

Touching Society's Raw Nerves: Castellucci and Frljić

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Abstract

The essay analyses the political tactics of two innovative European theatre directors, Romeo Castellucci and Oliver Frljić, and their use of displeasure as a theatrical tool. It shows how they decentre the spectator's vision of the world and shape theatre as a specific producer of truth as defined by Alain Badiou in *Handbook of Inaesthetics*: thinking about art is not extrinsic; it is art itself. Exploring their work and audience reactions to the performances of *On the Concept of Face* in Paris and Vilnius, *The Curse* in Warsaw, *Our Violence and Your Violence* in Vienna and Sarajevo, this essay shows how they transform theatre into a weapon of political action using the displeasure and offence of the audience as artistic tools. The actors provoke the audience in order to generate a response and their involvement. Their performances thus generate discomfort and sometimes violent responses from the audience within various theatrical, cultural, and political contexts. To achieve their goal, Castellucci and Frljić use radical means: religiously motivated image-making inciting extreme reactions, insulting the audience in a specific version of parabasis, and resurrections producing defamiliarization. They deliberately blur the line between reality and fiction, convinced that the performance is the result of interaction between the performers and the audience. Thus, they destabilize the social distribution of power reflected in the theatre.

Keywords

Romeo Castellucci, Oliver Frljić, Political Theatre, Alain Badiou, hyperrealism, stage writer

*Introduction: Exploring the Border Between Aesthetics, Ethics, and Politics*¹

Our aim is to delve into the compelling and controversial work of two prominent European theatre directors, Romeo Castellucci and Oliver Frljić. More precisely, to explore the border between aesthetics and politics in their selected performances: *Sul concetto di volto nel figlio di dio*, *Kłątwa*, *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje*, which caused strong reactions in Sarajevo, Brno, Split, Paris, Warsaw, and Vilnius. With the help of the concepts of Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Christopher Balme, Bruno Tackels, Buz Kershaw, Judith Butler, Johannes Birringer, and Oliver Neveaux in dealing with the paradoxes of political art, our aim will be to examine how the two directors use theatre as a powerful instrument of political action. By analyzing the reception of their selected performances, we will try to describe how Castellucci and Frljić produce what Christopher Balme defines as “hyperrealist theatre”.²

Frljić and Castellucci provoke open debate and transform the stage into a platform for shaping the truth by challenging conventional perceptions and pushing the boundaries of theatre. Thus, they echo the philosophy of Alain Badiou, where art is an internal to the artistic effect of works of art and the particular truth activated in the artwork is specific to art alone: “Art is a thought in which artworks are the Real (and not the effect). And this thought, or rather the truths that it activates, are irreducible to other truths—be they scientific, political, or amorous. This also means that art, as a singular regime of thought, is irreducible to philosophy. Immanence: Art is rigorously coextensive with the truths that it generates. Singularity: These truths are given nowhere else than in art.”³ Both directors do so by using a strategy of evoking discomfort and offence in their audiences, thereby catalyzing profound societal discussions. According to Balme, both directors belong to the realm of hyperrealism: “The term means somewhat different things in different art forms (...) In the theatre, it is difficult to disambiguate from realism or naturalism. However, if we understand realism as a set of conventionalized aesthetic rules linking representation and the lifeworld of the recipient—in shorthand the

¹ The essay was written in the framework of the research programme “Theatre and Interart Studies” (P6-0376), co-financed by the Slovenian Research and Innovation Agency.

² Balme 2015, 3

³ Badiou 2005, 9.

willing suspension of disbelief—hyperrealism discards or annuls this contract, destabilizes the conventions so that the spectator is unsure what the aesthetic frame is. It is this process of unsettling the theatrical frame that characterizes the theatrical version of hyperrealism and which poses difficulties for theatre critics and criticism.”⁴ It is important to note that during the last two decades, both artists discussed have been the subject of serious analysis dealing with both the structure and strong social impact of their works. Nevertheless, both directors reject the notion of intentional provocation.⁵ They understand and interpret their work as a means to rejuvenate the language of theatre. They construct theatrical representations that challenge established norms, often resulting in controversy and misinterpretation due to their transgressive elements. Our hypothesis will be that while doing so, both directors tap into the collective consciousness, triggering responses and political frustrations through their confrontational narratives.

In our analysis of the performances and their fervent receptions, we will try to explore the specific procedures that Castellucci and Frlić use to pave the way for various forms of resistance, including aesthetic. We will try to establish to what extent and how their provocations produce a generative strategy to incite a response and involvement. Their productions often elicit intense reactions from audiences, at times leading to violent protests in multiple countries, often spearheaded by Catholic groups and occasionally supported by right-wing politicians and other ideological and religious factions.⁶

To achieve their objectives, both artists employ radical means, including religiously charged imagery that incites displeasure and extreme reactions, as well as audience-insulting parabasis and defamiliarization techniques. Their productions reveal us to ourselves, but “not by providing a mirror in which we’d see our reflection, but rather by activating real, extreme

⁴ Balme 2015, 3.

⁵ When defining provocative qualities of his radical theatre Frlić speaks not about provocation but about semantic bombs: “Good theatre shouldn’t want to unify the ideas, but to plant into them semantic bombs with different timings that will trigger them.” (Mustroph 2022) When speaking about Castellucci, Francine Di Mercurio points out that, “the artist seems to reject the term provocation, adding nuances that reaffirm the political function of Art, and more specifically that of theatre. Roméo Castellucci states, in an interview published in *Télérama*, that he prefers the word scandal, in the Greek sense of a small stone that causes stumbling.” (Di Mercurio 2013)” For the interview, see Pascaud 2012.

⁶ For more details see Lease 2019 and Di Mercurio 2013.

affects, mobilized and made accessible to us in the form of direct, tangible experience during the performance and in the social process it has triggered.”⁷ Both artists employ Brechtian “lessons against identification and for commitment”.⁸ They explore the border between aesthetics, ethics, and politics. Both artists share the thoughts of Claudia Castellucci that “one of the political tasks of the theatre (...) is to get right to the bottom of its own specific language.”⁹ They are persuaded that in order to do so, artists do not need to fear the impossibility of communication, they do not need translation, commentary, or explanation, but have to employ a specific “strategy for words and a strategy for images that is capable of organising a new reality.”¹⁰ And they understand theatre as a form of representation that can renew: theatrical language using theatrical “iconoclastic” pictures.

Castellucci and His Attack on Central Iconographic Symbols

Let us start with Romeo Castellucci. In a 2015 interview, he articulated his belief, which will be a starting point for our discussion: “every image in art should penetrate us, cause in us a kind of fire.”¹¹ True to this sentiment, his work, spanning over almost four decades, has consistently ignited controversy and intrigue within the art world. Through his company, Società Raffaello Sanzio, Castellucci has pioneered a new theatrical language, creating productions that are simultaneously immediate, vibrant, beautiful, and unsettling. His theatrical approach delves into the boundaries between the human and the inhuman, often eschewing conventional dialogue in favour of primal symbolism. Castellucci’s oeuvre is marked by its ever-evolving style, experimental spirit, audacity, and delicate balance between risk and reward. His contributions have left an indelible mark on modern theatre, prompting theatre scholars to observe that Società Raffaello Sanzio has fundamentally altered contemporary theatre practice and theory. When writing about the work of Castellucci, Bruno Tackels attributes him the title of “stage writer” (*écrivain du plateau*)¹², he who invents “new languages of the stage and

⁷ Adamiecka-Sitek 2020 (2017), 19.

⁸ Bal 2007, 6.

⁹ Kelleher et al. 2007, 29.

¹⁰ Kelleher et al. 2007, 29.

¹¹ Orfanou 2015, 5.

¹² With the term “*écrivain du plateau*” Bruno Tackels refers to Pippo Delbono, François Tanguy, Romeo

immediately assumes the role of a writer, a writer of a particular kind, whose medium and material come essentially from the stage”.¹³ Consequently, “the text comes from the stage, not from the book”.¹⁴

Throughout his visually striking productions, Castellucci has presented bodies that vary widely in shape, age, and health, from disfigured and diseased to obese and emaciated. While his productions may occasionally follow a loose narrative structure, the central mode of communication remains the body in extreme states. In his essay, “The Iconoclasm of the Stage and the Return of the Body”, Castellucci himself advocated for an escape from figurative representation and narrative overload, instead emphasizing the immediacy of pure bodily communication. He wrote: “Therefore, escape; escape—in the shell of the figure—from figurativeness and from the overload of narration. Avoiding the expedient or the tedium of a story to narrate in order to reach more immediately—is this velocity?—the pure communication that is the body.”¹⁵ He is persuaded that it is the unrefined, spontaneous body that possesses the power to profoundly affect audiences and offer fresh perspectives on the world. In this context, Dorota Semenowicz describes and interprets (in *The Theatre of Romeo Castellucci and Societas Raffaello Sanzio*), how the time and space of the theatrical event encompasses the stage and the house under the same rules. “It is impossible to separate the subject from the world presented onstage, inside from outside. It is so due to the image, which both uncovers and breaks apart the representation: the image of Auschwitz destroys the order of the Book of Genesis in *Genesi*; rape in *Purgatorio* destroys the image of the affluent, bourgeois family that was constructed at the beginning; the scene of caring for the defecating father distorts our interaction with the image of Christ in *Sul concetto di volto nel Figlio di Dio*.”¹⁶

We are going to concentrate on a specific period in Castellucci’s work outlined by the productions *Purgatorio* (Purgatory, 2008), part of the triptych *Divine Comedy*, based on the

Castellucci, Rodrigo Garcia and Angelica Lidell, who write on stage and directly for the stage.

¹³ Tackels 2005, 13.

¹⁴ Tackels 2005, 14.

¹⁵ Castellucci 2007, 39.

¹⁶ Semenowicz 2016, 51.

Dante poem, and *Sul concetto del volto nel Figlio di Dio* (On the Concept of the Face in the Son of God, 2010). In both productions Castellucci “shifts audience emotions related to a social or religious image into a different context, disposing of their original meaning but keeping their authenticity.”¹⁷ This move is accompanied by a different aesthetic—in a realistic vein, built in reference to bourgeois theatre. Thus “*Purgatorio* considers the relationship between the creator and his creation, God and his work, the father and the son.”¹⁸

The story about the performance of *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris reads as an almost perfect thriller. On the evening of 20 October, 2011, during the premiere, a group of nine protesters dramatically interrupted the performance. They stormed the main stage, unfurling a banner bearing the words “Christianophobia—it’s enough!”. This incident led to a scuffle with stagehands attempting to clear the stage, culminating in the involvement of the police, who eventually removed the protesters after approximately twenty minutes. Prior to the performance, another group had attempted to block audience members from entering the theatre by chaining themselves to the doors, deploying tear gas and stink bombs, and distributing pamphlets denouncing the production as “Christianophobic”.

For the protesters, the play was deeply blasphemous and constituted a direct attack on central iconographic symbols. However, the stage intrusion on 20 October marked just the beginning of a ten-day campaign of violent protests, which resulted in the arrest of 220 individuals. This wave of demonstrations ignited a substantial public debate, involving not only artists and theatre critics, but also prominent religious figures who publicly defended the theatre, the production, and, most critically, the principle of freedom of expression.

Fifteen of those arrested faced charges under article 431–1 of the French penal code, which pertains to “hindering the freedom of expression.” Under French law, this offence is criminal and carries a maximum penalty of one year in prison and/or a 15,000 euro fine. When coupled with violence, this charge can lead to a more severe punishment, including up to three years in

¹⁷ Semenowicz 2016, 8.

¹⁸ Semenowicz 2016, 8.

prison and a 45,000 euro fine.¹⁹

When asked about his own intentions when creating and performing the piece, Castellucci claimed he was “doing a theatre of questioning, of worry, which plays on ambiguity. And everything is ambiguous (...): Jesus, shit, who is also of the light ... What I am seeking is to split consciousness in two, to open a wound so that questions can enter deeply into us. Art entirely relies on this condition of posing problems, otherwise it is purely decorative.”²⁰ And when asked by a *Libération* journalist how he experienced the controversy surrounding *Sul Concetto di volto nel figlio di Dio*, his answer was: “Badly. It’s terribly exhausting to fall back into clichés. You become your own enemy. (...) The sentence that crystallized a lot of questions was the one at the end, ‘You are my shepherd,’ which could also be read as ‘You are not my shepherd.’ But you just have to reread the psalms. Psalm 22, with ‘You are my shepherd,’ is preceded by Psalm 21, which contains dreadful accusations against God. I see prayer as a lack, a sign of the absence of faith. Having faith is believing in the unbelievable. We only pray because we don’t believe.”²¹

Highly interesting and politically productive was the reaction to the performance in Vilnius, where it generated significant excitement when shown twice at the Sirenos Festival in 2012.²² Discussions about the play started in the Lithuanian parliament in the week before the premiere – lawmakers opened debates into two resolutions condemning the play and calling to boycott or cancel it. The announcements for the performance drew protests from the Catholic Church, as parliamentary speaker Irena Degutienė called for “reservation regarding the play” and an “evaluation into whether the content of the play was in line with the Constitution.”²³ Thus, even

¹⁹ For press coverage of the event see: Mestre & Monnot 2011; Ribes 2011; Vernay 2011; Sirach 2011; Lavignotte 2011.

²⁰ Remarks from the interview by Darge 2011.

²¹ Solis 2012.

²² There were two performances scheduled as a part of Sirenos International Theatre Festival in Vilnius, 6 October and 7 October 2012. On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God, www.vilniusfestivals.lt

²³ Among the most interesting political reactions in a debate that preceded the performance in Vilnius, let us list some, described in the news article of 15min.lit: “Lithuanian Parliamentary Speaker Irena Degutienė on Wednesday called for reservation regarding the play. She said that state institutions should evaluate whether the content of the play was in line with the Constitution. Nevertheless, Degutienė emphasized that a ban would not produce the expected result, saying that top figures within Lithuania’s Catholic Church had also asked society to refrain from anger. “I believe we should act in a moderate manner. Those responsible should look into possible violations of the Constitution of the Republic of Lithuania,” told Degutienė, deputy leader of the ruling Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats, to Žinių Radijas news radio”. 15min.lit, 3. 10. 2012.

before it was shown, the performance produced varied instances of displeasure registered by not only audiences, but also representatives of political power within both the parliamentary system and the Church as an institution. However, even the Christian Democrats agreed that a ban would not produce the expected result and asked society to refrain from anger.

In an interview with Lithuanian television, Castellucci stated that depictions of love could involve even the most repulsive images, such as protesting excrement: “I cannot understand why those who call themselves Christians are upset about the presence of excrement in the performance. Are excrements not also God’s creation? Did God not want us to have a digestive system? Is that not part of God’s plan? Why should it be silenced? These are real things in life. Another aspect is that portraits of Jesus were hung in hospitals where human suffering and misery are evident. It is not in the lobby of banks where his images should hang.”²⁴

Castellucci firmly believes that while he acknowledges the existence of limits and personal taboos, these boundaries are determined by his own conscience and not imposed by any governmental body or organization. He is of the opinion that pre-emptive censorship does not pose a challenge for artists; rather, he sees it as an affront, an impediment to the audience’s understanding, an insult to the critical thinking of all individuals, a constraint on their freedom, and a restriction on their judgment. He finds it difficult to comprehend that such a situation persists in the present day and age. Therefore, in his performances, he deliberately produces some of the most famous examples of contemporary art which transgresses the agreed-upon limits of safety, sanity, and decency in order to reframe our everyday lives through the prism of aesthetics. When he sees people protesting against a performance that they have not seen and did not want to see, he experiences a dual feeling: anger and deep sadness because, when opinions or statements are provided in advance, the creator has no chance to respond.²⁵

The critical response to the performance *On the Concept of the Face, Regarding the Son of God* was very much multi-voiced, divided, and not always enthusiastic. Michael Billington, writing for *The Guardian*, maintained a sense of scepticism and even found himself inspired to

²⁴ Alper 2012.

²⁵ Solis 2012.

craft some less-than-impressive puns. “I found myself mildly bored rather than morally outraged (...) what makes the show seem perverse rather than profound is the sudden leap from mundane medical realism into apocalyptic iconoclasm (...). Pitched half-way between domestic drama and a piece of pseudo-religious performance art, it ends up falling, literally, between two stools.”²⁶

Castellucci's focus appears to be less on deliberately crafting potentially blasphemous imagery or provoking anger. Instead, his work delves into the profound theological concept of *ecce homo* in a modern context, emphasizing the act of witnessing human suffering rather than divine elements. However, he delves in a very specific way, described by Olivier Neveux, who borrows terms from the philosopher Alain Badiou,²⁷ as a contemporary aesthetic: “democratic materialism.”²⁸ This theatre is said to be subject to the dominant ideology and based on the axiom: “There are only bodies and languages.”²⁹ According to Neveux, this type of theatre confronts spectators with the impossibility of deciphering the de-dialectized elements of the stage images, condemning them to the surface of things and their own perceptions, rendering them, in fact, “in potential and value, equivalent and interchangeable, all legitimate.”³⁰ The emotion evoked by the perception of enigmatic, fragmented images devoid of any totalizing intelligibility, and any possibility of collectivization (especially through the logos, a function previously provided by the chorus in Greek tragedy), is believed not to generate contradictory thoughts but a “succession of autistic single opinions and emotions.”³¹

Unbearable and emotionally powerful, the sight of the elderly man's nudity, soiled and in despair, deeply moves the spectator. More than nudity, the use of excrement in art remains a

²⁶ Billington 2011.

²⁷ Badiou 2006, 13. The passage in which Badiou deals with the topic articulated in theatre relates very well to the case of the suffering body in Castellucci's performance: It is from an interview which reads as follows: “L'exploration des capacités du corps, souffrances, jouissances, actes, est en redondance avec la maxime fondamentale du matérialisme démocratique qui nous domine : il n'y a que des corps et des langages. Or la vocation absolue du théâtre est de dire, par les stricts moyens du corps et du langage, que, justement, il existe autre chose que ces moyens. Le théâtre est dans son essence l'indication d'un au-delà de la restriction démocratique aux ressources individuelles des corps et aux ressources “culturelles” des langages” (Neveux 2007, 107).

²⁸ Neveux 2009.

²⁹ Neveux 2009, 68.

³⁰ Neveux 2009, 68.

³¹ Neveux 2009, 68.

controversial subject, even though it is not new and evokes other works from the 1960s to 2000s (Piero Manzoni and his famous *Merda d'Artista* (Shit of the Artist) in a tin can (1961), or that of Wim Delvoye, titled *Cloaca* (2000), which reproduces an artificial digestive system). In the realm of theatre, we can think of “*merdre*” in Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi*, which was booed by the audience in 1896. Or, even better, of Antonin Artaud, of whom Castellucci seems to be a direct heir. Artaud wished for theatre to act like a plague, creating a state of physical disorganization. Paradoxically, it is through the metaphor of disease that he wanted to reinvigorate theatre. Continuing this idea, he wrote, “where it smells like shit, it smells like being”.³²

Castellucci seems to be developing a specific approach which advocates for the disappearance of language, tests existing images, and designates himself as a pilgrim of matter. His theatre of objective elements, defined by Claudia Castellucci as “central images”,³³ has as a specific aim: “communicating as little as possible.”³⁴ His theatre seeks to shock the viewer and above all to destroy in order to reconstruct differently, to instruct the viewer into another perception of the world, outside of any communicative discourse. His performances carry a critical punch by encouraging theatre makers and theatregoers to interrogate normative boundaries and normalizing discourses. The slowness and stammering of the image, like the little pebble that causes you to stumble on the road, imposes a moment of pause, of consciousness, forcing the spectator to stop and suspend their gaze. However, this slowness, bordering on the unbearable, can irritate the spectator to the point of having no other effect than simple incomprehension or even public exasperation. This sterile aspect of provocation is perhaps what Castellucci refutes, in contrast to the more constructive idea of a real “call” that opens up a fresh perspective.

The last two scenes of the performance, which bring elements of excrement (even if simulated) into contact with the face of Christ, have been considered blasphemous and have stirred the indignation of a certain portion of the audience and the fury of extremist Catholics.

³² Artaud 1974, 1644.

³³ Castellucci & Castellucci 2001, 26.

³⁴ Castellucci & Castellucci 2001, 115.

While the artist denies any intention to profane a holy image, he does assert that he invites us to see beyond (through) the image of Christ in a sort of semantic exploration. The iconoclasm produced by his performance underscores that religiously motivated image-making consistently sparks extreme reactions. The reactions to the performance show us that it is evident that the perception of blasphemy has always been a volatile issue waiting to erupt. And it is most probably due to this fact that the show sparked protests in the streets, with its radical and fundamental questioning of society and its values.

Oliver Frlić Crossing the Borders of Political Correctness in Radical Performances

We will continue with performances by one of the most provocative contemporary theatre directors, Oliver Frlić (*Balkan Macht Frei*, *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje*, and *Klq̄twa*), presented in different European contexts (Slovenia, Croatia, Germany, Serbia, Poland).³⁵ We will try to disclose the tactics of disconnection, redundancy, the crossing of the boundaries and borders of political correctness, and the use of provocation with repetition as a generative strategy of this radical theatre as an example of a zone of discomfort.

Marta Keil describes a specific method Frlić uses in the following sentence: “You come to the institution and problematize its way of working, you reveal its structure, name its power relations, say things out loud that usually nobody dares to mention”.³⁶ In his own words, Frlić is interested in “the deconstruction of structural violence manifesting itself in [sic] form of institutionalized ethnocentrism and social inequality”.³⁷ He creates impactful and unsettling performances, drawing from his personal experiences of war and politics in order to produce a critique of capitalism and explore universal themes such as the limits of artistic and social freedom, individual and collective responsibility, tolerance, and stereotypes. Through his persistent efforts to stage collective death, his performances actively question traditional theatrical representations. In this sense, the dramaturgy Frlić produces adheres to what Badiou

³⁵ For the introduction to the theatre of Oliver Frlić and its social impact see: Toporišič 2024 and Weber-Kapusta 2020.

³⁶ Frlić, Adamiecka-Sitek & Keil 2017, 1.

³⁷ Frlić & Marjanić 2019, 208.

names “a generic vacillation” in *Rhapsodie pour le theatre*: “The true theatre makes of each performance, each actor’s every gesture, a generic vacillation in which differences with no basis might be risked. The spectator must decide whether to expose himself to this void, and share the infinite procedure. He is called, not to pleasure..., but to thought.”³⁸

In 2016, Oliver Frljić presented a performance art piece called *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje* (Our Violence and Your Violence) in Vienna, Berlin, Rijeka, Ljubljana, Brno, Sarajevo, Split, and others, combining elements of dance, theatre, and performance art, creating striking scenes of physical theatre designed to provoke and shock the audience. However, the imagery in this performance, which included religious symbols and references to disturbing themes such as rape, torture, terror, fascism, and Islamophobia, seemed to harken back to a more traditional style of political theatre.

The piece was commissioned by the Berlin HAU Hebbel am Ufer Theater and Wiener Festwochen festival to create a critical homage to Peter Weiss’s novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (The Aesthetics of Resistance) (1975-81), which explores themes of radical resistance. Frljić had previously dealt with violence on stage in his earlier work. We might mention *Aleksandra Zec* (part of his trilogy dedicated to fascist tendencies and histories in Croatia, which dramatized Croatian war crimes against a young Serbian girl and her family), or *Balkan macht frei* (Balkan Sets You Free, 2015), a more personal and intentionally stereotypical portrayal of discriminatory policies found in various societies. In *Balkan macht frei*, Frljić’s alter ego played a central role, depicting his own struggles in meeting and overcoming the expectations associated with being a director from the Balkans.³⁹

As one observes the unrelenting and stereotypical violence portrayed in *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje*, it becomes evident that Frljić’s intense approach may be seen as an attempt to explain Islamic terrorism in the context of the long history of Western colonialism, religious oppression, fascism, and capitalist exploitation.

Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje commences with *Tanztheater* (dance theatre), featuring exquisite

³⁸ Badiou 2014, 91–2.

³⁹ For detailed critical analyses see Climenhaga 2024 or Hallmayer 2015.

choreography, powerful metaphors, and evocative music. It sparks meaningful associations, transcending any connection to Peter Weiss. As the performance unfolds, Frljić appears to draw inspiration from the conventions of *Dokumentartheater* (documentary theatre) akin to Rimini Protokoll. In a striking deviation, the characters introduce themselves through fictional biographies. The impact is astonishing, for the audience finds themselves embracing their stories until the absurdity of the attributions becomes impossible to ignore. Laughter erupts, together with disturbing thoughts of disbelief and the intricate machinery of theatrical narrative. In subsequent scenes, the audience is invited to engage in discussions, but every exchange is constrained by pre-scripted responses, exposing the absence of genuine opinions. The protagonists employ explicit actions to provoke, which culminates in a disturbing scene towards the conclusion, in which a crucified Jesus commits an act of violence against a Muslim woman, and a pile of oil barrels tumbles. The audience is perplexed; their minds are in a state of tumultuous contemplation.

Additionally, the production takes a critical stance towards the theatre audience itself (alluding to Handke's *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (Offending the Public)), addressing them with the statement, "I am most ashamed for you, the theatre audience. For you, even death is an aesthetic event." However, as Johannes Birringer points out: "The propulsive in-her-face theatre tends to privilege its political content through spectacular gestures that heighten theatrical affect. It is the loudness of the affect that turns me off. I wonder whether current dance theatre productions pursuing a more abstract spiritual technique of ritual, more subtle tonalities, and which are able to dig deeper, make us listen differently. And I wonder whether their withdrawal from political sensationalism can shape other awarenesses or mobilize other creative collectivities that are not whole or united and do not share the same cynical despair or political disappointment."⁴⁰

A similar pattern of protest and shocking reactions occurred around the performance of *Kłątwa* (The Curse), which premiered at Teatr Powszechny in Warsaw on 18 February 2017.

⁴⁰ Birringer 2016, 642.

The performance ignited a major theatre scandal, as it was perceived as blasphemous by both the right-wing government and right-wing movements in Poland. Protesters gathered in front of the theatre on each performance day, accusing the production of blasphemy. The neo-fascist organization Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny (ONR, National Radical Camp) launched attacks on the theatre and audience members. Private security services were hired to protect the cast and audience, but even members of the production team faced threats. One of the actresses received death threats and experienced professional consequences when a TV production premiere in which she was scheduled to appear was cancelled. Right-wing politicians and the episcopal conference called for the performance to be banned, and right-wing media urged the Warsaw city government to withdraw funding for the theatre. Nevertheless, despite the controversy surrounding the play, the city of Warsaw, governed by the opposition party Platforma Obywatelska (PO, The Civic Platform), made it clear that they do not intend to implement censorship tools and fully support the autonomy of theatre.⁴¹

Frljić's performance draws inspiration from Stanisław Wyspiański's 1899 drama *Curse*, where a village priest's illicit relationship leads to a horrific sacrifice. In his contemporary adaptation, Frljić uses this narrative as a lens to examine how the Catholic Church's abuses of power, particularly sexual abuse, are still shielded by the state today. The play begins with a challenging scene, summarizing the original, depicting the young woman's suffering at the hands of the villagers and the priest. Employing techniques reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht, known for engaging the audience directly to provoke critical thought, Frljić incorporates alienation and shocking imagery to stimulate action and reflection among viewers.

With *Kłątwa*, Oliver Frljić raises questions about the historical narratives promoted by the Polish government, which tend to exclusively highlight stories of heroes. He also criticizes the abuse of power within both the catholic Church and institutionalized theatre. In her essay "How to Lift the Curse? Oliver Frljić and the Poles", written for *Didaskalia*, Polish theatre scholar Agata Adamiecka-Sitek argues, "there's no other show like it – definitely not in the post-

⁴¹ For detailed political reactions and the political crisis generated by the performance see Adamiecka-Sitek 2020 (2017), 2–8 and Füllner 2019, 49–60.

transition, maybe not even in the post-war history of Polish theatre – that has divided Poles with equal force, while at the same time creating a special sort of ‘communal closed ranks’”.⁴²

Thus – as Niklas Füllner points it out in his analysis of *Kłqtw* using some of Jacques Rancière’s argumentations and his concept of critical theatre – Frljić questions both the theatre of representation and the theatre of non-representation: “Frljić’s approach to critical theatre can be regarded in the light of the concept of critical theatre developed by the French political philosopher Jacques Rancière. Rancière understands politics as an interruption of the established order and sees common features in politics and art: ‘Art and politics each define a form of dissensus, a dissensual re-configuration of the common experience of the sensible.’ (Rancière 2010, 140). According to Rancière, ‘there exists a politics of aesthetics that predates artistic intentions and strategies: the theatre, the museum and the book are ‘aesthetic’ realities in and of themselves’ (Rancière 2010, 141).”⁴³

Frljić engages in a “dissensual re-configuration”⁴⁴ of political theatre by altering frameworks, experimenting, and questioning the methods of theatrical production. Frljić seamlessly transitions between various strategies. Seconding Buz Kershaw, he is persuaded that theatre is best described as an “ideological transaction” that takes place between spectators and performers.⁴⁵ Ideology “provides the framework” that allows audiences to “decode” the rhetorical and authenticating conventions.⁴⁶ He is persuaded that theatre does something, creates ripples that can be felt outside the theatre walls.⁴⁷ This happens when “the micro-level of individual shows and the macro-level of the socio-political order interact”.⁴⁸

Following Judith Butler’s argument in *Excitable Speech* (1997), we could consider his theatrical approach using “injurious speech”, offending and wounding both the characters represented and the audience with the words by which one is addressed, as well as with “the mode of address itself, a mode — a disposition or conventional bearing — that interpellates and

⁴² Adamiecka-Sitek 2020 (2017).

⁴³ Füllner 2019, 55.

⁴⁴ Rancière 2010, 140.

⁴⁵ Kershaw 1992, 16.

⁴⁶ Kershaw 1992, 16

⁴⁷ Kershaw 1992, 1.

⁴⁸ Kershaw 1992, 1.

constitutes a subject”⁴⁹.

Despite some of the most controversial images (fellatio on the statue of John Paul II, the logging of the wooden cross, and the final scene where the entire cast kneels and prays to a glowing Polish eagle while ominous sounds play) not aligning with the concept of the theatre of dissensus, they convey meanings in a straightforward and direct manner: “The religious and political symbols function as a kind of ritualized semiotic: the iconography of signs of terror are meant to provoke shock on both Right and Left ideological spectrums, attack the violence of terror, and show the radical illusions of consensus, complacency, or ‘feel-good humanitarianism’. The West has no moral superiority at all in the current political context.”⁵⁰

Frlić, a director from the Balkan region of Eastern Europe, thus disrupts the established Left-liberal Western perspective, one that can be readily refuted in the present context, considering the state’s necro-political violence that upholds contemporary racism as a fundamental ideology of global capitalism.

Frlić works on the paradoxes within the oppressive logic of neoliberal society and its forms of “orientalisms”. He claims: “I am trying to create a polyphony of voices, not one unifying voice erasing all the other voices. I also want my performances to have a dialogue with each other, to reveal the meanings that could pop-up only in this broader context.”⁵¹ However, what disturbs Birringer is also the aesthetic procedure or texture Frlić uses in his theatre: “a blatant, fetishized violence” that makes his theatre *plakativ* (in German) and “intermixing with the archive of performance gestures that once resonated (for example, mimicking Carolee Schneemann’s iconic *Interior Scroll*, a hijab-wearing actress in *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje* pulls an Austrian flag from her vagina).”⁵²

Conclusion: A Social Reaction to Castellucci and Frlić: Insecurity and Discomfort

Castellucci and Frlić provide artistic explorations of the increasingly complex social impasse

⁴⁹ Butler 1997, 9.

⁵⁰ Birringer 2016, 642.

⁵¹ Mustroph 2022.

⁵² Birringer 2016, 642.

and the very essence of the paradoxes in political art today. They produce a specific version of what Rancière names “the modern aesthetic regime of art: the rupture of agreement between the rules of art and the laws of sensibility which distinguished the classical representative order”⁵³. Or, to put it differently, using the terminology of Balme: they produce “transgressive performances” in which “controversies and scandals by definition spill out of the auditorium and enter the wider public sphere where they tend to take on a life of their own.”⁵⁴ Their works still aim to call upon the spectator in the etymological sense of “provocation” (making an appeal) by eliciting an emotion, inquiry, or even visual shock.

The analysis of the reception of their selected performances shows that the term “scandal”, mentioned by the press and critics, emphasizes the idea of “halt” and “raising awareness”, which might be more in line with their artistic approach than the term “provocation”, which could imply a subtle and manipulative intention. Their specific form of hybrid theatre disrupts theatrical conventions and unsettles the audience through its effects of estrangement and alienation. It could also be seen as a form of provocation, using displeasure as theatrical tool, a specific performative displeasure provoking audiences to leave in the middle of a performance and provoking riots in the theatre or outside. The specific zones of discomfort they produce thus represent a part of the process of creation and reception of theatre practice.

Both artists develop aesthetically, socially, and politically transgressive theatrical practices that seek to interrogate and challenge boundaries related to individual and cultural identity. They highlight the emotional underpinnings that obstruct rational public discourse on matters concerning the relationship between the Church and the secular nature of the state, ideology and freedom of speech. They not only shatter the idealistic vision of a harmonious public sphere, but also dash most of the optimism pinned on the potential for democracy and its institutions to channel and transform the violent passions that form the basis of collective identifications.

Moreover, they dispel the illusion that art can truly contribute (as argued by Chantal Mouffe)

⁵³ Rancière 2010, 175.

⁵⁴ Balme 2015, 2.

in “disarming of the libidinal forces leading towards hostility which are always present in human societies” and ultimately to the “renunciation of death as an instrument of decision.”⁵⁵

Both artists make use of specific self-reflective structural approaches as a pretext for launching a harsh criticism against various institutions and ideological constructs. The targets they choose within contemporary liquid society (Bauman)⁵⁶ include national identity, the Church, cultural ideals, the perpetuation of chauvinism, the traditional values leading to the homogenization of a community formed through exclusion and discrimination. In most cases, these critical mechanisms highlight how the violence and oppression present on a smaller scale serve to validate and rationalize the brutality of the neoliberal and neo-Catholic state apparatus or the perpetuation of abusive actions.

When dealing with the performances by Castellucci and Frljić, we are also witnessing self-censorship, which allows us to learn from our misconceptions, false judgments, and wrong-headed expectations from both the performers and the public. Their performances are therefore not about mocking or criticising the Catholic Church and State Apparatus, but about deeply rooted limitations. These limitations prevent us from escaping from self-censorship. However, they also seem to go hand in hand with the critical thoughts of Jacques Rancière in his book *Dissensus, On Politics and Aesthetics*, advocating for “critical practice of philosophy” as “an inseparably egalitarian, or anarchistic, practice” considering “arguments, narratives, testimonies, investigations and metaphors all as the equal inventions of a common capacity in a common language.”⁵⁷

One could thus say that the theatre of Castellucci and Frljić engages in critique “of the instituted divisions and paves the way for renewing our interrogations into what we are able to think and to do.”⁵⁸ Both directors produce overcompensating fury of traumatic events, create and provoke political frustrations. Using the vocabulary of Judith Butler, one could say that the two directors expose their performances’ audiences to the injurious character of speech.

⁵⁵ Mouffe 2005, 26.

⁵⁶ Bauman 2000.

⁵⁷ Rancière 2010, 218.

⁵⁸ Rancière 2010, 218.

question of which words wound, which representations offend”.⁵⁹ Convinced that performance is the result of interaction between the performers and the audience, they use performative tactics of subversion in order to destabilize the social distribution of power reflected in the theatre. Their performances focus on an embodied presence of the performers and produce “discomfort, shame, frustration, longing, and failure” that “constitute affective bridges between bodies and can mobilize criticism.”⁶⁰

What we are witnessing is the extension of existing theatrical and political norms, the introduction of a germ, a foreign body “into the cultural matrix”, a germ that “cannot be accounted for by its existing codes and practices”⁶¹. The authors discussed produce a specific aesthetic of fluidity, which also collapses the roles of spectator and performer. This often makes the spectator uncomfortable, requiring a lot of engagement, but such discomfort allows them to experience the performance more deeply. Castellucci and Frljić try to put the audience in a state of insecurity and discomfort. In the words of Rancière (describing the paradoxes of political art) they “continue to try to overturn the logic of the theatre by making the spectator active, by turning the art exhibition into a place of political activism or by sending artists into the streets of derelict suburbs to invent new modes of social relations.”⁶² Like most of today’s critical art, they are “caught between two types of pedagogy: one that could be called ‘representational mediation’, and another that we might refer to as ‘ethical immediacy’”.⁶³ In their actions, the common oppositions of subject and object, of presence and representation, and of art and social reality disappear. The audience transforms and finds itself in a state that is alienated from everyday social norms. Following the logic of Erika Fischer Lichte, the consequence of this is a destabilization of the perception of reality due to the liminality of an artistic event. And this may cause a re-orientation of the individual (which, let us not deceive ourselves, is only temporary). The performances of both artists thus produce strong political reactions as though they were a series of political statements and not artistic events.

⁵⁹ Butler 1997, 9.

⁶⁰ White 2020, 18.

⁶¹ Attridge 2004, 55–6.

⁶² Rancière 2010, 137.

⁶³ Rancière 2010, 137.

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