



Nature Theater of Oklahoma (named after the travelling theatre company in Kafka's fragment *Amerika*) was founded in New York in 2004 by Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška. Its unmistakable blend of conceptual clarity, formal rigour and an apparently trashy surface borrows from every theatre tradition and modernist art strategy imaginable. Its oeuvre includes not only theatre works and performances but also dance pieces, musicals, audio dramas, literature, graphic novels and films in a wide range of genres.

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The Life and Work of NATURE THEATER OF OKLAHOMA

Edited by Florian Malzacher



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Foreword

Exaggerated expressions, as if the actors had just appeared out of an early silent movie. Weird gestures, sweaty bodies. The effort and concentration are unmistakeable but fail to lead to virtuosity – at least not in the classical sense. Nothing here is meant to look easy, even if the choice of genres – musicals, dance theatre, show choirs, dinner theatre – actually promises respectable entertainment.

What the New York-based theatremakers Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška have been producing since 2004 under the label Nature Theater of Oklahoma is hardcore entertainment. They daringly mix banal everyday stories with equally banal movement – observed in the street, offices, gyms or watching animals in the wild – with the actors frequently dressed in costumes that make it virtually impossible to take them seriously. And yet there is nothing ridiculous here. It is all essential, with rigorous conceptual thinking, complex sets of rules and an exuberant delight in performance keeping each other in check.

What is at stake is the time we share. Time that we can feel, suffer, forget, remember again, hate, fight and embrace. Until in the end the performers and audience together reach an objective that is nothing other than the entire route they have covered.

In 2007, when – as happens every January – umpteen curators, presenters and festival dramaturgs flew across the Atlantic to New York for several parallel festivals to see what new things were there to be discovered in the former capital of the avant-garde, Nature Theater of Oklahoma was at best a vague insider's recommendation. But when a handful of Europeans saw *No Dice* in an improvised rehearsal room in a run-down office building, within a few minutes it was clear to some of them: if this company could actually keep this up – all their strange grimaces, the repetitive recital of meaningless and at the same time touching everyday conversations, the inscrutable but also very clear underlying principle that governed every seemingly random movement, the physical exertion to blow up every minute detail to epic size – then this wasn't something derivative or tamely searching like most

of the rest of what was created in the shadow of legendary forebears like Elizabeth LeCompte's Wooster Group or Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater, but rather something irritatingly unique. The next morning Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška sat in the legendary 24 hour East Village restaurant with a Soviet vibe, Veselka, meeting festival directors at hourly intervals.

Nature Theater of Oklahoma has long since become one of the most prominent and individual voices within international theatre. This first monograph offers an insight into its diverse artistic strategies through a wide range of essays by critics, theoreticians, participants and fellow artists, while Copper and Liška themselves also have their own frequent and trenchant say. And because theatre is always a collective art form, the numerous photos also pay homage to the actors who shaped this work and who have burnt themselves into the memories of those who have seen it.

Nature Theater's long-standing working method – from *No Dice* (2006) to *Life and Times* (2009–2015) – of generating text by recording phone calls can be experienced in their dialogue with theatre scholar Bonnie Marranca: Copper and Liška secretly recorded the conversation and only sent it to her for approval afterwards. Its form and content are one and the same: it is a text about the way they work in the form with which they work. The same is also true of the texts interpolated through the volume – a selection of previously unpublished post-rehearsal conversations, manifestos and diary entries.

For all its internationalism, Nature Theater is clearly rooted in the North American theatre and particularly in the specific – contemporary and historic – milieu of Manhattan, as Tom Sellar demonstrates in his essay. Karinne Keithley Syers follows these ideas up by examining the role of text, language and speech and, alongside all manner of contemporary references, discovering traces of 19th century American literature ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson through Henry David Thoreau to Walt Whitman.

By contrast the director Joris Lacoste stumbled into a European performance of *No Dice* quite innocently without being able to place it into any context – and his confused fascination may coincide with the impressions of many audience members.

In recent years Nature Theater has increasingly left the theatre stage behind and gone in search of theatricality in other media, primarily film. Along with their choice of medium, the profile of the protagonists also changed: all the performers in the three full length films produced so far have been amateurs who live locally. After a look behind the scenes of *Die Nibelungen* (2016), in which we hear from the performers themselves, Claus Philipp examines the large-scale project based around the filming of *Die Kinder der Toten* (2018), whose plot is based very freely on Elfriede Jelinek's mammoth novel with the same title: "I say something, but they don't say it after me," is how the Nobel Prize winner describes her highly personal impression of Copper and Liška's work, whom she describes as "two magicians/angels, bodiless in their bodies."

The often neglected question of the Political in the work of Nature Theater of Oklahoma is addressed by Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, who focusses on the expansive, nine-part, script-based project *Life and Times*, whose complete text is based on a total of sixteen hours of telephone conversations with company member Kristin Worrall. Its second episode additionally shows Copper and Liška's sustained interest in dance and choreography: an arc that stretches from *Poetics: a ballet brut* (2005) – one of Nature Theater's earliest works – to what is currently their most recent piece *No President* (2018). Pieter T'Jonck illuminates this in his dance historical study.

Theatre is not created in a vacuum: it is always related to other discourses, works and artists, which it may differentiate itself from, align itself with, quote, contradict or tellingly ignore. Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška have never denied the affinities and inspirations within their own work. In their podcast *OK Radio* (2012–2013), following in the footsteps of John Cage and Morton Feldman, they conducted over eighty extensive conversations with colleagues from around the world. Before the volume concludes with a first ever index of their works, a glossary assembles extracts from these exchanges under a series of headings: "abstraction", "improvisation", "chance" and "audience" are naturally present alongside "death", "emotions", "ghosts" and "Lucifer". These spontaneous and unguarded remarks touch on much of what distinguishes the life and work of Nature Theater of Oklahoma.

Florian Malzacher

A MANIFESTO FOR MANIFESTOS

A manifesto is an expression of a firm commitment to a limited set of ideas and an adamant rejection of another set of ideas.

We don't write manifestos because we don't want to stick our neck out too far. You always risk looking stupid if you declare your belief in something too firmly. You risk ridicule and scorn from those whose ideas you demote. But these are exactly the kinds of risks we must be willing to take if we want to move on to bigger – not necessarily in size – and better things.

A certain amount of arrogance is unavoidable when composing a manifesto.

Make a commitment! You may not actually be arrogant, but you will appear so. Accept this fact. A manifesto is by definition an act of arrogance. Stick your neck out as far as possible. A manifesto must be a bold gesture.

Overcome your fear of looking stupid; there are worse things.

Speak with authority, even if you don't have any.

Don't be afraid of exclamation marks and capital letters. Dispense with them freely and generously.

RABIDLY ATTACK ONE SET OF IDEAS AND REPLACE IT WITH ANOTHER! Be AGGRESSIVE, even if only in appearance.

(Passive-aggressive manifestos, usually written in parentheses, or in italics, don't work, unfortunately, *otherwise we'd find it easier to write them, they'd suit our personality better?*)

Legitimize your manifesto and disarm your detractors. Intimidate them, by substituting "I" with "we". Your manifesto won't be dismissed if it appears a large number of you stand behind it and are willing to defend it.

A manifesto has to have sharp teeth and it has to be willing to use them both to attack and defend itself.

Don't be afraid to offend. Insult with abandon. Manifestos aren't meant to please. You can apologize later.

Individual ideas within the set of ideas you have firmly committed to are allowed to be mutually contradictory.

Declare the temporary nature of your firm commitment to a limited set of ideas and reserve the right to change your commitment at any time. Celebrate inconsistency!

Write a new manifesto every day!

Kelly Copper & Pavol Liška (2006)



Discomforts, Obstacles and Artistic Infidelities

The Theatre of Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška

“The great Theatre of Oklahoma calls you! Today only and never again! If you miss your chance now you miss it for ever! If you think of your future, you are one of us! Everyone is welcome. If you want to be an artist, join our company! Our theatre can find employment for everyone, a place for everyone!”

Franz Kafka, *Amerika*

Only today, for one time only! The Great Theatre of Oklahoma! Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška had been keeping the name of the immoderately ambitious touring troupe from Kafka's *Amerika* in mind for a long time – for the day they would found their own company. Not only because the unfinished novel had served Liška as a kind of instruction manual to his new homeland after emigrating from Slovakia (the same part of the world that both Kafka and *Amerika*'s protagonist Karl Roßmann are from), but also the grandiose gesture of the poster and the mind-boggling dimensions of the dubious-sounding Nature Theatre of Oklahoma held a powerful attraction for the two unknown theatre-makers who, with a combination of modesty and strength of will, had no doubts that they had something substantial to offer as artists.

left:
Pavol Liška and
Kelly Copper



Kelly Copper and
Pavol Liška (2010)

In 1991, at the age of 18, an obscure job offer suddenly gave Liška, who had grown up in a small town in Slovakia, the opportunity to move to the USA. He had never been abroad before, spoke no English, and was actually supposed to join the Army – but instead, a few weeks later, he ended up in Oklahoma. He learned the language at night (when he wasn't working) to be able to follow his classes in Philosophy and Writing at college during the day, constantly afraid of losing his student visa if his grades weren't good enough. After a year in a rather desperate work and life situation in Oklahoma he transferred to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire, where he met Kelly Copper in a seminar on Dadaist performance (a remarkably unpopular course with only three students in attendance) and the two became an inseparable pair. Copper graduated in 1993 and moved to New York.

While Liška was visiting her over Christmas that year they had seen *Frank Dell's the Temptation of St. Antony* by The Wooster Group,

Reza Abdoh's *Quotations from a Ruined City* and Richard Foreman's *My Head was a Sledgehammer* – in a kind of crash course one after another – and their entire concept of theatre was turned upside down. Liška, who was busy directing one of his own plays at college, came back and immediately told his fellow students: “that we have been doing it all wrong, and have to change everything. These three shows I saw in New York really made me realize what theatre could be.”

Since then Kelly Copper and Pavol Liška, who have called themselves Nature Theater of Oklahoma since 2004, have themselves created some of the most remarkable theatre works to be seen in the former capital of the avant-garde in recent years: unmistakable in their combination of conceptual rigour, an idiosyncratic mix of modernist art strategies (at times closer to the visual than the performing arts) and exultantly theatrical performance that refuses to shy away from apparently trashy surfaces while uninhibitedly poaching from all manner of theatrical traditions.

Even if their greatest success has come in Europe, their theatre remains unmistakeably North American – not least because in their works they draw on typically Anglo-American genres such as dinner theatre (in *No Dice*), musicals (*Life and Times – Episode 1*), show choirs (*Episode 2*), vaudeville mystery theatre (*Episodes 3 & 4*), Western movies (*Pursuit of Happiness*), Hollywood classics like *Citizen Kane* (*Episode 7*), North American landscape painting (*Episode 8*) and gangsta rap (*Episode 9*).

Most of all, however, they have been influenced by their home city of New York. Most of Nature Theater's idols live or did live in Manhattan: Marcel Duchamp the inventor of the readymade; Andy Warhol, who turned the everyday into art; John Cage and Merce Cunningham, who made chance a protagonist; Ken Jacobs and Joseph Cornell and their filmic compositions of found materials; The Wooster Group with its fascination with technical perfection and information overload; and not least the unique Jack Smith, who celebrated trash and camp as original aesthetics – all of them have influenced Nature Theater, that consciously and enthusiastically roots itself in these traditions.

Among theatremakers it is first and foremost Richard Foreman and his handling of props and the audience that has left the most evident traces. Pavol Liška joined the legendary director's team in the mid-

1990s and helped on several productions: “It was the most formative experience for me, and sometimes I feel like I learned everything I know about directing from Richard Foreman.” Foreman was also the one who gave them the chance to show their first work in New York at his theatre in 1996. “Our first 3 or 4 shows in New York were an attempt to imitate him.” And even later, long after they had found their own highly individual artistic path, Foreman remained a mentor and role model: “I learned from him to shape every small unit of time, to be rigorous, and never make compromises. His shows were built like sculptures out of words, gestures, movements, props, scenery. He built perfectly constructed worlds, and we struggled to do the same. Richard Foreman is never too far away from my mind when I direct.”

Now the couple live in Long Island City, Queens – Manhattan with its famous skyline is now more distant but remains in view (at least for the moment) until the crush of constantly expanding skyscrapers will hide it finally from sight.

Oral Histories

Copper and Liška’s fascination with audio recordings began early on. Kelly Copper spent her mostly itinerant childhood and teenage years moving from town to town almost every six months with her family throughout the United States. This didn’t leave much time for forming lasting friendships – but there were always books, and also the cassette recorder that she was given as one of her first toys. Her father, a radio personality, went to work every day with all kinds of audio toys in his bag that no one was allowed to touch. Kelly and her sister would listen to his show on the radio at home, and were frequently babysat by a cast of show people, including voice artists, magicians, and other special guests. Meanwhile they would produce their own radio plays: stuffed full of home-made special effects, put together with whatever they could find; mud, a Slinky, bumblebees trapped in a paper cup – even the toilet flush.

Pavol Liška’s interest in theatre began in very different circumstances at the age of sixteen when numerous theatre professionals took part in Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution of 1989 that ended forty-one years of one-party rule in a few weeks and made a playwright President. At the time Liška had never been to the theatre. And even then he



did not see theatre live but listened to audio cassettes of plays by Havel, Kohout and others that were circulated as hand-copied live recordings: “I thought that theatre was always presented in this way and for me it was enough.” So for him it was no deficiency that the first theatre play he wrote himself (which was very reminiscent of Havel) could only be produced as a cassette recording. He had no idea of what to do on stage: it did not interest him. “All I wanted was to hold a cassette in my hands.” Later, once he had arrived in Oklahoma, he translated the play literally word for word with the help of a dictionary.

Kelly Copper in
Home Movie (1999)

This interest in the spoken word, in sound as a document, is something both of them have retained to this day: Liška would later spend hours recording conversations with Copper’s mother – or his own father, talking about his life – hours of recordings – countless cassettes that are still in storage somewhere today, unused. They had no idea how to use them, simply the need to record everything “as a possibility for feeling alive and to be alive.” And an inkling that the material might have artistic potential.

The awareness that one’s own speech is being recorded changes that speech – not only in its content but also its form. The (unprac-



left:
Pavol Liška (1999),
right:
Pavol Liška and
Kelly Copper (1996)

tised) speaker becomes aware of their role and their speech turns more pretentious: something that previously fascinated Andy Warhol and prompted him to record conversations with a recording device very clearly in view. The idea of generating an entire play solely from oral reports and conversations first came about for the work *No Dice* (2006). From over one hundred hours of telephone conversations about work, art and life Copper and Liška distilled the material for a three-and-a-half hour performance. The recordings were edited and placed in different contexts, generating new meanings and above all giving the audience a great deal of space to create their own connections.

Telephone calls of course have a different style than face to face conversations. In the absence of facial expressions and physical gestures, nuances are exaggerated, the simplest points are made with ex-



cessive clarity and confirmation is continually being sought and given. If such conversations are then put on stage in a situation of direct communication, the tiniest details become overlarge and the language acquires an irritating artificiality.

Pavol Liška and
Kelly Copper filming
The Dump (1999)

However, sustaining this manner of speaking over countless performances is far from easy. In *No Dice* (and later in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Rambo Solo* [2008]) the text was therefore neither transcribed nor learned by heart by the actors. Instead they spoke their lines simultaneously along with a recording played to them in each performance on synchronised iPods through in-ear headphones. Even if at times they filled the text with other meanings, heightened it, or distorted it with strong (for example French) accents, the rhythm and intonation was always retained. Thus an unconventional type of text emerged along



Elisabeth Conner
Skjærvold,
Anne Gridley and
Robert M. Johanson,
(Istanbul, 2009)

with an unmistakable manner of speaking, a variation on the aesthetic of naturalism in the manner of Gerhard Hauptmann: both highly authentic and artificial at the same time.

Life and Times (2009–2015) engaged even more radically with recorded telephone conversations as the basis of a performance text: in phone calls that lasted a total of sixteen hours Kristin Worrall – a musician and performer in *No Dice* – told the story of her life; the life of a not exactly atypical American woman, aged 34 at the time; a life that was interesting above all because so much of it is highly reminiscent of our own. This telephone conversation was transcribed word for word, without any cuts or corrections, and became the libretto of *Life and Times*. With all the pauses, slips of the tongue, stuttering and errors of the original.

Everything that is at hand

The use of stories told by other people is part of Copper and Liška's strategy of working with found material. They explicitly classify themselves within an artistic tradition that extends from Marcel Duchamp's readymades via the experimental found footage films of particularly the 1960s to contemporary forms of verbatim theatre. Recycling and reworking found material became significant for Copper and Liška when they turned their back on theatre entirely for four years at the end of the 1990s and concentrated exclusively on visual arts: they became more interested in old family Super-8 films they found in flea markets and discarded photos than large-scale efforts to produce original artworks: "As an artist there was little that you could do that would have been more beautiful than these films and photos."

When they returned to the stage in 2002, they transposed these ideas to the theatre: not only in how they generated text, but also often in the material for movement, costumes and facial expressions. *Poetics: a ballet brut* (2005), one of the first works under the label Nature Theater of Oklahoma, is a dance piece that is essentially choreographed from everyday movements. A large part of these are gestures that can be performed sitting down: the rehearsals mainly took place – for lack of any other space – around the kitchen table. *No Dice* was then rehearsed in the studio of a children's theatre which not only offered more space but also cowboy hats and pirate headgear. It didn't take long to find the right costumes for the piece.

It is one of Copper and Liška's principles to integrate restrictions into the work along with opportunities that occur by chance. As Richard Foreman demands: Let the show become what it wants to become. Also: Identify the most radical element in the rehearsal process and then make the show about that. Both of these need time – and that means you can't organise rehearsals according to a preconceived plan, instead you have to embark upon a joint exploration with an uncertain outcome.

Life and Times reflects not only the life of Kristin Worrall. The monologue, always split between several actors, becomes a multiple biography. For the production of the first episode Liška incorporated movement and images from his own childhood, for example from the *Spartakiads*, collective socialist sporting events in Czechoslovakia

(and other Eastern Bloc countries) whose highlights were giant choreographed displays of mass gymnastics. In order to partially anonymise the narrative, the names of people and places in Worrall's story were partly replaced with names that Kelly Copper associated with similar childhood memories.

The stage and costumes for *Life and Times – Episodes 3 & 4* were derived more or less as a copy of the famous London West End production of Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap* (premiered in 1952) that is still playing to this day. And because the actors somehow had to move, for a long time during rehearsals its stage directions were also simply retained.

Strategies like this always raise the familiar question of authorship. However, the answer that Copper and Liška give to this in their work is not a modest one: yes, they do use other people's material, but they are the ones who consciously select, contextualise and shape it. They are the ones who make art out of it: an art that is intended to be greater than what they can apprehend themselves and yet unmistakably remains their own.

The same is true more recently in the case of texts that are no longer based on recorded conversations but have been written in a more or less conventional manner in a quiet room. Once the principle of recorded telephone conversations had become recognisable, it lost its innocence; suddenly it had an obvious purpose and ultimately a form that could be anticipated by the participants. After working in this way for almost ten years, suddenly it was writing for themselves that appeared to be unusual, challenging and threatening.

The Epic of the Everyday

One could say that, for Pavol Liška, the English language is itself an *objet trouvé*. He learned it rapidly and thoroughly after coming to the USA at the age of eighteen. Even though his powers of expression may now clearly exceed those of most people who were born in America, as with many emigrant writers who do not write in their mother tongue, there remains a certain distance and a fascination with observation.

It is this framing gaze that – in both *No Dice* and *Life and Times* but also in the more recent works *Pursuit of Happiness* (2017) and *No President* (2018) – discovers the epic in the everyday, both in the Bre-



chtian sense of gesturing and showing and also in the playful extension of epic traditions that are marked by their narrative approach, by addressing the listener directly (far removed from any notion of the fourth wall), by the exhaustive presentation of individual details and a certain desire to linger. *No Dice* lasted three and a half hours, *Life and Times – Episode 1* around four hours and on those few occasions when all nine parts were presented together the audience spent around 18 hours in the theatre. “Hardcore musical entertainment” – Nature Theater aims to be disproportionate and lacking in moderation: “We are so arduously entertaining that it becomes painful.”

Cast of *No Dice*
(Portland, 2007)

The epic rarely relies on the dramatic, on accentuating conflicts, on changes of pace. It is a flowing narrative that splits into tributaries from time to time but always finds its way back to the main current: a big story made up of many little ones. In this way it maintains exactly the same tension between free verbal speech (for example in



Julie LaMendola
and Anne Gridley
(Avignon, 2011)

fairy tales that are passed on orally) and the clearly structured verses (of Greek or medieval heroic epics) that *Life and Times* plays with. The banal, the lightweight, the everyday are all heightened and the actor is directed “to always look for the maximum degree of meaning.” Every filler word, every “anyway” thus becomes a statement. As in all epics even the most banal stories become allegorical and collective: It is always about us, too.

Dice, Coins and Rules

Decisions made by chance, tasks and rules for games form the backbone of Nature Theater’s dramaturgical structure that is unmistakably influenced by John Cage and Merce Cunningham’s compositional and choreographic principle of “chance operation”. The fact that for years Copper and Liška’s productions have been decisively determined by dice,

decks of cards and coins only appears to contradict their both being self-confessed control freaks who never start work unprepared or carelessly: indeed it is precisely the high proportion of chance decisions that forces them to continually reassert and question their control.

Like Cage, they often regard chance as superior to their own preferences – especially, as Cage describes it, since chance is not entirely arbitrary – rather it is something that occurs and thus as it were belongs to the whole: something one must face as a challenge and that requires flexibility in one's thinking. Leaving certain decisions to chance requires no less work, it simply displaces it.

Pavol Liška first refused to find ostensible directing solutions in *E. F. W. (Extreme Family Wrestling)*, a smaller work that ended their four years of theatrical abstinence in 2002, and they continued this approach in their very free Chekhov adaptation *The Chicken*. Telling the performers where to stand, how loudly to speak, what emotions to show had become boring – so they tossed coins or threw dice that would determine whether the actors would sit or stand. A card game divided the stage up into different areas they could occupy and also determined their volume, dynamics and emotions. They directed the text – but avoided the trap of doubling it and thereby simplifying it with their own interpretation. Chance went against the grain of the play and produced unexpected readings that subsequently had to be interpreted not only by the public but also by the directors. The performances and their interpretations became porous, the audience turned into active participants whose view was ultimately of equal value to that of the theatremakers. In doing so the desire for causality, linearity and stories was generally so strong that the public were constantly projecting different forms of their own narrative – but arbitrary – logic onto the proceedings.

Since then it has become impossible to understand Nature Theater's work without such "chance operations": in *Poetics* dice were used to generate entire choreographies and became so dominant that the next piece was defiantly entitled *No Dice*, with the power of decision-making given to a deck of cards instead. The rummy deck divided the space up into possible positions and generated gestures and dance material: the body was schematically divided (each arm and each leg was given a certain suit) and thirteen different movements corresponded to the values of each card.

However, “anything goes” does not produce an aesthetic on its own: chance and free spaces are only interesting as an artistic principle within clear rules: rules that allow the actors to make new decisions each evening but also make demands of them. This game character became most evident in *No Dice*: every decision had consequences for what the actor could do or avoid doing next. In this way the greatest possible restrictions were combined with countless possibilities whose manifestation did less to fundamentally alter the evening but rather made a special presence and permanent state of alertness on the part of the performers physically tangible within the auditorium. Like Zinédine Zidane in Douglas Gordon und Philippe Parreno’s eponymous film, the actors constantly kept an eye on the entire field of play in order to continually recalibrate their optimum position. Not every detail can be planned – “You practice in order to have the ability to match up with the other team: the audience.”

Dramaturgical strategies such as these serve above all to break through the routine of theatre and to make every evening genuinely live. Because while the theatre always promises to be ephemeral and fleeting and claims this moment of transience, of being incapable of reproduction as the unique selling point that distinguishes it from all other art forms – at the same time for centuries it has laid value on being repeatable as precisely as possible night after night. This paradox interests many experimental theatremakers because it aims right at the theatre’s heart: that it happens in the common presence of artists and audience, that it is shared time in which unforeseen and also undesired events may take place. Each error produces a greater awareness of the fragility that everything living has than the most perfect dramaturgy does.

When rehearsals for *Pursuit of Happiness* with the Slovenian dance ensemble En Knap, who they hardly knew beforehand, reached a dead end – how was a company attuned to perfection supposed to understand that the imperfect can also have a power of its own? – Copper and Liška showed them the YouTube video of Patti Smith’s performance at the 2016 award ceremony for the Nobel Prize for Literature, which she accepted on behalf of Bob Dylan: “She starts singing *A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall* and she forgets the lyrics only a little bit into the song. She stops, she falters. And she deals with it, and the energy she and the audience get from that rupture – and the way that she leans

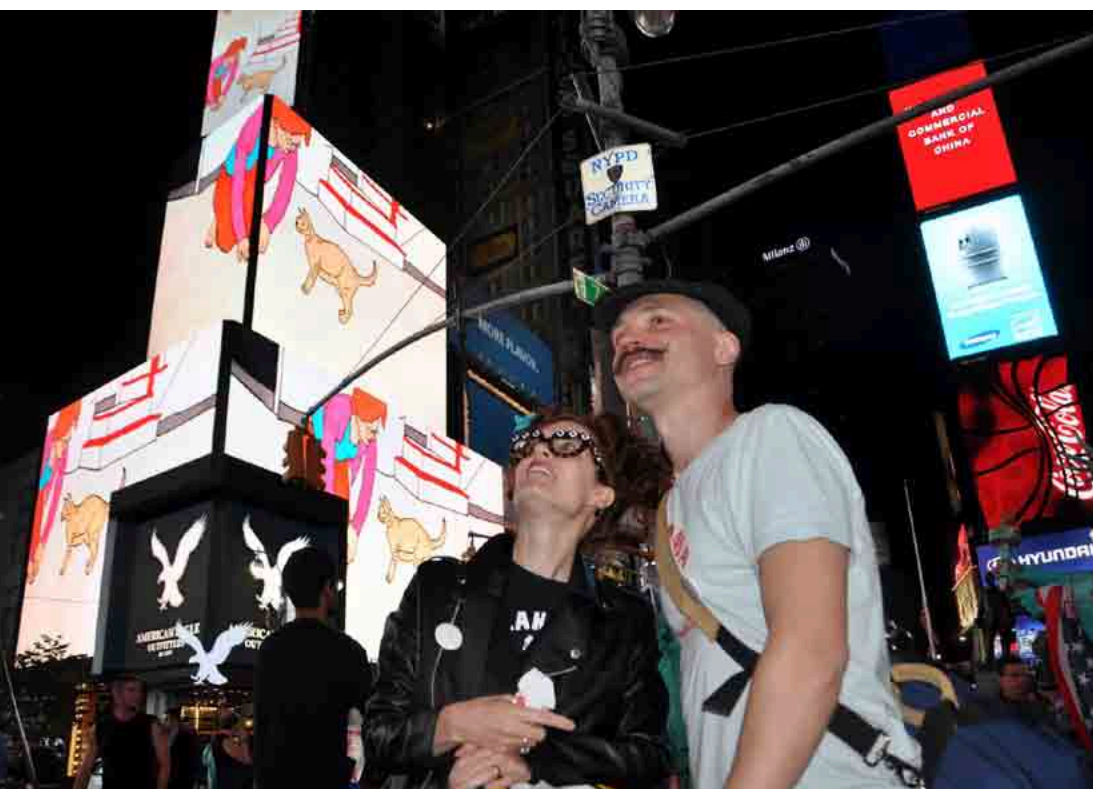


in to the text full of the fear and the embarrassment and the passion that's there – it's electric. The audience is with her because they were in the hole with her – and that's pure magic." A mistake, a failure can transform itself into strength. Because it allows the members of the audience to participate.

Fumiyo Ikeda,
Elisabeth Conner and
Robert M. Johanson
(NYC, 2010)

Dramaturgy of Obstacles

Such chance operations and rules of games also serve to create obstacles and restrictions which they as directors are obliged to deal with just as much as the performers are. Obstacles create a balance between freedom for the performers and directorial control, between the unpredictable and what is one's own. The couple's appearance already gives away this dramaturgical principle: the waxed moustache of Pavol Liška, the pinned up hair of Kelly Copper, often decorated with



Copper and Liška
at the screening of
Ancho in Times Square
(NYC, 2013)

plastic flowers or birds, their often extrovert clothing: if they want to be taken seriously a special effort is necessary.

Because deep down they do not believe that anything that is too simple can have any genuine value – in life as in theatre. They want to see actors working, especially when they are meant to be entertaining. Apparently effortless virtuosity does not interest them, for them it is purely a sign that someone is not trying hard enough, has yet to reach their own limits.

How do actors who are busy swinging their legs back and forth while pulling faces manage to communicate something existential? Through visible work. Their expressions, their movements – usually their most important allies in the theatre along with the text – are fighting against them, not for them. Comparable perhaps with people with a strong physical disability, their external tricks and limitations shift our perceptions: they have to concentrate particularly hard and

over-articulate in order to say what they want to say. And we have to concentrate particularly hard in order to be able to follow them.

The performance style taken from silent movies in *No Dice* and *Die Nibelungen* (2016), for example, produces theatrical forms that have long been too heightened for the theatre. Overblown and hammed up until it hurts, they are reminiscent of a time when performers were visibly grappling with the challenges and opportunities of the new medium of cinema. In *Life and Times* as well the performers are faced with many different obstacles and hurdles: the language of the telephone monologue is restrictive, follows its own rules and defies the theatrical frame that Copper and Liška have invented for it. The meaningful elements frequently conflict with each other and cannot agree on a common syntax. And the performers are often deprived of the skills and tricks that they can best use to defend themselves: the singer Julie LaMendola has to act and dance – and in *Episodes 3 & 4* she isn't even allowed to sing anymore. Fumyio Ikeda, a leading dancer with the famous Belgian company Rosas, is involved in some very strange choreography in *Episode 2* and is also obliged, like everyone else, to sing – which is clearly not her strong point. The musician and sound designer Kristin Worrall is used as an actress – and the actors as singers and dancers (which very few of them are). And Robert M. Johanson, a key actor in the company for many years, was handed his first ever commission as a composer with the score for *Episode 1*.

Wherever it emerges that an actor is developing techniques or strategies to rescue themselves these are deliberately hindered: rescues are boring. So the bar is raised ever higher, for example by continuously adding new dances. Being overstretched is not a deficit (as it normally is in theatre) but deliberate: “A hundred people are sitting there and watching you – why should you feel comfortable?”

Higher, faster, further

Thus Nature Theater's work can effectively be described in terms of a series of challenges the company has set itself. While *Episode 1* was sustained not least by the difficulties of spending three and a half hours singing a text that really was not made for singing (while also learning which gestures had to be performed at that moment from

cue cards that were always being reshuffled), *Episode 2* was a challenge mainly because of its ostensibly simple but actually often very complex choreography. In *Episodes 3 & 4* the actors were never given their lines in advance, instead having to read them night after night off old-fashioned cardboard signs like those used (before the invention of tele-prompters) on TV shows. And just to make it impossible for them to learn their lines before the premiere, for most of the rehearsal period Copper and Liška simply used the script for Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*.

Similar to the use of iPods in earlier works and for the score of *Episode 1* and *Episode 2* the cardboard signs also gave the directors control of the duration and timing within the production. And by changing rhythms that rarely corresponded to the speaking time that was actually required it demanded permanent concentration from the actors.

By the end of what was already a long evening in the theatre all the actors were standing or sitting motionless in the naturalistic set while Robert M. Johanson spent thirty minutes reciting a highly detailed and not particularly entertaining text. All of them had to maintain the tension and stay in the present without moving. One could feel the exertion more than one could see it.

This sense of endurance, of time as an obstacle that must be overcome together, runs through the plays. Even two and a half hours can be a challenge if they are taken not as a marathon but – as in *No President* – as a sprint. The key thing is always to create situations in which “the façade of the actors drops, and the audience can see the human effort to produce this thing live in front of you.”

But at some point the actors will also master this game and something else will be required to keep them on their toes. This is why decisions made by dice and rule-based systems have now largely disappeared from Nature Theater's work and it is now tight straightjackets of direction and choreography that make apparently impossible physical demands. In *No President* the husky and hairy actor Ilan Bachrach, as a kind of *prima ballerina*, hardly ever leaves the stage, struggling with the complex, high speed choreography: dancing, skipping and running around covered in sweat while the master of ceremonies Robert M. Johanson describes the escalating events in a breathless non-stop monologue. Only at the end, after all the precisely planned



and yet never entirely predictable chaos, does it finally calm down. The music of *The Nutcracker* fades away. And, to the sound of Adele's *Someone Like You*, Bachrach and Bence Mezei (reminiscent in their tutus of the finale of *Poetics*) come together in a dreamlike *pas de deux*. While attempting synchronicity and beauty, fake penises hidden under their skirts swing back and forth out of time: silly, touching and very human.

Early rehearsals of
Life and Times -
Episode 1 (NYC, 2009)

In Nature Theater of Oklahoma's three feature length films so far there has hardly been any need for an additional structure or artificially generated challenges: with casts consisting exclusively of locally-sourced amateur performers, simply being able to act and follow directions is generally enough of a challenge. (Which nevertheless didn't stop Copper and Liška making the cast of *Germany Year 2071* [2017] per-



During the shooting of
Die Nibelungen (2015)

form every gesture and every movement including the crowd scenes backwards. The direction of the film was then reversed during editing, creating a dream-like state of suspension.)

Ultimately what can be seen in the finished film contains a considerable element of chance. Because the tasks that the amateurs are required to master are compounded by the fragility of low budget filming. Problems require immediate solutions: within the tight shooting schedule the desire to maintain control is permanently at odds with improvised efforts at damage limitation: When filming *Die Nibelungen*, the romantic lead Siegfried was unwilling to even touch his beloved Kriemhild for religious reasons – and the horde of naked aliens escaping from the swamp monster in *Germany Year 2071* suddenly found themselves in the midst of a large marathon that was unexpectedly being run over the same course...