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I confess I am Billie Holiday! (so near so far)

(Roberto Palumbo, no.65 Purple Lilac - The Possibilities)

It seems strange, but it's true: Tomislav Gotovac, also known as Antonio g. Lauer, actor, Director, performer (and all-round artist) with his extraordinary physicality could impersonate anyone or anything, if he had the choice he would have chosen to "be" her, Billie Holiday. As the crow flies Harlem, New York, is 6,897 km from Zagreb. The two have never met, and we cannot say that they were contemporaries: and yet the connection and the influence of Holiday on Gotovac was so strong that it has happened "An American artist active in Zagreb."

Strange? Maybe not. To understand the complexity and at the same time the extraordinary simplicity and purity of his work, the man and the director, the actor and pioneer of performance art in the former Yugoslavia, it is necessary to identify with the historical, political and cultural context in which he was born, grew up and lived. Son of Elizabeth "Betti" Lauer (out of love, and as a sign of gratitude, he will adopt her surname), a passionate film buff originating from a good bourgeois Hungarian family, and Ivan Gotovac, military man in the Yugoslav Army, Tomislav was born in Sombor in 1937. When, in 1941, the axis forces invade Yugoslavia, the Kingdom, previously integrated despite popular discontent, crumbles, and the territory is divided between Hungary, Italy and Germany. Through the medium of radio Ante Pavelic, who is put in charge of the independent State of Croatia by fascists and Nazis, called together all the Croatian military of the army of the Kingdom, to join the troops of the new independent State of Croatia. With a four year-old son, his wife and their few belongings, Ivan Gotovac decided to leave for Zagreb. That trip aboard a freight train through what was now a ghostly realm would last two weeks. This adventure and those rail tracks, now controlled by an army under another command, will remain firmly etched in little Tomislav's mind. Upon arrival in Zagreb, his father rises to the rank of sergeant. As a result of the promotion he is assigned to the National Guard, which controls the territory together with the *Ustacha*, the ultra-nationalist armed force that will play havoc on all Serbs, Jew or communist who will not convert to Catholicism. The atmosphere in Zagreb, is very harsh, there are blocks everywhere, there is a curfew from nine till six in the morning, and the small Tomislav, bought up in the natural landscapes of Sombor where Hungarian was mostly spoken, now struggles to understand the

Of course it's also his introduction to *Summertime*, whose best interpreter, although outside the theater, might be found in a smoky club in New York, you can just imagine who it is. On stage he will also see Marcel Marceau and *Titus Andronicus* by Peter Brook, with Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier, in addition to a number of other composers from around the world. In his first visits to galleries he will see the works of Titian, Klee, Kurt Schwitters, Max Ernst that for him will almost be a shock, being the first encounter with something which until then he had only seen in books. In 1957 he is introduced to the realist cinema and admires the entire work of Chaplin, but also of Fritz Lang and the Russian films on Red October. It is in this period that a friend passes him some tapes of an American Jazz artist. That artist is Billie Holiday: when he hears *Good Morning Heartache*, Gotovac falls in love with her. Her silky soft voice is the essence of the Blues, it is a quintessence of America with its inconsistencies and contradictions. Her life and her career had been a constant struggle between light and shadow with a terrible childhood behind her, raped as a ten years-old, sent to a reformatory, even forced into prostitution, she will find in music only a partial redemption that will, according to the definition of Gotovac, make her "the greatest artist of the twentieth century." In 1939, with the song *Strange Fruit*, Billie Holiday is the first artist of color to sing explicitly of the racism prevailing in America in the nineteen forties, especially in the southern states, where the phenomenon of the lynching of blacks was widespread and tolerated: the strange fruits are men who hang from the trees. The song and Holiday thus become symbols of the struggle for civil rights of African Americans, sixteen years prior to the incident with Mrs. Rosa Parks, who refused to get up from her seat on the bus reserved for white people in Alabama, and about twenty-five years before the speech of Martin Luther King in Washington. For Gotovac the connection is very powerful. The sound of Holiday's voice is enough to transport him into another world, at the same time as being a source of inspiration. Artistically he is still trying to find his way, which needed to be compatible with his social and political commitments. When, in 1963, for the biennial of music the great John Cage arrives in Zagreb, the *Living Theater* and *La Mama*, almost overwhelmed Gotovac, he has in his mind all the elements needed for inspiration: cinema, theater, music, performance art, as well as political commitment and the need to awaken consciences. He finished his studies and directed a few movies. He begins to think and rethink about his mode

strange Serbs dialects that almost everyone speaks. In that smaller Zagreb of the time, few places were accessible to a four year-old. Among these, one in particular will take its place in his memory, feeding its future fantasy and artistic formation: the piazza of the national theatre where Gotovac sees *The Fountain Of Life* by Ivan Maestrovic. It is a composition of a group of sculptures placed in a circle, which attract his attention. What strikes and fascinates him is the fact that the sculptures representing the human figure: men, women, children and the elderly are completely naked. During the war, the square is one of the few places where you can hang out and come back to often. Those bodies and those figures that, through the touch of a hand can be felt every time you drink from the fountain, remain etched in his mind forever. In much the same way that as a youth he will be fascinated by the paintings of Victor Kovacic and sculptures in the Church of St. Blasius, in the district where he lives. Depicting the Stations of the Cross, Golgotha and the very Crucifixes that, by showing the features of the body exposed in nakedness, allow an artistic sensibility to creep under his own skin. Visions that will strike deeply, stimulating in him his first reflections on the role of the nude in art. After the war the city and the country profoundly change under the influence of Josep Broz 'Tito'. This oppressive regime will hinder free expression for a long time, yet it will allow Gotovac access to the medium that mostly will affect his work: cinema, which will literally possess him. Starting in 1951, Gotovac will have the access to six American films a week, in the hall of the YNAH, the National Military Theater; he sees the works of Vladimir Pogacic and Eisenstein, but also the complete works of Buster Keaton. And when later, the director of the National Film Library begins to project in the Balkan theatre and in the Zagreb all the material of the archives, for Gotovac this opens up the gates of paradise. In 1954, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia begins to open its doors to Western art, and, after the Korea war, he even has the chance to attend a performance of the Beijing opera company as well as the original representation of one of the works that most strike him most: *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin, directly from Manhattan. For the first time Gotovac sees one of the best musicals of all time, with more than 100 actors and singers of colour.

of expression. When he sees the first full nude scene in a Danish film by Arne Mattsson, *She Danced Only One Summer*, the idea that nudity is artistically important starts to take root in his mind because it is capable of shocking and compelling attention and through which you can tell the world of your perspective, beyond moral, social or religious conventions. Artistically there is no distinction between good naked and bad naked, between moral or amoral nude: performance art could give him his place in the sun. The first occasion was in 1970, when he won an award for his movie *T*. The idea was to get up and strip off during the award ceremony, but Gotovac hesitated and failed to go through with it. The following year, when his friend and colleague Lazar Stojanovic is filming *The Plastic Jesus*, he tells him that he has an idea that he would like to put it in the movie. Stojanovic accepts, so the first instance of streaking is inserted into the film (Ed 'Streaking' is to run naked through a public place in protest). The scene is visible in the film, which shows Gotovac running naked down a street in Zagreb screaming, "I am innocent." The film was censored and for many years vision of it was banned because of references to Tito in some scenes, but it entrenched in him the idea that this was his mode of expression, and that his body was the means by which to achieve it. His own life would become one long performance in which cinema, art and reality would merge. Simple daily gestures repeated endlessly, the intrusion of sensationalism in the banal and obvious, transfiguration into Broadway musicals, and his incursions in public spaces would become the tool with which he would induce viewers to think and interact. Gotovac would be able to deconstruct and make perceptible the social and political manipulations of his country through the use of his own symbols and of his own body. The most important decade of his work begins in 1986 with *Paranoia View Art* (the art of the paranoid vision of the world). For Gotovac "It's all about supporting or denying the paranoia," a vision of the world through the use of iconography that tries to reconstruct events and political relations of cause and effect. Accompanying him in almost all his works there are the emblems of American culture and arthouse cinema, to which Gotovac pays homage using parts, constructs or music, assembled in a maniacal way to create a personal language, often ingenious. His works are visionary metaphors dotted with tributes to those great artists who have inspired him, including Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Prévert, Glenn Miller, Duke Ellington and of course "her", the artist who touched his heart, always able to move him: Billie Holiday.

In 2008, two years before his death, his friend Sandro Dukic managed to immortalize Gotovac and his extraordinary expressive medium, capturing the essence in a series of shots, *Body Scan*, which also became a documentary film and included in the anthological exhibition *Speak Quietly*, displayed at the *Michaela Stocks* Gallery in Vienna in 2013. If you missed it, in the same gallery, as part of the exhibition *Postcards from Balkan*, from June 28 to August 28, 2014, the art and spirit of Gotovac is back with the show *Pure Words*. I'll be there. And perhaps, in honor of Tomislav, I will hum a Billie Holiday song.