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THEATRE. Signa. Where theatre is hiding these days

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Between 11 and 14 June, Intercult (with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs of Romania) organises in Mangalia the “Romanian phase” of the SEAS Black/North Sea project, financed through the “Culture (2007 – 2013)” Programme of the European Union and launched in 2003 (the Baltikum/Adriatico phase), as a platform for encouraging cultural exchange and artistic production development in the port cities of Europe, in order to raise awareness on the role of art in activating the public space. This year, the ports “targeted” by SEAS were Odessa and Varna / Balçik; Mangalia and Istanbul will come next. For 2009, there are projects planned in cities from Georgia and the Russian Federation.

I wouldn’t want to enter into details about the lack of Romanian artists in the carrying out of SEAS (caused by the absence of domestic funding), severe reason of frustration for me and, I suppose, for the coordinator of the project on behalf of Intercult, Corina Oprea (led by Chris Torch, Intercult is a Stockholm-based organisation which initiates and gets involved almost exclusively in European cultural cooperation events) and, this time, neither about the installations (Underneath/ Nothing as silent as snow by Karena Johnson from Great Britain and Melih Gorgun from Turkey, Borderline by Siri Hermansen from Norway, Fantomat by Dritero Kasapi from Sweden and Venelin Shurelov from Bulgaria), or the dance (Monday in the Sun, performance created in one of the most important European centres, Garajistanbul from Turkey), the pseudo stand-up comedy (Beer Tourist, created by Wunderbaum, Denmark) or the in situ projects (The Kiss and Waste Project by Anne Lise Stenseth, Norway and Night Scene, created by the Metro-Boulot-Dodo group from Great Britain, a combination of live performance, original music and new media), presented in Mangalia, as well as in Odessa.

We’ll be speaking about a great absence of the Mangalia phase (since that’s the way things go in life), the most shocking and enthusiastic of the creations brought by Intercult from the North Sea to the Black Sea (to Odessa and Bulgaria) that makes you seriously rethink the concept of theatre these days: the Black Sea Oracle of the Danish company Signa, “performed” in Ukraine and in the Bulgarian city of Varna.

Signa is an “artistic partnership” between the Danish Signa Sorensen (author of performances and installations) and the Austrian media artist Arthur Köstler, gathering, in addition, a wide array of artists (of circus included), with different

profiles and nationalities and amateur artists in what we could call "performance-like theatre-installations". In 2007, their creations in Köln and Berlin were nominated the best of the year by the theatre magazines from the respective cities, reason why Signa was invited at the famous festival in the capital of Germany, Berliner Theatertreffen, with a performance of 200 hours non-stop, called The Ruby Town Oracle.

Interlude: 200 hours non-stop? A few unavoidable clarifications: the constant principle of Signa is that the "performances" take place in non-theatre spaces (factories, hotels, ruined, decadent and degenerated spaces, where historical time is still imperceptible and, most of the times, having a gloomy atmosphere), with which they enter into a semantic relation bringing them closer to in situ art, they last for a continuous number of hours/days, during which the performers sleep, eat, drink, wash their teeth under the eyes of the audience, who can enter and stay for as long as they want, can eat, drink and smoke together with the "actors", can do absolutely whatever crosses their minds (including moving in for a little while in the performance space), as long as they don't break the rules of the story they enter into (they receive these written rules at the entrance); every time, the performers assume a fictional identity inside a pre-textual narrative structure, identity to which they stay loyal till the last consequences.

Just like The Ruby Town Oracle, The Black Sea Oracle has as pretext the story of Martha Rubin, a soothsayer of doubtful reputation crossing the fairs of Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, having been brought up in a circus and having mysteriously disappeared in 1913, in Constanta. The legend has it that from that moment onwards she kept reappearing in various corners of the continent and her descendants (she gave birth to 17 children, including a pair of Siamese) formed a society that bore her name, trying to understand her disappearance and her predictions. The Oracle...is exploiting the scheme of a successively-layered video game (a quest), the stake of which is the "rediscovery" of Martha Rubin's spirit. A goddess, a game master and a game mistress (actually a drag queen, a travestite) and their servants (one of their functions being that of continuously translating what was being said, from English into the language of the host country, i.e Russian this time) lead a ritual of identity granting (decided by the combination of the odds of four roulettes) to the four "players" (two men, two women) who had lost their own personalities and randomly take on the roles of prostitute, virgin, soldier, sailor, animal, etc, in certain situational structures that give birth to theatre improvisations of impeccable drama art (in the last "game", while the cigarette smoke was making the air impossible to breath, and when the drunk vodka and the tiredness had already ravaged everyone's imagination, the situation "virgin" – two sailors – love" instantly turned into a remake of the Twelfth Night type, with Viola and her shipwreck...). The audience can speak to the players and can ask the goddess questions or can place bets (regardless of the currency or with strange objects) on any of the participants in the roulette of identities.

In Odessa, The Black Sea Oracle was played for (over) 57 hours (it should have ended at the "the devil's hour", at midnight, but at way beyond one o'clock it was

still on...), occupying half of the 2nd towards the 3rd floor of the Passage Hotel – famous in town, placed at the heart of the historic and touristic centre, being actually a puzzling combination of accommodation for the trade-unionists' rest, a *komunalka* and imperial greatness, with no warm water – which (effect followed by *Signa*) gave the space an air of eternity, of a limbo in which the clocks had stopped at a certain time, anytime between 1900 and 1940, with pick-up music from the same period and a composite setting, slightly kitsch, with old things around looking as if they had survived the successive deaths of their owners (there is a genuine obsession for the scenographic detail, from the hair pins with stones of glass in the wig worn by the game mistress at her/his dress of torn apart canvas, rests of cinematographic stage props from the time of the *Potemkin Cruiser* and from the scented candles in the goddess's bedroom to the uneven number of cups, glasses and ashtrays broken into pieces all over). A sort of *Bleak House*. What *Signa* does is establish a parallel reality, of which the sole connection with the world outside are the spectators, a fictional reality in a challenging relation with the exterior one and which mixes the elements dear to pop culture (the melodrama, the kitsch, the glamour, the vaudeville, B series horror movies) with a sort of sinister, gloomy and hopeless authenticity. This time, Sorensen and Köstler's "expedition" of performance-like reconstitution takes place directly through the meanders of the identity notion and the constitutive structures of this identity, while some other time, with the same instruments of the theatre installations, it can question the power relations, the mechanisms of desire, approaching the same identity issue of the relation "truth" - fiction. Every time, "hitting" straight in the face the social and personal perception of the one who watches / participates.

During how many interactive performances, as we know them, would a Danish artist speaking English succeed in making 20 Ukrainians sing a capella, in one voice, 3 whole stanzas from *Katiusa*, by simply saying she wants to hear how that sounds in Russian?