

# *Ubu the King* – the Shock of Devised Theatre in a National Institution

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The beginnings of devised theatre in the 20th century in Slovenia can be found already at the end of the 1960s in certain practices that can be described as avant-garde, experimental, independent or alternative. Devised theatre is a wide, umbrella term, which does not denote any specific genre or style of performance, and in its essence is an alternative to the prevalent dramatic tradition. On the other hand, devised theatre enables a group of people to test ideas that do not come from drama plays. The production of *Ubu the King*, which opened on 30 January 2016 on the Main Stage of the Slovenian National Theatre (SNT) Drama Ljubljana, is a descendant of the author's theatre of the 1990s, but is also related to more contemporary practices, such as the group Via Negativa and the works by the director Oliver Frlić.

The production of *Ubu the King* is derived from the dramatic text only in its title and motives, as it rejects the original text and transforms many concepts into contemporary ones. Although the director of the production Jernej Lorenci has previously shown some methodological traces of devised theatre, he only abandoned the interpretation of the text in the 2015/2016 season in the co-production by Celje People's Theatre and Ptuj City Theatre *The Educated Ladies after motifs from Molière's The Educated Ladies*; the première of which took place a few months before the première of *Ubu the King* in SNT Drama Ljubljana, but did not spark a public debate. This is the first indication that, by far, *Ubu the King* not only opens the question of how the production is directed, but *where*. The political evident in Lorenci's gesture of the production of *Ubu the King*, is first and foremost contained in the location of the performance of the project, and only secondly in its directing methodology.

The performance of *Ubu the King* generated a few surprising reactions. Not only were there a good number of critical reviews – which we would wish for every production on the Slovenian stage – but the leading Slovenian newspaper *Delo* also performed a survey that began with the question of whether this production belongs on the stage of the main Slovenian theatre.

For those who rejected it, *Ubu the King* was too reminiscent of *kleinkunst* – a theatre type that includes cabaret, stand-up comedy, improvisational theatre and similar genres which is usually performed on smaller and traditionally non-theatrical venues. *Kleinkunst* is thus recognisably different from the drama or spoken theatre, while it also shares a few significant similarities. In the STEP City Study (see *Amfiteater* vol. 3, no. 1–2), a survey of audiences performed over several years in four European countries, the researchers discovered that the audience experiences spoken theatre and *kleinkunst* as the most socially relevant types of theatre, and *kleinkunst* as the most personally relevant. Therefore, have the formal objections overlooked the place where *Ubu the King* engages the most?

Maybe more than anything else, the work of the Ubu ensemble is intended as an intentional and conscious (ab)use of the principles of entertainment theatre, which, with its placement on the Main Stage of SNT Drama Ljubljana, causes a shift in perception. It connotes the inferiority, ordinariness and inappropriateness of such a genre in the national theatre; this transgression and incursion of mass/populist culture into the so-called elite level, enables the arrival of “popular amusement”, which, supposedly, has no place in a national theatre. Through this, the production triggers self-criticism on several levels: of the performers, of the SNT Drama Ljubljana as an institution, and of the cultural and artistic state of mind in Slovenia in general.

*Ubu the King* also utilises the principles of the “Cool Fun” genre, as defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann. This branch of theatre arose in the 1980s and 1990s, when, almost by force, the young performers searched for a “real”, which by refusing the form would provoke and thus adequately express the disappointment and the feeling of desperation. In its core, the production of *Ubu the King* primarily addresses exactly that: the function, evaluation and effects of entertainment/fun (within a space and context in which we do not expect it in such a form and quantity), detects them accurately and manipulates them, which also means that it keeps its distance, symbolically removing itself from the action onstage.

The three key parameters of the language of this performance are: (1) the real-time perception of the response of the audience, (2) the unveiling of privacy and (3) the content of the text, which was created collectively and is, therefore, in any event personal/intimate. At the same time, we must be aware that none of these parameters in its form is radical. The textual compilation is mostly comprised of humorous premises (or is performed as such subsequently), which provides the alibi “we do not mean it for real” in advance. This does not mean that humour cannot offer social criticism; however, it functions as some kind of safety switch for the entire

performance, which is constantly playing with references from the political and current reality; however, the reality itself is not included in the event, but rather its approximations, symbols, limitations.

In *Ubu the King* the prominent line of performing clearly distinguishes between presence and representation, concepts that theories of aesthetics have long seen as oppositional. Erika Fischer-Lichte separated them according to the principle that presence occurs and rises as immediacy and authenticity, while representation is a solidly defined state, fixed and rigid, always as the provided mediated access to the world. The actors move between presence and representation and create completely new, unrepeatable creations, which are even brutal on the outside; nonetheless, they are in their theatrical language more delicate than aggressive. The performance resists the unjust present, but in such a way that some people (mistakenly, in our opinion) read it as just the opposite, that is, as creating the circumstances it is making fun of.

Nonetheless, Elaine Aston points out that resistance should not be thought of only within the frame of opposition, as something we are against, but also as an affirmation of what we stand for. In her discussion "Agitating for Change: Theatre and a Feminist 'Network of Resistance'", Aston writes that a call to change requires not only strategies of opposition, but also reparative tactics, which help create the vision of an alternative, socially progressive hegemony. Establishing the methodology of devised theatre (especially the original and different levels of narration, moving between presentation and representation, the staging of actors' viewpoints, tripling the ends of performances) in the national theatre is undoubtedly a part of such reparative tactics, while the scenes of full-blown black humour can be seen mostly as a protest, a rise against the anomalies of modern society. Unfortunately, there is also a side of the performance that remains untouched, into which no daggers – neither rebellious nor reparative – are pointed. The weak point of the performance is the role of the woman in the modern world and in Slovenian theatre. In this sense, the performance is stereotypically similar to conservative views on the gender roles that mostly affect the role of Mama Ubu.