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Paradissolution – *Ritual Communion within the Spectator- Performer Frame in* Parallel

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to investigate the performative strategies employed by the authors of *Parallel* (2013), Sinkó Ferenc and Leta Popescu, in order to generate new forms of communication between artists (Lucia Mărneanu and kata-bodoki halmen) and spectators. The relationship between performers and spectators ranges from an initial recoil and fear to full empathy, achieved by means of traumatic narratives as well as through irony, humour and "gender performativity", to use Judith Butler's terminology (Judith Butler, 2006). I constructed my discourse around the hypothesis according to which the communion between spectators and performers can be traced by following the pattern established by Dante Alighieri in his *Divine Comedy*. I view *Parallel* as a journey that can be segmented in three stages, also explored by Dante throughout Hell, Purgatory and Paradise, implying the exposure of a tortured-torturous body, of nudity, *a* phase of relief and one of what I called "Paradissolution".

Keywords: Parallel, Dante, torture, guilt, empathy, nudity, gender performativity, queer.

Parallel, which premiered at the end of 2013, is a one-hour long performance led by Romanian artists Lucia Mărneanu and kata-bodoki halmen. It is worth being mentioned that both young artists were students at the Faculty of Theatre and Television of the Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca at the time when choreographer Sinkó Ferenc (concept / choreography / direction) and young director Leta Popescu (direction), affiliated to the same institution, shaped the performance. *Parallel* plays not only with space, concepts and objects, but also with the limitations and expectations experienced by spectators. The three main parts of the show permanently challenge the viewers' perspective, employing techniques and dramatic constructions whose origins may be traced in notions such as *gender performativity* (Judith Butler, 2006), *écriture féminine*, a term coined by Hélène Cixous (Bray, 2004), *epistemology*

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of the closet (Eva Kosofksy Sedgwick, 1990), but also more recent notions such as *metafeminism* (Green, 2001). The juxtaposition of all these elements creates a dynamic and playful performance capable to question in a pertinent manner the traditional roles assumed by both performers and spectators, despite the fact that the show does not presuppose direct interaction with the public.

But it should be noted that in *Parallel* gender-related games do not emerge solely from a series of highly theoretical concepts extracted from feminist and queer theories. Beyond this layer, there is a supplementary stratum that amplifies the reception of the performance in different directions, exceeding a purely social interpretation. My thesis is that *Parallel* is constructed as a journey of initiation with theological implications being added to the socio-cultural interrogations raised by the performance. The main premise is that the performers place themselves in a much more complex position than that announced through their transgressive, gender-bending disguises. Thus, they invite the spectators to become worshippers to a certain extent, instead of acting simply as passively disturbed agents.

The crucial questions I will address are derived from the intersection of sex and gender, both concepts being traversed by numerous other interfering factors, such as race, religion, corporeal culture and theatrical codes. What makes a body passive and / or active in this purposely confusing context? Whose is the victim's gaze and whose is the predator's gaze? What are the specific theatrical means by which the performers use subversion simultaneously as lack of submission and as a profoundly intimate mode of transfiguration? Are spectators held guilty or are they perceived as allies? Does the end of the performance indicate an act of surrender or an act of reconciliation? What role could the spectator play within the scheme of an unconventional liturgy like *Parallel*?

Through this analysis, I intend to demonstrate that the three main levels of construction in *Parallel* reiterate the Catholic doctrine of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise. Thus, the performers establish a meaningful, manifold connection with the audience.

Spectators: from oppressors to confessors

There sighs, lamentations and loud wailings
were resounding through the starless air;
wherefore I at the beginning wept for them.
(Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto III, 1894)

As spectators enter the theatre hall where *Parallel* is to take place, the first image they interfere with is the minimalist, monochromatically disposed setting (Valentin Oncu). Nothing is violent, nothing is disturbing. The only

colourful element on stage is represented by the two performers' workout clothes (Gyopár Bocskai): green and blue pants, red and pink tops. Interestingly, the two show up on stage for fitness practice without any footwear item, which marks from the very beginning a deviation from the norms instituted by this type of physical training. Barefoot as they are, the women start their exercises. Far from being agile, determined and conspicuously strong, yet simultaneously full of grace, they are training in a rather correct manner, without falling or stumbling. But there is one obvious fact that brings irony and derision to surface: they don't seem to enjoy it and neither do they manifest the empowering self-confidence and enthusiasm one is expected to experience during such solicitous activities. Their unshaved hair functions from the very beginning as a manifesto against traditional gender expectations, being ready to expose themselves without any artificial improvements that promise feminine beauty by patriarchal standards.

And yet, at the same time, it would be difficult to affirm their intention is undoubtedly ironic at this point, since they truly work hard and manifest a certain willingness to make a step forward in order to build their bodies according to the trainer's lively indications. Sometimes clumsy, but always powerful, with a rather sad expression on their faces, the performers embark on an ambiguous journey.

There is a significant contradiction that is instilled in the spectator as they witness the women's (self-)ironic attempts and which can be translated in the interrogation concerning how reliable this critical gaze the performers cast upon their own selves could be. The performers who bravely choose to expose themselves may not correspond to the physical standards that fitness impinges on them, and yet, they find themselves in the centre of a theatrical space, which they had conquered and can now use as a platform where they are able to voice their struggles and protests by means of both linguistic and corporeal discourse.

What possibility has the spectator got in order to deal with this exposure? Leaving aside the performers' traumatic narrative for a while and focusing more intensely on the spectator, an exploration of the latter's own traumatic history is inevitable. Heterosexuals, bisexuals, lesbians, gays and gender nonconforming persons are all gathered in the same conventionally homogenous group called "audience". They are all forced to face the performers' wounded history to the same degree, whether they share a similar infliction or simply see in the artist's enactment nothing more than an agent of presumably exotic alterity. Even more, one can wonder whether beyond the parodic effect conveyed by their fitness simulation the artists are, in fact, more than capable of fulfilling such a physical task in the exact terms dictated by fitness norms. If they can, but simply

choose not to submit to these standardized rules unquestionably pertaining to a patriarchal schema, to what extent does the spectator feel comfortable to invest them with credibility? If their apparent clumsiness is theatricalized, how can the performers install empathy within the possessors of maybe some even more unfit and untrained bodies? What conclusions can one draw from this *being-in-the-middle* attitude – neither completely subversive, nor completely immersed in the pleasure of physical strength?

Fig. 1: Photo courtesy of Roland Váczi

It is neither possible, nor necessary to speculate upon the traumatic baggage that each individual in the audience may carry. And yet, one cannot overlook the fact that the performers initiate a dangerous process that engenders deleterious effects for both artists and spectators, due to the fact that the latter are forced to plunge into their own chronology of inadequacy and turbulence. But it goes without saying that the confrontation is far from being much easier for the spectators for whom gender issue has never been a *troublemaker*, in Butler's terms (Butler, 2006). On the contrary: the more circumscribable to cisnormativity is one who enters the theatre hall, the more striking is the impact exerted upon him / her, since the understanding of gender roles and sexual identity presumed by a rather traditional spectator is completely shaken, when not subtly ridiculed.

At this point in which the artists express their incapacity to submit to the patriarchal standards prescribed for women in order to gain respect and prestige, spectators are invested with the force of a micro-societal organism. They stand as a symbol for a community that bears guilt for the two women's condition and understand that they must take this guilt upon them in order

to push the confession forward. The merciless exposure performed by the artists can be regarded as an act of confession or as a silent denunciation, but nonetheless as a chance they offer those in the audience to fill the blank space left by their absence from the performers' past. During a 10-minute workout routine, what the performers actually release are years of rejection, denial, self-hatred and inadequacy, but all these have never been seen and *witnessed* by the majority of those who are watching from the theatre hall. Inside this collective composed of two performers and usually around 100 spectators, there are only two entities that are enabled to manifest themselves and to ultimately heal themselves. The public rests silent as the artists not only perform their own mutilated and repressed history, but also deliver a symbolic Last Judgment to whom those in the audience fall as subjects. There is torture, but no forgiveness for any of the humans involved; to put is short, this stage can be simply described as *Hell*, in terms of Catholic spirituality.

Therefore, we can but wonder what may be brought onto the stage in order to link the voiced with the voiceless; the outcasts that had obtained the privilege of coming out into the light with the outcasts that are still captive in a homogenous mass within which concealment represents their daily and unique performance. And how is it possible for a connection to be established between all categories of outcasts and those for whom heteronormativity is deeply inscribed in their corporeal evolution?

In this apparently dynamic and ironically displayed first scene in *Parallel*, guilt is fairly distributed between performers, who are not yet able to transcend the gender expectations induced by androcracy, and spectators. In this phase, in which no expiation for guilt is made available, performers and spectators as well travel through *hell*.

When mystic St. John of the Cross writes about the various stages of initiation into contemplation that involve "grief and torment" and which he names *the dark night of the soul*, he mentions light as an inevitable correlative of darkness. But light, in the given context, is also configured as an element that the individual devoted to contemplation cannot fully grasp or assimilate, because its force is unbearable:

When this Divine light of contemplation assails the soul which is not yet wholly enlightened, it causes spiritual darkness in it; for not only does it overcome it, but likewise it overwhelms it and darkens the act of its natural intelligence. For this reason Saint Dionysus and other mystical theologians call this infused contemplation *a ray of darkness* [our emphasis] – that is to say, for the soul that is not enlightened and purged – for the natural strength of the intellect is transcended and overwhelmed by its great supernatural light. (St. John of the Cross, 1959, 50)

The bodily torment disclosed by the artists at this point of the show is nothing but the physical outburst induced by the torment of the soul, being reminiscent of ritual self-flagellation practices (which are to be fully developed, as I will present further in the paper, in the second part of the show). Thus, their intense physical effort is not a path to beauty and perfection but, from a Catholic perspective, a penance through which they confess their incapacity to be neither pure nor completely rebellious in regard to the standards imposed on them. If the body suffers, if the flesh is cruelly manipulated (in *Parallel*, the saints' punitive rod has been replaced with dumbbells and a jumping rope), then somehow there must be a sign of redemption at the end of the road. In his treaty on penance and self-flagellation addressed to "the Virgins consecrated to God", Saint Alphonsus de Liguori states that

> to preserve her soul and body free from stain, she must also chastise her flesh, by fasting, abstinence, by disciplines and other penitential works. And if she has not health or strength to practice such mortifications, she ought at least to bear in peace her infirmities and pains, and to accept cheerfully the contempt and ill-treatment that she receives from others. (Saint Alphonsus de Liguori, 1888)

No liberation is announced at this point either for the performers or for the spectators. Yet, the torment to which the two women subjugate their bodies does not rest without effect: due to their arduous efforts, this homogenous group starts shaping its identity as a community that is now bound up by the shared experience. Thus, the spectators' status as witnesses literally standing on the margins modifies from *testis* – "the position of a third party" (Agamben, 1999, 17) – to *superstes* – "a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end" (Ibid.).

Fig. 2: Photo courtesy of Roland Váczi

The *infernal* stage cannot be overcome or annihilated, but instead it functions as a necessary bridge that links all bodies taking part in the performance, whether on stage or outside the central platform. The audience, just like the crowd of the moaning souls that Dante mentions in the *Inferno*, had witnessed a torture no one else had and thus this ceremonial secrecy formulates the premises for the prolongation of the journey. Despite the fact that Western imagery is imbued with grotesque depictions of hell, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes a clear statement:

> The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs. (Catholic Church 1035)

In the first section of *Parallel*, violence is never aggressive and is never based on shock effects; what the performers enact is what we may call an *aseptic exposure.* Physical wounds, bruises, self-harm, body liquids or brutal malformations – none of them finds its place in this repertoire of disturbing, but geometrically designed gestures. Hell may be understood as absence and abandonment in the world, but in *Parallel* it is also constructed as a space which the individuals involved in the communion are invited to fill with the matter of their own flesh.

The spectator's gaze is assimilated by the performers as an apparatus capable of generating new material for the unfolding of the theatrical event. The two artists do not erase the possible contradictions that the spectator may experience, as I signalled above. They do not seem to be particularly interested in creating a highly intimate contact with the spectators upon which they project their own trauma. What they manage to achieve in relation to the viewers is the assumed incorporation of all the contradictions and non-answerable questions, of all the empathic and skeptical gazes, of all the bodies that symbolically precipitate onto the stage, assaulting the exposed subject.

By the end of the first scene, *spectatorship* does not become *worship* yet, but a sense of membership and belonging, even in the midst of *Hell*, is definitely weaved through the assimilation of the meaningful difference emerging from both performers and spectators. As Eugenio Barba puts it:

> Offering the spectator the possibility to decipher an event does not mean offering them ‹‹the true meaning››, but it means to provide them with the necessary questions in order to interrogate their own selves in relation to

the meaning. There are spectators for whom theatre is essential precisely due to the fact that is does not offer them solutions, but intersection points.[1] (Barba, 351, 2010)

The speaking gaze: fire, nudity, twilight

Look if thou e'er hast any of us seen, /
So that o'er yonder thou bear news of him; /
Ah, why dost thou go on? Ah, why not stay?
(Dante Alighieri, *Purgatory*, Canto V, 1886)

In Canto V of Dante's *Purgatory*, the poet is warned by Virgil to keep moving the moment a crowd of wandering souls would address him. Those whom Virgil refers to are individuals that "by violence died", but now repent for their sins. The group heads towards Dante and, as one, they ask him to acknowledge their presence there for those on Earth in case he recognizes any of them. Dante admits he is not able to recognize any of them, "although I gaze into your faces" (Dante 1886), but also ensures them that their confessions are safe with him - "speak ye" - and that he would do whatever depends on him to help them. Each of the souls recounting their tragic stories invests Dante with the power and dignity of a herald who is supposed to accomplish a sacred mission, that is to say, to share the ungraspable for those who had not had the possibility to *witness*. As he complies with the process of witnessing, the poet allows his identity to be infused by the miserable souls' condition. Moreover, his mission as messenger consists in disseminating their status, which can be interpreted as a temporary act of redemption from death for the helpless souls. Gaze, movement and discourse: these are the three steps the reader discovers in Dante's short, but insightful encounter with the repentant dead from the Purgatory.

At this point of the performance, spectators are no longer submitted to the torment of witnessing what they cannot fully understand. The spectator must watch everything in a state of "fear and trembling", but is no longer judged or forced to repeat the traumatic narrative. Instead, now that they had visualized the "othering" experience and also took their share of guilt for the *status quo* narrated by the performers, it is implied that they would not leave the performativity arena unmodified and that their own

[1] Our translation from Eugenio Barba: *Theatre: Solitude, Craft, Revolt*. Bucureşti: Nemira Publishing House, 2010, p. 351.

bodies and speech will manifest themselves in accordance with the mortifying experience. The spectator's gaze becomes active not in the sense of a visceral recoil or a similarly violent unconditional adherence, but in the sense in which he silently turns his extreme emotions into a vehicle for metamorphosis.

While it is true that the dogma of Purgatory is one of the most challenging dogmas within the corpus of teachings assigned by the Catholic Church – the controversy sparks genuine interest even to this day, still there are a series of clear, indisputable statements in relation to this concept. The decree formulated on Purgatory at The Council of Trent in 1563 reaffirms the Church's undeniable belief in this notion, but nonetheless the members of the Synod of Trent made it clear that "the more difficult and subtle questions (…) be excluded from popular discourses before the uneducated multitude." (Council of Trent, Session 25).

However, approximately one century before the Council of Trent took place, Saint Catherine of Genoa, a 15th century mystic, does not hesitate in depicting the Purgatory as a place that is but in a few aspects differentiated from Paradise. "The joy of souls" comes from their conscientious understanding of their transitory condition, as if they had already viewed and experienced the further heavenly delights that are to come. Fire is not destructive, but rather empowering, since it provides the soul with the necessary understanding of both his sin and of the possibility to be purged:

> It is in this way that rust, which is sin, covers souls, and in Purgatory is burnt away by fire; the more it is consumed, the more do the souls respond to God. *Pain however does not lessen, but only the time for which pain is endured* [our emphasis]. (Saint Catherine of Genoa, 1946)

The saint courageously moves on to affirm, in Chapter III, something even more radical in relation to the condition of those in Purgatory:

> Because the souls in Purgatory are without the guilt of sin, there is no hindrance between them and God except their *pain* [our emphasis], which holds them back so that they cannot reach perfection. (*Ibid*.)

The second and also the longest part in *Parallel* gives the viewers the possibility to cast a gaze upon this transformation the performers do not seek to hide. The transitional phase alludes to a space and time that involve severe modifications of the body and the soul. As a consequence, it is inferred that the very presence of an alien body in the same space represents a privilege for the latter and an undeniable source of pressure for the exhibitory subjects.

Once their fitness movements are finished, Lucia Mărneanu and kata-bodoki halmen begin operating a series of alterations upon the space. They strip off their workout clothes and show up in black boxer shorts and tops, with most of the epidermic surface exposed. Soon, they turn their backs to the audience and move to the back of the stage, whereas in the first scene the physical distance between them and spectators was considerably lower. Neither darkness, nor light infuses the theatrical platform integrally, but it is their alternation that disturbingly creates the main visual mark of the set, just as inside Purgatory the soul is extrinsic to the pure light of Paradise, but also remains outside the total obscurity of Hell.

After a short examination of their muscles, they throw their tops and create an initial contact with some of the objects placed on stage. The soccer ball hits the floor and the wall during a sequence of rhythmically destabilizing movements. Music (composed by Daniel Aga, known as danaga) is also constructed as a constant alternation between electronic beats and lyrical tonalities and helps modelate the twists and contortions of the bodies. Whether the performers' choreography is mobilized by the game with the ball or whether they touch the reproduction of Duchamp's famous *Fountain*, the spectator can easily observe that the nature, intensity and duration of their contact with the objects is different under all aspects from the manipulation of the jump rope and dumbbells in the first scene.

Fig. 3: Photo courtesy of Roland Váczi

What their bodies transmit while interfering with the things displayed on stage is a certain willingness to use them not as instruments that serve for self-condemnation or as a pretext to install guilt in the witnesses, but as a mean

of genuinely discovering the other in their own self. The jump rope and the weights consuming their bodies in the previous dramatic episode stand as symbols for strength, but the strength to which they are supposed to lead belongs, in fact, to the realm of femininity and grace. It is not force that counts when the female subject exercises her physical technique – one should never have a real insight on their torment and one should not see how fierce the female subject can be. From a traditional perspective, these are nothing but a series of necessary stages in order to attain beauty, grace and delicacy.

But the tyrannical faciality machine (Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) represented by the unseen fitness coach disappears in the second scene, and thus a new bodily and tactile journey is revealed to the performers. The soccer ball is traditionally associated with male power and with a whole set of phallocentric cultural prescriptions, while the ironic placement of the urinal in the back creates all necessary conditions in order to precipitately conclude that it is the women's penis envy, as Freud would say, that makes them want to inhabit a fundamentally masculine site. But their shift from "womanly" torture to the occupation of a masculine setting is not to be decrypted in terms of denying the feminine and switching to the masculine. Instead, what they actually perform in this scene is an authentic sample of *écriture feminine*, a concept through which feminist theorist Hélène Cixous (Bray, 2004) claims an exclusively feminine space for conceiving, exploring and displaying the woman body. Synthesized in the phrase "woman must write woman", her theory aims at disrupting the masculine syntax and the articulate language that have always dominated both the feminine identity and the discourse related to it:

> For Cixous, writing in the feminine is, above all, an attempt to let the other exist without imposing a definition of the self, the writer. *Écriture féminine* is about providing a space for the material and ontological specificity and autonomy of the other to exist, be, shine forth (…) It describes a path towards thought through the body. (Bray, 2004,71)

Thus, during their liberated corporeal investigation that no longer coincides neither with the feminine, nor with the masculine, the two performers access a conceptual terrain that extracts them from the dictatorship imposed by traditional dichotomies. Within their choreographic construction, the soccer ball is no longer redolent of masculine supremacy; on the contrary, it is precisely this clichéd object that serves best at demonstrating the fundamental lack of consistency on which gender and sexuality are based in the societal environment. The persona incorporated by kata bodoki-halmen simulates an urination

act in front of the male urinal after pulling her head inside it and crawling like that on the floor – with a gesture so irony-filled that it would be at least ridiculous to formulate any psychoanalytical assumptions in regard to this almost surrealistic enactment. *L'écriture féminine*, as transposed into body movement by Lucia Mărneanu and kata bodoki-halmen, is an inverted game in which any gender-specific object can be ascribed to any gender, with the implication that their refusal of cisnormative categories opens the door for other marginal sexualities, such as transgender identities, as we shall see in the final part of the present analysis.

By now, the spectator had learnt to anticipate the constant alternation between concealment and exposure, darkness and light, aggression and contemplation. If during the previous sequence it was the performers that had to assimilate and carry in their being the whole set of reactions and energies conveyed by spectators, in the second part it is the latter's turn to engage in a process of filling their selves with the performers' substance. The spectator's *supplementary* gaze, to use a concept borrowed from theorist Peggy Phelan, contributes just as much to the process through which the female-victim body is presented. If spectators want to preserve their body, they must first help preserve the possibly redemptive body of the performer:

> Performance uses the performer's body to pose a question about the inability to secure the relation between subjectivity and the body per se; performance uses the body to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body - that which cannot appear without a *supplement* [our emphasis]. (Peggy Phelan, 1993,150-151)

In this phase, another crucial concept involving theological connotations is nudity, also essential in the performer-spectator paradigm. In his own essay on nudity, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben quotes theologian Erik Peterson's article "Theologie des Kleides / Theology of Clothing" (1934). In his paper, Peterson evinces what we may call a chronology of Christian perceptions referring to nudity:

> Nudity appears only after sin. Before the Fall, there was an absence of clothing [*Unbekleidetheit*], but this was not yet nudity [*Nackheit*]. Nudity presupposes the absence of clothing, but it does not coincide with it. The perception of nudity is linked to the spiritual act that the Scriptures define as ‹‹the opening of the eyes››. (Peterson qtd. in Agamben, 2011, 58-59)

The philosopher then states that this conception can be summarized in a precept according to which "the problem of nudity is, therefore, the problem of human nature in its relationship with grace" (*Ibid*., 60). In other

words, nudity refers to something else than nakedness when defined in ontological terms, as it articulates a transitional, purgatorial state of being that announces the arrival of grace.

Nudity is also present in Grotowski's essay "The Denuded Actor" (Grotowski, 2014), that focuses on the sense of communion between actors and spectators, though it should be reminded that his conception of nudity is integrally symbolic and metaphorical. Denudation is what transposes the theatrical act from a cultural event to a liturgical celebration and this supreme act is in itself that which brings spectators and performers together in a holy union:

> When the actor's body is consumed by fire and is, to some extent, annihilated by its flames (...) the actor offers his body, reiterating the act of redemption and reaching something similar to the state of holiness.[2] (Grotowski, 2014, 79)

Fig. 4: Photo courtesy of Roland Váczi

Despite the fact that the performers are never fully naked, wearing a piece of black underwear when all other items are left aside, it can be considered that from the philosophical perspective unfolded by the three aforementioned authors all conditions are met for discussing nudity in *Parallel*.

At some point, the spectator takes notice of the unsettling cold light suffused by the light bulb in the back of the stage. Alternatively, the lights

[2] Our translation from Jerzy Grotowski. *Teatru şi ritual. Scrieri esenţiale*. Bucureşti: Nemira Publishing House, 2014, p. 79.

are switched on and off in each of the two areas that divide the performative space. As music becomes increasingly haunting too, a new type of anxiety is now generated inside the spectators' bodies. As I mentioned, they were led towards the anticipation of a specific pattern based on the interaction between passivity and violence. This pattern is now shaken as the two begin executing the manoeuvres by which the light design is reverted and twisted, offering us the hint of a torture chamber. No one can anticipate what may lie ahead of them, as the perspective is open towards all possibilities more than ever in the show up to this moment.

But the gesture performed by kata-bodoki halmen brings to surface a new dimension of spectacular violence, which consequently registers a modification in the performer-spectator equation as well. Silent, sombre and displaying an almost neuter facial expression, the artist interposes a new sound in the scheme, a sound that does not belong to the music of the show. It is the harsh sound of a piece of adhesive tape that she begins to attach slowly around her breasts. The black material now substituting her brassiere is the epitome of mutilation and self-harm in *Parallel*. Immediately afterwards, it is Lucia Mărneanu's turn to repeat the humiliating gesture with a transparent adhesive tape, although she performs it with a certain air of indifference and cold detachment. As in Saint Catherine's records of pain combined with ecstatic voluptuousness, the women on stage never reject the transfiguring potential contained in a moment of absolute affliction.

Nudity is now traversed by its most tragic occurrence: their gesture is a painful de-fetishization of a part of the body that males usually associate with desire and sensuality and a silent confession of their inner mutilation at once. In the terms designated by Agamben (1999), their attempt to cover their breasts in this merciless manner is the articulation of their awareness in relation to God's belatedness in revealing His grace. By covering the skin with an instrument evocative of mutilation in this given context, they actually affirm their complete abandonment in the world. It is not difficult to speculate that spectators had moved from shock to a silent contemplation, which reveals the fact that the connection between them and the performers is now completed and fully consecrated.

However, as we find ourselves at a point I associated with Purgatory, this affliction is soon directed towards a new level. The same way they had previously allowed the spectators to assist their progressive denudation, they now permit them to join in so that they can witness a different process, just as intimate, but much more playful and humorous. Once the process of

denudation is over, the stage partners switch their performance from (self-) aggression to *transgression*.

New objects are brought in order to serve as stage props, objects which seem to announce a celebrative unfolding of events. They cover themselves again and put on their clothes in the mid-stage, staying loyal to their well calculated programme of disclosure-enclosure in relation to how and how much spectators should see. But moving beyond nudity does not put an end to the ceremonial frame. If up to this point spectators had been exposed to the ordeal endured by the feminine stigmatized body, now the spectator is confronted with a new image, albeit their impossibility to set it within a preconfigured category. It is now that we move from the woman body – tortured, victimised, fallen into disgrace and captive between human contempt and God's silence – to the *all-genders-body*, a process that is to be completed in the third part.

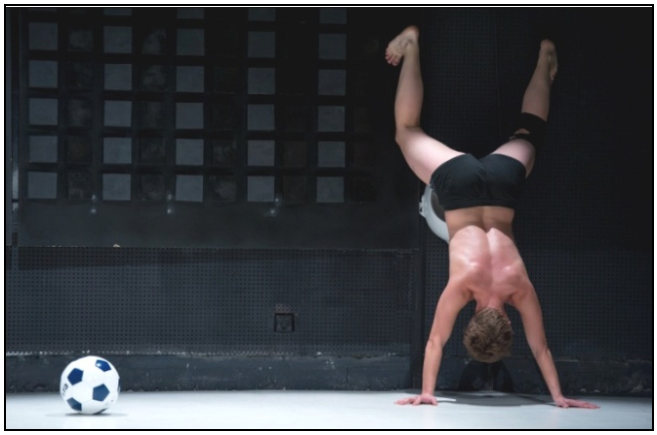

Fig. 5: Photo courtesy of Florin Biolan

The transformative moment corresponds to a notion that is less connected to the above discussed Purgatory, but rather to a concept that preoccupied Jewish scholars and mystics along the centuries. In the Bible, there is a verse in the book of Deuteronomy which states that "There shall not be a man's apparel on a woman, neither shall a man put on a woman's clothing, for whoever doeth so is an abomination to Jehovah thy God" (*King James Bible*, Deuteronomy 22.5). Therefore, it is beyond doubt that like all great traditional cultures, Orthodox Jews refuse any gender negotiation – there is no room for experiment or perilous identity games. And yet, in his

2006 conference speech entitled "The Holiness of the Twilight", Rabbi Reuben Zellman explicitly justifies the legitimacy of transgender identities by referring to ancient Jewish sources. Just as during the 24-hour cycle one encounters not only total dark and intense sunlight, but also innumerable nuances the eyes meet at dusk, so can things be understood in relation to gender:

> Our rabbis believed that twilight held great and unique power. (...) Many of them acknowledged that (...) *that middle place between light and dark could never be boxed in* [our emphasis]. It was not day and it was not night. Twilight was something else all its own. (Zellman, 2006, 3)

Supported by their witnesses, confessors and newly-invested priests that had faithfully followed their journey, either voyeuristically or empathically, the two performers escape the pains of Hell and the doubts of the Purgatory, having finally found their own in-between mental and spatial locus, "the twilight of twilights" (ibid.), a place where the outcast is permitted not only to perform, but also to rest.

Dragging the body into the light

Whether it was the last created part /
of me alone that rose, / O Sovereign Love, /
You know, Whose light it was that lifted me.
(Dante Alighieri, *Paradise*, Chant I, 1986)

The third and final part of the show coordinated by Sinkó Ferenc and Leta Popescu is constructed on three main interfering levels: *gender performativity* (Butler, 2006) by means of drag culture interventions, linguistic discourse and the rewriting of ritual along with the spectator, as a result of the investigation operated upon gender and sexual identity. Much can and should be said in relation to the gender bending mechanisms the performers operate with, from outfits to their assault upon articulate language, which they indirectly dislocate from the centre of patriarchal syntax. Since not all of the mentioned elements are correlated with the development of the performer-spectator relationship, I shall only make use of those that are relevant to this central issue.

However, the notion of gender performativity is of paramount importance in the evolution of the relationship between spectators and performers, since it gives birth to a new level of empathy now based on humour and irony, in contrast to the previous empathic networks created through pain and marginality. The use of drag-related techniques – with Lucia Mărneanu as a transvestite and

kata bodoki-halmen as a purportedly ambivalent combination of drag king and drag queen elements – stimulates the enhancement of a new perception that spectators may gain in relation to the performative agents, in that it manifests a humanizing effect. It is no longer *the tortured-torturous body* – that is to say, *martyr-body* – that offers itself to the spectator's gaze. A new body category is now at the viewer's disposal and one feels much more comfortable to watch it when it is covered with clothes and, consequently, with several new layers of signification, despite the intended ambiguity of their anti-traditional apparel. In *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler explains the political and cultural role drag is supposed to play within society in the following terms:

> This perpetual displacement constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. (Butler, 2007, 188)

Fig. 6: Photo courtesy of Adrian Pîclișan

Kata bodoki-halmen's black leather suit along with the high-heeled shoes connote a form of exoticism she does not fear to exhibit, the same way that her partner's morphology is radically modified due to the masculine suit she is proudly wearing. The artists reiterate a procedure that had made catharsis effective in the second scene: the only possibility to transcend the cliché placed upon you by society and its amputating constrictions does not consist in avoiding it, but in assimilating and interiorizing it until the nature of the oppressive labelling changes in the opposite direction. The "epistemology of the closet" – to use Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's expression – is now exceeded in favour of something much more subversive:

> Just so with coming out: it can bring about the revelation of a powerful unknowing *as* unknowing, not as a vacuum or as the blank it can pretend to be, but as a weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space. (Sedgwick, 1990, 77)

The spectator makes one more step further into performative irony as the artists introduce verbal discourse (to which all participants in the show contributed) – and it is only now that the audience clearly acknowledges, without any allusion or metaphor, the true sexual identity at stake, which is the lesbian identity. This revelation is brought to light with the help of a playful mode of speech, in an attempt to ignore the fact that the language through which we define marginal sexualities pays tribute by its very nature to the same patriarchal structures that are attacked. Therefore, linguistic transgression is aided by the attachment of various other subversive techniques and it is only their combination that produces resistance:

> The results of a systematic inquiry into the sexuation of language are still treated with vague suspicion. Is this a reversal, a ‹‹return of the repressed››, of the mastery over language exercised by one sex? (Irigaray, 1993, 134)

Though Lucy Irigaray's question remains unanswered and probably unanswerable, the strategy of reversing language through specific queer-feminist jokes and language games in *Parallel* ("What is better – to be born gay or black?" "Black, because you don't have to tell your parents"; "What do you call a woman with an opinion?" "Wrong!") activates the most energetic and fully exteriorized reactions that the public had manifested all throughout the show. Spectators reach a point of relief through language – now freed from its androcratically submissive function – and, as one can easily notice, it is far easier for the participants to deal with such essentially dramatic issues by means of queer humour. But laughing in a space outside of Hell and Purgatory is the exclusive privilege of those who had suffered the hardships of ontological annulment and identity distortion together with the artists during the previous scenes.

Turning back to the Dantesque analogy I have made use of in this paper, can it be said that the two performative agents had now carried the spectators to a level comparable to Paradise? If one understands this concept as a definitive enclosing in a sphere that had transcended human misery, the answer is definitely not. If at first they deny and then recreate language on their own *trans-* terms, Lucia Mărneanu and kata bodoki-halmen further fabricate their own paradisiacal space, the disguise of the natural body being part of this mechanism.

Fig. 7: Photo courtesy of Andrei Gîndac

But it is only towards the end of the show that we learn the nature of their personal *Paradise* towards which spectators are lifted too. Once jokes and irony proved their effectiveness in relation to the (usually extremely) sympathetic audience, the spectacular strategy suddenly shifts to confession, this time articulated through both corporeal and linguistic discourse.

The performers' free, gender-crossing and, to use Deleuze and Guattari's expression, "rhizomatic" bodies are now reinstalled in a genealogy they invoke in the last five minutes of the show. A "teleplastic abduction" (Lepecki, 2013) is accomplished, which means that we are finally confronted with the fact that we had seen not only the two bodies during their exposure, but the bodies of their relatives and their dead ancestors alike. Mothers, fathers, aunts, sisters, grandparents are all called into question as the artists revive memories that still inhabit their wounded bodies. Thus, familial origins, puberty ("Witnessing pubic hair growing over soul...breasts, hips"), gender roles within the confines of patriarchal family structures are all discussed, denied and somewhat reaffirmed.

Spectators seem to be transported into a litany as the artists replicate one another in succession, with a noticeable change in tonality that signals the shift from irony to supplication. The haunting polyphony leaves behind all subversive intentions – which has been, under all aspects, successfully acquired – and they also abandon the propensity towards protest and rebellion. Nevertheless, not only does the anti-patriarchal statement remain just as valid, but actually it is now that it fully legitimates the will to reconcile with a God who has been rendered to human beings through labels: Male, Ruler, Sovereign, Judge etc. It is thus particularly interesting to take notice of the

fact that, amongst this multitude of godly attributes, the artists do not attempt to denigrate His quality as Father, which is common and encouraged in most feminist debates that seek liberation from the Father figure archetype (see, for example, Mary Daly[3] and Adrienne Rich[4]). On the contrary, they seem to find comfort in the playful ambiguity that puts the earthly, "domestic" father on the same line with the heavenly Father, but Who, despite His magnitude, may be just as deaf and passive. Without denying the imperative of a feminist struggle, it can be said that the performers move on to *meta-feminism*, a term coined by theorist Lori Saint-Martin:

> the term *metafeminism* both includes and calls into question; it accompanies feminism, espouses its causes, incorporates it into new forms. It does not imply abandonment of what has come before, but a new form of integration, a way of building on past accomplishments (Saint-Martin qtd. in Green, 2001,104).

All these were already clearly articulated and this is the right time for them to be transcended. The issue at stake is no longer a question of LGBTQIA terminology, but a universal condition which Saint Paul explains in Galatians in the following words when he speaks about the way in which redemption annuls all present functioning binaries: "There is no Jew, nor Greek; there is no bondman, nor freeman; there is no man or female; for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." (*King James Bible*, Galatians 3.28). The performers approach this state through a process I would call *de-genderation*, which would imply that true transgression is reached when gender no longer needs to even be discussed – a perspective evidently inconceivable in the present socio-political context in which marginal sexual identities struggle to affirm their legitimacy. But *de-genderation,* the process of stripping off all genders, can at least function as a herald of the possibility to truly transcend language, power and societal patterns at some point.

The final speech, which can easily pass for a prayer, has a tragic connotation that the performers do not seek to hide or minimize: "Can a BODY heal of its own SOUL? Can it? Can it?" Gradually, darkness covers the bodies, seemingly displacing them from their performative centrality. Dissolution of language

[3] In her book *Beyond God the Father. Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Beacon Press, 1974), Mary Daly critically discusses the image of the Christian God as a tool for masculine power and female submission. Daly's response revolves around women's necessity to rediscover their divine nature.

[4] *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1986) by Adrienne Rich dismisses "the kingdom of the fathers" (p. 56) which she finds within the Christian system of thought and society as well. She also implies that the mystification of the feminine identity is part of the same androcratic process.

and dissolution of corporeality are finally accomplished, as Lucia Mărneanu articulates the final words in the show: "Father, I live for love." Paradise – in its traditional, Church-confirmed sense – may remain locked for the outcast and transgressor, but *Paradissolution* can never devoid itself of meaning as long as performative discourse is tangible for artists and spectators as well.

Fig. 8: Photo courtesy of Roland Váczi

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