a proper debut. Despite being her first feature-length solo* performance, **Petja Golec Horvat** is anything but unknown to the attentive contemporary dance audience, as demonstrated by her successful performances at the *Opus1* competitions in 2021 and 2022, where she left a distinctive mark with her innovative and surprisingly mature approach to the assigned topics, standing out from the overwhelming number of her female contemporaries. The same could be said of her role in *Everything is Alright* (Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, 2021), where she particularly appealed to the young audience with a similar experience in her portrayal of a high school outcast. Last but not least, in 2023, her incisiveness was rewarded with the Ksenia Hribar Award for promising artists in the field of contemporary dance. In their justification, the jury wrote, among other things, that the artist "is asking the right questions and is not afraid of radical answers". The expectations for her artistic debut were thus quite high. And in light of all of the above, it seems almost self-evident that her performance *my own private** would turn out to be exceptionally idiosyncratic.

Both the visual and sound imaginary of the performance (conceived and performed by Golec Horvat) and the title allude to the film *My Own Private Idaho* (Gus Van Sant, 1991). Seeing the film, however, is not a key prerequisite for viewing the production, but rather a *raison d'être*. The story of the film and its visual elements provide parallels for unpacking the performance's conceptual and aesthetic motifs. For example, the motif of a psychologically unstable outcast (portrayed in

the film by River Phoenix), who descends into episodes of psychosis, slumber and dreaming due to his existential circumstances, also appears in the performance. The picture that we see from his point of view is thus always somewhere in between reality and fantasy, while the line between the two is blurred. The sequence of the scenes in the performance follows this logic, and this interpretation is further encouraged by the set design of the mattress and the blurry lighting design (dialogue on visual image, lighting and video by **Toni Soprano Meneglejte**; dialogue on visual image (assistant) by **Simona Bobnar Radenković**; technical realisation by **Janko Oven**).

Another parallel between the film and the performance can be found in the protagonist's search for home, which resonates as psychologically logical and necessary, rather than mere romantic escapism. This aspect is where the set design comes to the fore – the stage of the Dance Theatre Ljubljana is transformed into a space that oscillates between the private and the staged. The backdrop features a lace curtain that also serves as a projection screen. Another element is a table with a laptop computer, which implies a bedroom. It also serves as technical equipment, as Golec Horvat uses the laptop to delineate different scenes and to play music. The very title of the production, which omits *Idaho* and replaces it with *, already sets up an intriguing reflection about what is *private*, which is vernacular for all that is not part of the theatrical concept, in which everything is perceived as a sign. *Private* clothes, behaviour and presence are thus understood as exclaves of a performer's civilian persona, something they are supposed to *leave at home* before stepping on the stage. In this, we are perhaps reminded of Jack Halberstam's definition of *nonperformance*, which *signifies as heavily as performance and reveals the ways in which performativity itself is as much a record of what a body will not do as what it might do* (*Female Masculinity*, 1998). Thus, the film's motif of searching for home finds its derivation in the production of *my private own** in *being at home on stage* through the moments of apparent privacy, when Golec Horvat averts her gaze away from the audience and appears to be soft and *non-performative* in her movement (dialogue on movement by **Ana Dubljević**; dialogue on dramaturgy and context by **Maša Radi Buh**; dialogue on dramaturgy and realisation by (assistant) **Domen Šubelj**).

This brings us to perhaps the greatest strength of the production, its freshness and topicality in a time of questioning the conventions of theatre in relation to the fictional and the real, which could only be explored in this way by someone questioning the domesticity of theatre. Although social outcasts often apply the metaphor of theatre to the private (role-playing in civility), Golec Horvat does the exact opposite, bringing the civilian onto the stage, which is considered a haven for fiction. Through questioning its status in literature, however, fiction as the unreal in its transformed forms has also become interesting in theatre. Following *documentary fiction* in Tomi Janežić's *Dodecalogy*, and, for example, Eva Mahkovic's autobiographical fiction in SNT Maribor, etc., Golec Horvat came to the derivation of *private fiction*. This label goes hand in hand with the adage *dreams are my reality*, which Golec Horvat adopts by including the song by Richard Sanderson. Dreams are reality – and theatre is the place where they *become* reality, even if remaining in the safe haven of fiction.

While dancing in socks on the dance floor, vaping, lip-sincing to pop hits and jumping on the mattress perfectly establish the in-between space between dreams and reality, domestic and stage, private and theatre, as they strike a balance between sufficiently interesting movement material for dance derivations of the mundane, the inclusion of the co-performer **Muhamed Kulauzović** functions a bit too much on the nose. In the guise of a cowboy, the latter appears as a kind of *imaginary friend* or dream figure; however, except for one of the most attractive scenes of riding a mattress, he spends most of the time just silently observing Golec Horvat, thus throwing the mise-en-scène off balance. Nevertheless, *my own private** represents a conceptually, contextually, technically and performatively highly sophisticated work of art, which only assembles in the audience's minds through the dreamlike associations that also constitute the dramaturgical methodology of the performance.

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8

Jaka Bombač

The Anti-heroine in the Abyss of Contexts

Phaedra (Livia Pandur, Tibor Hrs Pandur, Slovene National Theatre Drama Maribor, 26 April 2025).

Photo: Peter Giodani/Slovene National Theatre Maribor.

»The opening scene seems full of potential, not least due to the visual juxtaposition of the somnambulistic Phaedra and the driven and pragmatic Enone [...], but also due to the ambient chiaroscuro lighting and suspenseful soundtrack of violin music intertwined with the sounds of nocturnal birds of prey.«

We are living in an age of anti-heroines (and anti-heroes), and no doubt Phaedra is one of the first modern anti-heroines. Whereas in antiquity people saw her as a victim of fate, in **Racine**'s modern version (similarly as in Seneca's) she is depicted as free, only to fall prey to the webs of fate by her own action, by her own free will, constantly reminding us that she is conscious of her fate as well as of *the way we see her*, as if she were consciously staging for us the assumption of control over her fate, while at the same time realising the futility of such an act. Phaedra's character is interesting precisely because of this duality: she is both victim and aggressor simultaneously. This creates the potential for identification, as well as a socially critical reading. While the adaptation by director **Livia Pandur** and dramaturg **Tibor Hrs Pandur** manages to successfully capture the psychological depths of Fedra's character (through the rhythmically effective unfolding of her relationships to other characters), the fragmented dramaturgy and deconstructionist approach at times hinder the development and deepening of the affect, which is otherwise well highlighted by other means, notably physical action, lighting design and music.

Upon arriving at the auditorium, we can see all the characters already on stage, positioned in a kind of moving picture. Phaedra (**Nataša Matjašec Rošker**) stands out among them as she is poised on a raised platform a few metres above the ground at the back of the stage. She is illuminated by an intense front light, appearing almost like a backdrop cardboard cutout: she moves with barely perceptible movements, wearing an ever-so-slight smile on her face, which gradually turns

into an expression of horror. At the front of the stage before her, stands Enone (**Minca Lorenci**), peeling a dozen oranges, constantly in motion (the only one out of the five). Her movements, however, are repetitive and mechanical. The opening scene seems full of potential, not the least due to the visual juxtaposition of the somnambulistic Phaedra and the driven and pragmatic Enone (we can see the orange juice trickling across the stage floor, a somewhat startling detail indicative of Enone's activity, in contrast to Phaedra's horrific, yet ethereal stillness), but also due to the ambient chiaroscuro lighting and suspenseful soundtrack of violin music intertwined with the sounds of nocturnal birds of prey (lighting design by **Vesna Kolarec**, music by **Branko Rožman**).

As the performance unfolds, it maintains the continuity of the stage signs, strictly following the five-act structure and the Alexandrine verse of Racine's play. The opening image establishes the atmosphere that initiates and dictates the pace of the entire play as well as the interpretation of the verses. Given the plethora of contemporary social contexts in which one might read Racine's modernised Phaedra (the sheer popularity of anti-heroines in contemporary films and series, as well as the trope of victimhood and "acting" the victim in contemporary pop-psychology discourse), one would expect the performance to "cut to the gut". But while it at times succeeds to reach this impact by adopting a highly aestheticised style and physical approach to acting (which perhaps finds its strongest expression in the character of Hippolytus, portrayed by **Petja Labović**), the constant asides, alienation effects, breaking of the fourth-wall and exposition scenes explaining the various possible contexts of interpretation (which serve to update and establish the relationship between modern and ancient Greek society, but also introduce an element of self-reflection) prevent it from deepening Phaedra's enigmatic and "visceral" inner conflict.

The opening scene, which functions like the opening credits in a film, also informs the spectators (in the supertitles projected on a screen above the stage) about the social status of women in ancient Greek society, as well as how men often became pederasts due to their misogyny and Plato's idealisation of male homosexual love (which the spectators are generally most likely already aware of at least from this season's first première of the Drama of the SNT Maribor, *Women in Power*, directed by Juš Zidar), which also adopted a critical stance towards gender relations as well as containing many explanations about the social life and specific social status of women in Ancient Greece). Later in the performance, however, Phaedra steps out several times from the events of her unfolding fate, reminding us that we cannot truly understand her, as today's society is no longer the same as in her time, given the changes in the position of women. In these instances, the contextualisation is introduced in an appropriately subtle manner, as it does not come off as didactic and can also be read as a sign of Phaedra's obsessive self-reflexivity.

The corporeality in the performance, albeit undoubtedly obvious from the style of the play (for example, in the contrast between Phaedra's physical presence, often reduced to mere backdrop, and the constantly active Enone, who always follows closely at Phaedra's heels; or the decision to have the characters who are not actively involved in a scene stand still in the background instead of going offstage) is often also reduced to a *sign*. The function of the sign of corporeality – perhaps in the sense of a kind of collective unconscious – is portrayed by nudity, skin costumes, plumage (costume designer **Leo Kulaš**), stuffed pheasants (suspended on wires hanging from the ceiling in the central part of the stage; set designer **Marko Japelj**), and inserted choreographed scenes, which serve as the exposition for particular affects (choreographer **Tanja Zgonc**). **Blaž Dolenc** in the role of Teramen, Hippolytus' friend and confidant, embodies a kind of human-animal chimaera with subtle physical and verbal expressiveness and convulsive movements, prophetically foreshadowing the tragedy of Hippolytus' and Phaedra's deaths in the final act. However, the sudden change in the style of movement and physical presence also makes the scene feel somewhat contrived.

If the story was truly archetypal and emblematic for our times, then the audience should not need so much literary and historical context to understand and identify with it. While some of the cuts and asides function well to establish the rhythm and dynamics (the expressionist montage of scenes, which exposes the classicist fixation on the unity of time, action and space), others feel contrived (some choreographed scenes) or lack proper motivation (for example, the insertion of a 1980s pop-rock song).

The elaboration of the various contexts of reading Phaedra puts the spectators in the role of her interpreters, of her fate, to which she must defend herself; we thus become the basis for her identification and (self-)objectification. Thus, a psychoanalytically intoned index is established relating Phaedra's psychological division to ourselves, and apparently also to a broader impasse in human nature, which the performance helps us to discern in the interplay of antiquity (**Seneca**, **Euripides**), classicism (**Racine**) and modern context (the performance uses quotations from a study in comparative

literature). The play addresses many of the general intuitions and feelings of contemporaneity, establishing its themes in a loose and layered manner to allow space for our own engagement and reflection.

Although the deconstructive approach feels appropriate, the constant layering of potential approaches to reading Phaedra sometimes inhibits deeper physical and verbal expressivity through which the emotional nuances and subconscious dynamics between the various characters are revealed to us. Thus, by the fourth and fifth acts – in which Enone, Hippolytus and Phaedra tragically die – the development of the relationships between the characters, as well as the dynamics of acting, already start to recede and diminish. The foreboding tone of the family tragedy is reestablished with the arrival of Theseus, Hippolytus' father and Phaedra's husband, portrayed with subtle emotional precision and a measure of grotesqueness by (guest actor) **Branko Šturbej**. Questioning the relationship between realism and expressionism, reason and corporeality, contextualisation and aestheticisation mostly makes sense in the context of the literary tradition of classicism, from which Racine's drama emerges. However, this also relates to some of the sociocritical issues of our time. Watching the play, however, we find ourselves caught in a kind of paradox: on the one hand, we are looking at Phaedra in her duality and division, while on the other, we are subjected to redoubling and called upon to constantly reflect on our own understanding of Phaedra and, through this, on the relativity of self-representation. While this approach opens up many different contexts, the moral problematisation of Phaedra's relationship to fate, while addressed, remains unarticulated.

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