

SPECIAL REPORT FROM EUROPE 2010 - Slovenia, Hungary and Greece

SLOVENIA – October 17, 2010

Sitting in my hotel room looking out at Ljubljana, a church steeple in the distance. It is Sunday, our last day here, and the church bells have been ringing all day.

We arrived (Maya Deren, Julia Child and I) 4 days ago on Oct 13th after a very long flight via Paris to perform at the annual City of Women Festival. We were immediately ushered into the hotel restaurant for an interview with Iva Kosmos from the daily paper Dnevnik. After the long interview (we talked very slowly due to extreme fatigue) we ate a heavy dinner of pasta and gnocchi with cream sauce and went off to bed. Day 2 would be our street theatre workshop. We were picked up at 9am and taken to the venue for the workshop – a compound of mismatched buildings peppered with colorful graffiti and sculptures. Our venue used to be a horse stable and it reminded me very much of our venue in Poland. Inside we found a makeshift stage, sofas and chairs, Christmas lights hanging from everywhere and the all-important bar where coffee was already brewing. The workshop was supposed to begin at 10am but everyone trickled in late – I always forget how much NYers are slaves to being on time but there is no where else in the world that we have been to where things actually begin on schedule.

By 10:30AM 20 women artists have assembled and Julia immediately puts them through the comedic paces of our “name game”. Each person has to say their name using movement but when it’s Masha’s turn she pauses for what seems like an awful long time and then confesses that her focus is a bit off because she had just smoked a joint. I can’t stop laughing and neither can anyone.

After the warm-ups we have a group brain storming session about the issues they face as young Slovenian women. This lasted well over an hour. Our group of artists/activists is extremely talkative and they bring up many of the issues we hear all over the world such as pay equity, apathy and sexism in art.

It’s time for a cigarette break (everyone smokes here) and after everyone has a chance to get some air we resume the workshop by breaking into 4 groups addressing: Art in education, Animal rights, Food and Apathy. Each group got to work on designing a slogan and a street theatre action that would then be performed on Three Bridges (the main square of Ljubljana) later that afternoon. Maya is filming every single brainstorm, collaboration, and rehearsal while Julia and I float among the groups passing out props and suggesting ways to smooth out the rough spots of each performance.

We break for an hour and head over to Three Bridges but first stop off for a full fat cappuccino – no skinny lattes to-go here. As we arrive at Three Bridges we can see that the performances are already underway. Each group had come up with some very clever visual performances. One group tied themselves to a large statue of the national poet in the middle of the square wearing shirts that spelled out KNOW! (the K was in Red and the other letters in black so that it read KNOW NOW.) This was a plea for access to more contemporary art. Another group asked people to write suggestions to the city mayor on the T-Shirts they were wearing. Another group distributed pieces of fruit with sayings on them indicating just how far the piece of fruit had traveled to get to Slovenia. The last group held a sign that said “Be kind to animals, try it here” and enlisted the help of Bukowski, Masha’s gentle and friendly Dalmatian dog.

After about 20 minutes the performances came to a natural end and we gathered in the middle of Three Bridges for a debriefing session where we chatted about how satisfying and surprisingly fun the street theatre experience was. Everyone commented about how easy it was to directly engage the public in considering their issue and hearing what they had to say about it. In friendly and relaxed Slovenia it will be easy to continue the street theatre performance tradition in the days and months in between each City of Women Festival.

We had a rehearsal planned that evening for our performance of “If You Can Stand the Heat: The History of Women and Food” and after two hours we were ready to drop. We grabbed some fast food....hot dogs, French fries and a veggie burger (a veggie burger here is a giant, (and I mean giant) bun with lettuce, tomato and mayo) Bread is big in Slovenia. So after filling up on Slovene junk food we are ready for bed.

Friday we had scheduled a 12 hour rehearsal in our venue. This is because our performance is collaboration with a local actress and we only have one day to work out what we will do for that part of the show. We’ve already been in touch via email and have decided that the biggest female foodie in Slovenia is Sister Vendelina – a nun who wrote cookbooks featuring classic local recipes. So a Sister Vendelina section is a must. We were not picked up at the hotel at 10 am and so had to arrange for a cab to Cankarjev dom, our venue. When we arrive realize we are playing the Broadway stage of Ljubljana.

A full staff of non-English speaking technicians greets us in the middle of the fancy, turntable-equipped stage. The head techie is an English speaking woman – Karmen Klucar who comments on our intense schedule. The sound system is unbelievable....totally ear blowing and the head set mikes are the best we’ve had. The lighting guy sets some looks for us and we are assigned a stage manager – Ursku. They hang an opera glass drape for our back drop and our images are rear projected so that they fill the tremendous stage. This is intense and we begin to feel a bit of pressure. Julia suggests we use the turntable but I

nix that because I think we have no time to spend learning how. Our fears are quashed by the arrival of our local Guerrilla Girl On Tour, Gorka Berden, an upbeat and shining faced gem of an actress who's just returned from a year of study in Paris. We decide that Gorka must be including in not only the Sister Vendelina section, but in some of the rest of the show. Working for hours with few breaks (ahem, now we understand why Equity has all those rules) we work out the transitions and incorporate Gorka as a full fledged GGOT. We end at 9PM...almost 11 hours of rehearsal.

At one point during the day we set out to grab some coffee, Starbucks style. But alas, when we asked the local barista for "to-go" cups she nearly has a coronary. This is when we learned that there is no coffee "to-go" in Slovenia. There is especially no tea "to-go" in Slovenia. We have insulted the entire country by even asking! Being the bold New Yorkers that we are we insist, especially after seeing several paper "to-go" cups behind the coffee maker. We pay double to make up for insulting the barista and head back to the theatre with our hot paper cups brimming with full fat cappuccinos and hot tea.

Saturday we begin tech at 10am with the crew. The PowerPoint does not work on the theatre's computer. I had just purchased a new Mac book Pro (No Macs in Slovenia either) so we use my new computer to run the show. Maya runs around like crazy shooting video with her flip cam and snapping still shots with her camera. She takes pictures almost as fast as she can post them on our facebook and blog pages. We break for lunch about ¾ the way through the tech. Feeling the pressure of an international gig in a huge theatre makes for a quiet and concentrated lunch. Not to mention the jet lag. We do a dress rehearsal at 3PM that goes OK...not horrible but not perfect, just the way it should be. We have about 2 hours to go...Julia falls asleep on the stage. Maya posts more video to all our social media pages and I walk the halls of the huge theatre to relax.

Curtain time! We have about 200 people out there and they are in a great mood. (I can always tell the mood of the crowd from our first sound cue – if they laugh at that then it will be a good show). The laughter starts slowly and gradually builds into occasional bursts of guffawing. Shows outside of the US are always a challenge when you are doing comedy because you don't know if it is going to translate. Foreign audiences are much more restrained about being verbal but getting our audiences to talk to us is part of our shtick and Julia and I relax into a groove and hit all our timing. There's a good ebb and flow to this show and the audience is with us. The only time we hit a wall was when we asked the audience to announce shows by women artists that are coming up. There were several in the City of Women line up the very next evening but not one person wanted to speak up. Next time we'll know to plant someone out there. For that one brief moment we looked for Masha in the crowd because we know she'll have something to say but we can't spot her.

We end the show with pies in the face – hilarious to Gorka but I think the audience thought we were assaulting each other! Note to self – pies in the face are fun but do not translate well in the Balkans. The entire audience stays for the Q and A – also a first. We get many thoughtful questions about the differences in audiences between US and Europe. Wow! The Q and A lasts about 15 minutes. Maya has streamed it all live for the first time in GGOT history. We exit stage left feeling successful at having brought our brand of comedy to a new audience. I am grateful, happy, relieved. We celebrate at our favorite restaurant, Campo, near our hotel and hit the City of Women after party. A disco dancing sweat filled space where we dance until 2am

At the dance party we hear from one of our workshop women, Phaedra, who says our venue was all wrong. We were in too traditional a space. Mara, City of Women director, says about our show “Yes! I got it. Ha! Ha! ”. The online viewers say that we were having a ball.

And so it ‘s back to Sunday, our day off. Raining. Our plans to take a bus trip to a lake in the Alps are squashed by the rain and our exhaustion. Tomorrow we leave at the crack of dawn (4AM) for the airport and on to Hungary. We rest all day and that evening go to see another show in the festival. It’s a very dark piece about the strict role of women as mothers and homemakers. It seems this is the traditional Slovenia way for women...work very hard, at least 14 hours a day; be extremely thin; be quiet; don’t really speak your mind or if you do make sure it’s implied, not out there. Guess we were quite a different kind of POV.

HUNGARY

Aphra

October 17, 2010

On October 18 we depart at an ungodly hour – the crack of dawn or 4am to be exact for a 6:30AM flight to Prague and then onto Budapest. We finally arrive very groggy and exhausted in Budapest at 11:30AM and are met by Edit, a colleague of Zsazsa, our host from the University of Szeged. She puts us in her comfy Peugeot 620 and we drive for 2 hours to Szeged. I sit up front and talk with Edit while Maya and Julia crash in the back. We arrive at our hotel, the “academy” – a very old building opposite a huge cathedral. Our rooms have 20

food ceilings and window have shutters instead of blinds. Most importantly it has internet access.

Maya and Julia crawl back into bed and sleep. We agree to meet again at 7PM because that's when Zsazsa, our hostess, will come by to meet us. She knocks on my door at 6:30pm - a lovely and warm woman who seems genuinely happy that we have arrived greets me. She walks us to the heart of Szeged and to a restaurant with the same name as the city. On the way we are given pointers as to where to have coffee, how to get to the open market, etc. We have a yummy dinner full of Hungarian paprika and get to know our host. It seems there are not a lot of feminists in Szeged and Zsazsa is grateful to have us in town for 5 days. She explains the difficult political climate – the hatred of the gypsies; the bureaucracy of the university and the government. To her, it seems that the world is going backwards...more hatred, less tolerance. Yes, we can relate.

We crash...it's hard for me to sleep the first night anywhere.

Up early the next morning for breakfast but I should not have been so excited. There is bread, cheese, ham, butter and a cup of tea with lemon, not even any milk.

I eat fast and decide to find the local open air food market. Zsazsa has told us that there would be lots to see their....fruits, paprika, mushrooms, grapes, all from small local farmers. There will also be butchers displaying the best fried chicken skins and bacon bits. After that breakfast I am anxious to have some yummy food.

The market is great...tons of veggies and all sold by smiling women in huge overcoats...it's about 50 degrees and drizzling. As I walk around I take many photos of the food and the people. There are old women drinking shots (at 10am) and lots of women, women everywhere, in groups talking or searching for the best chickens to buy. Very few men here...mostly behind the butcher counters.

I go to buy an apple but the stout and smiling women will not sell it to me, she insists I take it. I guess no one buys one apple in Szeged. This would never happen at the Union Square Market in NYC! I am embarrassed and humbled by her generosity. I then go to the old synagogue. There is a sign posted that says because it's so cold I have to go to the rabbi's office and ask for the synagogue to be opened. A woman opens up and turns on the lights to a gorgeous and huge synagogue, more like a cathedral. I spend about 25 minutes looking over everything from the photos of it from WWII (when it was used for storage by the Nazi's) to the names of the 2000 victims from Szeged annihilated by the holocaust. I walk home in the rain to get ready for our street theatre workshop.

The students from the University of Szeged all huddle in silence and respect in the corner of the room on campus where our workshop is to take place. As usual, everyone arrives late and we get started 30 minutes behind schedule. There are about 20 shy and anxious students gathered around as Julia leads everyone in a group warm up – the name game.

One student, Alice, tells us that our masks intimidate her and she wants us to take them off. We explain the reason for masking and being anonymous and hope that she will feel more comfortable as the workshop goes on. It takes these students a bit more time to become comfortable with looking each other in the eye and remembering everyone's name and movement. I am reminded that they are not artists but gender studies and English students and that they are not used to doing work like this. Because of this our warm up goes on for a bit. They need time to get used to group work. But this first part of our workshop is key for everyone to be able to successfully create a collaborative work.

After the warm up we gather as a group and go over issues they may want to address in creating street theatre. Again, hesitation on the part of most of the students. Julia gently guides them into expressing what is on their minds. Many issues begin to pop up. Themes begin to emerge. Violence against women, bullying in the schools, the stereotyping of female roles. We break into three smaller groups and begin the hard part of the workshop....collaboration.

After a free write on paper that lasts about 5 minutes we see that some of the groups are better than others at getting down to ideas and sharing those ideas. One group in particular is very jazzed and animated (the stereotyping of women group). Another (school bullying) has a harder time. Julia and I float around the groups and try to assist them in focusing while Maya streams the workshop live.

Just as the clock winds down and the students must run off to another class we finish the workshop with three clear pieces of street theatre to perform. Julia, Maya and I discuss adding a fourth piece that we will create entitled "Feminism/sexism is everywhere." We lay out a bunch of white t-shirts on the floor and markers write out the words "sexism is everywhere/Feminism is everywhere" in Hungarian.

We head back to the hotel and decide to go out for a traditional Hungarian meal of fish soup and goulash. The restaurant is not far from the academy and when we enter we discover a trio playing traditional Hungarian music. After ordering wine and soup.....I get the fish soup and Julia and Maya order the goulash – the violinist from the trio approaches our table and asks for a request. Before I can even think I blurt out "Can you play the Godfather Theme?" and before you know the theme from the Oscar winning movie floods the restaurant. Maya whips out her flip video camera and captures the moment forever. The food arrives and we chow down, departing for our hotel sated and satisfied in our adopted

Hungarian city, falling asleep and dreaming of paprika.

The next morning I take Maya to the open air food market. We get lots of photos of the great food on display and the fantastic women and men who sell their fresh vegetables and meats. I even put on my gorilla mask and dance among the apples and carrots. It is still raining. Our street theatre performances are not scheduled until 4-6PM that afternoon so I hope the weather clears. Maya goes off on her own and I take the guide book and begin a walking tour of Szeged - exploring old buildings, and architecture. I stop by Acapella, a coffee and pastry shop for a much needed full fat cappuccino.

We assemble at 4PM for our performances and go over the order of the 4 pieces of street theatre – Julia and I first, then the “stereotyped female role” performance, the “bullying” performance and ending with the “violence against women” performance. We are in a public square in front of a large shopping mall. It is a good location with many people milling about. The first round is like a dress rehearsal. The groups end their performances too soon and are a bit tentative. We regroup and discuss what we can change and what we can make better. Everyone is excited and a bit animated by the experience of performing in public. Just as we begin to do all of the performances for a second time it begins to rain. We don’t have a plan B for the rain; street theatre is come rain or shine. So we plod on, Maya capturing it all on video camera with my umbrella strapped to her tripod. In the end the second round is much more focused, clear, and effective although the crowds are smaller because a steady rain is coming down now. After an hour and a half of this we are all soaked and head off to the pub for a much needed shot of plink – traditional Hungarian liquor or is it aperitif?

About 8 of the students join us as well as Zsazsa and we sit around discussing the afternoon. All of these students are in Zsazsa’s masters program and are just choosing their concentrations in gender studies. They are all very pleased with the performances although relieved they are over. We talk about the reactions and the power of public performance.

That evening Julia, Maya and I hit the John Bull Pub for a meal. Wine and cheese, heavy pastas are the norm in both Hungary and Slovenia. Then off to bed as tomorrow we leave for Budapest for our one day off.

OCT 21, 2010

At 8:30AM we are picked up by Johnborg who is Edit’s boyfriend who will drive us to Budapest. It takes at least 2 hours by car but he’s driving Edits Peugeot 620 with leather seats so again we will travel in style. Since he does not speak

English very well we can all have a bit of a snooze on the way in. We arrive at Le Meridian – a 5 star hotel where we will get two free rooms courtesy of the GGOT American Express Starwood's card. Our rooms are not ready so we go around the corner to Coffee Heaven for a quick full fat cappuccino. This is much different from Szeged....and a lot like Starbucks in look and price. This is the first place we've been that serves coffee in "to-go" containers. After our caffeine fix we head back to our rooms which are ready, gorgeous, comfy and a bit of heaven in the middle of a long tour with lots of travel and lots of 2 star hotels.

Julia wants to go to the museum while Maya and I want to check out the Doheny synagogue, which was occupied by the Nazis and used as a headquarters during the war. We take the hour long tour (excellent) and then check out the museums and the displays they have around the synagogue. Maya and Julia then go off to the Turkish baths while I go back to the hotel to soak in the huge tub. I buy a bath bomb at Lush, have an hour bath, then a nap and I'm ready to our Budapest foodapest meal . We have researched and chosen a "top chef" like place to eat a celebratory mid tour meal at - Dio. It's a bright red décor hip place where we share some soufflés and then some very interesting main dishes...I have the pork tenderloin, which is yummy, and we split two very creamy desserts. Then it's off to bed because tomorrow we fly to Greece.

October 22, 2010 GREECE!

We take an early cab to the airport and exchange all of our forints back to Euros and we are off for a short flight to Prague (scene of the 15 dollar cokes) and then a connection to Athens. We arrive in Athens and it's about 15 degrees warmer so we peel off layers of wool in exchange for cotton. Our host, Krini (Tina Mondatit) of the Mediterranean Women's Studies Centre is meeting us at the airport. We exit via "nothing to declare" and after looking around for a few minutes a woman with dark hair and sunglasses approaches us and asks if we are the GGOT's. She welcomes us to Athens. We jump in a cab and are off to our hotel. Tina makes sure we are all checked in (she insists on inspecting our rooms) and we settle in. It is about 5PM now and we are hungry and tired. We figure a quick bite and off to bed. We ask the front desk where we can have a meal and he points us in the direction behind the hotel that looks a lot like Rodeo drive – Feragamo and Gucci stores amid small cafes where everyone is smoking like chimneys. We share a few salads and a pasta (a bit on the sweet side) and off to bed. Tomorrow Tina will pick us up to take us to our poster workshop location.

Oct 23

The breakfast is vast with lots of choices – (thank goddess we are back to the huge breakfast buffet) - we all meet Tina in the lobby who puts us in another cab for the trip to the suburbs for our poster workshop. We arrive at the home of Zoe who is a professor and art lover. She has turned her living room into a screening room/studio and here is where we will lead two days of workshops. We are set to start at 10am but now realize that everyone will be there at 10:30 so we enjoy coffee on the terrace and get to meet the women who are the early birds. There is someone organizing a queer festival, a student, a visual artist, and Katy, the director of the women's study center. Maya is able to hook into the internet and sets up her camera to stream the workshop live. Because there is a screen on one side of the room we are able to show our posters to the group. But first things first, Julia takes over and we begin intros and warm ups – the name game. The women in the workshop (they have restricted it to women only) are all very chatty and upbeat. We laugh and lot and get to know each other before we all sit around and view posters and other images Maya has organized to get us into the poster making mood.

NOTE on ATHENS: We were scheduled to do a street theatre workshop here but there are protests daily in Greece because of the bad economy. People have not been paid in two years, the Greek budget is broken, pensions are being taken away and the people are frustrated. Even though all of the protests we saw were peaceful ones we did go into the section of town where university students lived and there were police everywhere. A young man had been shot in the back fleeing police last year and that was the reason given for all the militia. Given the political climate, Tina thought it was much wiser to host a poster making workshop instead.

We begin working on posters. Many of the same issues come out of the group – the lack of solidarity in the women's movement, stereotyping of women and the local elections coming up. Women in Athens feel powerless against the status quo. Three groups emerge and begin to work on their posters.

The women of Athens are animated and talkative. So much so that the groups have a difficult time coming to a consensus on their poster. Julia and I float around the room guiding the groups to some kind of agreement while Maya monitors the live feed and reactions from those watching. She also uses her computer to help one group make a poster – “One for All” is the title and it centers on women and unity.

We present the posters and discuss. Everyone has something positive to say and all are excited by their collaborative work. We end up going over time by an

hour and a half because of the lively discussions that evolve from the workshop. Tina and her sister take us all out for a very late lunch....delicious kebabs, restina wine and Greek salads. Then we head back to our hotel for a rest.

That evening we head off to the plaka district for some sight seeing and a drink – we are still full from lunch. We walk through the touristy section and are intrigued by all the outdoor restaurants and the aggressive hosts who try to shoo you into for something to eat. One host lets us sit down for a bottle of wine – he looks like barysinikoff and offers us all complimentary ouzo to start. When he suggests a plate of carrots to go with wine Julia laughs in his face....carrots with wine? Ok, we agree and chomp on cucumbers and carrots with our bottle of red. When in Greece....

In the morning I head off to the new Acropolis museum while Julia and Maya sleep in. The museum is gorgeous – a striking design full of glass, marble and fabulous images of female goddesses. No photos are allowed but being the GGOT that I am I manage to break the rules and sneak a few in. I stop for a full fat cappuccino (nothing but on this tour) before picking up Julia and Maya for our second workshop. This time we take the public transport train (clean and efficient) and head to the workshop.

Tina meets us at the train station and explains that not as many people are signed up for today, Sunday. But we find the small group of about 6 women very similar to the first one full of conversation and energy. I decide to make my own poster today, inspired by the tons of female images I have seen at the acropolis museum – “Bring Back Athena”. Sidebar: One lesson I have learned on this tour is just how much American women do have in terms of services like hot lines, shelters, programs for abused women. The workshop again goes over an hour and a half and we end about 4PM. The sun is still bright and sunny and we head off for a bite before we have to meet workshop member Vilma who is interviewing us at the hotel for a publication she writes for in Athens.

We meet Vilma and her partner Eletheinai in the lobby and Tina shows up as well. After the interview we all decide to go out for a meal and they take us to the section of town where the university students live. It is heavily guarded by police (for some reason they think that the uni students are the most dangerous) and we sit outside enjoying local Mediterranean inspired foods tsikik, kebab, and local wine.

We walk back to the hotel and Vilma offers to drive us to the beach the next day, but it rains that morning so the beach is off. We head to the Acropolis with our gorilla masks anxious to take photos in the theatre of Dionysus but when we get there we are yelled at by the guards who confiscate our cameras and insist that any photos in gorilla masks be deleted. No making fun of theatre or Dionysus they explain. No posting silly photos in site on facebook. No comedy in the

acropolis site! Wow. How weird, seeing that it originally was a mask there. We go up to the Parthenon and sneak a few photos and enjoy the amazing acropolis. We walk back to the hotel and pack and rest up before meeting V and E for pastries pre dinner.

Vilma takes us on a tour through some interesting parts of Athens including the art center, a traditional Turkish pastry shop and ending at a bar where we share beer and they tell us the story of their relationship. I am struck by their classic love story – isn't love a universal concept. We have many laughs as Vilma reads our coffee cups after Turkish coffee.

They take me on the train back to the hotel and we hug and kiss good buy. I have a feeling that we will meet again. And in fact at this moment we are writing a grant together do create a multi media theatre piece about lesbians in Greece together next fall.

In the morning I am met by Anastasia (Tinas sister) who puts me in a cab to the airport. (Julia is staying an extra day and Maya will stay for an additional 10 days)

After 14 hours I am back in NYC where it is HOT and humid.

The longest GGOT tour yet. The most satisfying. We met and engaged with the most people ever. Now three more countries to cross of the list.

Aphra

October 26, 2010