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Genre Intersections and Transmediality in Mark Požlep's Project Stranger than Paradise

Abstract

The paper adopts a transmedial and multidisciplinary perspective to present and analyze the project Stranger than Paradise by Slovenian artist Mark Požlep, which ran from 2014 to 2016, covering the initial concept, its execution, and the subsequent presentations in various media: exhibitions and performances. The documentary material presented at the exhibition as a documentation of the original event is compared with the later performance of the same name with different collaborators working on the production. The paper focuses on the issue of hybrid genres in contemporary performance practices and examines how the performance of this play contributes to the modes and strategies of documentary theater, i.e., performance, while demonstrating that it can be placed in the context of post-documentary theater as it represents the so-called transition from directorial to authorial work.

Keywords: musical performance, documentary performance, hybridization of genres, memory, ex-Yugoslavia

1. Introduction

Interdisciplinary or transmedial authorial work, play/performance Stranger than Paradise (Bolj čudno od raja) by Slovenian multimedia artist Mark Požlep, premiered in a production by Gledališča Glej in Ljubljana on September 27, 2016,[1] as a multi-layered, problematic, and for several reasons interpretatively interesting work. This paper will focus on the question of how this play, originally a musical performance, articulates the issue of genres in contemporary performing

arts and questions the boundaries of form, which is particularly important because in the author's announcement and media releases, as well as in the critical reception, the piece was not clearly terminologically determined and was described in quite different ways. Topic-wise, the work can be brought into a contextual connection with the relatively recent "trend" of reviving the theme of Yugoslav heritage in the states that emerged after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, both in the institutional repertoire and on the independent theater scene, which is particularly prominent in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (somewhat less in Croatia and Slovenia), especially in the period after 2010, given that many of these plays/projects, like Požlep's, are also based on documentary material. As a potential reason or a possible cause for the dominance of the mentioned topic, i.e., the evocation of the Yugoslav heritage on the contemporary performance scene in the former Yugoslavian countries, theater expert Ivan Medenica notes the fact that two decades have passed since the collapse of the former state, but also that there are deeper structural reasons, such as the redefinition of cultural identities (452).[2]

2. From the Concept of a 'Musical Tour' to Theater Performance

Stranger than Paradise arises as a medial transformation, a new variant of recording an original undertaking or action, which could generically be labelled as a crossing (interweaving) of a documentary performance travelogue and a musical concert, and which, genealogically speaking, arises in line with conceptual art, i.e., strategies of processuality. According to Šuvaković's definition, it can be distinguished as: "1. an action resulting in a work of art; 2. presentation of the action as a work of art" (34), the latter being more characteristic of happenings, actionism, body art and performance. In this context, it is interesting to note that Požlep's performance combines both variants of the definition. Originally, the project was an unusual 'musical tour,' that is, an artistic action or process that Požlep, together with pianist Igor Feketija, organized in 2014, and that included a musical performance of popular songs, mainly Yugoslav hits, be they originals or covers, from the 1950s and 1960s in the retirement homes across the former Yugoslavian countries; more precisely, seven songs were selected and rehearsed for the occasion: "Žute

dunje," "Oj sončece, sončece," "Bila je tako lijepa," "Dušo moja," "Djevojko mala," "Potraži me u predgrađu" and "Stranci u noći,"[3] mostly songs about love and nostalgia.

It should also be pointed out that Požlep presented himself to the public primarily as a visual/multimedia artist in his previous work, therefore this is also his first public, conceptually conceived, vocal-musical performance. The aforementioned "tour" was initially conceived as a seven-day event, i.e., seven concerts in different gerontological centers (retirement homes) in all seven countries that emerged after the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia; however, the performance was staged in six countries with the exception of Kosovo[4] where they refused such a "free-spirited" concert. The trip and the concert that featured seven selected songs took place in the following order: Dom starejšiš občanov/Retirement Home Tezno (Maribor, Slovenia), Dom za starije i nemoćne osobe/Home for the Elderly and Infirm Persons Volosko (Opatija, Croatia), Dom starih/Home for the Elderly Grabovac (Risan, Montenegro), Centar za zdravo starenje/Center for Healthy Ageing (Sarejevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina), Gerontološki centar/Gerontology Center Jagodina (Serbia) and Dom za stari lica/Old Age Home (Skopje, Northern Macedonia). According to the author's statement, he was interested in exploring "how the generation that put Yugoslavia on its feet and survived/experienced its disintegration lives today" (my trans.; Požlep, "Vizualni"), and the selection of a musical performance/concert was a kind of "entrance" to that world, conceived as a kind of exchange: "The project does not rely on elements of nostalgia and does not look for lost time, the element of singing and concentration is used as an entrance to the world of reality, where we cannot enter otherwise" (my trans.; Požlep, Čudnije 1). In this sense, the author's intention can be interpreted in such a way that by singing these popular songs, he wanted for the current residents of the retirement home to return to the days of their youth. At the same time, the selected songs marked the author's growing up as well. In a subsequent, self-referential, and explanatory statement, Požlep points out the following:

The songs that I have selected accompanied me throughout my childhood and youth. From a long list I chose seven songs from the right era, i.e., the 1950s and 1960s, which I found the most memorable. I was born in 1981 and I spent the first ten years of my life living in Yugoslavia. I was in the penultimate generation of Tito's pioneers. With the exception of some choir performances in the elementary and high school, I had never sung in front of an audience. I printed out the texts

and rehearsed for a month in the boathouse in Ghent, Belgium, where I currently live. I recorded my singing using a photo camera and sent the recordings to Igor. With each recording that I sent, I anxiously awaited his response. (my trans.; Čudnije 5)

On the other hand, in the artistic sense, this project also opposes the idea that art cannot change anything, whereby the conventional assumptions of creating and performing a theatrical work are reversed, because the original event represents a kind of impact on reality, or it is even literally "directing reality." As an artistic experiment of "intervention in reality," the Stranger than Paradise project was documented and then presented first as a gallery exhibition, and then, based on the same documented material in an attempt to recreate the original event or action, a new concept followed, i.e., the execution of a complete show/performance. It should immediately be pointed out that this "transfer" of documentary material from an exhibition to the performance is not only a transposition of the material collected and presented at the exhibition into another medium governed by its own rules, but it rather represents or demands a completely new way of thinking, which likes to introduce additional elements into the context and material reality itself motives. According to Požlep, it is the stage performance that provides him with new, or better, conditions for the implementation of the "initial idea of shared experience" ("Vizualni"), that is, the exchange that took place in the retirement homes. In this sense, the creation of the play starts from the collected video material: the audience in the retirement home recorded at the concert, listening, or singing, and then shown on screen as an interactive part of the exhibition. In this way, in a theatrical performance, a new or different audience can also get the same or similar experience. However, the central motif runs identically as in the exhibition: the staging of memory, that is, the presentation of the mechanisms of the logic of memory.

Parts of the undertaken journey were also linguistically mediated at the subsequent exhibition in the form of a separate catalogue that included some sort of diary entries, photographs, cartography, etc., while in the theatrical performance Požlep presents the above through his own spoken performance, in the casual tone of an informal concert gathering. In the context of the theatrical performance, the performers on stage are once again the pianist and the singer, Požlep, who, as a short introduction to the performance of each song, or as a guide through the concert, anecdotally recounts his memories of the tour, or of the more relevant parts that were written down

as a “travel report,” while the screen simultaneously shows video clips of the audience recorded in the retirement homes, mostly without sound, while watching the performance of songs. The self-referential statements, together with the live performance of songs on stage, thus dictate the structure, or determine the dramaturgy of this theatrical performance, while at the exhibition, the songs or the musical performance are presented in the form of an installation, i.e., a vinyl disc in a record player, illustrating the spirit of the time.

3. Questioning the Boundaries or the Question of Genre or Format

As already pointed out at the beginning, the descriptions of the play in official announcements and criticism vary, both descriptively and in terms of genre. Some have thus called it a documentary performance (performance art) or “something between a concert, a travelogue and a gathering (i.e., a gathering of friends)” (Potočan; Požlep, “Vizualni”), while Požlep himself sometimes defines it as “some kind of lecture performance” or “performance lecture.” However, although Požlep and Feketija’s performance has certain formal characteristics that are sometimes attributed to performance lecture – in the narrower sense, where a performance lecture is defined as a specific genre, according to the “in-depth” rhetorical criteria established by Jasna Žmak by relying primarily on the theoretical experiences of rhetorical genre studies – it does not belong to that genre. Namely, following the principles of rhetorical genre studies, which put the social-rhetorical aspects of genre operation in the foreground, as opposed to the aesthetic-formal ones, Žmak points out the impossibility of reducing genres to mere formal features and opposes such traditional definitions of genres, which, indeed, turned out to be a reductive approach because it thus “ignores the complexity of the mode of its activity and in this sense limits not only research perspectives, but also user perspectives” (my trans.; 21). According to her definition of the performance lecture genre and the identification of the basic strategies of its functioning as the basic or key motive for classifying a work as a performance lecture, the problematization of knowledge production through elements of the subversion of scientific-research and exhibition modes and the affirmation of artistic ones is shown: “Namely, performance lecture appropriates from the educational field the academic format of the lecture and places it in the artistic one, thus turning the relationship

between the performer and her audience, conditionally speaking, into a relationship between the lecturer and his audience" (Žmak 191).

In simpler terms, Požlep's theatrical performance takes on, or represents, therefore, a more tentative presentational format of a speech about the journey undertaken (along with the display of video material) than a truly lecturing character, which is the basis of the autonomy of performance lecture as a genre.[5] In addition, it can be noted that the central medium of the performance is not the speech recounting the events of the trip, which takes the format of a travel reportage, but the musical performance of selected songs. Part of the audience might perceive the speaking parts as the most significant in the mediation of the narrative, and therefore the explanation and the meaning of the event could become a crucial element for the interpretation of the entire set of events.

On the other hand, Požlep's performance of the play is, according to the critic Jernej Potočan, a specific hybrid work, that is, as he states: "a hybrid between a concert evening, an anecdotal narration and a film projection" (Potočan). At the same time, he obviously places emphasis on the concrete modes of performance, the recent performances as they are performed in the theater framework, and not on the phenomenology of the entire event as the basic foundation of this piece, if we understand it both in its procedural form and in terms of the original event – the performance as a whole as interpreted by Schechner: "as a whole constellation of events, many of which remain unnoticed" (71).

From the previous considerations, I hope it is clear enough that this theatrical performance, with the heterogeneity of differently produced types of materials, i.e., performance modes, which are tentatively expressed and have no strict hierarchical division, corresponds above all to the context and practices of Lehmann's postdramatic theater, and I also find it important to put this piece in the context of a more recent tradition of documentary theater because, as will soon become clear, it represents the so-called transition from directorial to conscious authorial work.

4. Stranger than Paradise as a Documentary Performance

In the past fifteen years, researchers of documentary theater have noticed a growing interest of the theater/performance scene in documentary forms or showing everyday life in contemporary urban contexts. Unlike the previous documentary wave that dominated the 1960s, the focus of the documentary approach to theater has now shifted to performers, choreographers, and the so-called everyday experts (such as perhaps the most famous group Rimini Protokoll). What makes this new wave different from the previous one is, first of all, that authors, performers, or groups no longer base their performance exclusively on a particular dramatic template or pre-existing text, but on immediate personal or historical experiences:

> *The performance does not have to take place in the privileged space of the theater, but really becomes a stage and a 'space of dramatic research;' lived reality is offered as the starting point and as material for performance, and performances are presented as non-fictional forms of describing reality or reality appears as an idea, representation, display. (my trans.; Car 277-78)*

However, what can be additionally highlighted in this context of Požlep's performative questioning of reality[6] is that, as Boris Nikitin points out, "the performer's body itself acquires a documentary dimension" (that is, the body, name, and biography are mutually authenticated) (my trans.; qtd. in. Car 277). Furthermore, in this very performance, a certain doubling of roles occurs: the performer and author Požlep, together with the pianist, is at the same time a witness of an already performed performance, but also a new performer or, conditionally speaking, an "actor" in the currently fictional, testimonial framework of this new, partly "repeated performance" that functions, that is, takes elements from the original concert in the retirement homes, in a way that is similar to the methods of the "theater of witnessing." In this sense, the peak of the physicality of the performance, i.e., the only key element of the performance of the body (besides the singing itself) in the play, is the moment when Požlep unrolls a rather oversized geographical map of the SFR Yugoslavia, that is, he tries to unroll it and demonstrate it to the audience, which is also the only scenography prop. In this sense, this play/performance can be best understood if it is placed within the framework or context of the contemporary post-documentary theater, i.e., as a specific realization of the so-called theater of testimony.

Although attempts at a clearer demarcation or classification of different documentary forms in the theater are still the subject of various debates, they indicate not only the difficulties of genre determination but also the variability and fluidity, i.e., the cross-genre interpenetration of different forms of theatrical performance practices and styles that recycle reality. According to, for example, Carol Martin's classification, typical forms of documentary theater can be divided into these specific types: documentary drama, verbatim theater, theater of testimony and court proceedings, autobiographical and non-fictional theater, and re-enactments of historical battles (4). The theater of testimony thus stands out as a special form of post-documentary theater that has been developing since the 1970s. Given the status of a document – a source understood in the ontological sense as a form of already mediated reality, that is, relativized – testimonies are starting to be seen as a kind of guarantor of a credible perspective because they do not offer an objective interpretation, but a certain lived or firsthand experienced perspective, derived directly from personal experience (Car 289).

The key to the success of the documentary method, in general, is to build trust in the veracity and reality of the used material, and Požlep insists on this aspect when performing the play as well, ultimately by interactively engaging the audience in the performance itself. It is immediately clear to the spectator that this is a real and witnessed event, where the author's self-referential statements are presented from the position of a witness, that is, based on his subjective experience and observations. Although the travel notes or diary reports themselves also have the status of an objective fact, recorded at first in written form and then partly retold in the play, they represent a credible, subjectivized choice in terms of the narrative selection of relevant elements (dramaturgically, Jure Novak adapted Požlep's diary notes for the play). There is also another distinguishing feature compared to the material presented at the exhibition – these travel reports are presented in a much more condensed, reduced form as dictated by the live performance and due to the dramaturgical structure in which they only serve as a kind of accompanying support, that is, an introduction to the musical performance. Admittedly, without any overly emotional identification, Požlep really conveys the elements of the events as they unfolded, i.e., as he remembers them. The discourse is anecdotal and factual, the sentences simple, and there are no excessive poeticizations or interpretations. In the sense of content and theme, it mostly recounts

the meetings with the retirement home directors and their comments, briefly presenting some reactions of the audience itself: we find out, for example, that in Opatija, two couples even started dancing to the song "Devojko mala," and the audience of the same retirement home was the only one that asked for an encore, but since they had only rehearsed the above seven songs, they performed the song "Devojko mala" again: "Two couples even danced during the song Devojko mala. The employee also danced with one of the residents. They demanded an encore. Our programme only consisted of those seven songs, so we did the Devojko mala song again" (Požlep, Čudnije 10)![7] A prominent new element introduced into the performance itself was the projection of alternating scenes of the filmed audience on the screen, namely, a silent video showing the audience from the retirement homes that accompanies the musical performance, occasionally switching to the "live camera" recording the current audience that is watching the performance, and so the audience also see themselves on the screen with a slight delay. This so-called audience projection mapping technique is commonly used at large open-air music festivals. With such a single shot of the audience, the audience becomes self-absorbed in the present moment, and the entire performance ends at the same time.

With such a polyphonic approach, in which no special thesis is emphasized, this music-documentary performance, especially on the thematic level, presents itself as a kind of "open work," thus leaving the experience and interpretation of what is seen and heard to each spectator individually. In this sense, the performance thematically tackles or brings out the issues of aging, collective and individual destinies, the past and cultural memory, and the issue of broken communities in a way that avoids a more direct engagement with nostalgia, utopian projection, or the present reckoning with the past of the former state. In interviews, as well as in the introductory part of the exhibition catalogue, Požlep renounces the possible interpretation of his endeavor as "Yugoslov-nostalgia":

> *The audience was selected because of their age connection with the music and the socialistic system-Yugoslavia. The aim of the project was to show/enter/confront with the cycle of men and the state, which once accounted for brotherhood and unity, now partitioned into seven different republics marked by war. This is a generation that has seen the rise and integration of many nations into one state and also survived its disintegration … Stranger than Paradise is not a story*

about Yugoslavia. It is a story about mankind. About the human and his eternal desire for change, the incredible capabilities of building and destruction, love and hatred, about birth, life, and death. (Čudnije 1)

However, it cannot be claimed that the author's renunciation of the politics behind the subject matter necessarily means that the play is entirely devoid of politics, especially if we understand it in the way that Lehmann writes about politics in postdramatic theater. According to his interpretation, the political is no longer exclusively tied to the theme or content of the play but it is reflected or moved into the framework of experimentation with the ways (even the ultimate limits) of representation and politics of perception (cf. Lehmann 329-30). In other words, more significant than the thematic content itself are the methods and protocols of the performance, which in this case highlight the novum of the visual artist's musical performance, as well as the procedures for recording the audience while watching the performance and the transfer of energy in general; but most importantly, both literally and symbolically, this is really about crossing borders and stepping out of familiar terrain, in the individual author's sense, but also through the symbolic erasure of the borders of the formerly unified country that today exist through different political entities.

The policies of perception and remembrance are strikingly evident in Požlep's project as we witness its progression from the exhibition to the actual multilayered performance which encompasses different affects (cultural, political, personal, and artistic), which mark the values of the documentary material that becomes universal and commonly understandable by underlining the notion of the inevitability of ageing – despite the political, social, and cultural ruptures. Well-envisioned genre intersections and transmediality with a purpose verified Požlep's intention by presenting his project as one with distinctiveness and importance within the realm of documentary theater.

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[1] The play was performed by Mark Požlep and pianist Igor Feketija, while other collaborators in the production were as follows: dramaturgy and videography (Jure Novak), scenography and visual image (Meta Grgurevič), light and technique (Grega Mohorčič), costume design (Dajana Ljubičić).

[2] Medenica singles out the following plays as particularly important in this context, all released in 2010/2011: Kukavičluk (National Theater Subotica, directed by Oliver Frljić); Born in Yu (Yugoslav Drama Theater, directed by Dino Mustafić); Hypermnesia (co-produced by Heartefact Fund and Bitef Theater, directed by Selma Spahić). In Croatia, a play based on Slavenka Drakulić's collection of essays How We Survived Communism & Even Laughed was also staged in 2014 (Zagreb Youth Theater, also directed by Sarajevo director Dino Mustafić), but it was not entirely based on documentary material.

[3] Titles in English, respectively in literal translation: Yellow Quinces; Oh, My Sun, My Shining Sun; She Was So Beautiful; My Dear; Little Girl; Look for Me in the Suburbs; Strangers in the Night.

[4] In an interview, he explained it as follows: "from Kosovo, all nine respondents told us that they do not want to have anything to do with anything related to the former Yugoslavia. So we canceled the performance in Kosovo, but that didn't even bother me: I could easily understand why they didn't care, on the other hand, the purpose of the project was to understand a certain socio-political picture, so it was also a somehow adequate response" (my trans.; Požlep, "Vizualni").

[5] See Žmak 72-73.

[6] According to certain claims, particularly the director Oliver Frljić's discussion regarding the domestic theater context, the theatrical frame itself takes away the documentary aspect, i.e., everything presented on the stage is fiction, and it is precisely this truth/fiction relationship that he leaves open on the stage.

[7] This entry is a transcript taken from the catalog for the accompanying exhibition, which is written in Slovenian, but in the performance of the play in Croatia (as part of the theater review NOSI SE organized by Teatro Verrdi, 29 August 2017) Požlep recited the text in his own version of

the Croatian language because of the topic and to build intimacy and better connection with the audience.

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