

Samo Oleami

Embracing Uncle Sam

Review of street theatre performance from Ana Desetnica festival 2015

Bad Rabbits (Lithuania): *Tomorrow Belongs to Me*

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Bad Rabbits's *"Tomorrow Belongs to Me"* offers an interesting answer to the problem of how to perform a political performance in a street situation. How to make an inviting show which audience will willingly follow and yet contains some weight or criticism? The answer lies in the strategy which is related to *parody*, but without the cynical distance – *"overidentification"*. This approach, which was used in Slovenian NSK movement in 1980s and is linked to artistic strategies of the then eastern bloc, subverts something not by criticising it, but by embracing it to the point of absurdity, creating a feeling of unease. In the case of theatre performances such an approach tries to get audience's participation in the celebration of the thing which will eventually be subverted and criticized.

In *"Tomorrow Belongs to Me"* the audience is framed as being a part of the ceremony Santa's elves are preparing for Uncle Sam. The performance embraces mainstream American (U.S.) culture with all its limbs and appendages, including the joyous atmosphere, the culture of smiling, show dance routines reminiscent of Disney's animated films, and (of course) all crucial U.S. brands like Coca Cola, CIA, globalism and colonialism. Bad Rabbits have created a well-crafted show that blends the approach of indoor drama theatre with its clearly cut scenes, smooth transitions, disciplined cast and a strong directorial guidance, with street theatre's handbook of tricks on how to engage and interact with the audience. After the initial celebration of Americanism with an occasional physical interaction

with the audience, the first turning point of the performance involves the appearance of an African black male fittingly presented as a blackface theatrical mask (*blackface was practice, also common in U.S., of a white actor painted as a black person*), who then runs through the whole body of the audience with elves in pursuit. Performers then redirect the already engaged audience into the culmination of the festivities – collective building of a “black gold” pipeline which requires the efforts of everyone, pouring of Coca cola into it and sending paper boats down the stream. It's the crucial point in the dramaturgy of the overidentification where the performers use the joy of being together as a small community on the street, creating a shared situation, and transplant this joy onto the topic of the performance – the embrace of the American culture – making the audience embrace it as well.



Strategy of overidentification is in not allowing the audience the luxury of a (cynical) distance and thus the performance shows how we are always a part of the system we try to appear to be distanced from; and this system is a part of us. This is finalised in *the reveal*, the breaking of the identification. In the case of “Tomorrow Belongs to Me” the show is suddenly and forcefully interrupted with the announcement of Armageddon, after which performers deliberately let the show descend into chaos, let the confusion take over, breaking the spell and dissolving the stage-audience barrier. In the downer ending, amidst the confusion and people not knowing whether to stay or leave or just wander around wrapped in their thoughts, the black man returns, creates a fire with sticks and gasoline, some people join him.

The strategy of “overidentification” allows *Tomorrow belongs to me* to employ the street theatre techniques of engaging an audience in a joyful embrace of togetherness, including physical interaction and collective activities, only to only to later pull the rug from under audience’s feet and deliver the critical social punch. One could also read the performance as a parody or a grotesque (*I remember myself laughing through the show and smiling afterwards*) and not necessarily through the

“overidentification” lens, though it seems to fit the Eastern European milieu the group is coming from. Be it a parody, criticism or irony, the show achieved what it was set out to do and its artistic strategy proved a good fit for the street theatre situation, as performance never takes a higher status than the audience, it never preaches, it stays open, inviting and embracing, till the abrupt end, when an iron fist is revealed within its velvet glove and the message strikes home.



*Samo Oleami, December 2015, some corrections July 2017
Photo: Bojan Okorn (1,3), Luka Dakskobler (2).*