



Dajana Ho and Sons: re-collecting an uncommon future

a common fragment of Dajana's uncommon identity

ABSTRACT

"Dajana Ho and Sons – re-collecting an uncommon future" is a part of the final work of the master program of the Applied Theater program at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad. Through interdisciplinary techniques of applied theater, contemporary dance, stage movement and performance dance, this work explores authenticity and identity that transcends gender, conscious and unconscious, individual and collective. The issue of authorship in this project remains open and fluid, while the central part of the work are twelve alter egos. They were created from the character of Dajana Ho, one of the oldest Belgrade drag performers. These alter egos of the second order go deeper into the field of liminal becoming ALTEROIDS - ephemeral phenomena that are not physically fixed. In this way, the alteroids are allowed to materialize in different ways. By taking unconventional forms of physical expression, they create a bridge between the author and the audience, ie, participants who, by taking on alteroids, contribute to their deeper development. Thus, the alteroids cease to be a mere display of the artist's search process for their authenticity, but rather open themselves to the true contribution of the audience to the construction of the overall performance. This type of interaction has the potential to further directly provoke the boundary between the role of the author of the interactive performance and the collective contribution of the audience, but it also examines the authenticity and the ownership of the self-development of the author of the project. By losing control over their work, the artist acquires insights that would not be possible without collective contribution and reassessment.

Key words: alteroid, identity, gender, collectivity, authorship, ownership

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION

Who is Dajana Ho?

Dajana Ho is a gender phenomenon based in Belgrade, Serbia. She is also one of the first Serbian drag performers. Her first public performance was in 2012, in an amateur theater production called "American Burlesque", where she portrayed herself. Dajana has performed at various venues in Belgrade and Novi Sad so far. In her performances, she incorporates diverse dance styles and theater approaches, primarily based on Latin and contemporary dance and clowning and applied theater techniques. Dajana participated in several art residencies and projects, such as: immersive theater residency "Diversity is Super-city" (Sremski Karlovci, 2016), immersive theater play "Day in Night" which was also presented at the 18. Bitef Polifonija (Belgrade, 2017). She is also a proud member of drag group "Wyrd Sisters" since 2016. Her latest project "Dajana Ho & Sons" (Belgrade, 2018) was created as part of Puzzle #3 project organized by Stanica (Service for contemporary dance). Her twelve Sons and she are constantly evolving and growing an active community together. They have also been introduced to an international audience at the "Play, Perform, Learn, Grow" conference in Thessaloniki in 2018. Dajana and Sons are currently working on a MA project in Applied Theater at the Academy of Arts in Novi Sad.

MAPPING THE DRAG "SUBCULTURE" IN CONTEMPORARY THEATER

It is quite essential to examine the position of drag in current contemporary theater scene, both in Serbia and in the world before one goes further into a discussion. Please note that all the subjectivity and stepping out of the academic style of writing further on will be due to trying to vividly represent Dajana's own experience and point of view. That said, it is impossible to maintain objectivity and integrity and that should not matter, since it's not vital for the purpose of review of this study that actually opposes those two principles at its core. Also, Dajana's sanity is debatable at times.

So, what is drag, finally?

The definition may vary, but since that's not the main subject of the work, we'll use the one from Merriam-Webster dictionary that states that drag is

“clothing typical of one sex worn by a person of the opposite sex —often used in the phrase in drag men dressed in drag”.

Drag performer is, then, someone who questions gender through their performance, roughly said.

In the recent years, drag has blossomed quite a bit, considering the rising popularity of the American hit reality TV series, RuPaul’s Drag Race. While this American hit series is bringing attention to drag, it also overshadows local performers. Global capitalistic aspect of the show raises the expectation of the audience, and at the same time drag becomes confined to a system of rules seen on the show. By defining drag to strict patterns of what’s right and what’s not, it becomes it’s own paradox and, some say, it loses its purpose.

In Serbia, on the other hand, Dajana thinks that drag is still quite unexplored and underdeveloped. Serbian performers are still struggling in finding their target audience, since they are not historically connected to the LGBT movement like their fellow colleagues from USA. So, this subculture is not yet a subculture in Serbia, since the community is close to non-existent. At the same time, the American TV show is so popular that Serbian performers suffer almost all of the consequences like local drag performers in USA – the expectations are high and unrealistic.

To Dajana it seems that drag performers have yet to find their role in Serbia’s cultural scene. Until then, their cultural identity gives them a huge opportunity to fluctuate and explore. In reality, though, it seems that this much freedom gives local Serbian performers a sense of hopelessness and a growing tendency to nurture patterns in order to fix at least a part of their performative identity.

DAJANA HO AND SONS: THE ORIGINS

Through her own struggle and inability to accept the situation as it is, Dajana began to explore different approaches that could offer solutions to the problem of drag not being a part of anything in Serbia. The more she researched, the more frustrated she became. As time passed, new drag performers emerged on the Belgrade scene, but the quantity did not help in resolving the issue at all – as all the young performers soon started adapting to the already existing patterns, due to the lack of experience probably.

Drag performers, commonly known as drag queens, are usually not known for their down-to-earth personas. The way Dajana sees it, young Serbian drag queens began interacting with the world around them in a manner that was a mere shadow of what was seen on RuPaul's Drag Race, creating a toxic environment for anyone included in the drag community in the making. By focusing on internal relationships, vanity and gossip instead of on the quality of their performance and communication with the audience, the Serbian drag community began to sink before it even had a chance to prosper.

Even though Dajana Ho was present from the very beginning, a feeling of inadvertence emerged. Frustration and feeling of being separated from the others were the main catalysts of two quite big consequences in Dajana's career: first she dropped the title of the queen and then she gave birth to twelve alter egos – Sons of Dajana Ho. The two are tightly connected to each other and are essential for understanding this work.

a) DAJANA HO IS NOT A DRAG QUEEN

Realizing that this title of a “queen” comes with quite a lot of expectations and unwanted assumptions, along with the inability to translate the term adequately to Serbian, Dajana decided to drop her title.

Even the term “drag” stays disputable, since it is still argued how it should be transcribed into Serbian phonologically. At the same time, Dajana came into contact with the crip theory by Robert McRuer, that basically connects all the missing links. It amalgamates queer activism, activism of people with disabilities and social activism for equality and combating discrimination. McRuer uses the term “crip” (short from cripple) as a self defining term for people with disabilities. Such a term includes the widest range of all types of disabilities, both physical and mental. By using a word that is considered derogatory in English language, McRuer reclaims its meaning and gives it a new perspective, just like it has been previously done with the term “queer”. This entire theory made strong sense to Dajana since it unites so many different communities and thus refuses the narrative of staying within the predefined margin created within the hetero-normative society. Each person rarely belongs to one community only, so by uniting all those marginalized and neglected communities it gives the people opportunity to really participate and create something different together. When it comes to Dajana's work specifically, this inclusive aspect of the theory really pushed her into further questioning identity and implementing that inclusiveness into the transitioning drag culture that

is usually connected to the LGBT community only. Dajana Ho, for once, never felt that a drag performer has to be directly connected to any community at all, which proved true judging by the diverse audience that watches and participates in her performances. So by informing her work by this theory, she is hoping to find better ways of connecting people that are only seemingly so different from one other. And that is precisely why she doesn't need this title of the “queen”, since it invokes unnecessary hierarchy that has no space in Dajana's work and is only in the way of connecting with the community.

b) DAJANA’S SONS ARE ALTEROIDS

Dajana has long searched for ways to shift the focus from what she thought was a self-centered self-development of a drag queen whose main goal usually is to achieve the improbable ideal of perfection of the self, imposed upon by the capitalistic society. Instead, she wants to divert the attention to a constant becoming through community building. She preaches that, in order for drag community to find its place on Serbia’s cultural scene, it is strongly necessary for it to step out of its comfort zone and to see what the needs of other neglected communities are. The crip theory should help Dajana find a way to shift the current glamorous exclusiveness of the emerging drag culture into a more inclusive approach for a wider audience or a broader, healthier community.

Even though Dajana Ho is aware that she isn't a performer with physical disabilities, she is strongly influenced by the inclusiveness of the crip theory and feels quite a strong connection and empathy with anyone that has some kind of a struggle and/or disability.

She firmly believes that, only in creating strong links with all the communities that are in the least neglected, lies the key to unlocking the full potential of drag. By becoming crip inspired and oriented, she thinks that drag could be given an opportunity to step out of the existing small social circles and find its way to a stronger social and cultural impact.

Around that time Dajana gave birth to her twelve alter egos, twelve Sons. She realized that she couldn't possibly handle all the work she had planned out by herself. Her sons are therefore naturally all strongly informed by the crip theory and they are focused on community building.

However, in order to actually build a community, Dajana felt that she should hold no ownership of her Sons, other than connecting them and giving them a starting platform for their future

work. That's why she opened the category of their identity and developed them into the form of alteroids, community-focused ephemeral phenomena that are not physically fixed.

The Sons are everchanging, and so are their names in contact with the community, but here will be listed all of them as of now: Purrva S-Prima, Vicki LLX, Indi Sajsi (V), Silov Ana (male name Pete Easdy), Lidia Olenina, Supportya Loca, Poly Dicka, Miss Petty Betty Blek, Radna Verzija (English name: Miss Work in Progress), Dragica Bradica (English name: Lisa Capitalista), Nicoletta and Orb Hanna. They vary diametrically from one another and each represent an archetype, a manifestation of a problem deeply rooted into our society that they want to examine with the community they perform in (e.g. question of ownership, political correctness, gender norms, (lack of) critical thinking, emotional literacy, mental health issues and visibility etc).

They are all still in the making and therefore a constant work in progress, mostly Radna Verzija (English name: Miss Work in Progress) herself. Dajana wanted to go an extra mile in making them approachable and decided that they grow together with an audience they are presented to. The idea is quite simple. Each time they are presented, they learn something new about themselves and in that way, they develop. It is also possible for them to fully realize their alteroid potential and to be passed on to someone else to represent them or simply try them on. The one who is usually being their physical host at the moment is Radna Verzija. In addition to being the most unnoticeable and uninteresting of all the Sons, Radna Verzija is also the one that has to make sure that the rest of them are showcased in the best way possible at all times, especially if there is no one else to represent them at the moment.

They exist for the audience and without them they can not grow. The very purpose of Dajana's Sons, these alteroids, is to connect with the audience in order to create a solid immersive experience for people who are present each time they emerge. When they fail to connect, they miss an opportunity to become. Without their community they are more than nothing. They cease to matter.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The biggest step for each Son is to become independent from Dajana's motherly embrace. Even though she presents herself as a selfless, giving mother, she still struggles with completely letting go of her ownership/mothership, as it is only natural that it is all a part of the process. After a while though, each Son should develop a life of their own. Whether they will be

successful in communicating with their own target audience and what kind of an approach they will use, remains unsure. Their identities have been created with the intention that they are ever changing and strongly dependent on the community that builds with them. How much they will give and whether they will get enough back to survive to see a future that is uncommonly common is entirely up to everyone included in the process.

FUTURE REFERENCE

For more information about this project, refer to Dajana Ho or the coordinator for all the Sons, Radna Verzija.

Since the project is a constant work in progress itself, this is where it stops for now.

Bibliography

- 1] Lukić, Darko (2016). Uvod u primijenjeno kazalište. Čije je kazalište? Zagreb: Leykam international d.o.o.
- 2] McRuer, Robert (2006). Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability. New York: