

Trauma – Performance – Identity: The Theatre of Evgenii Grishkovets

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Evgeny Grishkovets (b. 1967) is an actor, playwright, and performer of his own plays-monologues. He is almost a cult-figure, despite the fact that his performances are small-scale and of an intimate, almost chamber-like character. Grishkovets deploys a traumatic experience – for example, army, emigration, or war – as starting point in his quest for identity. In his first show *How I Ate a Dog* (1998) he reconstructed his own ‘foundational’ trauma caused by the absurdity and common violence of a Navy base, an ‘exemplarily concentration camp’ for young recruits. As follows from Grishkovets’s narrative, the trauma led to self-effacement, leaving only the ruins and debris of the former identity. Grishkovets’s productions represent the process of sharing experiences between the author/actor/protagonist and his audience. This shared experience consists of recognisable ‘little things’, details of emotional memory, childhood sensations, and common traumas. Grishkovets’s one-man-shows produce the effect of a *performative identity*, an identity that emerges in the process of performance through the shared *existential*, rather than social or political, experience. In *How I Ate the Dog* the traumatic experience stands for the Lacanian concept of the Real: it cannot be articulated directly, it escapes any verbalization, however, being contoured by Grishkovets’s performance, it creates the basis for the sensation of the shared identity. In other words, Grishkovets’s theatre suggests that sharing the trauma of Soviet communal experience serves as a sole tangible foundation for identity-formation, both on a personal and inter-personal level.

However, in his following plays (*Simultaneously*, *The Planet*, *Dreadnaughts*) Grishkovets tries to ‘translate’ the traumatic memory of the Real into the language of Symbolic. Paradoxically, these ‘translations’ require from the author/performer to utilize thanatological mythologies of war and institutionalised violence (borrowed from the Soviet culture as well as other ‘masculine’ and imperialist discourses), thus inscribing the Real of the erased self (as it appears in *How I Ate the Dog*) into the heroic and nostalgic narratives (*Dreadnaughts* 2000). Thus, trying to overcome the traumatic memory, Grishkovets in fact, solidifies it in heroic/nostalgic narratives, which strip the trauma off its explosive effects and substitute the pain and the loss with a comfortable mythological presence (of an ideal, a goal, a meaning for loss, - in short, the History as a transcendental signified). The transformation of traumatic memory into a simulacra of History which turns out to be a re-dressing of death and (self) destruction, typified by Grishkovets’ theatre is also indicative of the general transformations of post-soviet culture in the 2000s.