



Madness in Prague

Thauberger partners with performers, patients and psychiatrists

By FRAN SCHECHTER
ALTHEA THAUBERGER at the Power Plant



Althea Thauberger's Marat Sade Bohnice probes mental illness and its representation.

Althea Thauberger's focus on collaboration with various communities puts her squarely in the field known as relational aesthetics, art about human relations and social context that operates outside the studio/gallery environment.

For past projects, the Vancouver-based artist has partnered with Canadian and U.S. military personnel, German conscientious objectors, a Kashmiri theatre company and rural speakers of an obscure Italian dialect, among others, to create puzzling videos, photographs and performances that undercut expectations of how such groups should be depicted.

An interest in self-presentation and performance motivates her work with theatre troupes. Marat Sade Bohnice documents Akanda Theatre's English-language performance at Prague's Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital of Peter Weiss's play-within-a-play, in which the Marquis de Sade directs his fellow inmates at Charenton asylum in a dramatization of the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat.

Intercutting scenes from the performance and interviews with psychiatrists, an orderly and patients, Thauberger neatly bookends the history of the asylum. The 1964 play, written at the same time as Michel Foucault's *Madness And Civilization*, is set at the beginning of psychiatric incarceration; a decade later,

deinstitutionalization would empty hospitals and dump medicated patients on the streets, a process now in progress at Bohnice.

This is not, however, a documentary. Thauberger doesn't film outside the performance area, a decaying former laundry room that brings to mind the cold baths once used as treatment. We never get a sense of what the rest of Bohnice is like, though the interviews give glimpses into recent Czech history.

One patient's refusal to take drugs seems to indicate a liberal institution; a psychiatrist's description of therapy for sexual deviants, including voluntary castration, sounds more ominous. Why is the performance in English? A man introduced as a translator turns out to be one of the patients.

Marat Sade Bohnice leaves us with questions about the meaning of mental illness at this moment in time and the role of art in representing it.

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