

Samo Oleami

Between being alone and in the crowd

Dramaturgical feedback on the street theatre event from Ana Desetnica festival 2015

Ana Monro: Alone in the Crowd

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Production: Ana Monro Theatre, 2015

Alone in the Crowd sets out to combine several different notions and traditions of how to structure a street art event and comes up with a unique solution: take a piece of street theatre, a piece of hippiedom and a piece of grassroots socialism; i.e.: a piece of Ana Monro's street theatre practice, a piece of 1960s happenings and a piece of spontaneous work actions emerging from otherwise non-existing communities when neighbours help each other digging their cars out of the snow. Add generous amounts of cardboard and characters. Shake and stir till all the ingredients blend nicely.



At the height of the collective enthusiasm – building the city.

I was led away from the main group by one of the performers with my eyes closed to a small private show and have only re-joined the performance later, so I cannot describe the whole of the event. However, its central idea seemed to be in having no separate space for the performers and the audience, rather all of them being intermixed in the same area, with the happening focused on the cardboard boxes, first by making them and then using them like toy bricks to form different structures. One of these, a fountain, is a permanent fixture (*the performers give the audience instructions on how to build it*), while the rest of the architecture is up to spontaneous planning of its builders. The glue bringing all the bits together are actors playing different characters, mixed in between the audience. Some of them have prominent, visible roles and are actively guiding and giving directions to those audience members who might need *them* (*the building crew*), some others run around creating atmosphere (*the TV crew*) and some roles are subtler, interacting with one individual audience member at a time. This guided confusion with different playful

tangents goes on for a while, until a directive is given from the performance's "headquarters" (*directors of the show*) to round up the audience around a central space. From there on the formal procedure commences – the audience names the town they've created, vote for its mayor and end the formalities with new mayor's speech. Slowly the performance closes down, performers asking audience to help them pack the cardboard boxes.

The most precious thing I see in *Alone in the Crowd* is in how it allows for different individual entry points and different experiences for each audience member, each of them being able to pick the level of autonomy they're happy with. If one needs guidance, the central strong characters are there to guide anybody not sure of how to interact with the happening(s). If one wishes to explore on their own, they can, likely stumbling upon characters on periphery and interacting with them. In the spectrum from the most obvious characters and events to the subtlest ones, each "civilian" participant can probably find their preferred level of interaction within the happening's structure.



Mayor's speech in the closing stages of Alone in the Crowd.

The question of the ending and its dramaturgy

Talking with other festival's attendees at lunch, we realised several of us found the shift in *Alone in the Crowd* from the open middle part, where interaction was possible on several levels and styles, to the closed, strongly directed ending, too invasive as it dispensed with the freedom of interaction we were given before. There were several ideas of what possible alternatives would be, but I'd like to frame them within **three types of performance to audience strategies** based on **Marco de Marinis text "Dramaturgy of Spectator"** from 1987, which also roughly correlate to three lines of influences for *Alone in the Crowd*. Marinis distinguishes three kinds of performances according to what scope and type of audience's

involvement they anticipate: the **traditional “closed performance”**, the **avant-garde “open performance”** and his preferred path of **post-modernist open performance**.

The middle part of *Alone in the Crowd* exhibits exactly the properties of Marinis's preferred type – a performance that allows each audience member multiple entry points and where different styles of audience's participation can co-exist at the same time. Audience members can choose between the more guided, controlled experiences or the freer, open-ended ones, depending on their preferences and abilities.

The guided ending of the show displays the tributes of the so called “closed performance” which is connected to the drama theatre heritage. Such an approach is “closed” as it tries to control what type of experience of the performance the audience can have, or in the case of *Alone in the Crowd* it tries to prevent anybody possibly having a bad experience and thus giving all the participants the similar one. There is nothing inherently wrong with this (common) approach, but it does blocks audience strategies available up to that point, without a reason that would be internal to the performance.



The third path Marinis writes about, the neo-avant-garde “open performance”, isn't present in *Alone in the Crowd*, but was suggested at our lunch discussions by Alfred Konijnenbelt, phrasing “*why wouldn't the audience take over the performance?*”. While I'm not convinced this path is the best fit for *Alone in the Crowd*, we should discuss it, as its authors did reference 1960s happenings as one their sources of inspiration. My own research into Slovenian 1960s avantgarde performance leads me in understanding the crucial attribute of happening to be one where the audience's and performer's position is in some way equal or there being no distinction separating them – instead what ties the event together are explicit or implicit rules which all participants can act upon. The problem Marinis sees in 1960s neo-avantgarde “open works” is that they ask for a high level of activity and autonomy not many audience members are comfortable with or capable of, reducing the size of the work's potential target audience.

If I return to the somewhat related idea of the audience taking over the show – the strategy, not so unusual in contemporary theatre, is understood to mean handing over the responsibility for the show from the hands of performers unto the hands of the audience. Often this is manifested by the explicit removal of the performers from the space which instantly terminates the performance, but it can be succeeded by whatever the (former) audience creates in its place. The way *Alone in the Crowd* is structured, I don't see this type of ending being a logical continuation to what came before.

However, there is no need for this “happening” part to be the main structure of the show or its ending, it could merely be one of the constituents of the rich conglomerate of parts that make *Alone in the Crowd*, free to be engaged by those audience members who would seek it. For instance, there could be instructions left on the set for the audience to follow, maybe a prop they could use, maybe giving an audience member an option to take on a role of a character, if they wanted.



If I see the strength of *Alone in the Crowd* in allowing different approaches of audience's investment, another question appears: could the performance be concluded in the same heterogenous manner? The answer in how to reconcile the structural difference between central part of the show and its conclusion is ultimately left to the authors, but I'll list some suggestions and ideas. **One answer** would be to make a transition softer and instead of the strong central characters pushing for a change of direction (*leading into the naming of the city, the elections, the mayor's speech*) from the top of the hierarchy, let the change come from the subtler characters from the periphery, or from all the characters simultaneously. **Second option** would be in adding a political or social commentary which could be delivered as a parody or satire – if the middle of the performance gave freedoms to the audience, taking these away could be justified by a certain narrative. Such a frame could be linked to several occasions when civil rights were revoked in recent history, including for instance reduction of social rights in the name of austerity and economic crisis. The same difference between the body of the performance and ending would be retained, but would acquire internal justification.

Third option, probably the most fitting one, would be to abandon the idea of having just one possible end. Maybe we need go back to that inspiration (out of original three) which is the most similar to the heterogenous goings on in the middle of the performance, namely the spontaneous organisation of neighbours working together in digging their cars from underneath the snow. People are together, but not homogenous, there are different things going on at the micro level, and the same goes for how this snow shovelling project would end. Maybe some of the people helping with the shovelling will get together and finish the evening in the local pub while some others would wander off on their own or join another activity, like building a snowman with kids. *Alone in the Crowd* could end in the same way it develops – the same way It guides those audience members who need guidance and gives some freedom to those who claim it. A strong, satisfying conclusion could be provided to those who need it, while letting those audience members who claimed more freedom to act upon it and be responsible for their own ending. Or the more autonomous audience members could in small groups or individually be led away from the performance by the subtler, peripheral characters.

P.S. Talking to Goro Osojnik after he read this article, he revealed how indeed the audience organically developed a part of the show's ending which wasn't initially there: the audience helping the performers put the boxes apart and clean up the stage "the socialist way". (This happens after the collective peak with naming the city and electing the mayor.)



The question of the theatre presence

The character driven dynamics of *Alone in the Crowd* comes with a problem regarding the acting presence of the performers. In the main article about *2015 Ana Desetnica festival* I was describing how creating a community of the audience and the performers requires both the elimination of the 4th wall between the performers and the audience and the strengthening of the barrier between the performance and the street. Some characters running around in *Alone in the Crowd* and causing mayhem accomplish the latter

by creating a crazy, whimsical atmosphere that helps the audience get into the mood to participate and play around in the performance's space. But I've noticed many of these performers employ a method of acting which focuses strongly on the effect they would like their character to impart on the people around them, rather than being open to a two-way communication with their surroundings. The result is the impression as if many of these performers would carry the 4th wall wrapped around them as a sort of a bubble. I would suggest trying/considering using the so-called "open presence" where the actor can remain in character, but relinquishes control over their situation and allows to be touched by what goes on around them, going with the flow of improvisation. The bubble a character in a street theatre wants to be in, isn't the small sphere around them (*separating them from the audience*), rather it's a bubble stretching out to border between the performance and the street, engulfing the audience within itself – be it just one person they're focusing on, a small group, or the entire arena. (*If the group was to experiment in this direction, it would be wise to retain the effect characters have on the overall atmosphere by getting the audience into the mood the show needs.*)

Conclusion



Street theatre event *Alone in the Crowd* features an interesting structure with (for me) a unique approach of being able to incorporate different preferences of the audience members into its organism. The three lines of inspirations for the show roughly correlate to three different possible strategies performances have in relation to their audience. The **first line** is drama theatre influence ("classic performance") which is the most visible in the way characters carry the dynamics of the show, but also in the way the ending of the performance (*naming the city, voting of the mayor*) is shaped. The **second line** is being inspired by 1960s happenings ("*avant-garde open performance*") – its influence I see mostly in the decision to mix performers and the audience, not spatially separating the "stage" and "auditorium". It's also present in the general whimsical atmosphere that welcomes the audience to behave playfully. The

third line of inspiration draws from spontaneous worker's actions in Slovenia's socialist past and how neighbours would in certain conditions form work oriented temporal communities. Elements of the show linked to this inspiration are most notable in everything involving the cardboard boxes, but also in the idea of different people working together, some being more, some less involved, some characters driving the action, some being engaged in more intimate moments on the edge of the main action. This line correlates to the idea of "postmodernist open performance" (*according to Marinis*) and is for me the most interesting feature of the show. Thus, I would read it as the dominant organising principle of the performance, also because by its nature it can incorporate the other two lines: if somebody wants their participatory experience to be more open or more guided they can find their niche for it somewhere in the constantly moving conglomerate organism of *Alone in the Crowd*.

For the further development of the show I would suggest looking at two discrepancies within its structure. The first is related to trying to reconcile the logic that shapes the end of the performance with the one it shapes its main body. While in the main body all three lines of inspirations for the show and its correlating elements are present and intertwined, in the ending the "classic" theatre line reigns supreme, eliminating the other two. Not only is this visible in the how we suddenly get a unified audience position with just one legitimate way of observing the show, also the narrative of the city naming and building has no intrinsic connection to the narrative of the main body – the working community of neighbours, playing with cardboard boxes. I would suggest finding a way to let the same logic organise both the main body and the end of the performance. The second issue to think about is what kind of theatre presence would suit the current structure and dynamics of the show best – how the performers can include and guide all types of audience's involvement and communicate with them.

These are some dramaturgical observations, suggestion and hopefully some food for thought and material which might be able to help Alone in the Crowd further realise it's unique and interesting potential.

Samo Oleami, December 2015, some corrections July 2017

Photo: Luka Dakskobler (1,2,3,5), Bojan Okorn (4, 6)

Ana Monro: Alone in the Crowd

Created and Directed by: Goro Osojnik, Vita Osojnik, Majda Krivograd

Performers and Co-Creators: Agnius Jankevičius, Giedre Kriaučionyte, Linas Jurkštas, Biruté-Belada Tauteryté, Severina Špakovska, Jurgis Marčėnas, Aleksandras Kleinas, Gabrielius Zapalskas, Karolis Matuliauskas (Lithuania), Natalya Yushkevich (Belorussia), Pedro Desenna (Brasill), Isolte Avila, David Bower (UK), Teresa Koegler, Angelina Schwammerlin, Majda Krivograd (Austria), Alla Abramova (Ukraine), Slivia Viviani (Italia), Špela Bajželj, Aleks Kodek, Maša Ceglar, Vita Osojnik, Gaja Vudrag, Tea Vidmar, Noemi Veberič Levovnik and Goro Osojnik (Slovenia)
