

Interview with

SAŠA ASENTIĆ

Im Rahmen von FOKUS TANZ präsentiert der Choreograf Saša Ašentić DIS_SYLPHIDE (S. 56), eine Arbeit, in der er erstmals die langjährige Arbeit mit seinem Projekt Per.art aus Novi Sad mit Menschen mit Lernbehinderung und seine internationale Arbeit als Choreograf verbindet. Für dieses Interview stellen ihm Kampnagel-Dramaturgin Melanie Zimmermann, Dramaturg Marcel Bugiel und Per.Art-Mitglied Dalibor Šandor Fragen über seine Arbeit und das System des zeitgenössischen Tanzes in Europa.

MARCEL BUGIEL:
How did you come to start the Per.Art-Project? And what makes you continue working on it even though you are not getting any real funding for it?

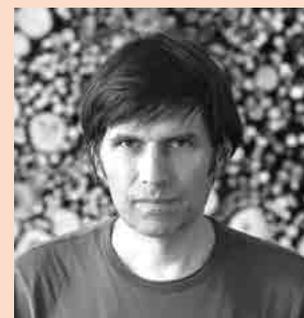
Since the very beginning the work with my disabled colleagues was a constant everyday fight for creating conditions in which people with learning disabilities can make their art and present it in public within the local cultural scene. All our efforts

were put into building the infrastructure for this work so it could exist locally. We started in a tiny room on the ground floor of a socialist building on the Boulevard of Liberation in Novi Sad, right after the NATO bombing. The next level for us was to step out into an environment defined by discrimination and corruption, which are the main two characteristics of Serbian society. They were and unfortunately still are defining our local context. Yet, as a very committed and

persistent group of people we managed to create our place within the local scene through our art and activism. We managed to do so by creating contents and relations that became new social facts that nobody could deny, even though they were constantly ignored by the local authorities. Still they found support by the audiences, colleagues, media, and public in general. It's important to say that for all these years we either had very small financial support or we worked with no support

THE BEAUTIFUL FEELING TO BE WHO YOU ARE

at all. So the principles of work and motivation are completely different from the ones shaped by the market logic on which the international scene is based. But this didn't prevent us of creating different performances, exhibitions, videos, and books by and with our disabled colleagues based on solidarity, enthusiasm, trust, and respect for diversity. What still keeps me continuing is the belief in art that is still defending the idea of art as a public good – the art that is NOT a category within the creative industries; the art that invests in the public realm that we all share, and through which we can challenge and change the way we are, or the way we are expected to be, as social subjects; and where we can celebrate the diversity of who we are,



Marcel Bugiel

“the beautiful feeling to be who you are”, as Natalija Vladisavljević, my colleague with Down syndrome, says in her poem. This is what gives us strength.

MELANIE ZIMMERMANN:
With the project DIS_SYLPHIDE you connect for the first time your choreographic practice as international touring artist and the work with disabled performers. What does this project mean to you?

Since 1999, I work with Per.Art. Since 2007 I'm presenting my work internationally as a performance maker, but it took much more time to communicate disability arts to the international dance and performance scene. It is not because I was hiding it. It is because the international scene is not organized around the principle of inclusion but rather on exclusion. Considering the circumstances in which we work locally it takes time for us to create conditions to present our work abroad. Still in the eyes of many, touring, i.e. marketability, visibility, appears as a promise for success



Melanie Zimmermann

although it becomes more and more exclusive, and only available to a small number of artists selected by the dance market. I am only interested in touring regarding what's left of its potential to connect artists as citizens, and in critical examination of its intercultural aspects. In this sense, I see DIS_SYLPHIDE as an effort of individuals, non-disabled and disabled artists, to assemble around their artistic and social concerns through

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solidarity without political, ethical and artistic compromises. It is an effort made in a place where institutions of our society again demonstrate us that their decisions become our realities which are defined by strict divisions and oppression, be them social, cultural, artistic or personal, that prevent us from coming together and acting in public. In such a context, I hope that DIS_SYLPHIDE will show us what disabled and non-disabled artist can make in the theatre based on enthusiasm, solidarity and, what my disabled colleague Dalibor Šandor believes, “on being brave to

perform in public regardless of circumstances, because that is the only way to foster change.”

MELANIE ZIMMERMANN:
Many organizations still categorize art projects with disabled performers as social projects and are clearly making a categorical distinction between „real art“-projects and others.
How do you feel about this distinction?

It was disappointing to realize how non-transparent decision making procedures of institutions that support dance in

Germany are, and then also how obviously dated their understanding of dance is. There is a new generation of artists and cultural professionals who are progressive in their thinking not only about dance but also about what roles institutions should play in structuring our society nowadays, and who problematizes the fact that there are still strong mechanisms of discrimination and oppression which roots we can trace historically by understanding the ideologies behind them. I think that those who practice their power by rigidly insisting on categories, i.e.

norms, who insist on divisions, on what is acceptable and what is not, on what is normal and what is abnormal,

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are really dangerous for our society today. We should ask ourselves what does it mean to constantly define someone as an unequal citizen. And I'm not only talking about disabled people!

I believe that in order to critically approach this situation and look for a solution that would correspond with the actual social and political needs of vulnerable social groups we should include in this process a specific perspective to create dance that would come out of relations between concrete people and their corporeality. A thought that is inseparable from its body, that is alive, in movement, rather than fixed, rigid, molded slave to the style and traditions that are always normative.

MARCEL BUGIEL:
Where – amongst your other activities as a performer, choreographer, and curator – do you place your artistic collaboration with learning disabled people from Per.Art?

I place it at the core of my interest in theatre as a place where one can rehearse various social relations, as well as temporarily establish them in relation to an ideal of a future society. Society that abolishes marginalisation processes (or reduces them to a minimum) does not use just one parameter to measure everything, nor applies the same norms to all people, but starts from the specificities of those concrete people, and opens up the possibility to form a social community. Such a society is not guaranteed to exist in the future but must be practiced today and its extent is not a criterion of its success or relevance – we simply must act like that and it's enough to start now to maintain a continuity. I realized this from working with my disabled colleagues. In my practice as a choreographer and cultural worker I'm trying to act in this way exploring the relationship between the individual and

society and analyzing it in terms of social choreography.

MARCEL BUGIEL: Why is your collaboration with people with learning disabilities still organised as a separate project and not simply included in all your other artistic activities?

My attempt with DIS_SYLPHIDE is to try to bridge this difference. This performance is being made for the German dance scene where the

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difference between the dance world and the realm of creativity of disabled, and other marginal subjects, is strictly marked. These two realms are divided. Their rare connection is usually through short term project based examples which are considered rather as an exception or as an excess. Beside my disabled colleagues from Serbia and the disabled artists from the Hamburg group Meine Damen und Herren, I invited other non-disabled colleagues that I usually work with. Some of them are working for the first

time with disabled artists. We cannot pretend that this separation doesn't exist.

The question is how we deal with it. It is exceptional that a venue like Kampnagel is supporting an artist with a background and interests like mine that brings in a very specific artistic practice and team of collaborators welcoming us all in a context where they as an institution question what dance, choreography, and performance are. Usually the venues do it as part of their community art or special outreach program for integration of different social groups, or by inviting a "big name" who has the authority to "import" new bodies on stage, or "questions" the understanding of dance, etc. We should take it seriously that to have a colleague with a disability, and in my case with a learning disability, one has to continuously make an extra effort for it to be possible. It is not something that simply happens. I can still see that non-disabled artists and curators react with confusion and in the best case with curiosity when they hear me saying "my disabled colleagues". Because this is the unknown relation, the one that doesn't exist usually. For this process one needs time

and has to work together to make art that is defined by the context but at the same time is defining the context in which it is made. It is a fact that I have disabled colleagues, our relation and their position as subjects in our work and society make a difference. But the art that we make cannot be "simply" art that is made by a normative system of production. It can only relate to it in one way or the other, and must always be aware of risks of assimilation, exoticizing, neutralization, etc. For many years my colleagues from abroad didn't even know about this work. The topics, concerns, modes of organization, and the relation towards the society – dominating the international scene – are structured in a way that disability can only enter rarely and only as a content of discussion and reflection. Mostly temporary and often in a way like someone's personal experience or



Dalibor Šandor

interest. The international scene is structured in an "ablist" way that doesn't provide opportunities, occasions, and conditions for such relations to appear, not to mention the impossibility for a subjectivation of disabled persons as artists. Disabled people are mainly, if not only, represented by non-disabled, and most often as a topic or objects in the representational regimes. With DIS_SYLPHIDE we are interested in addressing this problem and looking for a way to intervene.

DALIBOR ŠANDOR: What are your impressions about us in this working process? Do you feel pressure? And what does it mean to you to work with us as disabled performers?

The collaborative level of work between us is precious to me and is really defined by the practice of what some philosophers call "asymmetrical reciprocity", a relationship characterized by generosity, gratitude and desire of communion. I try to base my work with other non-disabled colleagues on what I learned through our collaboration in Per.Art, with you and other disabled colleagues, and that is: what I permit to require

from myself is not comparable to what I have right to require from the other. This new process also reminds me of how all of you are open for the unknown, not thinking of a final product but that each discussion, each exercise, each comment or question, each attempt or proposal, each digression is taken as the only thing that we have amongst us in the present moment, as something that allows us to give space for the process, to surprise us with where it takes us to and for the performance to appear, as something that is not held strongly in one person's hands. It is always impressive to feel this and I'm grateful to be able to share this together with you. The only pressure that I feel is related to how we will include the disabled performers from Meine Damen und Herren. Knowing that both you and them were excited by my idea to have a performance as an encounter, and as a chance to meet each other and collaborate, although I knew that due to the lack of support we won't be able to do it with the means and time as originally planned, I still kept the idea and decided to see what I would be able to propose to you all, as

THERE ARE MANY OUTSIDE OF THE OFFICIAL (DANCE) HISTORY

someone who is responsible for providing conditions and organizing working periods. I hope I won't let us down.

MARCEL BUGIEL: What do strategies of excluding/including people with (learning) disabilities teach us about the history of (20th century) dance?

We can actually see how normative and reductive it is. It says so much about power and domination of normality by Western society. Dance history is based on the promotion and embodiment of the ideals of individualistic culture and society. Its normative mechanisms exclude everything and everyone that falls out of the norm: white, free, not deviant in its behavior and its karyotype, healthy, opportunist ... There are many outside of the official (dance) history, not only when it comes to disability, but also race, class, gender, etc. that all shows us how big the group of oppressed is in dance as well as in society.