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The Practices of Sex Education II

In the 2022/2023 season, my collaborators and others from The New Post Office prepared a series of five lecture performances entitled *Sex Education II*, which explored from different angles and using different performing practises the right to sexual pleasure as a fundamental part of sexual rights as a human rights issue. The lecture performances were based on conversations with women¹ who shared their personal stories, experiences and difficulties, as well as interviews with experts from different fields. In October 2023, we combined the five lecture performances into one whole and performed them in one day.

Zala Dobovšek wrote about the project for *Theater der Zeit*: “The cycle not only contributed to new dimensions and possibilities of documentary theatre in Slovenia, but was undoubtedly also a remarkable political gesture, as the topics presented in these events have never been publicly exposed (performed) in the history of Slovenian theatre, let alone with such a precise, profound, sensitive and socio-critical approach.”²

In the continuation of the text, I look back as the initiator of the project, its co-author³ and director and document the practices that shaped our creative process.

1. That which is not yet there

The idea for the project came to me in the first half of 2021, during the “Slovenian and Balkan #metoo,” when there was much public discussion about the importance of recognising and preventing sexual harassment and violence. These socio-political developments coincided with my own question of whether it still makes sense (for me) to make theatre, what kind of theatre, about what and why.

With all the stories of harassment and violence in the media, I did not think it made sense to put such stories on stage just to expose societal misogyny. Instead, my thoughts centred around another side of sexual autonomy that I felt was being overlooked in all the revelations. I thought that maybe this blind spot is also the reason or one of the reasons why violence occurs in the first place. Sexual autonomy is not just about the other person not doing something to us that we do not want. Sexual autonomy is also about doing what we want, what we like and what we enjoy (while respecting the autonomy of the other person). The right to sexual autonomy is (also) the right to pleasure – yes, and we often do not realise this. Because in our society, women's sexual pleasure is still something that is hidden, shameful and forbidden. And in the first half of 2021, in a moment of self-questioning, this seemed to me to be something that should have a place on the stage. As a counterpoint to all the harassment and violence – as an affirmation of women's right to pleasure.

¹ The term woman includes women, trans and intersex people.

² Zala Dobovšek, *Viel Potenzial, Wenig Raum*, Teater der Zeit, <https://tdz.de/artikel/eebeba83-f1ec-4626-9a90-61158efd5a30> (last accessed 14 February 2024).

³ The co-authors of the project are Lina Akif, Sendi Bakotić, Nika Rozman, Vanda Velagić, Tijana Todorović, Barbara Kapelj, Tea Vidmar and Lene Lekše.

I have been thinking more and more about making theatre as something that intervenes in the public space with a specific content. Like a creative gesture that brings something into the public space that is not yet there. I saw this “something” as a series of events that would affirm women's sexual pleasure and approach this topic in a serious, studious, documentary and feminist way. And with warmth, that was important; with a warmth that makes pleasure something normal and permissible.

2. Collaborative process and practise of devised theatre

When selecting the performers and other participants, it was important to me that they be professional performers or artists who are interested in the topic of sexual autonomy and are articulate and committed in this area. I also thought it was important that they make their own work and are interested in different media and also feel comfortable exploring outside the conventional framework of institutional theatre. In all of this, I had in mind that I wanted to create a group in which individuals complement and inspire each other and in which there is a culture of mutual support and solidarity.

From June to October 2022, the first part of the process took place, which was conceived as a laboratory in which I and the performers Lina Akif, Sendi Bakotić, Nika Rozman and Vanda Velagić researched the topic of sexual desire very broadly in terms of content and at the same time tried out various strategies and approaches to bringing this topic to the stage. The aim of this lab was for each of the performers, in consultation with me, to select the topics that are closest to them, most important or most exciting and that they will work on in the further course of the process.

In June, September and October, we met two to three times a week for four hours. The way we worked was inspired by the Via Negativa lab methodology. Each of us (myself included, although that might be a bit unconventional for a director) would bring in scenes that the others would respond to verbally and give their feedback on what they saw, how it worked for them, where the potential was. The agreement was that the person performing the scene would take the group's feedback and remain silent – any explanation or defence of the scene on their part was unnecessary. Sometimes we also used the so-called performative response, a method I learned about in one of the devised theatre workshops and have since often suggested in creative processes. We responded to each other with scenes (if one did a scene A, the other responded with a scene B). Often we “simply” brought in articles, books, videos etc. that we found inspiring or informative. We also used various exercises inspired by psychodrama or sociodrama (I myself am training as a psychodrama psychotherapist). Through them, we explored our personal attitudes towards the topics discussed.

Sharing personal stories in the context of sexuality and pleasure is something very vulnerable, so we made a confidentiality agreement at the beginning of the lab. This meant that the personal stories told by the individual in the group remained in the group. It should be emphasised at this point that the aim of this kind of exchange was not psychotherapeutic, but rather served the artistic process.

As the leader of the group, I felt it was important to create space for any conflicts or problems relating to interpersonal relationships in the group to be addressed openly and

resolved within the group. Again, the aim of encouraging this kind of openness was not psychotherapeutic, but rather served the artistic process. In creative processes, it often happens that we complain to our close friends or theatre colleagues outside the group about something that bothers us, but in the group itself it remains unspoken. And yet it is there and has an effect. It can become something that is destructive and inhibits the creative process. On the other hand, it can turn into something creative if we share it and deal with it in the group.

At some point in late September or early October 2022, five main themes crystallised. We decided that Nika Rozman will further explore the topic of vaginismus⁴ and painful sexual relations as well as the concept of sexual consent, Lina Akif will focus on the topics of the sexual lives of women with disabilities and unconventional sexual practices, while Sendi Bakotić and Vanda Velagić will deal with the reconstruction of efforts for women's reproductive and sexual rights in Yugoslavia. We also hosted participating colleagues – Dr. Gabrijela Simetinger, Dr. Maja Vehar and Alja Lobnik – who presented some of the above-mentioned topics in more detail.

In the last part of the lab, we worked even more intensively on selected content orientations and materials to be performed as well as on the development of individual scenes. At the end of October 2022, we did a one-day run at The New Post Office, where we set ourselves the task of going through all the materials that seemed suitable as drafts for future lecture performances. I remember this run as a really exciting experience that was very raw and “disorganised” in terms of form, but at the same time vibrant, exploratory and spontaneous.

This was followed by work on individual lecture performances, which took place from November 2022 to June 2023. Lina Akif, Nika Rozman, Sendi Bakotić and Vanda Velagić each dedicated themselves to their own themes, while their creative processes took place separately or in collaboration with others. Tea Vidmar (music writer and sound performer), Tijana Todorović (costume designer, author of the artistic image and set designer), Lena Lekše (set designer) and Barbara Kapelj (set designer) joined us, and with them we continued to create and explore the individual aspects of the performance. At the same time, the performers continued to research individual themes, which became more and more field-based and documentary.

As the leader of the project, I have always tried to draw attention to the question of autonomy, from which the project emerged, at the level of the group process itself and thus of the relationships within the group and all the interpersonal relationships on which the project was based. In terms of content, the project focussed on sexual autonomy, which could be extended to autonomy within the group work process and artistic creation. I thought it was important to check: Am I enjoying the process? What do I need to enjoy it? Do my collaborators enjoy the process? What do they need? What is the balance of power between us and how does that affect consensus, attunement and obedience? What can I do as a group leader to allow and encourage the autonomy of the other group members? And so on.

⁴ Vaginismus is considered the most difficult sexual dysfunction in women. Vaginismus leads to a tightening of the pelvic floor muscles, which makes vaginal penetration completely impossible, even if the woman desires it.

The working method we used was devising, which also meant that we worked on all the scores of each lecture performance (from the music and sound to the text, art, etc.) until the premiere or even after the premiere. The process was slightly different for each lecture performance, as we used different staging tools, procedures and strategies. In *Ability*, which is conceived as a narrative with drawings (projected on the wall with slide projectors and overhead projectors) and live music, the text was gradually developed based on Lina Akif's narratives, excerpts from personal stories and expert testimonies. The same applies to the visual image. Tijana Todorović drew the images or developed them in parallel with the creation of the text in her temporary "studio" at The New Post Office and often brought them to the rehearsals so that we could test on the spot what works and what doesn't, what is missing, where the potentials lie, etc. Tea Vidmar, who performed music live on stage, also created the sound score in parallel with the development of the text and the textual and visual score. This way of working allowed us to make changes and improve the scenes right up to the end, weaving all these different "threads" into an organic whole. The costume design (Tijana Todorović), the set design (Barbara Kapelj) and the lighting design (Tjaša Črnigoj, Igor Remeta, Manca Vukelič and Barbara Kapelj) were also changed until the end. The surtitles (Tina Malič), with their rhythm and visuality, finely rounded off the entirety of the performance.

Five lecture performances were created in eight months: *Diagnosis + Consentire*, *Ability*, *Play* and *Fight*. Each of them uses different performance strategies derived from the theme to which they are dedicated. *Diagnosis* and *Consentire* flirt with the form of the exhibition and installation in which performative actions are embedded. *Ability* is based on the strategy of storytelling with drawing and live music and enters the field of object theatre. *Play* is a kind of guided tour through rooms and various artefacts and relies transparently on rapid role changes and the use of effects such as wigs, costumes, theatre fog and light. In some parts, *Struggle* is reminiscent of agitprop theatre, but also crosses over into the realm of theatre of objects, with lots of storytelling using archive photos, documents and artefacts. What all the events have in common is that they are embedded "site-specifically" in the ambience of The New Post Office and that they stage documentary interviews.

3. The practise of documentary theatre

The research for *Sex Education II* was based on interviews with experts from various fields and with women who shared their personal stories, experiences and problems with us. The exception is *Fight*, which takes a slightly different approach. Here the focus is not on the women's personal stories, but on the biographies of two historical figures and research in the archives.

Based on online research, specialist literature and recommendations, we have selected experts from the fields of sex education, gynaecology, sexology, sociology, sexuality, consent, social work, philosophy, history, etc. We met most of them only once, Dr. Gabrijela Simetinger, Dr. Maja Vehar and Alja Lobnik several times, as they were much more involved in the project as experts.

We contacted the people who told us their personal story either through the experts we worked with or they had already told their story publicly and we asked them if they would

meet with us. We also used what is known in sociology as the “snowball method,” i.e. we asked our friends and acquaintances if they knew a woman – or knew a woman who knew a woman – who would be willing to talk about her sex life. With some we only met once, with others we conducted two interviews or we spoke to them later if we wanted to verify something or ask more detailed questions. Most of the interviews were conducted in pairs (myself and a performer who was researching a specific topic), some interviews were conducted by myself or the performers themselves. It was easier and more pleasant in pairs because the performer and I complemented each other in our questions and the atmosphere was also more relaxed due to our interaction.

The interviews were recorded. And since these were also intimate stories that were very personal and private, we met in quiet and peaceful places whenever possible.

The interviews were semi-structured. We prepared the questionnaires in advance, but they only ever served as a guide. Rather than sticking to specific questions, I felt it was important to have a spontaneous conversation between us and the interviewees and explore what was alive and emotionally charged. I trusted that the essential content would crystallise in this way. Even with expert interviews, the best conversations were the ones that were the most spontaneous, as this brings out the interviewee's personality and passion for the field they work in.

In the interviews with women who told their personal stories, I found it important:

- That we did not persuade or force anyone to give an interview, and that we only spoke to those who immediately agreed.
- That we did not provoke them or “drill” them with questions. Our questions were merely hints to which they responded and told us as much as they were comfortable with. Each time we emphasised at the beginning of the interview that they did not have to answer all our questions, and if someone did not want to answer a question, we did not pressure them.
- That they had the option to remain completely anonymous (we did not reveal the identity of some people to anyone, including the other team members), but that they could also decide to what extent they wanted to remain anonymous (for example, some wanted us to change their name but allowed the use of audio recordings of their voices, while others did not allow the use of their voices, so we recorded their statements with actresses).
- That we informed them during our creative process about what we were doing with the recordings of their interviews and checked that they were happy with this.

In *Sex Education II*, we chose to play the interviewees' recordings over loudspeakers because we believe that this is the most convincing way to convey the authenticity of their statements to the viewers. In cases where the interviewees allowed us to do so, we played the original recordings of their voices over the loudspeakers. However, if the interviewees did not want us to play their voices publicly, we had to somehow replace and recreate the original recordings.

I decided to re-record these recordings with the actresses (we worked with the actresses of the Mladinsko Theatre). The usual approach would be to transcribe the statements and then

have the actresses memorise them or have the interviewees read them out loud and act them out themselves. But in a documentary context, the statements presented in this way could quickly come across as artificial and fake, no matter how convincing the actresses are in their interpretation. In addition, the idiosyncrasies of each interviewee's language would be at least partially lost, such as the rhythm of speech and the filler words that make a statement truly personal, specific and authentic.

For this reason, we have used the headphone verbatim technique in such cases. This is a technique often used in documentary theatre in which the actors listen to the recordings via a headset and repeat the words verbatim. In *Sex Education II*, the performers listened to the interviewees' statements through headphones and simultaneously repeated verbatim what they heard – but technically and without any attempt at imitation; every word, every filler word, every interjection. And I recorded. In this way, we recreated the recordings of the interviewees, where you can sense a certain distance, but at the same time, through listening and live repetition, you can perceive a special composure in the actress lending her voice. The documentary dimension of the recordings is preserved and the rhythm and other characteristics of the interviewees' speech are retained without revealing their voices.

In this kind of documentary theatre practice, ethical issues are usually very much to the fore, both in the relationships with the interviewees and in the performance procedures themselves. However, there is another side to such practice that often remains invisible and can be overlooked or taken for granted by someone who merely observes the performance but has no experience of such a way of working. In this practice, the interviews are recorded on tape and these recordings need to be edited before they are given their final form.

All the interviews were recorded on tape and lasted about an hour and a half each, sometimes less, sometimes more. For example, if we had four interviewees telling personal stories and four experts for a lecture performance, that meant about twelve hours of material. Of course, these recordings had to be edited: we listened to them again, some perhaps even several times, to make a selection of statements, roughly shorten them, create a transcript, shorten and edit them again and, in the event that the interviewee did not want the recording on which her voice can be heard, we also re-recorded it with the actress. It was important that this (apart from transcribing the statements and mastering) was done by us, the authors of the text, as this is the most important or one of the most important building blocks of the text. And as our aim was to create a devised piece of theatre – and that the script was created right up to the premiere – this work took place in parallel with the rehearsals.

4. Self-care

I think self-care is an essential part of the artistic process. By self-care, I mainly mean recognising and taking care of my personal needs – from the most basic, like the need for sleep, to emotional needs. I was deeply impressed by what Tomi Janežič, one of my mentors during my Master's degree in directing, kept emphasising: you take care of yourself so you don't have to take care of yourself. That was a real revelation for me at the time. Only when I take care of myself as a director can I really engage with the subject I'm dealing with in my

work in a high-quality way and with the question of how I can most effectively convey the content to the audience.

In developing *Sex Education II*, I myself have used various self-care practices that I am familiar with from my directing studies, my independent research and my training as a psychotherapist. I really enjoyed this creative process, which in some ways ran parallel for me, developing my own practices based on what I know and adapting them to my own needs. The performers and other contributors took care of themselves, each in their own way, and it was important for me as the process leader that we were concerned as little as possible with ourselves or each other, but rather with what we were focussing on – how to get the content across to the audience. Of course there were “slips,” we are only human after all, but that was definitely something I was aiming for.

5. Dramaturgy of multiple climaxes

At the end of September 2023, after one year, the artists who had participated in the lab gathered again: Lina Akif, Sendi Bakotić, Nika Rozman and Vanda Velagić. Although we only had a few days of rehearsals to prepare the final part of the series, I felt it was important to take the time to come together again – so that the artists could share experiences from their processes and recreate the feeling of a group from the time of the lab. We were soon joined by Tea Vidmar and Lene Lekše, who worked with us on some of the pieces, and Tijana Todorović, who was the only one present at all the works apart from me. The fact that we were now together for the first time in an extended line-up was really special, because everyone had a different experience of the process, and at that point these experiences began to merge.

With the support of a relatively large technical or rather support team, we then worked for several days on interventions and connections between the individual lecture performances and staged (one year after that first run) an almost six-hour event in which we performed all five parts one after the other.

This was the last in the series of premieres of *Sex Education II*. The whole series had a dramaturgy that is unconventional in theatre, but somehow seems appropriate when it comes to validating women's sexual pleasure. None of the events were – as you might expect – climaxes; perhaps there were just more climaxes. Yes, it was a “dramaturgy of multiple climaxes.”

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Prevod Katja Kosi