

Visitor Account of Snejanka Mihaylova's *A Song*

BOJANA MLADENOVIC

After a long busy day at work I was heading in the direction of the Ruysdaelkade where If I Cant Dance was presenting three works within their festival Performance Days. The first of the three being Snejanka Mihaylova's *A Song* for which I was invited to write this visitor's account.

Somewhat slowed down by one of the first windy winter days in Amsterdam and by the overbearing agenda at work, initially I took the starting time of the performance rather lightly. I reasoned, in the visual arts circuit the public is never on time.

Knowing Snejanka's work from before, I was sure her performance wouldn't be loosely disappearing in the chattering mingle of the evening audience, but I certainly didn't expect to enter the beautiful courtyard of the Ruysdaelkade venue so embarrassingly last-minute, and to see through the windows the already packed room of people waiting for the performance to start.

Slightly ashamed and unhappy about the self-produced attention that always befalls the entrance of latecomers, I very quickly spotted a dear friend and another of Snajanka's 'disciples', Joe Kelleher. His place on the floor was a perfect invitation for me to dive into the warmth, cosiness and gentleness of the atmosphere in the room. I arrived.

As my breath was calming down and getting as warm as the room temperature, Snejanka, nodding her head, gently greeted me. In a beautifully cut white blouse, black trousers and pointy white shoes, she was sitting on a wooden chair with papers in her hands. It was a familiar sight. In the same way that the classical theatre marks its beginning with a red curtain that discloses the stage, Snejanka's performance will have her located in a carefully chosen spot in the room, on a chair or on the floor with papers in her hands.

The patience and calm with which she allowed another ten-or-so minutes for another ten-or-so latecomers to enter and find their place in the room, was full of generosity and welcoming. The small size of the room, the cosiness of the deep-red coloured oriental carpets that covered the whole floor, the open fire in the yard which we could see through big glass windows and doors, all contributed to the forming of a congregation. We came to listen. And so we were spoken to.

Snejanka told us that this event followed her two-year long study of the Gospel of Thomas. She clarified the status of this text as a non-canonical gospel and gave us only the necessary facts of its place and time of discovery (Nag Hammadi, Egypt, in 1945–46).

Then she read us what I assumed to be the parts of the gospel.

For quite some time the words drifted through the space:

“When you come to dwell in the light, what will you do? On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do?”

“When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower, and when you make male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male nor the female be female, when you make eyes in place of an eye, a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image; then will you enter the kingdom.”

“When you make the two one, you will become the sons of man, and when you say, ‘Mountain, move away,’ it will move away.”

I don't know how long it took. I don't know how long it takes to hear these words. I don't know how long it takes to understand these words. Two of Snejanka's years or thousands of others' years? But in this carefully curated instance, the words come to me in the same way as some poetry comes to me and finds me converted regardless of my will.

The poem settled upon our bodies that were casually scattered across the floor and benches, as its tones occupied and thickened the spaces between these bodies, of a by now already converted and thirsty congregation. This thickening is not of the sort that increases the distance, but one that recognizes the volume of space between us and acts as a first tissue of contact. My skin is connected to the skin of Joe and the others via the thick 'poem-full' air between us.

Snejanka continued to talk to us. Now the teaching is that of her own. Gently meandering between interpretation and expansion of the gospel, with poetic excursions into her theory and philosophy of time, she kept on singing the unspeakable and speaking that which requires no voice. And we listened. And we heard.

Another of Snejanka's performance tropes happened in A Song as well. As soon as we settled in the poem and were gently carried through our own never-complete-understanding of what we were surrendering to, Snejanka got slightly bothered by her chair, removed it, sat on the floor, started pouring water in her glass and through genuine insecurity shared with us that “this might be it”. That nothing else may be said or read or told or thought this evening in this performance

in this world. Not to say informally that this is the end of the performance, oh no, we all sensed that it just started, we all understood that she didn't tell us all she prepared to tell us, we all knew that she may disappear and fall apart here in front of us if she wants, but she cannot abandon us now. And so she didn't. And so we all allowed for a long wait.

There is mastery in allowing nothingness to settle in an artwork. Committing to it is a tough call. Anyone who ever performed or spoke in public will tell you about the horrors of an 'awkward silence', of forgetting the lines, of the fragility of an improvisation that loses its spontaneity. (One of the teachers in the school where I work recently said something I didn't hear before; that it's common knowledge among psychologists that the fear of speaking in public comes first, and the fear of dying only second).

But here is an artist who will investigate the nothingness within an event beyond the dramaturgical silence and beyond the 'scene where nothing happens'. And so she did. Right at the point where we accepted that this might be it, and 'nothing more' is the nothing more we are happy to receive, a horn started to sound behind our backs.

Without a need to turn around and look at the musician - the woman with her hand in the horn's mouth, who gently pressed the buttons with the other hand and blew that warm air - I surrendered to it in the same way as I did to the words earlier. After all, it was the same poem that went on and on, thickening the space further.

And the song continued into a choir of five women, each singing in a duet with Snejanka at first, and then layering their voices further in harmonies. Oh yes, we were still in that 'On the day when you were one you became two. But when you become two, what will you do'.

As my spirit was lifted as high as the ladies' sopranos, I realized that it may not descend any more. Converted firmly, I became a part of congregation in which I am asked to pay nothing and receive it all.

This visitor report by Bojana Mladenovic was written at the invitation of If I Can't Dance, and follows the performance of *A Song* by Snejanka Mihaylova, that was presented three times at the Ruysdaelkade festival venue and once at the Vondelkerk, during the Performance Days festival, 27 November - 3 December 2014, Amsterdam.