

INSTEAD OF A PERFORMANCE (10.12.1996)

B. P. Good evening. We have gathered here tonight, at the Centre for Cultural Decontamination, on the day when no plays are performed, in support of what is happening in the streets, to talk about what we can do. It is our wish that tonight, when there are no performances out of solidarity with the students, and in protest against vote rigging, we have gathered here at a time when there is a protest going on, shall we say, in a state, if we can call it that, at a moment when it is being refused to settle matters within this particular human community by means of elections...

J. C. ...and that in this way the theatre has won for itself an image of this sphere of freedom. As it turned out, a very important factor of differentiation was the fact that in some theatres, in the majority of theatres, they read out the proclamation of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts and the students, and of the presidency itself, whereas in some theatres this was not done. A very comical situation was created, that today in those theatres where the proclamation was not read there are no performances anyway, and those who run these theatres found it necessary to justify themselves by saying that they would have performed, that they did have performances and that they were not performing because they were not performing, and that they would very gladly be performing and were sorry not to have scheduled a performance, that they would have performed and would not have supported this symbolic protest. Let me just tell you in a few words what things were like in these performances of ours. You know that people holding different views appear in the theatre, as opposed to public rallies, where it is predominantly people sharing similar aims who gather and who protest in unison. And so it happened, for the most part, that the reading of the proclamation before a performance, first of all, was greeted with a lot of applause, but what happened in several cases was, for example, at the Yugoslav Drama Theatre, where there were about twenty pensioners whose elderly voices were heard shouting: "Enough of politics, we want to see the performance, enough of those proclamations."

What is one to do in these difficult times, what are actors to do, what are theatres to do, that would be a topic that I'm sure my younger colleagues... will contribute to, and that we'll act together the way we all wish to.

G. S. Now I'll have to comment on this last part of J.C.'s speech, for I think that there is no question of how one is to react, that is an individual matter, just as the protest taking place in the streets is an absolutely individual matter. The Association of Dramatic Artists, as a non-political organisation, cannot judge an individual act of civic consciousness or self-consciousness. I don't think that the dilemma of whether to perform or not to perform can be raised at all.

The theatre is a sphere of freedom, the theatre, as opposed to some other institutions that I don't know, so I cannot say much about them, the theatre is a place where freedom, the freedom of actors on the stage is always brought into question anew, and each time an actor comes out onto the stage, he has the power not to do what has been agreed on in the course of rehearsals, he has the power not to say the text that he had to say, and not to make the move that he made. Relying on his personal consciousness, responsibility, professionalism, an actor behaves in accordance with his conscience, acts in accordance with his conscience. And we must act in the same way when situations like these, I would say, make-or-break situations, occur. We must do so lest this should turn into what used to be called, in the Youth Association, the ideational orientation of the young, personally, I would rather talk about what we are to do with something that is now manifesting itself as the negative tradition of the political theatre in Yugoslavia.

Over the next few minutes G. S. reminded the audience that in the course of the 1980's quite a few patriotic performances were produced in Serbia, and went on to name some of them. He claims that the cultural policy of that period influenced the current situation and concluded his speech as follows:

Those gathered here should be concerned about responsibility, for as far as I can see, they are mainly people to do with the theatre, responsibility for THAT which produced THIS. I don't see that the responsibility of people connected with the theatre lies elsewhere. I think acquiescing all too easily to compromise repertoires, agreeing to act in the service of national homogenisation, that such things have actually led to the situation that we are in now.

N. P. says that over the last few days he has participated in various public debates. He agrees with G. S. and thinks that the theatre has contributed a lot to this crisis. He says that he curses the day when he voted to include one of the nationalist plays mentioned by G. S. in the repertory, but thinks that the theatre must now respond to the times. Remembering his colleague's words, he goes on:

The theatre must no longer be a conformist, it mustn't turn a deaf ear, it is obligated by "not having obstructed this trend as much as it could have".

M. K. What I say on the stage is in the service of the culture of this people, it does not serve any powers-that-be!

A. J. For those who don't know me, I'm A. J., I teach at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts, where teaching has been suspended. Every day, a number of people address me as a professor teaching at that faculty, first of all actors who support the students, and they say, it's good that you're not working, that teaching's been suspended, that's the way it should be, keep it up, persevere in your protest; and yet, in the evening they go to see those very same performances, appear on TV, etc. I really don't understand what right someone has to encourage students not to attend their classes while he goes on doing his job as if nothing was happening.

S. B. I can understand why M. K. reacts so angrily, I reasoned with myself in a similar way in order to justify appearing in certain performances. In some performances I felt the way M. K. says she did, I expressed a certain attitude in them. However, there weren't many such performances, there were many more of the other kind, wherein by acting, by appearing on the stage, I actually gave my tacit approval, was inactive. Now, however, after the election fraud, I am surprised at the reaction of our Association, which gave its half-hearted, symbolic support to the students, for I think that it is no longer enough to have performances which even speak openly against the regime, it is now a much stronger form of resistance not to perform. I think it is high time to make such a radical move.

M.K. I'll be very brief. You know, this began as a talk about the theatre and about us in it, and it turned into mutual accusations that we have to defend against. I do believe that this is not the topic of this conversation and refuse to participate in it. I do apologise for reacting so angrily, it was over the top really, I do apologise, but what I have on the stage is my emotion, that's the only thing, a very clear thought that I want to express, and I am proud of that thought that I impart from the stage. Of course, a day may come when I'll say that I don't want to act any more, but don't make me do it, let me feel that myself. I DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO DO IT, I DON'T WANT TO HAVE TO DO ANYTHING, I WANT TO WANT TO DO THINGS! You have to give me the right to want something. I defend my right to speak some important, clever, emotional things about us and about myself from the stage.

A.J. But we haven't been doing anything for three weeks already...

M.K. But you don't do anything anyway, apart from going to school! I mean, that's your job, you still...

Noise from the audience.

No... you didn't hear me well, you didn't hear me at all, sorry.

M. P. I'm sorry, I'm not from your line of work, I'm a painter and a writer. I must ask M. K. whether she has seen that there is a bigger and more magnificent stage in this city these days than any stage she'll ever appear on, and in this sense, I believe that she can go on acting in a theatre that no one will ever come to...

M. K. The theatre is always full.

G. S. I don't act since I'm a theatrical director, so I can't speak of the same thing as M. K., I can understand that. But something else is the matter here. One who doesn't understand that the theatre is the sphere of freedom and that we are, as L.J. R., who is with us tonight, would say, forced to enact our freedom in this theatre.

Noise from the audience.

Someone maintains that it was not L.J. R. who said that but Heidegger.

Noise from the audience.

Somebody else says it wasn't Heidegger.

Whoever said that, what I mean is that one who does not understand that it is a sphere of freedom, that your canvas, M. P., is stretched tight, I don't know whether you are on strike at home or not. I don't know whether a composer is composing at home or not, maybe he's composing right now, perhaps he's creating his best work now, well, following that same principle, we have no other space for that freedom of ours. And we can make symbolic gestures, we can decide not to perform for a day, seven days, five days, a month. If a general strike is announced in this country, of course, theatres won't work either, but what the canvas is to a painter, what a piano or a music sheet is to a composer, to an actor, it's performing. I have tried to initiate another debate here, one that, as far as I can see, concerns no one very much, and that is our own responsibility for this state of affairs that we've come to...

Someone interrupts him.

...that's another matter, the theatre is a collective, and performing is something else, that's an individual act.

G. S. continues to talk about the negative heritage of Yugoslav political and nationalist theatre, mentions Leni Riefenstahl and the ethical senselessness of her work during World War Two, and suggests that they should return to the topic of whether to perform or not, without accusing one another, addressing former professor M. M., who, he feels, should not voice an opinion on the matter since she is a theoretician, not a practitioner.

M. M. I'll only tell you one thing. I know a lot of writers who haven't written anything over these nine years, I know a lot of painters who have been unable to paint. And I have a lot of friends who have written so that nobody here wanted to publish them, and when they did get published their works weren't read. So don't exclude other disciplines first of all and then claim that you're God-given, incredibly inspired, and that your space is the only space of freedom.

G. S. says that M. M. misunderstood him. M. K. says that M. M. is a dissatisfied person. B. P. says that she is of the same opinion and that I. B. also claims that M.M. is a dissatisfied person. M. M. says that she has never argued otherwise, adding:

One who is satisfied, he now performs in the theatre!

D. M. I have only just arrived, and I believe that you've been debating, arguing over pros and cons... I know only one thing. As far as I see, no one can threaten my life. Call off my performance, and you're threatening my life. That is a freedom I won't allow to anyone. For, I don't perform in order to live, I live in order to perform. You, Mrs M. M., are on your own, while I stand in front of a collective.

He also says that his performance features people with different political attitudes, and that he cannot bring into question their right to participate in his performance. He points out that it is not his performance but a joint performance. And says to M. M. to refrain from attacking this because she's lost the argument.

YOU'VE LOST! All your reasoning's empty. The theatres won't respond to your crazy demand that we should stop doing our work!

J. S. Do you teach at the faculty now?

D. M. I beg your pardon?

J. S. Do you teach at the faculty now?

D. M. No, I don't, but that's my individual gesture, my dear! I agree with my students... You've no idea what the theatre is.

Laughter in the audience.

D. M. That is my firm belief, for which I am prepared to give what they call physical life. YOU CAN'T, YOU CAN'T demand of me to stop living.

M. M. I'm not demanding that at all.

D. M. You are!!! You are categorically demanding precisely that in the name of your political hot-headedness. You cannot abolish a life!!! You can't... Well, that's how I see it.

Noise.

J. A. It would be good to discuss whether we want to react, and in what way, if people do not agree that performances should be suspended, let's have some new suggestions. J. C., you've mentioned what's happening... Let's not delude ourselves, the theatre is a social category! Social! M. M. is right in pointing that out.

Somebody speaks, but it is unintelligible.

J. A. So we say, people, take a walk through the centre of the city, take a look around... That's as much as I want to say, it's very important to me, I mean, why empty words now, why should we try to outsmart one another now, "sphere of freedom", "it means life to me", it means that to all of us, and we all know why. If we go on like this, G. S., I'm sure that our responsibility will be even greater!

N. P. Among the students, you'll find no more emotions. They've decided to do something, with us or without us... There are no emotions there. And as for the theatre, let it deal with emotions where it's necessary, what we should find here is some technical, non-emotional mode, that which should be our contribution or something else.

M. P. Or retreat... The Serbian Patriarch Pavle says that he won't take sides. Today, on one side, there are the youth and the future of Serbia, and on the other, the one who has been called "the last tyrant in Europe" by [the Warsaw weekly] *Polytika!* That is to say, life, as opposed to illusions. If you want to be an illusion outside the theatre, off-stage and outside your profession, you have every right to do so. If you don't, you must organise yourselves technically, without any emotions, in order to give those people who are more aware than you support on a daily basis.

F. D. Obviously, over the past four years things have got to such a state that we must make a 360-degree turnaround, and EVERYTHING must stop so that we can start anew. Some are corrupted by money, some by politics, ideology, nationalism, etc. And in that sense,

EVERYTHING MUST FALL APART!!! That's how far things have gone! And concerning all this, we must think now about our responsibility for this, both on the part of those who made those performances and of those who wrote the texts.

D. M. Are you saying that the theatres should stop performing?

F. D. Yes, if everything else stops, then the theatres must stop, too.

D. M. If everything else stops, yes.

J. S. The theatres can't go on performing if everything else stops. BUT OUR AIM MUST BE THAT EVERYTHING SHOULD STOP!!!!...

F. D. Our colleague from Hungary, the writer Professor Peter Zilahy.

P. Z. (in English) First of all, I'd like to apologise for speaking English and not Serbian. I'm sorry. So I apologise for not speaking Serbian, but this is probably a part of that international culture in which we lived, it's called communism, that's why we don't speak the languages of others. The reason why I asked to be allowed to speak is that I've been to Prague, Berlin and Budapest, and I've seen all those mass demonstrations. And I view those demonstrations as theatre. I wouldn't like to advise anyone to perform or not to perform, but I do think that this is an opportunity for every actor and for every person connected to the theatre in some way. For, this is no longer a matter of politics. This is a matter of art, what you have now you'll never have in the same way again. From the point of view of art, if you don't do something now, you'll never be able to do it again.

O. S. I'm O. S., and I'm an intruder in your world. I'd just like to say why cultural practitioners must react. Because while the concept that has led us to this was being prepared, we participated in it, literature, philosophy, the theatre, film, we paved the way. Therefore, if we paved the way for this, we are now obligated to step out and say: "Yes, this was our doing", everyone should square his own accounts. This evil actually originated from the cultural sector, not just from the military or the political sector. We are neither naive nor innocent, WE PARTICIPATED IN IT AS WELL. So now we should step out and say: "We won't do this any longer, we made a mistake, we want a new world..."

V. DJ. Actors, colleagues, don't take offence, I know all of you as the back of my own hand. You can sit in the bar until 4 o'clock and then perform half-drunk, and I call on you, don't be offended by my words, colleagues, not everybody drinks, but it's well known that actors drink more than other artists, ballerinas wobble on the stage if they drink... I call on you to take a walk, instead of spending time in bars and chatting to friends. Take a walk!!! Don't be the elite, be the elite in the evening, when you appear on the stage, and in the street be citizens. Go out for your rights, TAKE A WALK. Join the masses. Take a walk!!!

VOCIES FROM THE AUDIENCE We do that.

G. S. Some walk, others don't.

V. DJ. I call upon those who don't walk.

VOICE FROM THE AUDIENCE Who doesn't walk?

D. M. Can I say something again? You are forcing me to do something I can't do, and I think this debate is futile. There is no one who can talk a top-class actor into not performing. Don't try it, it's a game you're bound to lose.

B. P. Do excuse me, D. M., let me just make one thing clear. Whether actors will perform or not is a matter for the Association, an entirely different debate. What we wanted to do tonight

is not that at all. The fact that our debate boils down to that only proves that there is something there, people voice their own opinions on that matter.

D. M. B. P., dear, let me tell you, dear....

B. P. ...let me finish, wait, wait, let me finish. This debate was not conceived for the purpose of talking anyone into doing anything! No one has brought anyone here in order to, wait, wait...

J. C. ...what do you mean they're not talking anyone into anything, of course they are. People speak about it very temperamentally.

B. P.: Wait, people are talking about...

J. C. ...never mind, let's talk about what people want to talk about.

B. P. I know, but we can also talk about some crucial things, as a consequence of which we have this question.

D. M. Do excuse me, I'm not ready, you should have provided me with talking points, as if in a symposium...

B. P. No, I'm not talking about any symposium.

D. M. Don't talk like that, don't...

B. P. ...well, I believe that everyone...

J. C. ...B. P., B. P., you can only propose that we talk about something else, otherwise, let people talk about...

B. P. ...well, let him not say that we are trying to talk him into something, nobody is talking him into anything...

J. C. ...we have gathered here at a moment when, in a symbolic gesture, we are not performing...

B. P. ...I agree...

J. C. ...so that's one of the lacmus tests for our topic, and never mind, let's not criticise what people are saying...

B. P. ...why, I simply think that those problems are far more complex than...

J. C. ...and don't you feel that through this we are talking about those more complex topics?

B. P. OK. I do.

J. C. Don't...

D. M. ...A critique of the situation... All right, let that be the topic, but not this time.

B. P. Why, no, but I think...

D. M. ...I, I, I have come because people have driven me into a schizophrenic situation, to behave like a split personality. I protest, all right, but don't make me not perform, for God's sake... It means, by opting to perform I negate my participation in the protest as a citizen. Don't do this, please. Do understand me, I CAN'T. As a living organism, I can't, it's not that

I don't want to, I can't do it!!! Likewise, I CAN'T STOP, do understand. I can stop if I feel there's no more life, but if you think there's no more life and come up with the slogan: "Long live the future", then it means there is life left, and how! In the name of that life ahead of us, allow me to participate in the building of that life, the only way I know how.

J. C. The problem is, the theatre is a collective act, and if one accepts the view of one part of the collective that we should not perform, then the will of the other part of the collective is negated...

P. E. *Suggests that, in his opinion, people who come to the theatre feel threatened, those people whose postulates of existence and everything that made them free once have been destroyed, so they are lonely and come to the theatre in order to exchange some thoughts, to hear some subversive thoughts and to see that there is someone who thinks about them. And adds:*

And as for the question of whether the theatre should stop or not, artists do carry some responsibility, which is individual and will remain individual no matter how much the theatre is a collective act. The theatre must and should react in this way, perhaps even more radically, both individually and as a collective.

B. P. D. M., leave the siren of the Centre for Cultural Decontamination alone...

K. P. I think it's detrimental for everyone to think that the audience came to the theatre because the plays were telling them about the time they lived in and showed them some of the possibilities of that time. What the theatre did here was convince the audience that they could find some kind of a shelter and a kind of constant amnesia, make it possible for them to close their eyes on what was happening around them. Had the theatre repertory been different, had the influence of those plays that did reflect the time we were in been dominant, I think we wouldn't be having this debate tonight.

S. V. I apologise for entering this debate, for I am not directly connected with the theatre. I am a journalist employed with the newspaper that they are currently throwing eggs at. In my opinion, and I'm trying to think from the perspective of some future time, what remains recorded is a gesture. Whether that of actress D. S., who counts votes and then decides not to perform, whether that of actor G. S., who refuses to perform for ethical reasons.

Over the next few sentences she raises the question of anticipation on the part of the theatre on the social and political scene, and of her view of N. P.'s opinion that the theatre lags behind events.

N. P. The best kind of theatre I've seen these days is the football fans' rhythm section, when we've created something like that, then we can boast.

LJ. R. Who the hell are you?

S. V. Don't interrupt now, LJ. R., please.

LJ. R. No, I must, I'm sorry.

S. V. Excuse me, please, don't barge in right now, say it later.

LJ. R. No, I must, I'm sorry, I just can't stand that much talentless arrogance.

S. V. Don't interrupt, just let me finish.

LJ. R. No, excuse me, please. For 30 years now in this country we've been fucking around with commissars who want to ban our plays, to prevent us from performing them, allow us this, forbid us that, and now I'm supposed to listen to this man explain to me what a rhythm section is and what the theatre is. N. P., this is very rude, but you don't give a toss, so there.

SEVERAL PARTICIPANTS Boo, boo!!!!

LJ. R. You can boo all you like, a fat lot do you know.

S. V. Don't be like that, LJ.R.

LJ. R. Wait, hold on...

SOMEONE ...let him speak.

S. V. Let me finish, then you'll have your say.

LJ. R. No, I won't let you.

SOMEONE What's he saying?

LJ. R. The result of all this was that books didn't get written, other things were written, those people didn't write books, their life just passed. Children who were growing up never saw their plays, didn't read their books, because they demanded that silence should reign, that was their misfortune, when all's said and done.

N. P. We know who wrote books.

LJ. R. That's right, those who had something to say.

V. DJ. Those who get the money.

LJ. R. reacts to this emotionally, saying that for 20 years now he's been working under dreadful conditions, but M. M. reminds him of a person that he, too, knows, who writes because of getting paid to do it. LJ. R. says that this is so, adding that they shouldn't scare young people, and then asks if anyone can be free to do what he feels he ought to do. V. S. interrupts him, saying that this is precisely what they are trying to do now, only he won't let them. LJ. R. doesn't agree with this and adds:

All day long wise men have been telephoning my actors, threatening them, lecturing them, one moment they say, you can perform, the next that you can't. Well, no one can tell anyone – you can't! No way!

SOMEONE Well, they aren't saying...

LJ. R. ...they are. When our performances were banned, 90 per cent of those who are now lying to the young were pretending not to know. My friend F. D., there he is, he was the first to do so.

F. D. You're just lying in order to disqualify me.

LJ. R. F. D.!

F. D. We are finally in a position to see where each one of us stands. You are heading a Nazi, profascist organisation.

The loudest applause so far, general approval.

LJ. R. That's right... fantastic... And, of course, I'm a nationalist. I'm a nationalist, of course, right?

F. D. Well, I don't know what you are...

LJ. R. Of course, I'm a nationalist.

F. D. Then why are you with those who have started this war?

LJ. R. Well, I won't tell you. For you are too dumb to understand. I can't say to a man I don't like that he's stupid. To you, I must say it because I love you.

SEVERAL FEMALE VOICES Oh, oh!!!!

M. D. S. You said that those who banned things before are banning them again, and they banned things in the 1970's, when they had the power, and now those who don't have the power are raising their voices, that's a huge difference. If I say, don't print nationalist texts, my voice doesn't count, it is but a small voice of the civic public, it is quite a different matter if someone who has the power, who is a party official, a state official, says, don't print that book, then that book really doesn't get printed. And those two situations simply can't be compared. In that respect, LJ. R., your voice and your attitude as a party official reach much further than those of a retired professor who says, I ask actors not to perform, that's her attitude, plea, that's not an order, and if anyone sees it as an order, that reveals something about him. The first thing I said to the students at the rally they held at the faculty was, why are you asking more of the actors, why aren't you asking more of others, who have much greater social power. Some of our colleagues are TV producers, some are journalists who publish the most shameless lies, editors who accept to manipulate when editing footage, and directors who direct all that. Why don't we demand of them to suspend work, for their work is much more horrible than what is happening in theatres right now. It appears to me that what we should be talking about here is what a theatrical artist can do here and now, in his or her own way, in order to express his or her attitude clearly, lest that attitude should be subjected to abuse, manipulation, we are all collaborators of this regime, all of us, myself first of all. We are all collaborators of the regime in the same way as the audience, as already mentioned. In this respect, it would appear to me that the effect of reading out a proclamation before a performance is much greater... Thus the effect of reading a proclamation perhaps makes more sense at this particular moment in time than suspending theatrical performances. Believe me, no one would pay it any mind. No one would care. But let us have a moral attitude and say clearly what kind of society we live in, what kind of society we are fighting for and what we want to achieve. On that point, I would agree with K. P., who said that the repertory was essential, that it is something we can all influence, where we can achieve some breakthroughs.

LJ. R. I don't think you heard what D. M. said. He said precisely the same thing as you, only he said it entirely correctly and precisely.

M. D. S. I wasn't replying to D. M. but to you.

LJ. R. He told you a very simple thing – the essence of what we're doing is that there should be performances.

M. D. S. But what kind of performance, LJ. R? You've made good performances before, what are your performances now?

LJ. R. How do you know when you don't even see them?

FEMALE VOICES FROM THE AUDIENCE We do, we do!

LJ. R. You've no idea, nor is it of interest to you.

B. P. Please, people, please, just one thing – to perform or not to perform, can I now sideline this?

VOICES FROM THE AUDIENCE No, that is the essence of the matter!

LJ. R. We are not questioning one another's political views here. Some are interested in politics, others are not, that's quite natural.

N. P. Why, then?

B. P. Well, we know it, but no one...

N. P. ... but why, then, does someone want to ban something here, I am expressing my opinion. And as for you, LJ. R., if you came to see that rhythm section, you'd like it, I'm sure, but no one...

LJ. R. ... I heard you, I heard what you said a moment ago.

Silence.

N. P. So what did I say, come on.

LJ. R. You know what you said.

N. P. What did I say?

LJ. R. You know.

N. P. If I don't know, tell me.

J. S. I am very much opposed to everything that is happening, which I view as terrorising the citizens, I pity those who were brutally beaten, we all witness this and no one here raises his or her voice to say that it is so drastic, on the contrary, things that are a total lie get justified. What is shown on TV, the statements we hear from politicians, all that is full of lies. From now on, whoever takes sides, that's their personal right, but let them know that there is a lot of power on the streets, that's just an honest, non-partisan, citizens' initiative.

Applause.

N. P. I'm going home.

STUDENTS We, the students, are going home, too.

B. P. Let us lock up, then.

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