

What lead you to take an interest in football ?

Coming from ex-Yugoslavia, I've seen moments in which football played an important role in relation to politics. One theory for the disintegration of Former Yugoslavia claims that the war started at football stadium, during the match between Red Star Belgrade and Dinamo Zagreb in 1990. This is just one example and there are many others, from other countries and historical eras in which football was involved – symbolically or practically – with matters of war and peace. At the beginning of the show, as the audience comes in, you can see the information about some of these cases projected as a scrolling text.

My father was a supporter of FK Partizan, one of two big football clubs from Belgrade, and I remember watching games with him on TV every Sunday when I was small. The first match I went to see live was Red Star Belgrade versus Dinamo Kiev in 2000, a couple of months before the overthrow of the Slobodan Milošević's regime. I was overwhelmed by the atmosphere – chanting, almost choreographed movements of this large mass of bodies, a feeling of belonging to something bigger than yourself. But in the next moment I could hear 60.000 people shouting, "Kill, kill, kill!" and I felt nauseous. They were referring to Milošević, so it was a double-edged emotion to deal with. We were surrounded by the police and it all felt very volatile, like it could explode at any moment.

It was an event which made me think about the thin line separating potentially productive and destructive impulses of the crowd, how something which begins with a sense of community and positive energy can in a split second turn into a killing machine. Football is an arena in which emotions and passions are expressed in a most direct way. People go the stadium and there they feel free to vent their frustrations and anxieties, which are otherwise suppressed. In these surroundings, they're allowed to erupt and gain a very theatrical expression. So I kept being fascinated by the importance of football, by why it means so much to so many people, and by how it can influence everyday life in profound ways, even if you're not a fan. You can have no interest in football whatsoever, but during the World Cup you still find yourself cheering for our country. It's a very strong point of identification, and this is what interests me.

Referring to Alexandra Moreira Da Silva speech (maître de conférence à l'IRET) can we say that *Do You Still Love Me?* is a documentary-performance ?

I think "documentary" is a valid description. Theatre doesn't have to be defined exclusively as political. But, to my mind, theatre, as any other art, has to be a reflection of society. The concept of art for art's sake doesn't amount to much. Without connection to its immediate surroundings, without posing questions about the current state of affairs, and a negotiation of its own position, art becomes but mere decoration. In my work I'm interested in the ways in which lived reality is transformed into fiction, so I often use documentary material and personal testimonies, and work with non-professional performers, which is different than working with amateur actors.

In this production, supporters' stories are at the very heart of the show. I didn't want to make something in which non-professionals figure just as "visitors" or guests, but to make them equal with the actors. So it's important that the supporters are on stage, that they speak in their own name, just like the actors do. Without their contribution, we wouldn't have had the moment of mirroring, and the idea of a meeting between two groups, of everything that connect and divides them, would have been lost. In addition, the fact that supporters voice their own opinions in public makes them

at the same time powerful and fragile. This friction is something that the audience can feel and that makes the show, among other things, emotional. That's quite important.

What were the criteria for the choosing of the supporters after two rehearsal's week with actors ?

At the beginning I worked only with actors because I wanted to discuss the topic with them. Some of them like football and went to see games, others didn't really know much about it. In this period, we researched the history and iconography of supporting, specific rituals and sociological aspects of it, and watched a lot of recordings of various football matches. The books like Bill Buford's *Among the Thugs* were an important part of research, as were the films such as *The Firm* by Alan Clarke from 1989.

After that we started to work with supporters and their organisations. I wanted to put together two groups, almost like two "teams", who otherwise might not have much in common but who would share this situation and the temporary space of encounter which it provides. For the supporters, the main criteria was their stories, the range of topics they covered, the amount of detail they conveyed. Equally important was how they told their stories. This an essential aspect of storytelling – the speaker's presence, his or her confidence in public, interaction with other contributors. In fact, pretty much all the qualities which you also look for in actors.

What was the process of creation with the supporters and the actors ? You talked about a long list of questions that you asked to supporters during the rehearsals. Did you ask the same questions to the supporters and the actors ? What did you look for to approach, grasp, reveal with this questions ?

The questions for actors and supporters were not literally the same but they reflected comparable areas of experience: when was the first time you saw a game / when was the first time you were on stage; when have you felt disappointed in the club / do you ever feel let down by theatre, etc. After these general questionnaires we had longer, more intimate sessions, organised both as individual interviews and group discussions in which we dealt with personal stories, the ideas of love and loyalty, family relationships, political views, and a sense of belonging to a group or a nation.

Like in some of my previous works, the problem of nationalism plays an important role. Both groups of performers are confronted with questions relating to national symbols and points of identification that they provide. One of the supporters says that if someone attempts to take your flag, it's a declaration of war. We take this statement as a question – how far are we ready to go in order to protect our family, our land, our history. I think it's important to ask such questions in relation to football supporters and their organisations which often act as a litmus test for society's repressed mores: from nationalism and xenophobia to political violence and civil wars.

During the premiere of *Do You Still Love Me ?* in the Festival Reims Scène d'Europe, we saw that the theater was full of fans : fans came to support (cheer, scream...) the fans on stage. The "regular" spectators and the "new" spectators were very identifiable. Could you talk to us about the difference of reception between this two kind of public ? The affects experienced and manifested by each one ?

The show is not made exclusively for either the theatre lovers or the football fans. I hope that it allows for a space of encounter and exchange between different audiences. In Reims it was fantastic when local supporters showed up on both nights. You could really feel a very special atmosphere. Some of them may have never been in theatre before. They chanted, cheered their mates, strongly responded to some of the references, and awarded all performers with a very generous reaction. It was a pleasure to see such strong connection with the local context. I'm not sure if and how this coloured the perception of the "other" audience, the "regular" spectators as you call them, but for me it was encouraging to be able to experience theatre on this level of connection.

Can you talk about the title of the show *Do You Still Love Me?*

The title refers to the importance of love in its many complex and contradictory manifestations, particularly in relation to the notions of community, family, and belonging.

Sanja Mitrović is a Yugoslav-born theatre director, choreographer, and performer. She lives and works in Bruxelles. After studying in Amsterdam, she founded her company Stand Up Tall Productions in 2009. Mitrović's work is based on documentary approach, often using performers' personal stories and testimonies to explore social and political realities of our times. Three of her productions have been presented at Festival Reims Scène d'Europe. This year, Mitrović created *Do You Still Love Me?*, a site specific production which brings together four actors and four football supporters. *Do You Still Love Me ?* was conceived in four different versions, each one developed with supporters of different football clubs in France, the Netherlands and Belgium where the show is touring.

DO YOU STILL LOVE ME?

With : Servane Ducorps, Cédric Eeckhout, Ina Geerts, Sid Van Oerle, Jacques Poncelet, Dylan Charlot, Michel Cornillier, and Romain Jacquet

Text : Sanja Mitrović in collaboration with performers – Dramaturgy and : Jorge Palinhos – Costumes: Frédérick Denis – Sound: Vladimir Rakić

Production : Stand Up Tall Productions (NL), La Comédie de Reims–CDN / Reims Scènes d'Europe (FR), Hiros (BE)

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