

Orlanding the Dominant

Not Just Dancers on Stage

SV Damenkraft, Sissy Boyz and Gustav directed and performed *Orlanding the Dominant* at Brut Konzerthaus Vienna in January 2008.

The story of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* as a *queer burlesque* by and featuring Katrina Daschner, Eva Jantschitsch, Sabine Marte, Gini Müller, Christina Nemeč and Tomka Weiß.

Katrina Daschner, Sabine Marte, Gini Müller and Tomka Weiß on figures, promises, movements and sex.

Moira Hille, Dominika Krejs and Flora Schanda spoke with them.

Flora (F): Our first question is about the title *Orlanding the Dominant*. Do you see "orlanding" as a way of shifting Orlando from a figure in Virginia Woolf's novel toward a performative act? In the novel, Orlando constantly remains, in one way or another, subjected to the dominant, to the system, unable to determine her/his own change of gender. Do you see this perversion, this "orlading the dominant," as form of empowerment?

Katrina Daschner (KD): For us, making this piece was certainly about creating something processual and performative. This is strongly linked to the role of Orlando, which each of us play, because one person can't possibly portray it. In this sense, orlanding also means "being-in-the-moment." Gendered roles rarely ever refer to conditions; they are more about being-in-motion and constantly shifting borders. In this way, "the dominant" means creating places or spaces for yourself within a system where you would otherwise have much less space.

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Sabine Marte (SM): Orlando traverses different systems of power. She starts out as a Lord, then becomes a woman in the early 19th century who is forced to fight for virtually all the rights she lost. Despite this, we do not conceive Orlando as a figure who fights against systems of power, but more as one who appropriates things for her/himself; we wanted to create a space where this is possible, which is also important to the piece.

Moira (M): I'm interested in the ironic moments you create in the piece, partly through a repetition of movements, which makes for an ironic view of irony. An integral part of irony is, of course, contributing to the construction and continual re-instatement of "the other." In your piece the ironic moments are also ironicized. To what extent do you see this as a political strategy?

SM: The irony lies in our position. We put ourselves out there without taking an ironic distance to the figure and we don't present Orlando as a self-contained, unquestionable character. I don't consider that to be a political strategy; it does, however, open up the possibility to work with literary texts and established theories in a different way and to place them in new contexts.

M: A powerful moment is when all the figures you bring onto the stage toward the end of the piece (for example Yoko Ono, Annie Sprinkle, Beatriz Preciado) fall to the floor twitching. They all happen to be figures that have made some kind of promise or are promising figures within a queer context. I am particularly interested in the disappointment that arises here, because you manage to destabilize this effect to a certain extent. Can

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disappointment lead to desire? Did you think about this moment of disappointment or the ironicization of this promise when making the piece?

SM: From my point of view, I see a certain disillusionment. Throughout feminist history much effort has been invested in rewriting history, and reinscribing all the women who were forgotten. Then, many of the leading, long-standing theories and issues were deconstructed—and with them our own understanding of using art to address issues and work politically—which somehow led to a kind of self-disillusionment. The shifts that take place within this foray span from ironicization to paying tribute; and the tension-filled area created here is full of conflicting ideas about what we are able to do with (hi)story and how we deal with certain issues. What does it mean to us today? When we list their names, they become little pieces of glitter that catch the light for a moment and then disappear—instead of putting all those theories up for discussion.

M: Are the references to revue and burlesque performance, i.e. the forms of presenting the women on stage, historical references? You could have also just done a play.

Tomka Weiß (TW): We wanted to illustrate our backgrounds. We chose this form of presentation, because it is part of our normality. We used performance, music, dance and song because we are performers and musicians. It would have been pretty abstract to make a classical theater piece. I think what makes our staging of *Orlando* so special is that we are all part of a queer-feminist subculture.

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KD: We chose to present the piece in this way, because this project came directly out of our band projects where we consciously avoid reproducing stereotypes of women, like reducing women to singers in a band. In the Sissy Boyz and SV Damenkraft each member has an equal part on stage. Gustav is not just a singer either; she's also a musician and music producer. That's what we did in *Orlending the Dominant* too. We aren't just dancers on stage, we're also responsible for the entire production on all levels.

SM: We discussed at length how we should make the story of Orlando more transparent in our piece. We didn't want to simply put on a musical revue; it was important to us to include a larger range of ideas. Our solution, in the end, was to create the images you see in the performance and to convey a great deal of the story through music, dance and choreography. It's quite an insane project of appropriation, to say: hey, we're going to do it all ourselves. This was really empowering for us all, because each of us did things she'd never done before.

TW: Regarding the question of how we relate to the (hi)story of the woman on stage, it's like this: we don't have the body images or corporality that are considered ideal in film and theater, and we aren't working towards achieving them either.

M: The question was more about referencing certain ways of performing women and identities, how you manage to transcend these roles and, at the same time, still employ and reappropriate certain elements. You described the piece as a queer burlesque, but you also take it a step further than what is presently known as "new burlesque." The question this raises for me is: despite

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your reference to the genre, how do you manage to leave certain promises that burlesque makes unfulfilled?

SM: Yes, definitely, and the difference here is that a narration that is part of an overall story and strong enough to stand on its own is interwoven into each of the numbers.

Dominika (D): Could you tell us more about what you mean by burlesque? What does "new burlesque" mean here?

KD: I would say that neo-burlesque refers to the traditional burlesque genre that is composed of dance, comedy, spoken word and striptease, which are all included in our performance in one way or another. Neo-burlesque has a certain twist; it approaches all of these things using irony, for instance revealing in a striptease that the performer is conscious of the voyeuristic situation (which is also designed for a particular subcultural audience). That is the main difference between our show and the more or less neo-burlesque shows in places like New York or Berlin that often still consist of a series of revue numbers that don't necessarily show a wide variety of body types. I am not sure if the "great new movement" as discussed in current literature is actually taking place all over. Maybe one in ten shows actually has this moment of self-empowerment, makes other body types visible, and has commentaries in between the pieces that is made by the "host of the night" and that are actually entertaining enough to grip the audience, create a shift their mind-set, and make them question their role as an audience and their relationship to the performers. Because our show is also embedded within this entire process, I hope it succeeds in satirizing it too.

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TW: It's also a way of performing body politics, which in our case is on stage, by showing alternative body images that are part of our subculture but are not likely to be visible in the mainstream.

KD: Yes, that's what I think is so great about neo-burlesque performance: the fact that it shows the pleasure of the bodily act. I think that our stage performance strongly conveys the pleasure of sexualized performances—which can be aggressive or sometimes even offensive.

M: It differs from other ways of staging sexuality, such as a bondage performance. Do you consider your show to be provocative because of the ironic ways you approach the body/corporeality? Ironicizing the sexual body plays with the level of shame and inhibition of the spectators. It's probably easier to consume a more familiar heteronormative erotic staging of the body, i.e. it is easier to recall a preexisting position towards it.

SM: Our performance is certainly not based on a desire to be provocative, because that's absolutely not the intention of our movements on stage; the actual transgressions take place within us. I'm quite surprised that people often find it provocative or shocking. We've heard comments from people who have seen the show. Some find it terribly difficult and far from easily consumable or acceptable.

KD: I'm not so surprised. If I felt the politics discussed in our piece were so common or that they wouldn't have any effect on the audience, then we wouldn't have worked on this project for a year. So, it was obvious to me that the piece would throw salt in certain "wounds."

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TW: I was actually surprised at some of the faces I saw in the audience when I performed the "man with breasts." I thought, ok, it's funny, but it's not shocking, because it doesn't shock me. But then I looked at their faces and saw that some people—four or five women and one or two men in the audience—had been really attached to the idea [of me being a man] they had throughout the piece and then couldn't believe their eyes. So, some people are taken aback and shocked for a moment, but then—at least some of them—really enjoy it.

KD: The piece is about different forms of sexuality and desire. It strongly shows forms of sexuality that we are into, which are—hopefully—also appealing for those in our audience. That's why I'd say it's not just an ironic piece, because that kind of description always has an air of cabaret or parody.

TW: There are several things going on at the same time. On the one hand different elements of classical, heteronormative forms of sexuality are de-sexualized and on the other hand a specific visual form that is not usually sexualized is sexually charged.

Gini Müller (GM): I think that *Orlading the Dominant* strongly caters to a [queer] scene. I also think that if the piece ran for a long time or was staged in a larger space, we would become sexual objects for men who get off on watching lesbians—I don't think our piece excludes that kind of reception. Then again, becoming sexual objects (to a certain degree) for a lesbian audience is integral to the piece.

TW: A critical moment is when you become too much of a sex object and the content fades into the background.

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KD: I would also say that there are also moments in our piece that are for pleasure's sake. We chose vaudeville or burlesque as the genre, as opposed to a symposium where hard facts are negotiated, because this expanded type of concert is also about entertainment, ecstasy and being swept away—also in a physical sense.

D: I think the spaces and contexts in the queer-lesbian scene are heavily laden with theory. Do you feel it's necessary to deal with issues in a different way?

KD: For many decades now, the gay scene has been much more assertive in their ways of dealing with sexualized spaces and I think there's a need for us to catch up somehow. One of our songs is called "This Very Moment." And if you explicitly stage voyeurism and take on an aggressive—in terms of active—stance, you end up subverting lots of things. So when I take off all my clothes on stage, of course *I'm* still the one wearing the pants—nobody else.

Translation: Erika Doucette