

Reconceptualising contemporary musical theatre – Fellows’ seminar by Karmina Šilec

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“Performance offers a space for reckoning and reflection. The project Baba is a canvas on which the contents of society’s consciousness, its beliefs, the history and the present, knowledge and delusions are projected. This Choregie project is based on research but it’s fictional. Invented but it could be true. My work is often related to current events. In this case it’s about exposing narrow-minded visions of society and tradition, patriarchy and misogyny,” said Karmina Šilec, Independent Artistic Director and Artist-in-Residence at STIAS.



STIAS Fellow Karmina Šilec during her seminar on 23 August 2022

Šilec is at STIAS to work on Baba – a contemporary music-theatre work inspired by the real and imagined stories of Balkan women – known as sworn virgins – who live as men after taking vows of chastity and celibacy. It’s a practice associated with remote Balkan areas of Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia – “what was formerly Yugoslavia – my own former home” explained Šilec. The practice has been around for centuries but was formally recorded from the mid-1800s.

“There is a long list of synonyms describing these women who exist across cultures, languages and religions in the region,” said Šilec.

She explained that there were two categories – “whether a woman was raised as a boy during early childhood (some were predetermined before they were even born), or whether she changed gender later in life, in adulthood, or after she became a widow, because of the lack of male heirs, or where there were no males in the house due to blood feuds between families. They change their names, wear men’s clothing, smoke, drink and fully inhabit the male world, not doing tasks historically seen as women’s work. They often don’t even talk to other women”.

“Sworn virgins assume male roles usually due to economic pressure to run the household or out of concern that family properties will fall into other hands,” said Šilec. “There were also some who seek a more independent lifestyle as a male perhaps after breaking an engagement or something similar. Their uplifted status as males within society giving them protection.”

“They don’t have to live separately but often do live alone. There is no mention of homosexuality, the word isn’t in the vocabulary – but, of course, it may occur.”

“Their virginity is not to do with spirituality but rather an economic decision. So it’s radically different from current socially defined ideas of transgenderism,” she continued. “Contemporary liberal society cherishes freedom of choice but this is a fascinating counterpoint to this freedom. It was done for survival not self-realisation and freedom often came at a stiff price.”

“Although cross dressing is a part of all cultures, the sworn virgins of the Balkans are unique. They seem to be from another lineage with different reasons for their decisions. I’m interested in understanding those reasons.”

“The project Baba raises questions about choice and sexual identity in modern society by bringing to light a disappearing practice of women transforming themselves into men as a means of upholding their family honour and surviving in an isolated, dangerous, impoverished, and intensely patriarchal part of the world,” she continued. “Women who are *the other* in society.”

‘I have an ongoing interest in the phenomenon of virginity. Virginity is a triumph over more than just the imperatives of the body. It is, in every way, a triumph of the will. By any material recognition, virginity does not exist. But it does. It is completely human concept to control bodies and minds.’

Breaking conventional boundaries

She described the production as a hybrid work that breaks down boundaries between the disciplines “becoming a metaphor for the opening up of thought, perception and experience”. It brings together Homeric and oral epic storytelling with new technologies.

“This fusion gives various semantic directions. The treatment of music, movement, light, words, image, sound, gesture and other elements is mostly based on musical principles and compositional techniques, and so musical thinking applies to the performance as a whole. The idea of the project is music, which refers to other fields, or music which reacts to other fields. Conceiving and composing this project means working on all its parameters simultaneously (concept, text, music, dramaturgy, visuals, movement, etc.), and involves research in gender studies, philosophy, anthropology, ethnology, history, visual arts, contemporary music, drama and more.”

Initially planned for 2020, it will be performed by a 12-woman vocal ensemble. Šilec’s stay at STIAS thus far has been focused on the set design, costumes and staging.

Šilec’s presentation was richly interspersed with examples of her other works from the Baba collection which includes three published books, two CDs, sound art, concerts and an entire vocal album recorded on smartphones during lockdown “to highlight the power of music in conditions of fear and tragedy”. She also pointed to how she aims to work on new music composition by manipulating and transforming sounds and the use of electronics. “My concept Choregie involves no narrative or defined storylines, no roles, no acting as it is the case in other music theatre forms in western culture (opera, musical). It’s new music theatre, with music not heard before, with the use of extended vocal techniques.” She will use a newly constructed instrument inspired by the one-string instrument Gusle – which will be manipulated (electro-acoustic music). The Choregie concept brings music, movement, drama and visual elements to the stage.

“I’m trying to develop a music theatre form to comment on the world and society,” she said.

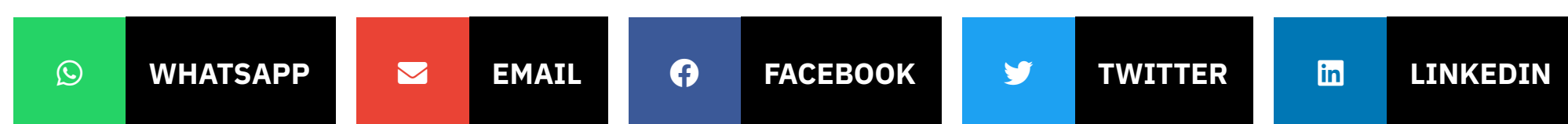
Outlining her process, she indicated that she usually starts with a question which she researches in detail. “There are different entry points but I develop all the elements simultaneously – music, movement, sound, visual, they are all related. There is no hierarchy, the music doesn’t come first. Everything is equal. For this I create a meta-composition.”

“A project always starts with uncertainty. It’s hard to have a blank page in front of you,” she added. “But art is not science, so I can communicate a complex phenomenon more freely. The idea is to put research into a performative form.”

And clearly Šilec is doing something right as her production Threnos (For the Throat) was awarded the 2021 Music Theatre NOW! Award. Threnos focuses on slaughterhouses as places where man, machines and animals meet, reflecting on man’s relationship to nature and the environment.

Michelle Galloway: Part-time media officer at STIAS
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