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A Strategy of Deployment

Reflections on the play “Liebesforschung”

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Political theatre is associated with a specific regime of politics. It challenges certain social assumptions – the assumption that society is consensual, for example, or that individual representatives of society are entitled to speak. Why exactly should this man or that woman have the right to speak when someone else doesn’t? And theatre challenges space and time. The way that the factual conditions of space and time are distributed in day-to-day life has no place on the stage. So there is a new distribution: time is denser, space as social framework is restructured and an attempt is made to let people who have no voice ‘outside’ take on a visible, audible position ‘inside’ – in the theatre. This intention represents the final remnants of the great revolutionary ideas of theatre in the twentieth century. The names of Meyerhold, Brecht or Erwin Piscator hide, almost bashfully, behind it. You can see it today in the theatrical productions, continually on the rise since the 1990s, that deal with the topic of migrants and have migrants as cast members.

Plato wanted to ban theatre because of this 'capacity to create space' with its attendant revelation of the conditions that were actually in existence.1 Schiller wanted to use theatre as a platform for a politics made impossible by absolutist power in the world beyond the theatre doors. The theatre was supposed to serve as a public forum for negotiating the affairs of public life, which the Athenians of ancient Greece had carried on in the *agora*, the public market.2 The unpolitical solution that bourgeois theatre came up with was what is known as 'high culture'. This was theatre regarded as a cultural event, which was supposed to educate people to be good, 'moral' individuals. It was to educate them, therefore, to be obedient subjects either of the king or the state (it was much the same thing). Schiller was not only an advocate of the public sphere but also of normalization as the prerequisite for a bourgeois public sphere.

What were the issues preoccupying me during the production of "Liebesforschung – Rodimos e kamlipesko – Istraživanje ljubavi"3? They were questions about democracy, power and the decision-making power of the people; there was also the issue of representation and how this might be extended or overcome through self-representation. Is it possible to substitute self-representation for representation and at the same time steer clear of exoticization or the tradition of the *Fremdenschau*, the 'exotic foreigner show' that still exists in Vienna today? And furthermore, what role does translation have in all of this? What can translation be in a play that claims to be political?

The prerequisites

What kind of play did we want to stage? And how did we want to achieve this? The project took the standard route in the

contemporary field of art that is oriented towards the participatory and the political. If a play about the 'discrimination in the labour market against the Roma' (guidelines we had set ourselves in the proposal) was to be written and staged, then Roma people should be involved in making it happen. Rather more unusual in all of this was the fact that work on the play was jointly carried out with a self-organizing migrants' network.[4] In political or cultural circles, these networks organized by migrants for migrants – of which there are about 500 in Vienna alone – are neither recognized nor accepted as actors. Most of the time, artists or other project directors simply seek out the people who, in their opinion (and essentially in their eyes), best represent a given group so that they can present those people as an element in their artistic work.[5]

In our project proposal, we had planned eight workshops to gather information and insights into instances of discrimination in order to develop the content of the play. The subject, remember, was discrimination in the labour market against Roma people and it was our intention in the project to combat this discrimination. For us, it was about the political translation of discriminatory conditions and mechanisms into self-empowering positions of action. The position of the actors also constitutes the key component of political anti-racism[6] and the issue here is not just what we should do, but also how we should do it. So, how should we go about translating? And what should we translate? Since we were engaged in a cultural project, however, our primary concern was to translate the reality of discrimination into the language of the theatre. But don't we risk losing something in translation? Doesn't a certain depoliticization of politics lie hidden behind the putative politicization of art?

One scene

In the following discussion, I will focus on a single scene from the play 7. The scene highlights our method of proceeding in relation to the theme of translation in that it functions as an example within the play itself. Fundamental issues running through the play as a whole then become clear. This scene starts with a question addressed to the audience by the Mascha character: "Well, … Did you understand all that?" It makes a direct demand on the audience's attention. As she asks the question, Mascha comes downstairs from above to where, in the preceding scene, the venerable gathering of the all-male court of Roma asylum seekers has just passed judgement on her.

Her mother was found guilty of 'an infringement of the rules', which means that, as that mother's child and therefore someone who must continue to bear her mother's shame, Mascha too is no longer entitled to a place within the group. She is excluded from it because of the power of traditional rules. She knows that and, at that very moment, the first stage of linguistic 'translation' towards the audience takes place because the entire *Romani kris* (Roma court) scene had been performed in Romani. And Mascha doesn't translate. While she conveys what happened, it is not at all a literal translation of the preceding scene, which was comprehensible to one section of the audience only. Mascha does not present this scene as a purely linguistic translation to those in the audience who belong to the German-speaking majority. She does something very different. Here, in this scene, Mascha deploys a particular language and mode of behaviour: I use the term 'deploy' in the sense of 'bringing something into action'. Through these gestures, by means of this action, something that wasn't part of day-to-day reality up to this point becomes itself a reality. It is an independent action, one that strives towards emancipation, which is disguised as translation here. This moment of deploying or bringing something

into action, of asserting a position, of turning something around, of a subversion, which comes along and cannot hope to last, is central to the play. The words spoken by the Mascha character are not a means of renaming, or indeed translating, what has just occurred using other words; rather they introduce a further possible reality into the world. Mascha proves to be a 'linguistically armed' subject. As a subject, her goal is to put an end to the hitherto predominant "game of forms"8. Her action does not lead her to name the context of what has just taken place in order to duplicate it in another language; rather she redefines that context by demonstrating her superior linguistic power – admittedly within an overall context of previous powerlessness.

Every theatrical performance is about a kind of new beginning. In the actual experience of individuals who rebel against something, this moment of new beginning also marks an important point in their lives. In a revolt against something, regardless of whether it is an authority specific to a particular group or a particular state, every single instance of rebellion must be considered as a new beginning (without any guarantee of continuation). The act of rebellion is an act of deployment, not one of translation. There is behind it a decision that has consequences for both the individual and the whole, not one that seeks to communicate between differences. Mascha provides only a fragmentary translation of the sentences spoken by the members of the *Romani kris*; they are delivered with pronounced distancing effects and accompanied by gestures that undermine the court's authority – and all in expectation of an audience reaction that is favourable to her. Deployment is not a mediating action. In this context, the actor is at great pains to change something, not to bring something together. Mascha adopts the typical position of someone who informs and instructs, someone who mediates using translation ostensibly at least, but she

does not use her position merely to convey information. Rather, this role of translator, in which she is also used by a section of the audience, offers her an opportunity to act. It provides her with a position as an actor, which can lead to subversive actions and stubborn resistance. It is about initiating a possible, future process of change. For there are very few powers available to individual men or women as individuals, which are actually capable of changing social conditions. To change a society, to influence its development requires nothing less than bringing together the countless individual powers in a long-drawn-out process, so that they are in a position to take on the collective powers as collective powers in their own right. This grouping process is not a simple matter of adding together all the available individuals. The political subject is not simply a "body that is held together". Rather, "it is a temporary actor that has moments, places and opportunities. Its peculiar characteristic is to logically and aesthetically create *arguments* and present *the evidence* (in the dual sense of both these expressions) in order to set what is without any connection (*den Nicht-Bezug*) within a clear system of relationships and to allow what has not occurred (*das Nichtstattfinden*) to take place."9

The decision to opt for a deployment rather than the usual effort to produce a translation suggests that translating, and so making universally comprehensible, the discourse of patriarchy (on the part of the Roma court) and of racism (on the part of society, within which Roma people as a group suffer discrimination) has no credibility. There is, however, a firm belief in the struggle against these things. But this struggle does not take place beyond the real socio-political conditions and there is nothing heroic about it. It doesn't take place beyond the patriarchal and racist order; it can only happen within it, as one of its components. Mascha is and can only be an actor within the patriarchal and racist conditions. That's

why she has the power to 'deploy' a stubborn discourse and so challenge what has been happening. She takes on the Roma court by *putting across* her version of the story to the (non-Romani-speaking) audience, who interpret her action as an empowering translation. The audience, the spectators, become an integral part of the play in this way. They become one of its components because, as they perceive it, 'the victim' makes an appeal to them. And they are there, wholeheartedly, to support the 'unfortunate girl'.

But who exactly are they ready to support and against what? Against the image of the *Romani kris* that, as members of the majority group, they have created, an image that is part of their own imaginary world. Against an empty space they themselves have overloaded with their own prejudices. They take a stand against a trial within Roma jurisdiction that, despite the play's many languages, imposes silence; against a jurisdiction they cannot comprehend because nothing about it is retold to them. Not only is the perception of what is real selective by nature, it is also heavily dependent on the social conditions of power and predetermined by the (non-)accessibility of information and discourses.10

And therein lies the hidden significance of this scene, the content of which can only be understood in its entirety by the Roma themselves, i.e. by those people who understand and speak almost all the languages we hear in the play (German, Serbo-Croat, Romani, English, Albanian ...). Here, the opportunity to directly understand the wholly contradictory and tragic nature of the conflict (within as well as beyond the group itself) between modernity and tradition11 is only available to the Roma in the audience and they might even choose to delve deeper into it.

The figure of Mascha as a character in the play and as part of the Roma people remains just that: a Roma, since she has no access to majority society, despite her role as a 'translator'. The entire play is about asylum seekers. The modern age and the structure of the nation state are prerequisites for the creation of a legal form of asylum in this world. Without the modern age, the asylum seekers' hostel is as inconceivable as the relationship that the people, thrown together there by chance, have with one another. The unrelentingly discriminatory laws of the nation state shape communication between the individuals within the institution. In this hostel, it turns out that tradition hasn't disappeared at all. It still exists – to the extent necessary for the preservation of the group – since it is precisely the nation state that is in part responsible for the existence of traditional mechanisms of group preservation. Because this structure, with its regime of individuals and groups excluded from the majority group of nationals, restricts a person's prospects in life, it also creates the need for mechanisms of group preservation and solidarity.

Mascha's character is caught in this split. That is her tragedy. It is the tragedy of an individual who breaks out of the social structure and rebels against it; the tragedy that is inherent in a subjectivation that deviates from the norm, that can develop from an actor's position and regularly accompanies it. It is the tragedy of those who have decided to work towards changing normality. Mascha can make her appeal to the audience and get support but only she and those like her, having adopted the position of political subjects, can take the appropriate steps towards change in this specific context. Steps that can also lead to a transformation of society generally and that ought not to degenerate into exoticism. Because change can only come from those people who have both feet squarely in the process itself, at the point where they can make the right

interventions at the right time. The steps taken towards changing normality also involve a decision to destroy something. It is not just the form of external, social continuities that is changed; internal, personal continuities hitherto experienced as real also change form.

Which theatre?

Theatrical work is about working towards an understanding of normality. To understand normality means "to submit what seems natural and self-evident, and therefore not conceptualized, to a discursive reworking, to process information. To draw out realities hitherto poorly understood and unspecified from the realm of the non-conceptualized and the normal by activities of reflection, by creating corresponding objects of knowledge and by introducing them into discourse, thereby making them a matter of conscious political action."12 According to Rancière, the normal order of the society in which we live lies in the fact that it is ruled by those who have a right to rule "and this right is endorsed by the fact that they rule"13. Those who only understand German, and can only comprehend the appellative aspect of Mascha's method of proceeding, remain unmoved because of their position of power, something they take so completely for granted. A power position, as Spivak says, is not just a position of power; it also involves all the strategies and actions necessary to perpetuate that power.14 The outcome is precisely the fact that a deployment is interpreted as a translation. What we see in action here is a particular perception serving its own interest. A partial conflict is perceived and internalised as a legitimate representation and image of the whole and of the Roma group in general. The instruments for understanding other 'cultures' are the very ones that serve to subjugate them.15 The play allowed the discrimination inherent in

discursive processing to be more closely examined. It may be easier as a result to combat such discrimination in the future, but not by means of actions within the theatre or through cultural productions as such, rather through the opportunity to highlight the political aspect of our normality, the aspect of dissent, thus making it amenable to discursive and political reworking and also, therefore, to change. It becomes possible in theatre as a potential, short-term formulation of the political question, and the question can only be this: how can current positions be changed? We should nevertheless remember that acting in the theatre is still only action within the cultural sphere. Within this sphere, we can head for specific boundaries, feel our way around them and from this position cast individual 'spotlights' on prevailing conditions. But this does not in any way change the socio-political reality of either the actors or the audience. Some of the actors in the play are still today what they were before: delegitimized and denied the possibility of bringing about a direct change in their personal circumstances. To think that a direct political or at least individual impact might be possible in and through the cultural sphere amounts to little more than self-deception. But it is this very deception that allows untranslatable phenomena and discourses to appear as translatable and comprehensible. To put it negatively, the cultural sphere offers an ideal world of collective anaesthesia. Everything is translatable as long as one is not working towards a fundamental overhaul of the whole.16

It is precisely at this point that the play intervenes by ruling out a specific possibility of perception and thus appropriation. The spectators who enjoy the most power understand least in linguistic terms. Translation, in order to understand everyone's reality, is simply not possible in circumstances where one language predominates. The power of a language also represents the power

of a particular discourse of justification. The reasoning of the speaker is once again the reasoning of those in power. And power, as it affects migrants, asylum seekers and the Roma, is state power, the power of the nation state. It is a racist power within which translation and understanding are deployed to reinforce mechanisms of control and oppression.

The play points to the most fundamental level of understanding: for communication and dialogue to evolve, a common level of knowledge and power, a common political stage, has to be in place. What happens when this is not the case? It turns out that the dividing lines run right across the spectators. And the people who are excluded from society prove to be among those who speak the most languages. The modern age suppresses multilinguality – in stark contrast to the protestations we keep hearing about the value of each language. From this, we infer that, as long as there is no common political stage, the individual possibility of communication alone doesn't mean that it can be realized in socio-political terms – not by a long shot. Again, the common political platform is not to be found in the theatre; it can only be achieved by political means. What theatre can do, perhaps, is sketch the social conditions that prevail beyond its doors and use them as themes so that discussions about them also open up a sphere of action. Theatre can function as a technique to strip normality of the aura of naturalness that brings with it a certain resistance to scrutiny; it can be an artistic technique for understanding normality. The task of changing reality, however, falls within the realm of political action alone.

We live in a society structured in a linguistic hierarchy. This means that our experiences are not integrated with language – nor can they be. Migrants experience a devaluation of their languages. To speak a different language within linguistically homogeneous

societies means cutting oneself off. But cutting oneself off as an act of non-participation also signifies a partial admission of one's own powerlessness even though, in the short term at least, it can be (self)empowering. This experience is political and not at all cultural. What lies behind this devaluation of migrant languages are not the diffuse and reactionary efforts to 'preserve culture'; it is rather the interests (dependent on power politics) of those in the majority, who affirm their own socially enhanced worth in this way. Language, even when understood purely as a means of communication, sets up aggressive and defensive positions within a given social structure. Language is a weapon. It is brought into action, deployed. In the play, we wanted to show this reality.

When translation is deployed to reinforce the dividing lines between individuals, erecting them as a wall, then the only real starting point for political subjectivation is a kind of negative power used as a tactic to oppose the whole thing. To argue that translation is impossible is on a par nowadays with the real political experience of the impossibility (and the actual refusal) of dialogue. There can be no dialogue when migrants cannot speak. So, as well as highlighting the current functions of multilinguality, the play "Liebesforschung" deals with the political speechlessness of the actors that actually exists. For this reason too, there is no message, no demand, no appeal as a component of the play. In a society structured along racist lines, and since the fall of the great emancipatory subject of the proletariat, asylum seekers, be they Roma or not, have nobody to appeal to, nobody to whom they can address their demands. Because no matter whom they turn to, their voice and their language do not really exist in the society in which we live, within the framework of the nation state. They are no more than a supplement to the hegemonic language. This moment of subversion, of plotting, of protest, of contradiction

within the hegemonic order is all that remains these days for asylum seekers as the moment when a future political subject might start to crystallize. We tried to show this in the play "Liebesforschung". It's not about acknowledging the various parting melodies; it's about examining why there is this necessity for separation in our societies in the first place. It's also about acknowledging dissent as a means of determining one's own position. Indeed that is the genuinely political issue: which side am I on? It's about taking sides.

The fact that the Others – embodied in the play by the Roma – are unable, because of the prevailing racism, to control by themselves the social processes that determine their experiences doesn't mean they can't comprehend them – far from it. An understanding of reality facilitates the beginnings, at least, of resistance by a specific group to all-embracing social controls. This insistence on one's own potential beyond the imperative of the nation state is the starting point of a daily strategy for migrants of poaching within societies that are structured along racist lines. How these micropolitical acts of subversion can exercise a consistent influence on the world given the continuing realities of misery and exploitation is, however, another matter.

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1 "Speaking in confidence, [...] all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and [...] the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them." and "great is the issue at stake, greater than appears, whether a man is to be good or bad. And what will any one be profited if under the influence of honour or money or power, aye, or under the excitement of poetry, he neglect justice and virtue?", from: Plato, *The Republic* (http://classics.mit.edu). In the classical Greek *polis*, theatre played an

important role in public life. To steer this public in the right direction was precisely Plato's concern, one that made him oppose ancient democracy. Plato regarded theatre as morally inappropriate for the upbringing and education of adolescents. On the role of theatre in ancient and contemporary democracy, see also Finley, Moses L., *Antike und moderne Demokratie*, Stuttgart: Reclam1987, pp. 84-88.

2 The question that Schiller asked himself was: "what a good theatre, viewed as a moral institution, can actually achieve", and his answer to that question: "it is the responsibility of the theatre to nurture the emotion of 'being human'". Cf Koselleck, Reinhart, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973, p. 82.

3 "Liebesforschung – Rodimos e kamlipesko – Istraživanje ljubavi" ("investigating love") was a theatre project by the Platform for Minorities in Austria, *Initiative Minderheite*n, within the framework of the "work in process" Development Partnership, which was supported by the Austrian Federal Ministry for Economy and Labour and the European Social Fund in the EU EQUAL Initiative (http://work-in-process.at). I initially developed the idea for the play in cooperation with Slavomir Boban Stojkov, head of the "*Romani dori*" association. Following a series of eight workshops with members of the association in the summer of 2006, the play was the outcome of intensive discussions between Tina Leisch, Slavomir Boban Stojkov and myself. My subsequent role in the process involved, among other things, coordinating the play's content. On the one hand, this was closely linked to the task of linguistic translation from Serbo-Croat into German and vice versa (something that turned out to be extremely intensive). It also involved mediating between different content-related ideas about how such a project might be translated to the stage. Director Tina

Leisch produced the play. It was staged between 21 and 30 November 2006 at the *Künstlerhaus* theatre in Vienna.

4 Unlike "the 'mainstream' organizations of non-immigrant Austrians", self-organizing migrant networks (known as SOMs in German) are, according to Waldrauch and Sohler, characterized by a) "self-help and solidarity through mutual support", b) "the creation of a cultural identity (establishing minorities) and intercultural communication" and c) "political organization and representation". Cf. Waldrauch, Harald / Sohler, Karin, *Migrantenorganisationen in der Großstadt. Entstehung, Strukturen und Aktivitäten am Beispiel Wien*, Frankfurt/Main: Campus 2004, pp. 36-39.

5 The question of who owns the work of art is important because it also determines who can create cultural (and also material) capital out of an artistic production in the future. One possible consequence of the participatory understanding of art might be the existence of collectively signed works only; until now, this has not been the norm in the art market. In our case, we resolved the issue in this way: after its première, the play legally belonged to the "Romani dori" association. However, this resulted in other difficulties, e.g. a structural knowledge of how to deal with a work of art was required.

6 On "political anti-racism" in Austria, cf Bratić, Ljubomir / Görg, Andreas, Das Projekt des politischen Antirassismus, in: *MALMOE*, No. 11, January 2005, pp. 18-19.

7 The entire play is set in an asylum seekers' hostel somewhere in Vienna or the surrounding area. The various destinies of the hostel residents are interwoven in the plot and each role is characterized by an inner split. There are several plot lines in which different

aspects of this specific asylum situation are touched upon. In the second half of the play, however, all plot lines centre on the tragedy of a family in which the father brings the mother before a Roma court following two offences considered unforgivable by the Roma group. First, she is supposed to have been unfaithful to him (she flirted with another man, an Albanian); then there was her disloyalty to the group as a whole (she told the hostel warden about the imminent forced marriage of her underage daughter, Mascha). The daughter has grown up in the hostel because they have had to wait such a long time for an official decision on her case. She is one of the so-called 'second generation' and, because of her linguistic ability, she takes on one of the three 'translator roles' in the play. Her job is to make those parts of the play not performed in German comprehensible to the audience. The whole time, Mascha translates word for word her own part in the play. Only in the case of the Roma trial, where her own destiny is at stake, does she adopt another strategy, a strategy of deployment.

8 Cf. Jacques Rancière, *Das Unvernehmen. Politik und Philosophie*, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 2002, p. 98. [translated in English as *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, transl. Julie Rose, Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1999].

9 Ibid. p. 100.

10 Cf. Ginzburg, Carlo, *Die Wahrheit der Geschichte. Rhetorik und Beweis,* Berlin: Wagenbach 2001, p. 52.

11 What I mean here by 'tradition' is something that is consciously nurtured and that functions as a sign in the process by which a given group is recognized both from within and outside. It is not at all about a continuity that is *a priori* ancient or distinctive.

12 BUM (Araba Evelyn Johnston Arthur, Ljubomir Bratić, Andreas Görg), Unser kleines Jenseits. Das Wir und der Antirassismus. Ein Beitrag zur antirassistischen Arbeitspraxis, in: BUM - Büro für ungewöhnliche Maßnahmen (Pub.), *Historisierung als Strategie. Positionen – Macht – Kritik*, Vienna 2004, p. 17.

13 Rancière, Jacques, Die Demokratie als politische Form. Ein Gespräch mit Chevrier, Jean-Francis und Wahnich, Sophie, in: *politics – poetics. Das Buch zur Documenta X*, Kassel 1997, p. 801.

14 Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, *Imperative zur Neuerfindung des Planeten*, Vienna: Passagen Verlag 1999, p. 51.

15 The tradition of this type of "understanding" is today widely challenged in one of the key sciences of the colonial era, i.e. in ethnology. As far as migration and migrants are concerned, the fields of sociology and demography appear to have taken on this role in western host countries. The principal aim of these "sciences" in the study of migrants serves the nation state's claim of a more efficient exploitation. It is about knowledge production in order to exploit people more efficiently. Boris Buden sums up the facts of the matter in the following sentence: " Understanding is a prerequisite for control and control is sufficient proof of understanding.", in: Buden, Boris, *Der Schacht von Babel. Ist Kultur übersetzbar?* Berlin: Kadmos 2005, p. 113.

16 Another aspect of this concept also deserves mention in this context: the idea of translating struggles – seen from a weak post-communist standpoint – could also be interpreted as an attempt to take up the ideas of revolution. The problem with this interpretation: no consideration is given to the long-established, universal principle of discrimination, i.e. capitalism itself. A translation doesn't fight against anything; nor does it assert a

position that can be fought against. In the end, a real struggle for change always takes place at the level of universals and thus at the level of norms which could be redefined (and not translated). The current relevance of this issue of the internal translatability of social struggles is comparable to the equally current topic of alliance-building on the political scene outside parliament. It is a step towards the analysis of existing individual and common potentialities. These are issues that serve to summon up courage before asking the really important questions. Deciding what those important questions and answers are has a profound influence on how a person lives their life.