



Oliver Frlić **The Making of *TURBOFOLK* (2008)**

Award-winning director, author and theorist Oliver Frlić joins us from Zagreb for an LMYE Laboratory about his production *Turbofolk*, originally presented in Rijeka in 2008 and restaged at various times over the past two decades.

Frlić, whose recent work has mostly been produced in Berlin at HAU and Gorki, and who served as director of the National Theatre of Rijeka before resigning as an act of protest against Croatian cultural policy, is both a beloved and a controversial figure. He is known for his cutting views towards the social, cultural and political world of ex-Yugoslavia and for problematising the concept of Europe, through a theatre that is always made up of complex games in representation that pose rich critical interrogatives to his audiences. *Turbofolk*, in this regard, is classic and foundational Frlić.

Taking seriously as its starting point one of the most richly sedimented yet most deeply misunderstood popular music genres of new Europe – the term ‘turbo-folk’ was coined in the mid-1980s by Rambo Amadeus – *Turbofolk* is a rich, caustic, irreverent and sometimes darkly funny investigation of ex-Yugoslav society and of how it might choose to tell its own story to itself.

In this long-form talk, Frlić details his thinking and his process through hearing the music as both a marker of de-generation and of re-generation to make a performance that throws both a convex and a concave mirror-image back to its audience: who’s watching and who is being watched, who is authorising who to do what, whose autonomy is at stake on stage and how is identity made and unmade through images, gestures, sound – and especially music? How does a music make and represent a moment in a culture, and can we ever exist outside representation? Or is spectating, and indeed listening, a kind of performance in and of itself?

[00:00:23 to 00:01:16] Montage of clips from *TURBOFOLK* (2008) by Oliver Frlić, video edited by Juan Salazar

[00:01:20] TURBO WHAT?

So, hello to everybody! My name is Oliver Frlić, I am a theatre director, and most of the time I work – lately, I work most of the time in Germany. I used to work in ex-Yugoslavia, almost in all the countries, and today, I would like to talk about my show from 2008 – that was a long time ago. The title of the show is *Turbofolk*. So, I guess that international audience, or whoever is watching this now, is asking him/herself – ‘turbo what?’ So, I would like to give you a brief introduction or definition of ‘turbo-folk’.

‘Turbo-folk’ is a phenomenon originated in the Western Balkans, and I would say it’s a form of popular culture, as well as a musical genre, as well as a social phenomenon. There are different equivalents of turbo-folk in other Balkan countries: in Bulgaria, it’s called ‘chalga’, in Romania ‘manele’, and in Albania ‘tallava’, and it operates with different folk idioms and combines it with contemporary musical production.

I was particularly interested in turbo-folk for this production that I did in 2008, as it originated primarily in Serbia and how it later spread through the whole of ex-Yugoslavia. One of the pioneer works and conceptualisation of turbo-folk was a book by Ivana Kronja with the same title, and she tried to actually trace the origin of turbo-folk, starting with the so-called ‘novokomponovana’ – in English, it would be the music that is contemporary in a way, and this music was dealing with the dichotomy between the village and the city, good and evil, et cetera. So, in this binary dichotomy, village was representing something good while the city and urbanisation and its industrialisation was presenting something different. At the beginning, turbo-folk as a phenomenon – I mean, the ‘novokomponovana’ music, and then turbo-folk later – were in a way innocent and operating within this binary dichotomy,



but later, at the end of the '80s and beginning of the '90s, turbo-folk went through a lot of changes and started to deal with other topics, which were not part of this first wave of turbo-folk.

I would like, for the beginning, for our viewers, to show one of the turbo-folk songs. It's a song, performed by the turbo-folk icon Lepa Brena, and this song was recorded in the '80s – and you can see, it had also a propaganda function: it tried to, in a way, keep together the Yugoslav society that was slowly starting to crumble by introducing as Brena's co-singers, singers from three other Yugoslav republics.

[00:05:25 to 00:06:53] Excerpt from 'Jugoslovenka' (1989) by Lepa Brena

And here we can stop for the moment. For those, who want to know more, all those videos are, of course, on YouTube. But this is very interesting, because you can see from this video, the flags and the whole iconicity promotes a kind of national homogeneity in the society that at that point was really starting to crumble down, there were already a lot of national tensions in ex-Yugoslavia. So, from this video, I would like us to fast forward to the beginning of the 90s, where turbo-folk, as I already said, went through different changes, incorporating more contemporary musical production and utilising a variety of topics: mostly celebration of different forms of escapism, unrealised love, sexual promiscuity, et cetera.

[00:08:03] TURBO-FOLK WILL BE TELEVISED

My next chapter: I took the title 'Turbo-Folk Will Be Televised' because it's very interesting – the relationship of this social phenomenon and television or video, as the most dominant media at that time. I would like to show you another insert, but just a brief introduction: the marriage between Ceca Veličković, who was to become the biggest turbo-folk star and Arkan, who was a war criminal. He was later assassinated. And this marriage between Ceca and Arkan could be read as a metaphor for another marriage between political criminals turned into paramilitaries and Slobodan Milošević's regime in Serbia of that time. This marriage was covered, amongst the others, by the CNN and the BBC – I just want to show you that this steps out into the broader context. It was not just of local relevance, but it was really interesting in this international context as well. For those who don't know, Arkan has a very interesting biography, he was a bodyguard of the Slovenian politician and chief of state's security administration, Stane Dolanc. Later, he was also a football fan leader, then, a war criminal and founder of the paramilitary unit, so-called Serb Volunteer Guard, also known as Arkan's Tigers. And just for our viewers to get an impression who was Arkan, I would like to show one image. *[Screen-shares an image of Arkan in uniform with his paramilitary unit.]*

So, this is the image of Arkan, posing in front of the tank with members of his paramilitary units, and holding a little tiger that later, he gave to his future wife Ceca as a present. He was responsible for ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia as well, and this is one of the images from that time. I don't know where it was exactly taken, but it stands as a mark for his role in the war in ex-Yugoslavia.

The marriage between Ceca and Arkan took place on the 19th of February 1995, and the wedding ceremony was recorded for the purpose to be later sold and distributed. And this event was in a way a precursor of today's reality shows, and in a way, blended and commodified the private and the public sphere. So I think this is also one interesting thing, and not very often analysed when it comes to the phenomenon of turbo-folk. Another very interesting thing was that Ceca Ražnjatović, who was Arkan's widow after he was assassinated, she was arrested after the assassination of Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić. And I would like to show you also a short excerpt from this wedding, just for the audience to get the impression how it was.

[00:12:22 to 00:13:40] Excerpt from 'Arkan's Marriage' (1995), AP archive (YouTube)

The guns are real, of course.

And I will do a little bit of fast forwarding. You can see here is the crane, so it was really organised, and professionally filmed according to the standards of that time, with the clear idea to be later distributed. We can stop here for the moment.



[00:13:43] TURBO-FOLK AND EMANCIPATION

I wanted to show you this because the public perception and interpretation of turbo-folk in Croatia, where I did my performance, *Turbofolk*, is quite different. In a way, from the beginning of the '90s until even today, turbo-folk has been officially banned, and I would say this was part of a structural Serbophobia. It was not officially banned, but actually, you couldn't air it on the TV or radio. It was excluded in a way. On the other hand, and that's part of the contradiction, it was very popular amongst the younger population, very important for example, for the definition of their sexual identity. It is very popular amongst the Croatian football representatives, and also, some highly ranked politicians from Croatia's biggest political party, Croatian Democratic Union – for example, Josipa Rimac, ex-mayor of the city of Knin, she was a great fan of the turbo-folk music. So I would say that's a kind of schizophrenia of the Croatian society: on the one hand, something is unofficially forbidden, but on the other hand, it becomes more and more popular due to this ban.

Due to this, I would like to propose two potential readings of *Turbofolk*. I explained a little bit the phenomenon itself, but very often it's seen as something that promotes conservative gender politics, fixed social roles, objectification of women, nationalism and national values, et cetera. And I would say that Ceca's and Arkan's marriage epitomises all those values. In Serbia in the '90s, during the wars in ex-Yugoslavia, turbo-folk was used as the kind of social, I would say, anaesthetic, something that had a role of distracting the public from all the problems and the wars and in that context, I can speak about TV Pink that was founded by Željko Mitrović, ex-leader of the rock band Oktobar 1864. He was a member of Slobodan Milošević's wife's party [YUL], and that's how he got this TV station. So, that's one interpretation, I would say, a very conservative interpretation of turbo-folk. The other reading of turbo-folk could go in the opposite direction, and in that context, we can speak about the emancipatory potential of turbo-folk. I think there are very rare analyses dealing with turbo-folk as something emancipatory, but in that context I can mention another turbo-folk star – that's Jelena Karleuša. I can show you one picture of her.

[Screen-shares an image of Jelena Karleuša with a gay pride flag.]

This is Jelena Karleuša, who openly expressed her support for the LGBTQ community, and this was a turning point in the perception of the function of turbo-folk phenomenon and the values that turbo-folk singers should represent. Karleuša also wrote a text talking about a gay pride that happened in Belgrade, and expressing openly support for this community, and that's another very interesting thing that a lot of turbo-folk singers are kind of gay and transgender icons. And in that context, we can also talk about turbo-folk as something promoting not just the fixed identities but also the fluid ones – and that's, I would say, something very often omitted from the analyses of turbo-folk.

And talking about Jelena Karleuša and the emancipatory potential of turbo-folk, it brings me to a performance of a friend of mine, a conceptual artist from Belgrade, now living in Austria, in Graz, Milica Tomić. In 2001 Milica was commissioned by one of the biggest and most important European theatre festivals, Wiener Festwochen, to create an artwork, and what she did was that she decided to collaborate with another turbo-folk singer, Dragana Mirković, and to just take her concert as a kind of ready-made and put it in this high art context and see what's gonna happen. What happened was very interesting – the perception of criticism that she received from ex-Yugoslavia, most of the people could not see or understand this kind of gesture, and I think it was, and it is a very important artwork, and something, actually, that helped me also in understanding the complexity of this phenomenon. This concert of Dragana Mirković, I think, was performed in front of the audience of 5,000 people. A lot of those people were people who came from ex-Yugoslavia, either before the war, or during the war, or were the second generation of Yugoslav gastarbeiters in Austria. But also, there were a lot of art critics and people from the high art context. And I think this was interesting in terms of different perceptions of what was happening on the stage. It was interesting that Dragana Mirković accepted to perform in this context, because turbo-folk is a popular culture, it is most of the time separated from high art and this kind of context.

[00:21:24 to 00:22:27] Excerpt from 'This is Contemporary Art' (2001) by Milica Tomić (performed at Wiener Festwochen)



[00:22:30] MAKING *TURBOFOLK* (2008)

With Milica's work, I'm slowly coming to my performance, *Turbofolk*. I did it in 2008 in the Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka – and it's also another interesting thing, later, I'm to become intendant or general director of the same theatre. That was, I would say, not exactly the beginning, but a very early stage of my professional career, and at that point, I was interested mostly in devised theatre. I was not really staging a lot of texts or going into this direction. For the actors from the Croatian National Theatre, this was also a very specific experience, because I always use this metaphor that national theatres in Croatia – and we have five of them – are kind of refrigerators for national culture: you put it in this refrigerator not to get rotten. So, for me, it was, in a way, a perfect playground. I could deconstruct this idea of national culture and the national and cultural identity produced and promoted through this kind of institution. We started without any text or any idea how and where we would like to go. I just brought a bunch of turbo-folk songs, and I was playing those songs and trying to see how the actors are going to respond to them. So, basically, we had a lot of improvisations. I was not interested to create any kind of text in the first stage of work, I was more interested to have this music that actually excludes the possibility for the actors to be understandable, or to speak. So the music is all the time very loud, and the scenes are more based on the physical action of the actors. And it's very interesting that different semantic relationships are established with the content and the rhythm of those songs. Maybe this is the possibility that we see one of the excerpts from *Turbofolk*, it is a song performed by Yugoslav/Serbian artist, Vasilija Radojčić, 'I Was Born on Easter', and you can see how it works – how I tried to create a semantic clash between the action of the actors and the situation and the content of the song.

[00:26:08 to 00:28:24] Excerpt from *Turbofolk* (2008)

And so on, and so on. It works, in a way, as a kind of almost a silent movie. And what is also dramaturgically interesting for me was theatre is always a machine for a production of identity, and those actors, they perform different kind of identities from one situation to another. The audience in this theatre operates mostly on the terms of dramatic theatre, so they wanted to have some kind of narrative, and I was very interested to hear a different interpretation, because we never tried to have a kind of continuity of character, or even to go into some more detail: the individualisation of those people. I was interested to constantly push them from one situation to another, and we also did not discuss very much who they are, what they perform, they were responsible to find something that works as a kind of explanation for themselves. And I told them, the internal dramaturgical engine for those situations is something that we don't have to present to the audience, we can lead them come up with their own conclusions. And I think this is actually what theatre should do, not to take away, as Heiner Müller said, the labour of the audience, which is interpretation and creation of meaning – we just put the elements on the stage, and it's up to them to connect those pieces, or to keep them disconnected, and to deal with their frustrations, or joys, or whatever is there at the moment. And of course, it was not an easy process, because a lot of the actors are classically Stanislavsky-trained actors, and they couldn't step out from those concepts and ideas, like: 'What is the theatre?', 'What is the character?', 'What is the situation?', – and also, the lack of fabula as an organising principle for the material was a big problem for a lot of them. And so due to this, let's say, growing frustration of the part of the ensemble and a lack of understanding, I decided to create the scene, which was partly inspired by Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience*, but instead of attacking and offending the audience, and creating and recreating the identity of the audience, I told them, and we took this as a starting point for an improvisation, to attack me as the director of this performance. The questions that I was interested in were: 'Who is authorising whom to do what?', and this promise of emancipation of actors in the theatre, how true is it and is it actually possible? And the question that was most important for me was: 'Is theatre really the space for emancipation, or maybe each promise of emancipation is just further empowerment of those already existing hierarchies and distributions of roles?' So, maybe we can also check out an excerpt from this scene. We are watching right now – maybe it's important to say – a video recording of the opening night of *Turbofolk*. So, I would like to show you this scene – let's call it: 'Offending the Director'.



[00:32:54 to 00:35:48] 'Offending the Director' from *Turbofolk* (2008)

[Actors seated in a line. English translation of the dialogue from the clip.]

Actress 1: Come on then, [dramaturg] Šeparović, let [famous actress] Alma Prica curse here in her own words without a script, you dirty faggot, fuck you both in your arse and in your mouth. Motherfuckers.

Actor 2: Where did you graduate from, you motherfucker? Travnik, maybe? Where did you graduate from? Certainly not Zagreb! You come to direct me here?! You direct us here?!

Actress 1: On his arse, that's how he graduated.

Actor 1: You motherfucker. Go back to Travnik, go over there and direct sheep, you motherfucker, and not me here. Fuck the day you were born, you motherfucker. You come here to direct me?! *[Shouting from the off]* Look, look what you are doing! Fuck your mother and then your sister too. You motherfucker. I can't find a girlfriend in this town, you motherfucker!

Actor 2: Fuck the one that gave birth to you. You make me snog with him here, everybody will think I am a faggot, you motherfucker. Come here so I can give it to you! Fuck you, you motherfucker!

Actress 2: What is it, Oliver Frlić – is this what you wanted? You want us to curse you, can't you see that people are leaving the show? Fuck you!

And so on, and so on. And we go now to the very end. This is where, like, let's call it 'a gentle physical encounter between me and the actors' happens. Yeah. Let us see. *[Fast forwards the video and plays the end of the scene.]*

[English translation of the dialogue from the clip]

Actor 3: And the audience just lapped this up, right – like, we just spontaneously started rebelling against you? Very imaginative! We all know who follows who. And we know very well that we are waiting for me to finish this scene. Everyone just went for it, didn't they? Come on, you fucker, direct this in Split if you dare! Not here in Rijeka. Go down there and direct this. Why would the citizens of Rijeka give a fuck for Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia? Do I give a fuck for Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia!? You motherfucker. Go and direct Vukovar '91, you motherfucker, the month of November, the wounded and Ovčara. Come on give us that scene, the beds, the wounded, hit in the balls in Vukovar. You motherfucker! Give me just one name, one name of the 200 victims in Ovčara. Say just one name. And you know all the folk singers, and the song words, you motherfucker. Come on let's take the piss out of Vukovar. Tell me one name of a defence hero who topped himself, just one name. And you know all the Serbs, you motherfucker.

[Commotion and 'gentle physical encounter' between the advancing actors and the director in the auditorium.]

Actor: Were it not for this audience I'd nail you to the stage boards, you motherfucker!

Director: Eat shit!

This scene is also very interesting, not just because of the questioning of this 'who is authorising whom to do what' – for me, it was also because the actors, in the process of improvisation, did try to actually give a kind of interpretation of what we do and create the kind of narrative coherence for the whole performance, and I never meant to have any kind of narrative coherence, for me it was very interesting in the process of work, how they were trying to explain through this attack what this performance actually is about. Unfortunately, I couldn't be present for every performance, so, we had another version for when the director was not available.

[00:36:45] PERFORMANCE OBJECTS AND STRATEGIES

Another thing that was also interesting in the process of the work on this was a kind of implicit critique and a polemic with documentary theatre. That was the time when we had a kind of boom of



documentary theatre, and I was very sceptical about the idea of documentarism in the theatre and documentary theatre. So, like, whatever we present on the stage is already under the regime of theatrical fictionalisation, and then the status of every document is also very, very questionable in that context. And I tried to do a few improvisations with my actors, where I offered them to create micro-narratives – kind of their biographies, mixing up facts from their real biographies and the things which were completely invented. In the Croatian National Theatre in Rijeka, where we performed it, it was very interesting, because the audience had a chance to recognise what is true, what is not true, what could be potentially a true, et cetera. When we started to tour with this show – we toured a lot – for the international audience, it was not clear, and most of the time, they took it for granted that all they were saying had the status of some kind of truth. And for me, what was interesting also were the new layers of meaning and new possibilities of interpretation that this performance could get in a new context. I remember when we performed in Berlin, in HAU Hebbel am Ufer, the audience had completely different reception of our work. For them, this was a kind of realistic representation of Balkan society. They couldn't see any kind of ironic distance or criticism, and of course, in the talks with the audience, we intentionally played with this kind of reception, we actually didn't want to make it too simple for us or for them. And that was a part of the strategy, to blur this border between – what is the fiction, what is the truth, what is the document, what is the fake document, et cetera, et cetera. This was a part of, I would say intensifying this process of creation of fluid identities, which is a [key] part of my production of *Turbofolk*.

This, let's say, conservative interpretation of turbo-folk which I offered at the very beginning, deals with different kinds of objectification and over-eroticising of mostly female body, and there is one scene which refers directly to this – how certain organs of our body could become objects for performance. I tried to create a kind of puppet theatre in which actors are using the parts – we will see which ones – of their body as real puppets. I would like to propose that we see an excerpt from this scene.

[00:41:09 to 00:41:46] Excerpt from *Turbofolk* (2008)

[An actress and an actor standing on chairs next to each other. English translation of the dialogue from the clip]

Actress *[referring to her genitals]*: Then I can get really stubborn and then I push really hard all the way and then she gets rally sad. *[Speaking to her crotch]* What is it, darling? *[Laughter.] [To the audience]* It's not funny, she is sulking now. *[Addressing the actor]* Look. *[He looks closer at her crotch; laughter.] [Actress to the audience]* Do you want to see her sulk? *[To the crotch]* Come on, darling, come on... *[To the audience]* Here... *[Exposes herself.]* And that's how it goes all day. Sometimes two days. She keeps sulking. *[To the crotch]* Come on, come on, darling, what is it?

Okay. Yeah, I will try to explain, but this is the scene in which actor Alen Liverić and actress Jelena Lopatić are using their reproductive organs – I don't know, like, probably there is a more politically correct expression for this – as puppets. And it was very interesting, because there is, like, this very Brechtian moment, where they are in the role of the narrator, they perform their reproductive organs as, like, autonomous beings, characters on the stage. I think, in terms of theatrical language and the tradition that the scene refers to, it is very, very, very interesting. I offered this as a possibility for improvisation, and from the whole team, only those two actors were ready to accept this offer, and then they started to improvise around this, and slowly, we formed this scene.

There is another thing in *Turbofolk* that's like – I was also a set designer for this performance, and in terms of set design, I actually didn't want to build anything. I just wanted to use the Croatian National Theatre as a kind of ready-made object, and to work with what is already there, and with the symbolic capital of this institution. This is the strategy that I will use also very often after becoming a general director of the same theatre. But just to briefly explain it, we didn't put the audience in the auditorium, but on the stage. So we built a kind of improvised auditorium on the stage, and from the stage through this so-called portal, the audience was looking to the empty – this neo-baroque building with all those lodges, velvet, but this emptiness of the space, where the audience is supposed to be, was interesting for me. And thinking about this set design, I was actually dealing very much, also, with the



politics of spectatorship, with the performativity of our own gaze – how we perform through the simple act of watching or observing something. And most of the time, this process of observing and watching is reserved for the audience. The actors do not perform the same act of objectification as the one performed on them in this situation. And for this, I would like to show you now the excerpt from the very end of the show. You will see, when the actors – they go to this empty auditorium, and their final scene is just speechless observation of the audience on the stage. And at that point, you know, the audience is, I would say, completely turned into performers, not because they do anything in particular, but just by the fact that now what is reserved only for them, becomes a kind of a strategy. This politics – this spectatorship goes back as a kind of a performative boomerang to the audience.

[00:45:52 to 00:47:58] Excerpt from the final scene of *Turbofolk* (2008)

[00:48:00] POLITICS OF IDENTITY AND SPECTATORSHIP

Those were some of the problems in terms of the identity politics in the theatre that I was dealing with very much at that time. They're still present in my work, but now, in a different way. My last work was also – the one I did now in Berlin, *Alles unter Kontrolle* – also very much concerned with the politics of spectatorship and performativity of our gaze, how it imposes a certain identity. I even use the term, which is 'performative colonisation' through the act of watching or observing something. I can draw the parallel with the work of Rimini Protokoll, *Cargo Sofia*, which really goes into this – deeply into this direction. There is this truck with the one glass wall and the audience is on this truck, and there are different kinds of narrative, and those narratives and our act of watching certain non-theatrical reality, turns it into kind of a fiction. So, like, accidental passers-by, they become part of fictional narrative, and it is very interesting how our gaze is not innocent. And I think, for the audience it's very important to train and understand their own roles, not just what's going on on the stage, but actually, what they do. Most of the time, they are not aware that they are complicit in this process of fictionalisation, objectification, colonisation of certain bodies, and imposition of certain identity. So, theatre is not harmless. You can also see, in all of my shows, I have a lot of meta-theatrical dialogue with the shows or authors which were formative for me, and *Turbofolk* was a kind of I would say, discreet dedication to Forced Entertainment, especially to, for example, *Bloody Mess* [2004]. But of course, at the same time, I was trying to deconstruct certain procedures that they were using in the work. It's very interesting, most of the time, those references are not recognised, and it is a kind of work that never pays back. It's just, like, something that I do, I think, mostly for myself as an audience, or very rarely – I'm so happy when somebody recognises this layer of my work. For example, one of my late work, *Our Violence and Your Violence*, is completely constructed on this principle: every scene is either a quote or a paraphrase of another show or artwork, and although Wiener Festwochen was one of the main producers of this show, where I would expect more critique, critical and professional perception, this layer was completely – not ignored, but not seen or recognised by this audience that should be experts in this kind of things. So, yeah, that's the way – we always have to produce more, and hope that somebody will catch something. It's like sending the signals to the space, and you hope that one day, somebody will say: 'Hello, we got it!'

[00:52:42] Q & A

Duška Radosavljević: Thank you so much, that was really interesting actually! A couple of surprises for me there – actually, I had no idea that Željko Mitrović was part of Oktobar 1864 originally, but actually then I remembered that you have a whole speech, a whole section of *Turbofolk* dedicated to him.

Oliver Frlić: Yes, to Željko Mitrović. This was very interesting, because my work, especially work from this time, was always dealing with the, I would say, extended performativity of the theatre – or what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls the 'irruption of the real' (2006: 99). I was asking myself: 'If we accuse Željko Mitrović for different kinds of things, could he press charges against this show? What does it mean if we name somebody like this on the stage? Is it still fiction, or not so?' This whole scene is about how theatre comes into this, let's say, grey zone, where we cannot distinguish



anymore between the fiction and real, whatever is the real. Theatre is real as well, theatre is a part of broader social reality. So, it's never something completely excluded from it, it is like a kind of representation of this broader social reality, and a part of this social reality.

DR: Is there also a way in which we can just briefly mention the way in which *Turbofolk* then incidentally became part of a series of works that – or at least, not deliberately so, but that's how some people have perceived some of the works that you created in close succession, starting with *Turbofolk*, and then going on to *Damned be the Traitor*, and *Kukavičluk (Cowardice)*. But I'm interested also because when we were deciding which of your shows to profile here, *Damned be the Traitor* was also interesting to us in terms of how it takes forward this notion of documentarism and your challenging of that aspect of contemporary theatre-making.

OF: After *Turbofolk*, as you mentioned, I did two other shows, and some critics were labelling them as 'A Balkan Trilogy'. I never meant to create organic or inorganic trilogy. I was just dealing with some issues and topics, and especially, questions of theatrical representation that I was very much interested in at that point. But yes, you're right, all those three shows were kind of questioning the notion of documentarism in the theatre, like: what it stands for, and is it something that sharpens our critical attitude in the theatre or something that actually creates a kind of fiction, and selling it as some kind of truth? So, *Damned be the Traitor of his Homeland* took as a starting point how the actors of this show – the show was produced in Ljubljana, in Slovenian Youth Theatre, that's one of the most avant-garde theatre in ex-Yugoslavia, a very important theatre in the international context as well. So, I started from this very simple situation of how the ex-country is remembered by the individuals who were participating in this show, and this question of memory in the theatre was very interesting, like, how memory shapes certain political events. So, for example, one of the improvisations we did in this show *Damned be the Traitor of his Homeland* was to talk about how each one of us remembers the day of Josip Broz Tito's death, who was the lifelong president of Yugoslavia, and it was very interesting, you can see in this scene, this is a very good example of how this attempt to create something documentary, like – Is our memory also kind of a document? Can we treat it also as a kind of document? So, we got, I don't know, eight or nine stories, and of course, they were very much inconsistent and not really relating to historic facts that we know about this, and seeing the same event from eight perspectives, and also including a very strong emotional relationship towards this event, was a kind of dramaturgical platform for this scene.

And with *Cowardice, Kukavičluk* that you mentioned, just if I can briefly refer to this performance as well, I wanted to talk about collective responsibility. I was very much dealing with this concept, borrowed from Hannah Arendt's writing, and what does it mean – because all Yugoslav society were refusing to deal with this concept. They were saying there is no collective guilt, and I said: 'Yeah, cool, there is no collective guilt, but there is a collective responsibility, and – to put it simply – it means, if you belong to any kind of collective, you have to take the responsibility for everything this collective did during its whole existence.' Simply like this. If you want to have a national identity, then you have to deal with all that your nation, or the nation that you want to belong to, did in its whole history. But I think, I went the furthest with this one in exploring different issues that I opened with the previous two, but I think, the most complex scene was the last one, where I asked the actors to learn the names of 505 victims from Srebrenica by heart. So, basically, those names – we just had them in an alphabetic order – and before this scene, there is a monologue of an actor explaining, like, the problem of memory in the theatre and counter-memory, and how in an attempt to give a kind of individualisation to all those victims, they learned by heart their names. And this is really difficult for them to memorise those names, because there was not any kind of logic, just the alphabetic order. And on the other hand, one critic wrote about this scene in itself – there is nothing spectacular happening, they just sit, there was a working light in the whole theatre. So, the audience is equally visible as the performers, and they then just start slowly to enumerate those names in a slow rhythm. So, the audience has a lot of time to confront itself with what I already labelled as a 'collective responsibility', like, being passive could also be a kind of complicity, most of the time it is. And this was very interesting, especially when we did it for the first time in the Subotica, of course, a lot of audience wanted to leave this scene, because there was nothing entertaining or spectacular or



whatever, but there was also a kind of emotional blackmail: 'Do you want to leave this situation, because you are bored?' So, they had to decide between searching for more entertaining content and leaving the room, or paying a kind of respect to those who were killed in Srebrenica.

DR: Which is another manifestation of your approach as a director, where you often cast the audience in a particular role as well.

OF: Yeah, that's another thing, I spent some – I mean, now, in Germany it's a little bit different, because I would say that process of passivisation of the audience – I mean, there is some time intellectual activation, but body-wise, they always stay seated and they look in front of them. So sometimes, I was trying in Germany to read the surtitles on the left or right, and then you have to pierce through the gaze of the person sitting next to you, and looking straight forward to the stage, and even not to look in this direction is already seen as a kind of violation of certain code. And for me, coming from this tradition, where my role was always to challenge the role of the audience and prescribe the role of the audience, this was difficult, of course. I always wanted to see – because, to put it simply, I think that theatre happens in the audience, not on the stage. I mean, we just offer a certain situation, but let's say, a semantic conclusion happens here, this is the space where the audience decides on what it is, what it stands for, what it means, et cetera. And to me it was very liberating to understand this, that I'm not in control, and the more I was trying to control this semantic production in the theatre, the more I was creating, let's say, unintended meanings, and that's interesting. It's great when you give up on this, and you say: 'I don't have to deal with the meaning, the meaning is necessarily there. I have to deal with some other things, maybe with the rhythm, with the questions of representation, et cetera.' And of course, you know my ongoing war with logocentrism in the theatre is very interesting, especially because now, I do a lot of texts, and I have to pretend that I'm really interested in those text. But with those big titles, this is what I learned, that they leave you alone – so, nobody, then – you know, if you do play by [Bernd Heinrich Wilhelm von] Kleist or [Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe, then you don't have to explain too much. It's already big art, and then I have a lot of space for those things that I'm really interested in: like, questions of representation, rhythm, visual identity of the performance – this is another thing, all those shows were very much concerned, all three that we already mentioned that are part of this so-called 'Balkan Trilogy', they were very much concerned with the visual identity, and the theatre as a visual medium as well. But nobody, I think, has spoken about this. People were mostly concerned with what they say and what they do. And this process of creating the text in those shows – because we have parts, which are then fixed as a textual material – I never wanted to intervene, I would take what actors produce as a kind of ready-made, with all imperfections, because it's not literature, it's theatre. And I can borrow another term from Heiner Müller, it's a 'material, something that we work with, not something that we plan to preserve for eternity', or whatever.

DR: In listing some of your primary interests in theatre-making – you've just mentioned rhythm. Is there anything more you can say, or you'd like to say, about rhythm and what your thinking is there?

OF: I was very much thinking about the rhythm, and two major influences from history of music on my thinking about the rhythm in the theatre, are baroque music and minimalism. So, basically, it's very interesting, you know, baroque with those extremes from pianissimo to fortissimo or, on the other hand, the repetitiveness of minimalism. So, for example, the work of Steve Reich was very important for me to understand certain things. And I also realise that space has a certain rhythm as well, so that the distribution of the bodies in the space creates also a kind of a rhythm, and I mean, for me, this is – I dig much more into this, I leave the text as a kind of surface to hide my interest in this context, because if I prioritise, or openly-prioritise my interests in rhythm, then I wouldn't be taken seriously enough. So, this is like this very complex game that I play with the theatrical institutions. I used to work on the independent scene for a long time, now I'm mostly in those so-called Stadttheaters, and in a way, I play this very complex game. I don't want to – I come to the border of almost self-exclusion, and then I get back. And this kind of pulsation is another rhythm, like, how you almost kick yourself out of this system, and then you get to the centre of the system, et cetera.

I am very grateful for this opportunity especially to speak about this work, because it's very old, and I'm still searching and trying to understand what I was searching for. That's another interesting thing



– and paradoxically, I think I was more fresh at that time, and yeah, you also learn certain tricks, and when you get your audience used to a certain kind of, let's say, theatrical language or certain kind of representational politics, you can go on forever with this, because now, they understand or whatever, et cetera. But I'm really curious to question myself all the time, and in any kind of authority that I create through my work – and of course, the relationship with the audience is very interesting. And now, in those times, we are – in the Covid times, it's also very interesting, those empty theatres. I think about them a lot, and also about silence as aesthetic phenomena. So, I was referring to one of the scenes that we saw as almost, almost silent film, and in my latest work, *Alles unter Kontrolle*, we did a kind of reconstruction of one scene, the first scene from Bob Wilson's *Deafman Glance*, where this actor comes, passes a glass of milk to this child, and goes back, comes back with a knife and stabs him. And most of the time, Wilson presents his work as apolitical, but of course, it was impossible to ignore identity politics in 1971, when he premiered it, and even more today. Like, what does it mean, what do those identity politics stand for why did you pick those actors? And of course, this notion of silent opera is still challenging for me. Like, what does it mean – because, in a way, it's a kind of oxymoron, silent opera? Opera, per se, should include music, and hopefully, singing, and here there is no singing. There is music, there is this [Johann Sebastian] Bach. And yeah, it was interesting, especially, Maxim Gorki Theatre, where I'm now working as a house director, we have this idea to make a kind of critical review of the most important works of theatrical interculturalism or whatever it is today. I know that Patrice Pavis wrote a text a few years ago [2010] questioning what should be the proper term in this context, how we should call what we used to call interculturalism in the theatre. And I was also analysing The Wooster Group's *ROUTE 1 & 9* and [Jean] Genet's N-play – and to try to better understand the moment in which we are right now, and what theatre should do, and what I should do as a European director. And by being a European director, I mentioned already, this notion of collective responsibility – of course that I have to take responsibility for the whole colonial history of Europe and what Europe did and how it accumulated its first capital. But that's another topic. Maybe next time we can talk more about this.

Transcription by Kalina Petrova / Translation by Duška Radosavljević

Clips Summary

- [00:05:25 to 00:06:53] 'Jugoslovenka' (1989) by Lepa Brena (YouTube)
- [00:12:22 to 00:13:40] Ceca and Arkan's wedding (1995), AP archive (YouTube)
- [00:21:24 to 00:22:27] 'This is Contemporary Art' (2001) by Milica Tomić
- [00:26:08 to 00:28:24] *Turbofolk* (2008)
- [00:32:54 to 00:35:48] 'Offending the Director', *Turbofolk* (2008)
- [00:41:09: to 00:41:46] *Turbofolk* (2008)
- [00:45:52 to 00:47:58] Final scene, *Turbofolk* (2008)

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Video available at <https://www.auralia.space/laboratory4-oliverfrljic/>.



To cite this material:

Radosavljević, Duška; Pitrolo, Flora; Salazar Cardona, Juan Felipe; Frlić, Oliver (2021) LMYE Laboratory #4: Oliver Frlić – The Making of TURBOFOLK (2008), *Auralia.Space*, Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, <https://doi.org/10.25389/rcssd.14060933.v2>.

