
Vladimir Tzekov. Laboratory of Stage Action. Dependencies and Independence of Contemporary Theatre

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Abstract

In spring 2008, Santiago del Hoyo and Manuel Bonillo settled in Granada after having worked for three years with the company @lma @lter in Bulgaria. They brought together an unstructured and heterogeneous group of people with different backgrounds, contexts and profiles, and created a theatrical rarity that they introduced at the Universidad de Granada that same year. It was entitled *Rapsodia n.º 2: "La vida es sueño"* and was born of the intersection of a Brahms rhapsody, a pseudo-random selection of the text of Calderon's play, and an overactive philosophical obsession. The theatrical experiment was a success, and they received a small grant that they fully invested in renting premises of 40 m² in a deprived neighbourhood in Granada. In September 2009 they boldly opened the venue to the public, where they offer comprehensive courses in "stage creation" and free shows three times a week. Since then they have produced more than twenty shows, toured some of the most important international experimental theatre circuits, and continue with their stage rarities, which critics and audiences alike regard as unclassifiable. Coinciding with the beginning of spring 2019, the 2nd Research Conference on Independent Theatre was held at the Institut del Teatre. The specification ("independent") of the call first caused bewilderment, and then controversy. The Vladimir Tzekov case, which feels challenged by both, is presented here as a bid to discover, denounce, contradict and subvert its own conditions of possibility, which are the conditions of possibility of its (in)dependencies.

Keywords: Vladimir Tzekov, independent theatre, experimental theatre, alternative theatre, theatre research, theatre studies, politics and theatre, philosophy of theatre, counter-reality

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In the framework of the 2nd Research Conference on Independent Theatre held in March 2019 at the Institut del Teatre, the debate found an obvious centre of gravity, which led most of the discussion to focus on the question – central for some, peripheral for others – of the pertinence of the category that gave the call its name: the adjective “independent” that specifies, circumscribes and delimits the noun that accompanies it: “theatre”. The fact of regarding the noun as an *accompaniment* of the adjective, and not the reverse, reveals a grassroots transposition at the centre of interest of the academic question due to the nature of its object of study, shifting the problem of the ontological question (what independent *theatre* is) to a taxonomic problem (what *independent* theatre is like). Presentations, papers, talks with the audience and roundtables have seen the return of the question over and over again (independent theatre? is this category appropriate? with what conditions, what presuppositions, what implications? who and what *can* feel challenged and how and why?) but what is more symptomatic is that the most interesting proposals, as they are more fruitful, are those that, formulated in the question, denote a conscious effort to refine the approach to it, to seek not a decisive answer but a more adjusted, nuanced, directed, thoughtful, incisive way of posing it. Not of resolving the problem (and liquidating and thereby eliminating it as such) but making it a major problem, a better problem.

This article aims contribute to this debate, from the perspective of a case analysis. The following discourse is articulated around four objectives and a general thesis that provides its backbone. The first objective is to introduce the project of the Laboratorio de Acción Escénica Vladimir Tzekov to the specialised academic community; the second is to situate the history, context and trajectory of the project as a constitutive foundation of the fabric of conditions that explain its idiosyncrasy and that of its artistic production; the third is to set out the management model with which the project has worked during its founding and its first years of existence; and the fourth is to share some of the fundamental features of its poetics, which is, at the same

time, its politics, philosophy, ethics and aesthetics. The general supporting thesis is that the entire path of the Laboratorio de Acción Escénica Vladimir Tzekov is the story of its struggle/confrontation/resistance in relation to its independence: in relation to the management of what, how and why to resist “independent” in the context and the circumstance, and what the condition of independence in theatre *can* mean and what *power* it conceals.

1.

The history of Vladimir Tzekov began in 2008 in Granada, coinciding with the outbreak of the crisis and the call for the Primer Encuentro de Teatro Universitario in the city. But this history has a prehistory, a Bulgarian prehistory, dating back to 2004, when Manuel Bonillo and Santiago del Hoyo joined the @lma @lter Theatre-laboratory in Sofia. Under the direction of Nikolay Gyorgiev and with the choreography of Petya Yosifova, Manolo and Santiago began their initiation in Grotowski’s teachings about a non-actor theatre, built on the principle of a cast iron discipline, of Soviet origin, based on the pillars of commitment, work, sacrifice and effort. Work on the body and work on the soul, as the constitutive foundation of the stage. The team spent three days a week on physical training, two days on the stage rehearsal and one day on the presentation of the “materials” in meetings open to the public in a venue provided by the university and with the prerogative that none of these activities would be mediated by any kind of economic exchange: the audience did not pay and the artistes were not paid. Theatre could not become a commodity. The people (audience and artistes) went to the theatre to work. To work outside the market’s perimeter of influence. However, the director and choreographer were paid by the University of Sofia.

In spring 2007, Manuel Bonillo, who had assimilated work and discipline with a point of rebellion, defied the “Gospodini” (*gospodini* means “gentlemen” and is how they referred to them) by presenting a play that he also directed, with the participation of a small group of actresses and actors of the company. The piece, called *Sonata Este n.º 1*, would be the first of 24 productions that, until 2017, were presented to the public uninterruptedly.

Sonata Este n.º 1 is the staging of a Bach sonata. Manuel Bonillo (who had just turned twenty-five) was a piano teacher, as well as a physiotherapist and graduate in philosophy. He had no training as an actor, except for three years of experience at @lma @alter, where he had been cast by the company thanks to his knowledge of music, philosophy and human anatomy. Today he also has a degree in musicology, a master’s degree in philosophy and is a professional graduate in lyrical singing and contemporary dance. He has absolutely no training in directing, playwriting or acting. Music, scene creation, body and philosophy would be, from its foundation, the particular quadrivium on which the training of the members of the company would be developed.

Sonata Este n.º 1 closed the Bulgarian triennium, and Manuel Bonillo and Santiago del Hoyo left Gyorgiev’s company and spent some time away from the theatre. Manolo travelled to Granada to do a master’s degree in

contemporary philosophy with a La Caixa scholarship of excellence, while Santiago crossed North Africa on a donkey's back.

In September 2008 the academic year in Granada began, the property bubble began to rapidly deflate (the second "Spanish economic miracle" proved to be not a miracle but a mirage) and disaster befell the New York Stock Exchange. At the same time, the Aula de Artes Escénicas of the Universidad de Granada announced the Primer Encuentro de Teatro Universitario in the city, with a brand new call to award the best theatre projects with artistic production and an economic subsidy, with the excluding criterion of requiring a minimum level of theoretical research and it being experimental.

As for the crisis, it should be said that for a city like Granada, where a quarter of the population is made up of university students, and therefore characterised by itinerancy and youth, and with the second highest unemployment rate in the country, the word *crisis* must at least be considered a figure of speech. This is not to say that meant nothing. Rather the opposite: it meant more. And it was this excess of significance that Vladimir Tzekov used to transform it into energy, the raw material of creativity. We'll see how below.

Regarding the call of the Aula de Artes Escénicas, Manuel Bonillo, who at that time was working on the development of a theatrical poetics based on musical (and not performative, narrative or dramatic) principles and studied the relationships between Deleuze's philosophy and the identity paradigm in Stanislavski, Grotowski and Artaud, was challenged and decided to submit a project: *Rapsodia n.º 2: "La vida es sueño"*. The jury selected it. They had to open in five months.

Santiago returned from Africa and in two weeks they managed to put together a team of ten people who agreed to work on the project: these were the people Manolo had met in the last few months he had been living in the city: casual contacts and contacts of contacts: roommates, other students on the master's degree, a flamenco classmate, the gypsy who taught classes, and a hippy from the Sacromonte Caves.

Rapsodia n.º 2: "La vida es sueño" is a staged Brahms rhapsody, accompanied by a few excerpts from Calderón's play selected according to formal and structural principles, responding to poetic, political and philosophical criteria. The piece aims to be a stage device that intercepts power relations under Foucault's prism and that affects the experience of actors and audience in the most direct and least mediated way through narrativity and the concept possible. Over the years, the piece would become one of the most celebrated in the Tzekov's repertoire.

The *Rhapsodia* was the culmination of Vladimir Tzekov's prehistoric phase. They used the grant money to pay for producing it (the actual cost of which did not reach 20% of the budget they had submitted and the consequent subsidy they received to finance it) and the rent of small premises (a former butcher's) in the La Cartuja neighbourhood, a deprived area of students and senior citizens and one of the most economically disadvantaged parts of the city. The remaining money from the La Caixa grant was invested in the remodelling of the premises, which was completed in a few months thanks to the selfless help of friends, colleagues and family. In September

2009, they opened the Laboratorio de Acción Escénica Vladimir Tzekov to the public. School, Company and Theatre. They took the gamble and the adventure began.

2.

During one of the roundtables in the conference on independent theatre, Professors Carles Batlle and Roberto Fratini reflected on the question of the nature of the category “independent theatre” and its critical fortune. Despite the difference in the tone and form of their discourses, they agreed in substance that it was the specification of its reference: independent... in what sense and in relation to what? And that, in the specialists’ formulation, it was encapsulated along three complementary axes: economic/financial independence; political/ideological independence; and artistic/aesthetic/poetic independence. And they warned of the complexity intrinsic to considering it in all its potential meanings, relationships and nuances.

The triad proposed by the two professors (and, it should be said, more or less explicitly implied by the other contributors to the debate), which we accept and assume with all its problems, is a good starting point for theoretical reflection and is especially productive when, from a holistic perspective, the intention is to account for how the three dimensions referred to by theory interact and complement each other in practice, to the extent that some involve and explain the others in an *interdependence* similar to that evoked by Lacan’s Borromean knots. But theatre does not *become* in critical reflection, but is *realised* in empirical existence, and, to account for this realisation (existence, effectuation), one must overcome the two-dimensionality of the representation of the knot in order to achieve that third dimension, that of depth, which gives it relief and the three-dimensionality characteristic of existence: the presence in a time, a space, a becoming, an awareness. A third dimension that should provide the key to move from theoretical speculation (the what: *what independent theatre is*) to the pragmatic experience of the becoming (the how: Vladimir Tzekov *as independent theatre*).

This dimension, in the reading we propose here, is that of attention to the specific *material* conditions that define the conditions as a whole in which the theatre phenomenon is *possible*, as a foundation and starting point of the analysis, and not as a mere circumstantial complement. In this respect, the exceptionality with which the reference to two factors such as the “historical context” and the conditions of the “late capitalism system” operates (in all its nominal versions) in the predominant critical discourse is very significant. The emphasis, on the one hand, with which the centrality of the historical condition and its notorious particularity is considered, when it refers to the so-called “*historical independent theatre*”, i. e., the theatre that succeeded during a very specific hyper-determined period of our recent history: the Franco regime. (“What, in that context, really was, without any doubt, authentically independent theatre!”) And, on the other, the Debordian reflection in relation to the capacity of the neoliberal institution to assimilate any event that takes place within its sphere of influence, regardless

of the *intention* of its realisation is precisely that of resisting, opposing or transgressing it. The resilience of techno-capitalism, in the words of Frattini, which assimilates and phagocytises any artistic manifestation, makes it a mercantile product and, in the very act of realisation, reduces its entire subversive potential to zero. (“In this context, this will never be a truly independent theatre!”) Integrated and apocalyptic, again.

The call to “pay attention to the specific material conditions that define the conditions as a whole in which the theatrical phenomenon is possible, as the foundation and starting point of the analysis,” seeks instead to temporarily suspend (by doing what phenomenologists call “ἀπέποχή” [*epokhē*]) the *a priori* judgment about the *abstract* possibility of a general theatrical praxis that can be described, *in general*, as independent. And the proposal, in contrast and in consequence, is to consider the *particular* praxis in relation to its *specific* conditions of possibility in order to make an *a posteriori* judgment with respect to its *effective realisation*.

3.

Studying the case of the Laboratorio de Acción Escénica Vladimir Tzekov from the perspective of its possibility in relation to its conditions of existence is the aim of what follows. To this end, it is our intention to explicitly set out the theoretical framework and general assumptions of this study. All theoretical considerations are formulated from a specific, given position that, although in most cases is implicit, unnameable — hidden, concealed, inaccessible and thus unquestionable — and often unconscious (in the sense of “not consciously thematised”) by the researcher, in this case, in contrast, we are especially interested in making it as explicit as possible. Such explicitness must necessarily entail the epistemological bias that every ontological statement implies. We take responsibility.¹ The study that follows is built upon a theoretical framework consisting of six premises and a corollary, as detailed below:

First premise: The raw material of theatre

- The raw material of theatre is the Person.
- Person and Community are intertwined.
- Theatre involves the Person and the Community *existing*.
- Existence involves existence-in-space-and-time.
- Existence involves event.
- Theatre involves the person, the community, time, space, becoming... in existence.

1. We repeat: it is not our intention to claim here the “being” of theatre but to make explicit (bring to the surface what was implied, hidden, concealed in the folds) the ontological consideration that, strategically, circumstantially and deliberately we now adopt, because it is the right one *for the study we propose here*. However, as we do not consider it at all similar to a universal essence, we will abandon it when it stops serving our theoretical, practical or explanatory interests. The insistence on the importance of making explicit, of casting light on the foundations of the ontological and epistemological framework in which we move, responds to the principle of militantly avoiding our ontoepistemological position from falling into acritical ignorance.

Second premise: The raw form of theatre

- This raw material is *realised* in the form of performance (by the artiste), attention (from the audience) and co-presence (in time and space).
- Performance, attention and co-presence are the forms that existence takes on in the theatre event in its effective realisation.

Third premise: Conditions of possibility of theatre

- The possibility of theatre *depends* on the possibility of the existence of its raw material and of the conditions for its realisation. Without *some*² people, without a space, without a temporality and without a becoming, there is no theatre.
- Theatre *depends* on the conditions of possibility that ensure the maintenance of the lives of people, of the use of space, of the use of time, and of the opening of an authentic becoming.
- In this sense all theatre is, by definition, dependent, or, rather, dependency. Its differential must therefore be played out in the specificity of this “dependency” and its particular strategies for managing it.

Fourth premise: The power (of) doing theatre

- Doing theatre involves having a space, having time. And having the person: the living person. And the other person: the other living person.³
- Being able to do theatre is being able to have the person (*having* life), being able to have the space (*having* a space), being able to have time (*having* time).
- The capacity to control the conditions of maintaining life, of the use of the space and the availability of time and, therefore, of all the circumstances on which they depend, determines the capacity to control the conditions of theatre. And, therefore, is the possibility of its independence.

Fifth premise: Performance, attention and co-presence: audience and artistes

- For theatre to be possible the people who *do* it must play two kinds of complementary role: performance (people who perform a show and are on show) and attention (people paying attention to what is performed). Artistes and audience.
- For theatre to be possible, artistes and audience must be in the same place (here) in the same time (present). Co-presence in space and time. Therefore artistes need a performance place and time to perform, and also a space and time to prepare this performance. And the audience must be able to go to this space and have time to do so.

2. The article “some” seeks to denote specification: a specific person, empirical, person-existing; and not the person, abstractly, as a universal concept, or people in general.

3. The artiste is the other of the audience; the audience is the other of the artiste. Artiste and audience are defined by the fact of existing in as much as they *are* the otherness of each other, and it is this assumed condition of being-otherness that constitutes them.

- Being able to do theatre means being able to *maintain* the artistes and being able to *maintain* the audience, and being able to maintain the possibility of their availability and co-presence.
- The control of the conditions of the meeting between artistes and audience in a shared space and time, and of all the circumstances on which they depend, determines control of the conditions of theatre and constitutes, therefore, the possibility of its independence.

Sixth premise: Creation/Production, Reception/Consumption, Community/Market

- All the agents involved in the theatre event have a different degree (quantitatively and qualitatively) of control over the conditions of possibility of the theatre event.
- The determination of the degree of dependence/independence of theatre must be assessed, therefore, according to degree of self-management of the circumstances that affect the control of the raw material and its conditions of possibility by who (or what) exercises this control.
- This assessment must take into account who (or what) possesses the capacity to control and manage the raw material and the conditions of theatre, and how this control is exercised in each case.
- To determine this, all the conditions and circumstances (system) in which all agents involved carry out their function must be taken into account.
- The assessment can adopt different points of view depending on which of these agents the analysis focuses: the artistes, the audience or the realisation of the theatre event.
- In the artistic paradigm of the market society⁴ the agency attributed to the artiste operates in the field of creation-production; the agency attributed to the audience operates in the field of reception-consumption; while the realisation of the theatre event is the competency of the community, which, in a society where all relations are mediated by capital, is identified with the market.

Corollary:

- The critical study of a theatre project that seeks to account for its condition as “independent” implies the critical analysis of the conditions of possibility on which the existence of its raw material and its effective realisation depends. A study like this must explain how this possibility takes place in reality, under what conditions, its strategies, its implications and its results.

4. We use “market society” as a synonym of capitalism, or, rather, as the resulting model of society: society in which all its constituent relations are mediated by the market, all the organisations that form part of it are hyperdetermined by the role they occupy within the mercantile organisation, and all the organisations involved are marked by the exchange value that the market assigns to them.

4.

In autumn 2009, the Laboratorio de Acción Escénica Vladimir Tzekov (hereafter “Vladimir Tzekov”) opened its doors to the public. They had rented premises⁵ of 40 m² where they programmed training activities, research and experimentation seminars and meetings to perform their own creations and those of others. The academy provided integral courses on contemporary stage creation with a 3-year curricular programme that included intensive training on the following subjects: musical language; musical analysis; singing; voice; body (physical training); classical dance, contemporary dance; biomechanics; classical and contemporary philosophy; aesthetics and arts theory; theatre theory; theatre analysis and criticism (analysis of the company’s productions); acting; and stage creation. Moreover, first year students had to participate in one of the company’s shows (second year students, in two, and third year students, in three) and, at the end of the studies, propose a piece of their own (solo or group) to be performed in front of an audience and, eventually, to be included in the company’s repertoire. The whole team attended all the training courses, whether as students or teachers. This is how gradually, with changing members, the protean cast was gradually formed, which would shape the Vladimir Tzekov project and its idiosyncrasy. Training in the academy had a cost, per student, of approximately €100 per month. But only some of the students could afford it. The others paid for the training by working there and doing cleaning and maintenance tasks, promoting the project and other activities that required more investment of time than money (paperwork, etc.). Others only partially participated in the training and, unequally depending on the case, in the whole of the project. Some principles were gradually established concerning the regulation of the participation, obligations and commitments but without ever forming a closed management model that could be convincingly presented. Nevertheless, the income provided by the training activities covered the maintenance expenses of the venue but was never enough to pay the members of the project every month.

During this first stage, Manolo and Santiago made a living with what remained from the income obtained from students’ fees, once the venue maintenance expenses had been covered, but did not have any other source of income or the time to find it, because they dedicated around ten hours a day

5. The need to *have* a space was the most primary need when starting the project: theatre is done in a space, it is essential. “Having” a space at our disposal means ensuring control over one of the fundamental conditions of theatre: a place of its own enables research and stage experimentation, training and rehearsal, creation and performance. But what does having a space of one’s own mean? The space is not possessed: the space is used, or rather the space is occupied. The space “is made to exist”. Everything that exists occupies a space; existing means occupying a space. Denying the use of a space means denying the possibility of existing in a portion of the world. Denying someone the use of a space means depriving the individual of their potential to exist in a plot of the earth. The space *does not belong* to someone because the space cannot become a possession. The space is used, occupied, “is made to exist”. Nevertheless, in a market society, where everything is a commodity, where everything has an exchange value and where everything can be owned, the use of the space is also regulated, limited. And, with it, the possibility for people to exist in all the corners of the planet in which the use of the ground has been regulated. In the context of the autumn 2008 in Granada, the space is bought and sold. And Vladimir Tzekov, which does not “have” a space and needs one, must buy it. With money. The possibility of having a space, depends, in this case, on the possibility of getting money to rent it.

Closely linked to the need to have a space *appears*, therefore, the need to have the time available to find the money to pay for it. Or, more precisely, time available to sell one’s own workforce (or life time) in exchange for the money requested by the *owner*, who holds its “legal” ownership, to allow its use by others.

to Vladimir Tzekov, if we only count the actual time spent in the venue. They were involved with 90% of the courses taught in the academy, in the two morning and afternoon groups, and devoted the rest of the time to the creation and performance of the pieces that they had produced: the aforementioned sonata, rhapsody and a prelude and fugue called *Preludio y fuga n.º 3: "Quién canta aquí"*. To keep up this pace under these conditions, they had to make a decision: reduce daily expenses to the minimum.

The other members spent less time on the project and did not include the whole of the daily activity: they invested around 25 hours in training (around 5 hours per day, Monday to Friday) and around 9 more hours per week in the theatre meetings with the audience. They were otherwise occupied the rest of the time, which is highly significant: most of them were studying university courses at the Universidad de Granada (UGR) at different levels: bachelor's and master's degrees and doctoral programmes (always in the areas of humanities and social sciences). This involved a significant commitment of time and a source of income that in many cases came from the public purse: general scholarships and doctoral research grants. This sector funded the training of the academy with part of this income so that, indirectly, the project was partly funded with private money that came from a very special source: the public subsidy for students. For our purposes, this detail is important.

The other main source of income of the project consisted of small annual subsidies that the company received year after year from the Aula de Artes Escénicas of the UGR: in all its years, the projects presented by Vladimir Tzekov were selected to participate in the Encuentros de Teatro Universitario of the city. The subsidy responded to the budget submitted by the company, but, of this amount, only a small part was invested in the production: the spending on sets and props in Vladimir Tzekov's shows was very small, as they were almost always reused or made by themselves. One of the distinctive features of Vladimir Tzekov's productions is, in fact, the zero (or almost zero) cost of the economic investments in their productions, which, again, responds to an economic, political and aesthetic principle, very close to Grotowski's poor theatre.

Therefore, in this first stage, the Vladimir Tzekov project was nourished with time and money that, in different proportions, came almost exclusively from their members: founders, students and artistes. This was possible thanks to the *part-time* commitment of most of them, which enabled them to invest much of their time in other activities (studies with grants and paid work) and thus obtain enough private income to be able to make the economic contribution required for maintaining the space, paying the people who exclusively worked there and other expenses.

5.

Since the opening of the laboratory in the autumn of 2009 and until summer 2012, the premises opened three times a week to present its shows to the audience, or rather, to "do theatre" with the co-participation of audience

and artistes.⁶ This conception, the result of the legacy of @lma @lter and a firm conviction that turning theatre into a commodity is a criminal act, soon became one of the hallmarks of the company but also one of the greatest strengths and, at the same time, weaknesses of the project. It is probably one of the most interesting points for reflection and most controversial aspects of the project and, although we cannot explore this issue now as much as necessary, we must stop for a moment to carefully consider why Vladimir Tzekov is a paradigmatic case in the deconstruction of the triad that splits into three differentiated dimensions — economics, politics and aesthetics — and resumes the demand, from a new perspective, for the Art-Politics-Life link. The conviction that theatre *cannot* become a commodity is due to two different reasons. The first comes from a mainly aesthetic consideration, concerning the status of theatre in its specificity: that theatre, which is in itself the experience of exploiting its own potential, of unfolding its power (as an art of existence, by virtue of its status as an art of the person, time, space and community) can never be done, as a matter of principle, if this depends on *external* limitations. Vladimir Tzekov sees theatre as experimentation: experimentation of the boundaries of its own possibility, a triggering device of the regime imposed by “reality”. Immanence and development of one’s own power, which *cannot*, by a necessary matter of principle, depend on anything “external” to the experiment itself. That cannot, therefore, be limited to what the audience is willing to *buy*.

Hence, and in strict connection (confusion) with this, the other reason for the refusal to turn theatre into a commodity, to see theatre as a product that can be bought and sold. If the audience pays, they denature themselves as such and therefore lose their essential condition: that of being people-existing in co-presence with the artiste (their “other”). The audience becomes a customer, someone who *can* pay: whose prerogative is, therefore, capital rather than co-existence. Meanwhile, the artiste becomes a salaried worker and, his or her activity, that of offering a product that satisfies the customer who has paid. Limitation of theatre, which is now a trading product with a price and therefore depends on the market. And limitation of the artiste, now a producer at the service of the demand of an audience willing to pay. Investment, therefore, of the initial artistic strategy, which consisted of seeing money as a means to maintain the conditions of theatre, through an adulterated, swollen conception of this logic in which the end becomes a means and the whole artistic work is at the service of its conditioning factor: the possibility that the audience wants to buy it.

Vladimir Tzekov’s insistence that its theatre meetings⁷ should be free had immediate effects on the relationship between artistes, audience and theatre. Put at the same level, the audience’s criteria when experimenting,

6. In order to hold these meetings open to the public dodging the legal regulation that impedes the performance of shows without the applicable permits, Vladimir Tzekov decided to create an association in which those attending the meeting could on the same premises become *ipso facto* members. In this way, the meetings met the legal condition of being a mere meeting of members in the headquarters of the legal association.

7. A strategy that it abandoned three years later, when a professionalising trend began that completely transformed the project, and that we will address in another article.

reviewing, assessing, reflecting on and conceiving the theatre experience take on great importance: the experience in itself becomes another when the audience see themselves as co-responsible for the theatre event. The fact that the meetings were free and very regular (three meetings per week for a repertoire of three, four, five, six or seven pieces that increased annually and were repeatedly performed circularly) brought about very unique dynamics. The fact that there were people who participated, as members of the audience, seven and eight and nine times in the staging of the same piece, created a *different* understanding of the experience, another way of perceiving, being and looking, and an acute conception of the nature of theatricality as an experience in which repetition and difference are played out in a very particular sense. The deliberate presentation of the proposal as both unique and repeatable event-becoming generated new ways of conceiving the “sameness” (or identity), one of the key issues of the company and one of the usual focuses of debate. Each meeting ended with a talk between the audience and the artistes, no longer as “others” but as “peers” to discuss with words the lived experience. The *logos*, the word, the reflection, as a way of seeking the paradoxical intersection between the immediacy of the experienced event and the “return” to the daily *convention* of rational communication. Moreover, the participation of the audience in each meeting was, in numbers, quite unequal: there were sessions with the participation of two or three or four audience members, and some meetings were cancelled because of lack of participants. On other occasions, in which people literally did not fit in the auditorium, the space available was modified to reduce to the maximum the performance area and increase the number of seats: then the limitation of the space became clear, revealing its possibilities and affecting the work of the artistes, the conditions of the audience (piled up, squeezed, stifled) and those of the resulting piece.

But none of these circumstances altered or endangered the continuity, quality or condition of the project: it had to be a total experiment, and an experiment has no guarantees or cannot depend on any external circumstance that determines, a priori, the possibility of going beyond its own frame of possibilities.

6.

Vladimir Tzekov *knows* the conditions that make up the power and the possibility of doing theatre. The group knows this *because it experiences them* and *because it thinks about them*: it thinks about them until their ultimate consequences. And “thinking the real until its ultimate consequences” means “thinking about the possibilities of its critical and revolutionary transformation” (Garcés, 2002: 155). An experience and a thought that become praxis, action. Thinking until the ultimate consequence means thinking critically, so critically that the very foundation of what is thought, but also the “thinking” itself is, in its turn, *criticised*. A thought that criticises the condition of its very possibility; as thought, it is a thought-action that blows apart the principle of its foundations: the representation, the *logos*. Thinking about reality

until the ultimate consequences. Until the possibility of the possibility itself. Self-referential loop that collapses or triggers, reduplicated, in theatre.

This praxis, this action, is *manifested* in the Vladimir Tzekov case in the form that the projects take in relation to the management of the lives of its members, their commitment, their dedication, their priority, their order (quantitative and also qualitative) of preferences. But also in the artistic praxis, in its stage production. Theatre, which is the resulting factor (and not the result, not the effect) and, in this sense, the reflection (not representative but performed, simulated, an Artaudian hieroglyphic) of its conditions of possibility, *cannot* ignore, dissimulate, conceal what these conditions are, which, in the end, it entails, exploits, involves, ex-presses. Theatre must express what it is, otherwise it represses, conceals, lies, hides, ignores, disguises: negligent connivance of art with the world in which it exists, confirmation, assent, approval by omission of the circumstance. Resignation, finally, to “what there is”.

All Vladimir Tzekov’s pieces are the problematic, contradictory, exploited expression of its world and its conditions of possibility. The claim of Life by denying life (lower case): the denial of reality as a blunt refusal to represent it. Being, like Life, the experience of doing against reality, against the world of what there is (www.vladimirtzekov.es):

At **Vladimir Tzekov** we began working with the aim of generating a consistent, rather than coherent, stage language that challenges with energy the certainties that society and culture have formed about it and about the life of the individual.

A stage language that advocates the right to be contradictory.

That does not resolve problems but opens new breaches.

That it is not serious but responsible.

Not a political fanzine but a poetic act.

Not representation but presentation, new, every time.

All Vladimir Tzekov’s pieces *deal with* their circumstance, manifest it, express it, and are an effort to exploit it, just like the fossil or the silent stone of which Rancière speaks, which are the bearers, throughout their existence, of the corporality, the experience of their story, but with the difference that theatre, which is the very experience of “doing”, *the possibility of doing everything*, is not only existing but also an *existing event* and, therefore, pure agency and explosion of immanence. The renunciation of the representation involved in the renunciation of the assumption that “the world is more real than the stage” (www.vladimirtzekov.es) will be *in itself* the natural form of this “taking responsibility, responding in the sense of *becoming* responsible for the conditions of its existence. Vladimir Tzekov’s pieces do not *represent* their conditions of existence mimicking scenes, characters, situations,

circumstances, emotions, feelings, spaces, anecdotes, behaviours, psychological states, conflicts, persons or ideas from real life on the stage but, in fact, they generate doing theatre, new formulations of their key question, which is the question about the logics that cross it, about the ontological paradigms that they involve and the conditions that, through omission or assent, they accept, assimilate and nourish. For this reason, it is not in the theme represented of each piece where this answer to the condition, to the system, lies (because, in fact, they do not contain any thematisation or representationality) but in the particular way in which the event, the experience, is played out. Hence the energetic, militant renunciation of the representational paradigm and the paradoxical and stubborn research into new stage languages, new ways of theatre existing, which the director finds in the complicity of music and its forms of structure and experience (melody, harmony, rhythm, intensity, composition...). Hence also the overwhelming bewilderment generated among the inexperienced audience by the meeting with some bodies, some tempos, some spatialities broken, questioned, called, drowned on the stage; the impossibility of *understanding* with the *logos*, of *logically reasoning*, of building a narrative, some identities, some meanings, of controlling, with understanding, what “is happening”; the renunciation, the frailty, the fact of surrendering to “feeling without thinking”,⁸ or, in contrast, resistance, stubbornness, the will not to lose oneself in the experience of not being able to understand.

The Vladimir Tzekov experience is an exercise in resistance. In resistance to a censorship that no longer bans contents but forms of experience: that admits, subsidises and nourishes itself with anti-establishment arts productions, provided their producers and their clients receive money, pay rents, buy food, pay the electricity, water and gas bills, buy clothes, travel in motor vehicles, ask for permissions, meet the legality clauses, respect the regulations of use of the spaces. And, with the remaining time and money, they do theatre. And sell it to whoever wants to buy it.

In the market society, where everything is, by definition, mediated by the trading of goods, theatre cannot be independent. Provided it escapes all these logics, inventing, *temporally*, new ways of understanding the being-in-the-world of all the agents involved in its experience. Rather than independent theatre, it is a theatre that combats the external dependencies that shape its framework of possibility. From all the fronts involved in the practice of theatre: from the management of resources to the theatre creations themselves. Committed theatre in the sense of it taking responsibility for its conditions and circumstances, not assuming but rather challenging, contradicting and exploiting them.

8. Excerpt from the Introit of the *Sonata Este n.º 1*: “Rationalising, reducing the entire world to three. This is the criminal act you’re going to commit. You’re irreversibly human: you can’t feel without thinking. In any case, thanks for trying.”

7.

Life is given to us. And space, and time. Only in this sense it is ours. They are ours. The market society is determined by the fact that everything, and mainly the satisfaction of the needs of individuals and the use of time and space, has a price, a value, an exchange value, established by the mercantile system, outside the control of the person. The person, dispossessed of his or her own life, of his or her own possibility, must acquire it. Their life is no longer theirs: they have to buy it. They must pay for what they need to meet their needs, but also to use the space; in other words, to be able to exist, because existence is, by definition, extensive, existence-in-the-space (-and-time). And how is it bought? What is the exchange currency? On what is this exchange based? On the sale of the time of life itself. Hence the paradox: buying life itself, of which we have been dispossessed, with life itself, of which, in this procedure, we dispossess ourselves.

These are the material conditions in which all the agents involved in theatre find themselves, starting with the audience and artistes, in this part of history, in the space-time here and now. The search for an independent theatre must come through the search for ways of resistance to the dispossession of life. Other regimes of existence. And theatre *can* be a good platform to *put them into practice*. To create other alternative, different, combative and resistant spheres of possibility; spheres that *do*, that *realise* their own possibility in the praxis of the existence. That break, therefore, the possibilities *left* by the market society, and that is, in itself, the rehearsal of another way of living, of existing.

This involves not accepting, not assimilating, not claiming the times and the spaces that the market society leaves to us but rather exploiting them, practising new ones. To assert a new way of life that is not resigned, not complicit with the *given* reality (and that, therefore, *cannot* be representative, because the representation is based on accepting a first, real, foundation of what *is*) but rather inventing another. This is the creative power of theatre: of theatre as a theatrical experience but also as an experience of transformation of its own possibility.

When censorship becomes a fetish, the real formal innovation is the generation of new forms of possibility of existence, of life, of what “doing art” means. Refusing reality, contradicting it. Refusing to do theatre in the *legal* spaces and not acknowledging the legitimacy of the hegemonic institution to limit, to control, these spaces. This is the ambition that drove Vladimir Tzekov during its early years: that of contradicting reality, in life, in art; in the praxis, to combat the new institutional censorship: the one that regulates the spaces, the times, the prices of their lives.

In 2012, Vladimir Tzekov closed its venue in La Cartuja. They moved to larger premises, in the city centre. The meetings open to the public are limited to twice weekly, Saturday and Sunday, and a fee of 4 euros is charged for everyone wishing to participate. The experiment took a new form: the company systematically submitted their projects and pieces for awards and theatre festivals. Vladimir Tzekov has invented new forms of managing its independence.



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