

# szcenárium

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## Plans for the National Theatre's Next Five Years

ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY

## National Theatres in Smaller European Countries

STEPHEN WILMER

## MITEM Retrospective 2014–2017

ZSOLT SZÁSZ – ÁGNES PÁLFI

## Articles by/about this Year's Guests

ROLF C. HEMKE, MOHAMED MOUMEM,  
FADHEL JAÏBI, PARVATHY BAUL,  
ANTONIO LATELLA – ANDREA BAJANI



# authors

**Albert, Dénes** (1962) journalist, translator

**Bajani, Andrea** (1975) writer, journalist

**Baul, Parvathy** (1976) singer, artist, storyteller

**Durkóné Varga, Nóra** (1965) translator, English teacher

**Hemke, Rolf C.** (1972) dramaturge for public relations and marketing at Theater an der Ruhr, artistic director of Kunstfest Weimar

**Kocsis, Anikó** (1969) translator, English teacher

**Latella, Antonio** (1967) stage director

**Moumen, Mohamed**, theatre aesthete and reviewer

**Pálfi, Ágnes** (1952) poet, essayist, editor of Szcenárium

**Regéczi, Ildikó** (1969) reader at Institute of Slavic Studies, University of Debrecen

**Szász, Zsolt** (1959) puppeteer, dramaturge, stage director, managing editor of Szcenárium

**Vidnyánszky, Attila** (1964) stage director, general manager of the National Theatre in Budapest

**Wilmer, Stephen** (1944) Fellow Emeritus at Trinity College, Dublin



Támogatók



PUBLISHER IN-CHIEF: Attila Vidnyánszky • EDITOR IN-CHIEF: Zsolt Szász • EDITOR: Ágnes Pálfi • LAYOUT EDITOR: Bence Szondi • MAKER-UP: Nyolc és fél Bt. • SECRETARY: Noémi Nagy • EDITORIAL STAFF: Nina Király (theatre historian, world theatre, international relations), Ernő Verebes (author, composer, dramaturge), Zsófia Rideg (dramaturge, international relations, translation workshop), András Kozma (literary translator, dramaturge, international relations), Edit Kulcsár (dramaturge, Romanian and transborder Hungarian theatres), István Kornya (journalist, editor, German language literary translator), Zsolt Eöri Szabó (journalist, web-editor, photographer) • PERMANENT STAFF: Márta Tömöry (author, dramaturge, theatre historian, cult theatre), Attila Végh (poet, philosopher, Greek thought), János Regős (chair of MSz-JSz (Hungarian Federation of Amateur Theatres and Players), alternative and semi-professional theatres), Nóra Durkó (English translation) • EDITORIAL OFFICE: Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre), Budapest, 1095, Bajor Gizi park1., 3. em. 3221 • OFFICE HOURS: Wednesdays, 17 pm – 19 pm • TELEPHONE: +36 1 476 68 76 • E-MAIL: szcenarium@nemzetiszinhas.hu • PUBLISHER: Nemzeti Színház Nonprofit Zrt • BANK ACCOUNT: 10300002-20116437-00003285 • TAX NUMBER: 12519718-2-43 • DISTRIBUTOR: Nemzeti Színház • PRESS: Crew Print • ISSN 2064-2695

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Facade of new National Theatre, Budapest, MITEM 2017 (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY



## The next Five Years of the National Theatre\*

The application submitted by me for the position of director in 2012 was a kind of pamphlet in which I defended the need for a National Theatre. My appointment at the time was opposed by national and international intellectual elites which proclaimed even the very idea of a nation state to be obsolete.

The new bill on performing arts came into effect in 2011 (in no small part due to my own efforts), which went back to the stone theatre tradition of the emerging bourgeois Hungary and conferred the rank of national theatre to five stone theatres across the country.

I have always believed it to be my duty to take part in devising the operational principles of theatres based on their public service functions, which may serve the renewal of audience relations, community culture and theatrical structures in general. The National Theatre in Budapest – which I have been heading for the past five years – has always aspired to be one of the intellectual centres of this task. Beyond representing the interest of Hungarian theatres at home and abroad, this theatre should also assume a greater role in bringing international recognition to the achievements of contemporary Hungarian theatre in the future.

At the time of my appointment we immediately began organising the first MITEM, Madách International Theatre Meeting, which has been held every year ever since and which has been instrumental in introducing the National Theatre on the world stage. Thanks to this festival, the Hungarian audience has been treated to a series of outstanding productions by emblematic theatre-makers as well as most recent innovative workshops from Europe and elsewhere. We wish to further develop this project of ours, which has gained recognition from Budapest audiences and the entire theatrical profession in the country, by presenting

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\* Details of the application for the post of director (2018)



the theatrical culture of further regions – this is why in 2018 we have invited companies representing the diverse Arab theatrical scene.

The United States of Europe or a federation of equal European nation states? – this is a topical and poignant question in cultural life as well, shedding a new light on the place, role and current mission of national theatres, too. I firmly believe that we must further explore our national identity within a European context, while remaining open to dialogue with cultures outside Europe. This strategy has already been part of the institution during my leadership and we wish to further strengthen it beyond the stage, in the fields of cultural diplomacy and education.

Should my application be accepted (and this applies to our plan for the future, too) we wish to give a greater emphasis in our repertoire to time-honoured Hungarian drama pieces, the traditional national values of civic theatres, as well as the major narratives of the modern European spirit which have redefined Europe as a Christian cult community since the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, elevating the individual citizen to being the primary shaper of the world. Out of the three greatest Hungarian plays we already have *Bánk bán* and *Csongor és Tünde* in our repertoire. Our renewed company is staging *The Tragedy of Man* this autumn, and it is now within the realm of the possible to also have on permanent offer at the National Theatre – in addition to Don Quixote – the other three great heroes of modern drama: Faust, Hamlet and Don Juan.

These basic principles of our programme policy will give the opportunity to the entire company – but foremost to new graduates – to forge a new identity in which national and European values will no longer be pitted against one another. This dual identity should also give birth to a new way of theatrical expression, which I hope would be even better suited to attract in increasing numbers the young generation, which has yet to discover its own identity but is open to new experiences.

The Theatre Olympics founded in Delphi in 1993 by Theodoros Terzepoulos is relatively unknown in Hungary. The reason for this is that Hungarian theatrical culture has yet to catch the attention of the organising committee. It was only thanks to the efforts of Anatoly Vasiliev that at the Third Theatre Olympics in Moscow in 2001, directed by Yuri Lyubimov, the Illyés Gyula Hungarian National Theatre of Beregovo was invited into the independent section titled “The Eye – Slanted Scythians View”, which represented the anthropological approach and traditional Eurasian theatrical culture in the programme. At the time, one of the ten million Muscovites saw the full programme of the Olympics. It is a major achievement for the National Theatre led by me that we have been invited to the eighth Olympics to be held in St Petersburg in 2019. This has also given me the idea that in 2023, the year of the ninth Olympics and hopefully the tenth year of MITEM, we could put forward a proposal to stage this grand event. It could be an event just as unique in the cultural life of Hungary as the World Aquatics Championship was for sports in 2017, which, in my opinion, has once and for all put to rest the infamous “let us dare to be small” slogan. At the same time, we are fully aware that for this dream to come true in five years, we should immediately begin a dialogue in our cultural and immediate theatrical circles in order to solve the mostly artificially generated conflicts.



## MITEM (Madách International Theatre Meeting) 2014–2018

The varied and rich Hungarian theatre scene has for a long time been lacking a major international meeting. During the first MITEM in the spring of 2014, twenty companies from thirteen countries made their first appearance in Budapest and our festival became part of the international circuit at once. We named the festival after Imre Madách on the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death and the meeting also featured an exhibition subtitled in English, drawing the attention of the international theatre world to this Hungarian genius who created a “humanity drama”. We managed to achieve our goal of making the productions a shared experience for the artists, the audience and the profession during the very first MITEM. The plays, professional programmes and roundtable discussions have all proven that the various theatrical languages can cross-fertilize one another, reinforce our joint passion and commitment to theatre as lifestyle.

We call MITEM a *meeting* because we aim to emphasize the importance of creative togetherness as against competition. The programme is not dictated by the tastes of a festival director or curator. We do also invite particular plays, but the decision is partially that of the guests. This is not as simple as it may sound first, given that the guests have to think it over who and what should represent their theatre, country and national culture.

We have primarily hosted prestigious theatres which create exciting and innovative plays drawing on their own theatrical tradition. They do not wish to conform to the rules of the festival business, but conduct a dialogue with their native Romanian, Macedonian, German, Polish, French, Spanish, Russian or Italian audiences and serve the community which supports the particular theatre.

Our experience is that such a panorama offers a very wide horizon and new ways of getting to know one another’s mentalities. We can have a hands-on experience about how different nations react to the challenges of a globalising world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what strategies are employed by the artists, directors, playwrights and other theatrical professionals at foreign stone theatres and independent companies in order to devise their specific aesthetic credo – expressing our joint conviction that art is an agent shaping the world to this day.

*Translated by Dénes Albert and Nóra Varga*



ÁGNES PÁLFI



ZSOLT SZÁSZ

mitem retrospective  
2014–2018



MADÁCH INTERNATIONAL THEATRE MEETING  
Madách Nemzetközi Színházi Találkozó  
Nemzeti Színház • Budapest 2014. március 26. – április 6.

# Self-Identity and Artist's Existence

## Flash Report on MITEM Productions (2014)

Ágnes Pálfi: Thinking back on the professional programmes as well as the entire festival, it is worth asking ourselves the question: were we, editors of *Szcenárium*, right in selecting the concepts of “Identity – Sacrality – Theatricality” to delineate the topic of the two professional days organised by the journal?

Zsolt Szász: There is no point denying that the artistic workshop of the theatre showed some resistance to our topic selection at first, which stemmed from the apparent political projection in our proposition. Since well do we remember the roundtable organised by Heinrich Böll Foundation in Berlin last December, where Attila Vidnyánszky was told off for arbitrarily associating nationalism with Christianity – as if serving the current Hungarian political regime – in the production titled *Johanna a máglyán* (*Joan of Arc at the Stake*). Watching the video recording of the debate, one cannot help thinking that the person who posed the questions was equally unfamiliar with the Claudel–Honegger piece and its historical background, namely that the virgin of Orleans is a key figure of both French national identity and European Christianity, whose flag the allied Euro-Atlantic states fought under against Hitler's Germany during the Second World War. Beyond ideological narrow-mindedness, the debate in Berlin betrayed signs of cultural amnesia which we could not possibly ignore while preparing for this festival.

Ágnes Pálfi: During both days, we could feel the interest in the “philosophy” of the festival among the audience taking part in our professional programmes. Esther Slevogt, editor of the webmagazine *Nachtkritik*, even addressed the question to us if we had any written resolution on the topics we had offered for



discussion. And at the end of our programme she said she missed a discourse where we could have clarified our stance on the above three concepts.<sup>1</sup>

Zsolt Szász: Indeed, such a summary was impossible on the scene, unfortunately, due to lack of time. But from what did come to pass, our answer might have become clear to Barba's statements presented in the two mottos. First, that for a true theatre practitioner professional identity takes priority because this is the "only profile on which we can consciously act as rational beings". Second, that "There is no genius loci, genie of the place, either in theatre or culture."

Ágnes Pálfi: Let us not forget though that Barba's book titled *The Paper Canoe*, where these two quotations<sup>2</sup> are taken from, was published twenty years ago and the world has changed a lot since then. I think it would be difficult to argue with Barba's statement concerning professional identity. However, his second idea arises in an entirely new context nowadays. Perhaps this was most clearly explained by the director of Caragiale's *Two Lottery Tickets*, Alexandru Dabija, during the professional roundtable when he spoke about the historical resentment and inferiority complex of small Central European nations liberated from Soviet influence, which resulted in the efforts of these countries to create a culture not by focussing on themselves but adapting to global trends instead. Through his very choice of play and elemental passion in staging this self-critical absurd comedy, the director apparently flies in the face of that tendency. Just like the other two participants in the professional event organised by Edit Kulcsár,



I. L. Caragiale: *Two Lottery Tickets*, National Theatre, Bucharest, Romania (d: Alexandru Dabija)



Jon Fosse: *A Summer Day*, Galiaskar Kamal Tatar State Academic Theatre, Republic of Tatarstan, Kazan (d: Farid Bikchantaev)

<sup>1</sup> See our professional programmes in *Szcenarium*, March 2014, pp 73–77

<sup>2</sup> Eugenio Barba: *La Canoa di carta*. Societa aditrice Il Mulino, Bologna, 1993. English translation from: [http://asset.soup.io/asset/0826/4375\\_63b2.pdf](http://asset.soup.io/asset/0826/4375_63b2.pdf) p145, p147



W. Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, Vaso Abashidze State Music and Drama Theatre, Tbilisi, Georgia (d: David Doiashvili)

Matei Vişniec and Helmut Stürmer both agreed that the emblematic composer of Romanian national self-image was still the great end-of-the-19<sup>th</sup>-century national author, I. L. Caragiale.

Zsolt Szász: *A Summer Day*, directed by Farid Bikchantaev and performed by the otherwise most likeable team of the Tatar State Academic Theatre from Kazan, was a shining example to me of an inner drive to adapt.

The Tatar stage adaptation of the play by the Scandinavian author, Jon Fosse warns of the dark side of transculturalism. It reminds me of

the '70s fake-existentialist Hungarian films, which came from a compulsion to conform to the Western taste of life.

Ágnes Pálfi: The Georgian postdramatic *Macbeth* caused a sense of lack for a similar reason. Although the genre of tragedy itself was enough to make this production more theatrical than that of the Kazan artists', it failed to live up to the expectations expressed in the programme guide by a drama student in Igor Jacko's masterclass: "...[I'm curious about the Georgians because] I'm interested in how much Georgian folk tradition I can see in their production". One may really think that in a several-thousand-year-old culture like the Georgian, the most archaic layer of Shakespeare's piece will emerge, allowing a new kind of interpretation. Instead, this production was dominated by the sort of Western European aesthetics which deliberately downplays dramatic collision.

Zsolt Szász: By ethnic culture we naturally do not only mean "folk tradition" in the narrow sense – as the drama student put it –, but the totality of the features of mentality which appeared in a complex manner



Huseyn Alp Tahmaz: *Where to?*, Ankara State Theatre (d: Volkan Özgömet)

on the Turks' stage in the production titled *Where to?*, for example. Thanks to the hyperrealist acting style, we could directly see the layers of contemporary Turkish society, how the Islamic ethical system permeates human relationships, what serious conflicts are generated by the unwritten law handed down from the Middle Ages (see the shepherd's story about his raped sister) and how controversial their relationship is to European civilization which they crave.

Ágnes Pálfi: It is a shame we did not see the Iraqi production titled *Camp*, because – on the basis of the photos and stories – we suppose that this production also informs of a critical and transitory existential situation and the sense of identity in jeopardy. As a result of the two world wars, this kind of continuous identity crisis in the Western part of Europe now has a century-long history. These problematics were represented at the festival by a mono-drama, *First Love*, based on a Beckett short story. Staged by Péter Gemza, the piece showed, through the transmission of personality disorder, the process of the loss of self-identity and its consequences, the psychotic state which already produces symptoms of an incapability of living. At the same time, this performance proved that Hungarian theatre is now eminently able to speak the language of absurd drama, which emerged after the Second World War.

Zsolt Szász: Productions Russian also in their topic – including the Lithuanian Rimas Tuminas's *The Masquerade*, and *The Seagull* by the Serbian National Theatre, Novi Sad, Serbia – approach identity–sacrality–theatricality far more indirectly, even though almost all of them pose the question directly, too: "After all, what are we, Russians like?". To this, the substantive answer



*Gogolrevizor* from: Gogol's *The Government Inspector*, Moscow Art Theatre – Studio, Moscow, Russia (d: Viktor Ryzhakov)



Viktor Astafiev: *The Damned and the Killed*, Moscow Art Theatre, Moscow, Russia (d: Viktor Ryzhakov)



*Zero Liturgy* from Dostoevsky: *The Gambler*, Alexandrinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, Russia (d: Valery Fokin, protagonists: Anton Shagin and Eva Ziganshina)

lies in the very active and creative relation of the companies to the Russian classical authors they have already put on stage. It was particularly pronounced in Viktor Ryzhakov's direction of *Gogolrevizor*, which he carried out with graduate MHAT studio students. Following the best Russian avant-garde traditions, Gogol's original scenario was replaced by a rendering of the taste of life which the new generation, born in the years of the regime change, had as well as the emotional and intellectual exposure of the artist's existence.

Through the string of scenes developed from school études, which gives young actors the freedom to play and become someone (or anyone?), the announced arrival of the revizor is beginning to come across as a waiting for some absurd

judgment-situation. As a result of that, the production is filling up with a moral content to provoke discourse about the role of art and its social benefit.

Ágnes Pálfi: A similarly brave attempt on Ryzhakov's part has been the re-evaluation of the Great Patriotic War, previously treated as a "sacred cow", in *The Damned and the Killed*. This staging depicts the captivity of young conscripted soldiers of the Soviet Army as similar to German concentration camps. Yet this historical pivot point of Russian identity is not destroyed, but built on other foundations and sanctified through the representation of the senseless sacrifice of Russian Holocaust victims. Watching the production, one, as a Hungarian, suddenly comes to realise what obligations our dramatic literature and theatre art has fallen short of in terms of processing the two World Wars – no matter how significant a proposition Pilinszky's *KZ-Oratórium* (*KZ Oratorio*) is, which reflects not on Hungarians' historical trauma but directly on European identity, or the loss of it.<sup>3</sup>

Zsolt Szász: As far as Russian mentality is concerned, the memory abides with me of how Vasiliev on the professional day devoted to his work associated adventurism, a Russian characteristic, with himself and with his stage directing activity as a European citizen of the world. This was also the central theme in

<sup>3</sup> See the January and February 2014 issues of *Szcenárium*



*Zero Liturgy*, Fokin's stage adaptation of Dostoevsky's novel entitled *The Gambler*. It was the obvious intention of the director and all the creators of the production to absolutise and elavate to the level of world theatre this quality, deep-rooted in the soul of Russian people. This just became practicable in the currently cultivated forms of expression, with the use of the toolkit of post-dramatic theatre. Roulette on this stage is not merely a metaphor for the present state of the world;

the revolving stage moving forward and backward within concentric circles is also the visualisation of the medieval wheel of furtune, of fate, which never punishes or rewards mortal man according to his works.

Ágnes Pálfi: When I was analysing the narrative structure of Dostoevsky's *The Gambler* as a former Russist<sup>4</sup>, I came to the conclusion that Alexey Ivanovich was the prisoner of the situation not only as a character, but also as a diarist, the narrator of the story with a burning ambition to become an author, who cannot break out of the vicious circle of hopelessness and the captivity of a future which terminated in the past. Naturally, it is not this inner drama of the protagonist which is put on stage here, because his struggle for language can only be represented through narrative prose (or maybe monodrama) in terms of genre. However, this stage adaptation can illustrate it most clearly that today, when money is not just a means to an end but the end in itself, we are all spinning on the same hamster wheel of life.

Zsolt Szász: Let me again refer to Vasiliev at this point, who thinks that this



*Alice – Running Around in Two Acts*, after Lewis Carroll, Tovstonogov Bolshoi Drama Theatre, St. Petersburg, Russia (d: Andrey Moguchy, lead: Alisa Freindlich)



Molière: *Don Juan*, Ivan Vazov National Theatre, Sofia, Bulgaria (d: Alexander Morfov, lead: Deran Donkov)

<sup>4</sup> Pálfi, Ágnes: Puskin-elemzések (Vers és próza). Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1997, pp 71–88



Scene from the St. Petersburg *Alice* production





P. Claudel – Arthur Honegger: *Johanna a máglyán* – *Joan of Arc at the Stake*, National Theatre, Budapest, Hungary (d: Vidnyánszky Attila)

is the current megatrend which questions the legitimacy of art in the traditional sense no longer in the West only, but in the East as well. Vasiliev made a very sharp statement: the world does not need us, we ought to be shot down as terrorists. However, *Alice*, directed by Andrey Moguchy, has been proof to me that the situation is not that despondent, after all. The question of identity arises here as the ultimate proof of and haven for identity, like the rights and duties associated with the personal name. During the production in which Alisa Freindlich was meant to act for her benefit, the surplus arising from the sameness of names sets personal as well as collective memory into motion and restores – by the end of the play – the identity which connects the artist's existence with that of a human being at an elemental level (even the spirit of place, genius loci is given a role when the war, the siege of Leningrad is evoked in the story). The manner of theatricality in which this rendering approaches the issue of identity and sacrality deserves special appreciation.

Ágnes Pálfi: In the case of Alexander Morfov's *Don Juan*, however, we are dealing with a mythicised modern hero whom Erika Fischer examines in the *History of European Drama and Theatre* as the prototype of European man who has lost his identity. The interesting thing at the end of Molière's comedy, which served as the basis for Morfov's production, is, nevertheless, that the hero is identifying with the author's satirical worldview more and more (see Don Juan's last monologue in the "praise" of hypocrisy). That is, he is gaining a sort of discernment which can be interpreted almost as a kind of artistic

identity already. Morfov omitted this monologue, but it was not his only change in Molière's dramaturgy, since he used motives from other Don Juan pieces as well as intertexts. This inspired me to place Morfov's rendering and the figure of Don Juan into the broader context of the mythical antecedent, taking some other literary transcripts of Molina's original drama into consideration.



Szénási, Miklós – Oleg, Zhukovsky – Lénárd, Ödön:  
*Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal (Fabulous Men with Wings)*,  
 National Theatre, Budapest, Hungary (d: Vidnyánszky Attila)

Zsolt Szász: The idea of sacrality was represented at this festival, in a targeted manner, by Attila Vidnyánszky's two stage directions: *Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal (Fabulous Men with Wings)* and *Johanna a máglyán – Joan of Arc at the Stake*. At the beginning of our conversation, we already mentioned what hostility the latter one had aroused in the West as well as among critics within the country. But nor was the former production rewarded according to its deserts at POSZT in 2011, saying: what have Hungarians got to do with this Soviet Gagarin theme? If we are talking about European identity, we cannot ignore the circa 1700 years, in the course of which, beginning with the reign of Emperor Constantine the Great, Europe became a culturally uniform cult community (regardless of the fact that this shared history has continually been interspersed with religious schisms and wars ever since). I have mentioned this because both performances are of a larger scale and other dimensions than the other productions at MITEM. It is enough here to refer to the apocalyptic view of time in *Fabulous Men*, or the simultaneous representation of the story of the fourth petty monarch, the myth of flight and the chronicle of the first space flight. The collision of the sacred and the profane in this production becomes historically concrete and relevant to us through the continuous conflicts of culture and civilization. For my part, I think that in order to reconsider the cataclysms of Hungarian history, our theatrical art as a whole would need a similar change of scale.

*The photos published here of MITEM productions were taken by Zsolt Eöri Szabó.  
 Translated by Nóra Varga*

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## Friendly Hand-Shakes?

Flash Report on 'MITEM 2015' Productions  
by Zsolt Szász and Ágnes Pálfi

While this year's MITEM was underway, one could see en route the Nemzeti (National) day by day how the stone carvers built the pedestal of the equestrian statue of Gyula Andrássy, the first minister of foreign affairs during the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, on the concrete core which had been lying there lonely and undisturbed for months. This was theatre, too, right next to the Houses of Parliament, even if the erection of this statue did not generate such media coverage as the transposition of the one of Attila József, which, despite the opposition of certain leading intellectuals, came out successful with the poet gaining a better view from the new place at the Danube of that particular melon-rind floating by...

But before MITEM started, Attila Vidnyánszky was summoned by the director of the Burgtheater at a Goethe Institute panel to give account of the situation of democracy, or rather the lack of it, in Hungary.<sup>1</sup> However, Zoltán Imre, reportedly today's best authority on the history of national theatres, failed to prove as good a mediator between the two nations as was Count Andrássy in his time, who, after the 1849 bloodshed, turned the Bavarian Duchess Sisi and, through her, even the emperor in favour of Hungarians. Had he answered moderator Beatrix Kricsfalussy's question about the creation and role in our history of the first permanent Hungarian-language stone theatre, founded in Pest in 1837 and predecessor to the present National Theatre, words would probably not have run high and no scandal would have broken out after the Burgtheater's performance of *The Seagull*, either. Fortunately, the atmosphere at MITEM was not determined by this undeserving episode (even if the press was more preoccupied with it than with substantive reviews of the productions).

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<sup>1</sup> The event took place on 13th April, 2015. Its participants from abroad were Karin Bergmann, director of the Burgtheater, Joachim Lux, director of Thalia Theater, Hamburg, and Matthias Langhoff of Theater Vidy-Lausanne.

We must admit that Szcenárium had no intention to rehash the issue this year. Especially as last year we devoted a two-day professional programme to the topic of identity – sacrality – theatricality, the cornerstone of which could have been, according to our intention, the question of national identity.<sup>2</sup> However, we had to concede that the manner of “*the staging of nations*” is more relevant now than ever. After twelve years, there is a war again across the border of Hungary. And those arriving from a war zone put things differently and step beyond the usual limits of theatre differently from the dictate of Lehman’s theory of postdramatic theatre.

The Kiev DAKH Theatre’s production, *Dog’s Cage*, is meant to “insult” the audience, at which Hungarian viewers are no longer shocked after fifty years’ experience of alternative theatre. In the first part we observe in apathy the merciless picture of Ukrainian society: the daily routine of amoebic beings vegetating as rats, the drill and cheesy dream world of prison life, reminiscent of soviet times,



*Dog’s Cage*, based on I. Franko, KLIM, V. Barka,  
d: Vlad Troitsky; DAKH Centre of Contemporary Arts, Kiev  
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

and fluorescent floral designs. In the second part we realize dispassionately again that now it is time for us to change places with the players and start a dog’s life, letting the sky above us be boarded up. However, when we are called on to sing something that is truly ours, typical of our nation or “tribe”, the play is beginning to take a serious turn: we get the feeling of sitting in a classroom where a most aggressive teacher is examining us and we must not contradict. It took some

time until someone broke the silence and started to sing the Hungarian national anthem softly. Almost immediately everyone joined in. At the post-performance discussion, director Vlad Troitskyi reported that in the course of their eleven-stop tour of Western Europe it was the first occasion they managed to make the audience sing. Still, are we allowed to be proud of any such thing after the indoctrination at Goethe Institute? This question was ably answered at the discussion by the confession of a young man in his twenties, who said that the recent experience relieved him of his inhibition which had up till then questioned and made ambiguous his positive relationship to the national anthem and the profession of his national identity.

By a happy arrangement, the Macedonian presentation was by two days preceded by the roundtable discussion *National Theatres in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* on 18<sup>th</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Papers related to the professional programme were published in the March, April and May issues of Szcenárium in 2015.



April. Stage director Dejan Projkovski, the artistic director of the Macedonian National Theatre, and general manager Dejan Lilic made it known that the greatest cultural enterprise of the barely twenty-year-old Republic of Macedonia had been the construction of a national theatre for all needs, which opened last year. The mega production *Eternal House* was prepared for the opening ceremony and expressly demonstrated that “*the theatrical concept of nation*”, “*the staging of the nation*”, was not an outdated 19<sup>th</sup>-century idea, but relevant and existing practice when the current and unavoidable historical task lay in the promotion of a young nation’s consciousness. The director took meticulous care of this “self-representation” to comply with norms of European democracy and not to challenge the sensitivity of minorities living in great numbers in the country. At the same time, he represented on stage the Macedonian heroes of liberty, outstanding artists and scientists of the last one and a half centuries, as those who had been and were still playing a fundamental role in the present-day formation of national identity. It may be open to debate whether the director succeeded in finding a common artistic ground for the private mythology of the protagonist, the old Jewish woman, who is reclaiming the “eternal house” as her rightful property, and for the story of becoming a nation, elevated into cosmic space and time dimensions, where this “eternal house” gains a new



Jordan Plevneš: *Eternal House*, National Theatre, Skopje, d: Dejan Projkovski (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

symbolic meaning, being open to all who consider themselves part of the nation. However, it is indisputable that this most abstract dramaturgical construction induces audience involvement with the power of sensual evidence through the chorus in Act Two – similarly to the way the prime role is taken by the chorus in the second part of the Ukrainians’ *Dog’s Cage* production. Not insignificantly, both ensembles use the same archaic music, the roots of which reach back to the drama of antiquity and continue in the tradition of Christian liturgy.

Also antique in its theme is the presentation of Sud Costa Occidentale Theatre, Palermo, Italy, *Verso Medea*, adapted from Euripides and directed by Emma Dante. It is made memorable partly by the reinterpretation of the figure of Medea, with not the murder of the children in its focus but the drama, stemming from differences in culture and civilisation, of a woman who gives birth, against the backdrop of the ethnically and culturally mixed Sicilian population’s multi-layered identity. This is highlighted by the director when she stages Neapolitan and Sicilian dialects beside the standard Italian literary dialect. The Mancuso

brothers, whose singing functions as the Greek chorus, also used the Greek and Latin languages. Their throat singing, rich in overtones, first triggered a giggle in the audience, then this special recitative, which primarily served to convey Medea's internal struggle, soon jerked us into this world of conflicts burdened with elementary passions. Director Imre Katona made the perceptive remark at the post-performance discussion that the choruses in ancient Greek theatres with a capacity of tens of thousands must also have used this technique and had this transmissive power in their time.

Apart from the above three productions, it was *Körhinta* (Merry-Go-Round) and *Isten ostora* (Flagellum Dei) which also had a dominant presence of ethnic tradition in their musical texture. In our view, *Merry-Go-Round*, directed jointly by Attila Vidnyánszky and Zoltán Zsuráfszky, is pregnant with the chance of such

a new genre as reverses former practice: it does not try to have dance tell a necessarily simplistic story but takes a complex epic story as its starting point to create a dance drama which does not illustrate but expands and sensualizes the world in which the plot takes place. In this staging of *Merry-Go-Round* the communal character, customs and festive rituals of Hungarian rural culture are added to the story and the personal drama of the main characters through folk dance in a virtuoso and genuine way.

As the National Theatre is preparing for a *Don Quixote* premiere this year, we were very much looking forward to the Teatro de La Abadía production,



*Verso Medea*, Euripides adaptation by Emma Dante, d: Emma Dante, Sud Costa Occidentale, Palermo (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Sarkadi–Fábri–Nádasy–Vincze: *Merry-Go-Round*, National Theatre, d: Attila Vidnyánszky, co-director: Zoltán Zsuráfszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

*Entremeses*, directed by José Luis Gómez of Cervantes' comedies. The twenty-year old ensemble seems to be following in the footsteps of Giorgio Strehler, who earned a reputation in the 60s as, among other things, the reformer of commedia dell'arte. This presentation proves to us that traditionalism these days is a possible direction for stage renewal, especially if it is realised at such a level of aesthetic excellence, where



Eduardo de Filippo: *Inner Voices*, Piccolo Teatro di Milano – Teatro d'Europa Teatr  Uniti di Napoli, d: Toni Servillo (photo: Zsolt E ri Szab )

superb character acting is coupled with exciting tempo changes, culture of singing and motion. The most distinguishing feature of Cervantes' poetics of the novel, namely the continuous interplay between the worlds of reality and imagination, was subtly represented on stage, and this was the prime mover of dramaturgy and main source of humour in the stories abundant in comic situations. If we come to think of the exceptional moment in Hungarian theatre history when J zsef Ruszt directed Csokonai's *Karny n * (*The Widow of Mr Karny *) on the Egyetemi Sz npad (University Stage) in the 60s and also drew an international response, we can only feel sorry for the failure of this kind of full-blooded theatricality of comedy-playing and "folk culture of laughter" to gain ground here at professional theatres over the last decades.

It is also the several centuries' culture of playing commedia dell'arte that the absurd

comedy entitled *Inner Voices*, played in the Neapolitan dialect, originates from. Its author, Eduardo de Filippo (1900 – 1984), who came from a famous acting dynasty and is called the Italian Moli re, has recently been ranked with Beckett, Ionesc  or Pinter. The play, written after World War II in 1948, and directed by as well as starring Toni Servillo, arrived at MITEM within the framework of a major European tour just to bring down the house. It showed that the kind of irrationality which distinguished Italian society at the time of the play has, by now, become a constant condition of the world and that the characters in the drama very much resemble the modern type of man, who cannot and/or would not tell the difference between the worlds of virtuality and reality, especially if it suits his interest not to do so.

At the post-performance discussion we learnt from Thomas Jolly, the young French director, that the present staging of *Harlequin, Refined by Love* was already the third version of the original, which he created seven years ago, right after his graduation from the theatre academy, and which he meant as an act of rebellion against contemporary postdramatic theatre. That is why he turned



Pierre de Marivaux: *Harlequin, Refined by Love* Compagnie La Piccola Famiglia, Rouen, d: Thomas Jolly (photo: Zsolt E ri Szab )



W. Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, National Theatre, d: David Doiashvili (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

and also in being made to believe them that they have something to say about love, which, let us admit, is one of the toughest subjects to be staged nowadays (it is enough to think of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by David Doiashvili<sup>3</sup> or Rózewicz's *White Marriage* at MITEM). From time to time, attention needs to be drawn to the fact that the language of love is to be acquired, too, and that theatre is a most effective medium for that, particularly when it is young people who pass on the vocabulary of this language from the stage to other young people. It is worth it, even if the idyllic scene, which seemed to be lasting for ever in the moment of finding each other, turns dark at the end of Jolly's latest staging and the protagonist sacrifices love at the altar of struggle for power.

It may well be that it was the last time we could see Tibor Pálffy at MITEM in the lead of *The Miser*, at present Molière's most frequently played piece in Hungary, since the play will be removed from the programme of the



Molière: *The Miser*, Tamási Áron Theatre, Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu Gheorghe, d: László Boczárdi (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

towards 18<sup>th</sup> century author Pierre de Marivaux, himself a rebel in his time, challenging the supremacy of Italian comedians as a French playwright. Beyond the so-called "French ease" which describes every bit of this performance, the secret of its success presumably lies in the viewers' pleasure to see these talented young people apparently having a good time

Sepsiszentgyörgy theatre. It is a pity, since he has been one of the best – if not the best – Harpagons on the Hungarian stage over the last three decades. In addition to the actor's ingenuity, the secret of roaring success is to be found in director László Boczárdi's interpretation of the work, which instead of making the protagonist a subject of ridicule gradually uncovered the much-to-be-pitied and lovable man

<sup>3</sup> Márta Tömöry gave an analysis, entitled *A befogadó fantáziaképei* (The Recipient's Images) of the play at the Nemzeti Színház as well as the above-mentioned direction. See the November 2014 issue of *Szcenárium*, pp 55–64.)



in him. It again proves to us indirectly that the genre congenial to Hungarian humour is not annihilating satire. In this case we saw a tragicomedy with ageing, and not money in its focus. This is expressed clearly by Harpagon's nudity, which makes him as fallible as a newborn. This ambiguous tone seems to be best suited to Transylvanian, or more precisely

Székelly mentality, too, which is perfectly compatible with the unbroken tradition there of character acting. It is a shame that the "main stream" in Hungary does not prefer this style and dismisses it as outdated.

The comic vein of Romanian theatre was exposed by the Shakespeare production of the Bucharest National Theatre, *The Tempest*, directed by Alexander Morfov. He said that he was inspired to reconstruct the Elizabethan stage by the exceptional facilities of the renewed Romanian National Theatre. Scenography of this kind is thoroughly suitable to increase the intimacy of acting and to relieve the presentation of computer-controlled technical effects and allow actors to move props, like for example at the evocation of the storm. This aspect of animation apparently follows from the director's grounding in puppetry, too, but is not alien from Romanian theatre in general, either. Morfov belongs to the rare exceptions of directors who have a feel for the stage representation of eroticism and love (cf. the shipwreck episode in *Don Juan* at last year's MITEM<sup>4</sup>). Here, the scenes with the couple Miranda and Ferdinand remain in the memory, even if their story is not allowed a happy end by the present staging, either. Morfov's sceptic statement at the post-performance discussion on the general crisis of theatre and his fear of the pleasure of play vanishing at once from people's lives and the stage was also thought-provoking.

After a survey of the above nine productions, two aspects emerged as bases for classification and drawing parallels, namely the manner in which nation is



W. Shakespeare: *The Tempest*, National Theatre, Bucharest, d: Alexander Morfov (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Tadeusz Rózewicz: *White Marriage*, Maska Teatr, Rzeszów, d: Oleg Ziugzda (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>4</sup> Of the topic and direction see Ágnes Pálfi: *Don Juan minden időben* (Don Juan Through Changing Times) in May 2014, *Szcenárium*, pp 37–52.



represented on stage as well as the adherence to traditional acting. Now we continue by three presentations which used puppets, or may unequivocally be qualified as puppet theatre. The staging of Rózewicz's drama *White Marriage* (1973) is an authentic puppet theatre production, even if some critics, ignorant of this genre's aesthetics and mechanism of action, are embarrassed when they see a puppet and a human actor side by side on the stage, especially in this case when the topic is love, corporeality and morals. This piece is described by theatre history as melodrama and low comedy combined. It was just this contrast of genres which made the idea of a transcript for puppets a good one, because a puppet is far more adequate than a human actor for the suggestive visualisation and clashing of these generic extremes, let alone the undisguised representation of sexual intercourse. At the time when the play was written, the author's dominant intention must have been social criticism, however, in our time, when prudery and pornography mix to form an unprecedented symbiosis, the presentation raises the question at the level of anthropology whether corporeality



Matei Vişniec: *Voices in the Dark*, puppeteer: Éric Déniaud  
d: Éric Déniaud (photo: Collectif Kahraba)

and love have any chance in our life to be synchronised. The puppet theatre is capable of expressing and making fun of this civilisational fake-conflict – which nevertheless is, as it was in the past, taking its deadly toll – and by this it is already capable of healing, too. It is initiatory theatre par excellence, relieving spasms of anxiety, addressing us all, and of vital importance to adolescents primarily, when they first face the brutal force of sex.

In the 70s of the last century, European puppetry discovered how to represent daemons, ready to break out into the open, in the subconscious of modern man. This tendency, made to triumph by the Dutch Figurentheater Triangel as well as the English Stephen Mottram, well known also in Hungary, has become the one and only among Western-European puppet theatres playing for adults. However, while these particular daemons were – at least in the beginning – embodied by amorphous imaginary creatures there, Éric Déniaud has human-shaped miniature beings play the almost-stories and monologues of Matei Vişniec's poetic texts on urban loneliness. A major element in the mechanism of action is that while viewers need to focus on under-illuminated and hardly visible images, the text itself becomes extraordinarily intensive, somewhat similarly to the classical shadow play which makes the direct projection of happenings in the soul possible. Having seen the presentation, a question arose in our mind about why this school has not taken root in Hungary, where poetic and dramatic texts requiring this kind of representation are written in increasing numbers these days.

The way director Viktor Ryzhakov stages the puppet in *A Night's Lodging* is of an absolutely different kind. Ryzhakov, similarly to Tadeusz Kantor, presents life-size mannequins on stage as duplicates of marginalised individuals. Though this solution here does not carry the sort of symbolic meaning as with Kantor. The actors drag along their duplicates as some ballast in order to illustrate that the players cannot get rid of their burden, whether this forced symbiosis be interpreted as a mental or a physical weight. Still, the animation projected onto the ever-changing, abstract setting creates such an exciting psycho-space, never seen before on Hungarian stage, as throws entirely fresh light upon Gorky's play.



Maxim Gorky: *A Night's Lodging*, National Theatre,  
d: Viktor Ryzhakov (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Michel Deutsch – Matthias Langhoff:  
*Cinéma Apollo*, Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne,  
d: Matthias Langhoff – Caspar Langhoff  
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Having seen these three puppet performances, we welcome the genre's long-awaited coming of age at this year's MITEM anyway.

No one can say that the so-called postdramatic school has been underrepresented at this festival. Three of the productions were undoubtedly typical examples of this "main stream": *Cinéma Apollo*, *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Seagull*, directed by such famous European artists as Matthias and Caspar Langhoff, Luk Perceval and Jan Bosse, respectively. Although this idea of ours would not be easy to support in an exact manner, because even those aesthetes evade the accurate definition of the concept of postdramatic theatre who introduced the term by the inspiration of Hans-Thies Lehmann in the last year of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have been propagating it, like Patris Pavis, ever since. It is almost unique in Hungarian theatre history that Lehmann's work came out in Hungarian as early as one year after its publication, in 2000<sup>5</sup>, and

<sup>5</sup> Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Postdramatisches Theater*. Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt am Main, 1999. In Hungarian: Hans-Thies Lehmann: *Poszt dramatikusszínház*, Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 2009.

that a new school of theatre theory sprang from it, aspiring to exclusivity by now. It is easy to see that the adjective ‘postdramatic’, like ‘postmodern’, denotes not only an aesthetic category but also a general state of the world, referring, at the end of the day, to the unfeasibility of man as a dramatic being, incapable of active participation in their own life. However, we in East-Central Europe, where exposure to the constellation of world politics has been present for centuries, are coping with this traumatic condition in a completely different manner from that of the citizens and artists in Western realms. Yet it is now observable that as a consequence of the world crisis, which did not spare affluent societies, either, and existential exposure, a feeling of responsibility and a need for practising active citizenship are arising in our Western-European colleagues, too. It was not only Vlad Troitskyi at MITEM who stressed that it is time to stop pointing fingers at one another and take personal responsibility for what is happening to and around us, but also François Chattot, protagonist of *Cinéma Apollo*, who, already over sixty, even founded a new company called “Service Public” in that spirit in 2013<sup>6</sup>.

The above was put forward because we ourselves do not quite comprehend why we were not overwhelmingly impressed with these presentations heralded as superproductions. The parade of the multimedia inventory in *Cinéma Apollo*, directed by the two Langhoffs, father and son, was certainly compelling. Our attention was also caught by the fake documentary film extract in the first part and we would not say that the autobiographically inspired story on 20<sup>th</sup> century man’s experience of displacedness was of no interest, either. However, the ultimate suggestion of the production was that we, like the protagonist, are left outside of our life, therefore, unlike Odyssey, we have nowhere to return. We took home the depressing feeling that the performance had too much text and that the outburst of emotion by the protagonist’s casual chat partner, the female employee at the cinema, on account of her bitterness over her unlived life could be nothing but a belated reaction to the story she had been listening to, in fact an unnarratable one.

The other two productions, contrary to that of Matthias and Caspar Langhoff, were not author-oriented – Luk Perceval and Jan Bosse put a novel and a drama by the two best-known Russian classic writers, Dostoevsky and Chekhov, on stage, inviting us to pose the question whether the primary criterion of postdramatic theatre, the new attitude toward the literary material, has been done justice to. *The Brothers Karamazov* is by no accident termed a novel-tragedy, which depicts the relationship between the possible perpetrators of the patricide at an existential, psychological and intellectual level simultaneously. Apparently the director shows little interest in this complexity, and, instead, is dealing directly with spirituality, the nature, presence or lack of faith in god. This

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<sup>6</sup> Actors’ existential crisis and the situation of an acting career in the changing world were the topics in focus at one of the MITEM professional programmes, entitled *One Generation, Two Countries, Three Emblematic Actors*, on 15th April. The roundtable was moderated by Jean Pierre Thibaudat, and had Évelyne Didi, Dorottya Udvaros and François Chattot as participants.

simplification does not serve the play well. Perhaps this is why even viewers familiar with the novel find it difficult to identify the two brothers: Alyosha, who entered a monastery, and Ivan, the poet-philosopher brooding over the ultimate questions of faith. Although Mitya, who lives his own faith sensuously, is unmistakably recognised from the start (if for no other reason, because he is the only active figure in the presentation), his true inner drama will never come to light in this directorial concept. If Grushenka (played brilliantly by Polish-born Patrycia Ziolkowska) did not appear on stage, this performance would hardly amount to more than a Readers Theatre using high-standard scenery and excellent acting.

*The Seagull*, presented by Burgtheater, made us declare again that Chekhov is a great author. We may firmly state this also because the director felt no need to change the structure and plot of the drama or to trim its text. Still, the postdramatic character of the direction is to be caught in the interaction with the audience provoked by the actors at the beginning of the performance and in the appearance in Scene One of the actress in Nina's role (Aenne Schwarcz) as a sort of waterfowl, funny and lovable at the same time. It is a shame that this kind of playfulness and affinity for caricature does not permeate the entire direction. Although there are a couple of ideas throughout the production which resemble the symbolic language of the first scene (e.g. the photo-animation, the scene of lonely Treplev playing the guitar), the further devices do not much differ from the psycho-realistic clichés of conventional theatre.

Three more presentations at the festival might as well be classified – on account of certain formal features – as belonging to the same postdramatic trend: *Faulkner.Silence*, *Brand* and *Flagellum Dei*.

The exam performance *Faulkner.Silence*, directed by Viktor Ryzhakov, prides itself on the same virtues with regard to play as *Gogol.revizor* last year. The



F. M. Dostoevsky: *The Brothers Karamazov*, Thalia Theater, Hamburg, d: Luk Perceval (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



A. P. Chekhov: *The Seagull*, Burgtheater, Vienna, d: Jan Bosse (photo: Reinhard Werner)





Faulkner: *Silence*, a W. Faulkner adaptation,  
d: Viktor Ryzhakov, Moscow Art Theatre School  
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



H. Ibsen: *Brand*, National Theatre, d: Sándor Zsótér  
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

spirit of this school is distinct from contemporary Western aspirations primarily in that the deconstruction of the selected literary material is realised through the array of devices of the Russian avant-garde, above all the reform of the language of theatre associated with Meyerhold's name. It is characterised by using etudes for construction, harshness and dynamism, extreme caricature in playing style, which puts psychologism into the shade and gives priority to team work rather than brilliant individual acting. These devices were functioning perfectly during last year's performance, but, in our view, failed to do so this year. It is not easy to explain why. It is perhaps because Gogol's satire is a seminal work of Russian national identity and, as such, the director and the young team found it fitting from the outset.

Now they have undertaken the stage adaptation of an already unconventional Western novel, which could, in theory, have been suitable for another successful presentation, but, as we see it, this company, however hard it tried, eventually failed to relate to the selected work, or its foreign social context, as its own.

*Brand*, directed by Sándor Zsótér, and *Flagellum Dei*, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, share one thing in common: the focus of the selected works and the presentations is a dramatic hero in the classical sense of the word. This is paramount in both enterprises even if both directors happen to deconstruct and revise the narrative structure of the initial work, which is a standard postdramatic procedure. *Brand* is a romantic hero, Attila is one of myth and legend – neither is to be gauged by any ordinary measure. Their brand of solitude is distinct from that of postdramatic works' characters', who feel extruded even from their very life. The heroes of these two presentations are eager and able to do something not only for themselves but for others as well. They are entrusted with responsibility for a larger community, or even have to decide the fate of an entire nation or empire. It is not true that these two stagings were created out of some gazing into the





*Flagellum Dei*, based on Miklós Bánffy's *Great Lord*, National Theatre, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

nostalgic past. What we see on stage is exciting because it puts into circulation the heritage of European dramatic literature, the heroes of 19<sup>th</sup> century late-Romanticism and 20<sup>th</sup> century Art Nouveau, by stripping them of the conventional array of devices which were attached to their former stage representations in the viewer's consciousness. We believe we can safely call these two productions Neo-romantic, but it is not our duty to decide here whether this kind of Neo-romantic vision is a phenomenon inside or outside the postdramatic canon.

On 11<sup>th</sup> April, at the presentation of the book "*Land of Ashes and Diamonds*"<sup>7</sup>, we rose and observed a minute's silence in memory of Judith Malina, co-founder of the American Living Theater. Theatre historians now consider this experimental company, founded in New York in 1947, as a forerunner of postdramatic theatre. Interestingly enough, Odin Teatret, created by Eugenio Barba in 1964, is not to be

found in the Wikipedia list, although it could rightly be there. But what is most interesting is that this fifty-year old theatre workshop represents such a unique profile and operating model on the world's contemporary theatrical palette as rooted in the autonomy of the actor and equal partnership throughout the creative process leading to a performance. *The Chronic Life* presented at MITEM is also an imprint of this kind of operation, with the actors not shaping roles in the classical sense but each of them singing a part, embodying characters they themselves have created and elaborated, who may also be regarded as the iconised figures of a generation – the so-called "great generation". The coffin placed in the middle of the playing area, as



*The Chronic Life*, OdinTeatret–Holstebro, d: Eugenio Barba (photo: Tommy Bay)

<sup>7</sup> The presentation of Eugenio Barba's book was a pre-event to MITEM, with the author's participation and Julia Varley's presentation.



Statue of *Theiresias* in the Kossuth square metro station, sculptor: Mátyás László Oláh

sculpture is offering his *friendly left hand to shake*, pointing in the direction of the escalator, which is moving upwards from the “underworld”...

a sacrificial altar, and the ritual taking place around it may be interpreted as a singular funeral observance, suggesting that we have irrevocably arrived at the end of an era. After the playing area has been surrounded by terrorists, the characters have no other choice but, with that particular key they possess as artists, escape from it.

Which way next? At the metro station in Kossuth square, where we pass by weekly, everything looks just the same for the time being: Tiresias’ postmodern doggy

*Translated by Nóra Varga*

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# It Has Been a Real Inauguration of Theatre!

Flash Report on 'MITEM 2016' Productions  
by Zsolt Szász and Ágnes Pálfi

Ágnes Pálfi (Á. P.): “It has been a real inauguration of theatre!”, I exclaimed involuntarily when the hour-and-a-half production by Teatro Potlach was over. Well-well, it has taken an Italian company to come along and make us settle in and bless the interior and exterior of our theatre, the building caught in the crossfire of ignoble attacks and debates since its foundation stone was laid.

Zsolt Szász (Zs. Sz.): Perhaps MITEM itself has not become an event of our own before the third time, either. It has been a special pleasure for me, artistic director of an international street theatre festival<sup>1</sup> over twenty years, to see the appearance of this genre at the event, too. And at such a scale to start with that it could really get the spirit of the place to express itself. It was also justified by the Potlach artists' accomplishment that the designers of the surroundings of the theatre building and the garden did in those days create a space which, with all its eclecticism, can be operated well and to which symbolic meaning can be attributed.

Á. P.: Some of the stations of that procession evoking the tropes of European culture will certainly be remembered by many. Take for instance the duet of Narcissus and Psyche, the lovers never to meet each other in the interior of the labyrinth, and, along its external curve, the playful evocation of the Fall of Man by means of the apple, which was quasi-offered to the viewers, too, by the hand reaching out of the hedge. The name of Richárd Kránitz's ship-towing Odysseus in the ten-degree Celsius water of the pool deserves special mention. He, repeating Homer's text over and over again, inevitably recalled the myth of Sisyphus also.

Zs. Sz.: Let us not forget about the Italian acrobats of the air, either. Because the title metaphor of the production, *Angels Over the City*, highlights taking possession of that very element as its major stunt (which we, Hungarians may find reminiscent of the visual worlds of László Nagy and Béla Kondor). Ad hoc international collaboration is the order of the day within the realm of street

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<sup>1</sup> See Szász, Zs.: 'Genius Loci', *Szcenárium*, April 2014, pp 27–33



Psyche scene in the labyrinth (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Ship-towing Odysseus (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



The "angels" at 20m up on the theatre wall (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

theatre. It was no different in this case, either, with Kaposvár drama students, the Pál family as well as István Berecz taking part in this project besides the Italian troupe of 17 members. It indicates to us that our Italian friends are really sensitive also to where they are invited. And seeing our artists, I believe there is nothing to be ashamed of with respect to current actor training in Hungary. Not to speak of traditional folk culture, which again proved its highest quality during that night. I am convinced that this theatre meeting will be able to turn into a celebration at the same time if it continues to make use of that elementary communication which street theatre alone is capable of.

Attila Vidnyánszky's words at the MITEM opening ceremony on the responsibility of artists are still echoing in my ears. I wonder why this concept, smeared in the '50s and '60s of the previous century, struck as new several of the renowned foreign directors from Western Europe at the festival. For them, this word is obviously not loaded with that demanding tone in which certain reviewers here got promising artistic careers derailed at the time. Likewise, the festival guests may be unaware of today's liberal opposition employing the very same word to accuse the leadership of the Nemzeti Színház continuously of lack of social responsibility. At the same time, these experts vindicate their rights as opposition to be the only



spokesmen for the so-called oppressed majority of the country.

Á. P.: We had better be keeping our concepts clear. Tadeusz Kantor, called the greatest 20<sup>th</sup> century theorist-director by Attila Vidnyánszky at the opening of the exhibition dedicated to his memory, provides an example of this clarification of concepts in his writing, published in serial form by *Szcenárium* last year.<sup>2</sup> In this summary, Kantor, four years prior to the change of regime in Central Europe, while protesting in the name of artistic liberty against artists' "social motivation" of any kind, analyses the responsibility of theatre in a totally different context:

"The actors want to go on stage from behind the scenes.

NO BACKSTAGE!

NO 'EMERGENCY EXITS',

NO COMFY NOOKS FOR THEM TO HIDE IN WITH THE DRAMATIC ILLUSION OR THE ROLES OFFERED BY THE AUTHOR.

THERE IS NO ESCAPE FROM THE STAGE.

UNLESS TOWARDS THE AUDIENCE,

INTO REALITY!

THE PRESENCE OF THE ACTOR ON STAGE IS LIKE THAT OF THE CAPTIVE, THE ENTRAPPED,

AS IF HE WAS SURROUNDED BY THE WALLS OF A FORTRESS.

THE SAME IS EXPECTED OF THE SPECTATOR, TOO.

THE SPECTATOR BEARS FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR COMING TO THE THEATRE.

HE MUST NOT STEP BACK.

THE STAGE AND THE HOUSE ARE ONE!

THE ACTORS AND THE SPECTATORS ARE IN THE SAME BAG.

BOTH PARTIES SHARE EQUAL HAZARDS."<sup>3</sup>

Zs. Sz.: Similarly to the entire exhibition and the accompanying conference, this writing ought to compel the participants in this general hullabaloo to continue dialogue on these basic questions at a higher level. It was no accident that the idea could be heard at the conference that theatrical life in Hungary would have



Interior of Kantor exhibition with puppets from *The Dead Class* (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>2</sup> Kantor, T.: 'A színház elemi iskolája' (translated into Hungarian by Katona, I.). See chapters in *Szcenárium* December 2014, January to May 2015

<sup>3</sup> Cf. op. cit. Part 3 in *Szcenárium*, February 2015, pp 16–17



*Fade-In*, Witold Gombrowicz and Bruno Schulz adaptation, Teatr Powszechny, Radom, d: Waldemar Smigasiewicz (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

developed in a different way had Kantor's oeuvre been integrated into public thought in his own time in the '70s and '80s.

The characteristically Central-European aesthetic creed of his could have thrown stones into still waters then, which were thus to be stirred only as late as the middle and end of the '90s by that – originally German – postdramatic theory which has, to this day, been dominating the spirit of theatrological workshops emerging in the meantime.

Á. P.: That is why I was surprised at the receptivity and sustained interest that surrounded the two Polish productions at the “meet the artists” event. Adapted from *Ferdydurke* by Witold Gombrowicz and *Emeryta* by Bruno Schulz, Waldemar Smigasiewicz's direction of *Fade-In* was easy to digest even without prior knowledge of the two narratives. This performance stages the internal process of aging in a way that – while illustrating the absurd and grotesque end game in the course of which the old man is getting excluded from the external

world – it preserves the intimacy and personalness of the internal storytelling all through, by which the director is advocating the value and dignity of human life. I cannot really think of any recent Hungarian productions of this kind.

Zs. Sz.: The joint appearance of the child and the old man makes one automatically think of Kantor's *The Dead Class*, and even more so on account of those particular school desks, one of which the old man sits into on this stage. However, the performance did not suggest a Kantor-reminiscence. It was the manifestation of the viability of Polish theatrical language created over many generations, which never uses the elements of avant-garde superficially but endeavours to maintain a sense of “shared inspiration” by applying for viewer participation. The road to that leads through the exploration of the personal sphere only.

Á. P.: This “shared inspiration” or inner concentration permeated the stage and the house alike during the production of *Acropolys*, of which I think it can be genuinely said that it addressed the senses and the spiritual sphere instead of the intellect (that is why it offered an almost complete experience, despite the elimination of subtitling). Through the minimalist stage-setting alone, the director represented a sort of a general, Central-European syndrome: the condition of continuous, unstoppable reconstruction. Human community is present on the stage in the form of a seemingly semiconscious, motor enforcer and it is impossible

to say whether he is driven by an external or rather an internal force to take part in this activity. The choir plays the fragments of Vespiański's "grand narrative" in an abstract stage space created with an engineer's exactitude, whether they be stories from the Bible, scenes from Greek mythology or memorable moments in Polish history. This layeredness gradually gives birth to the spiritual dimension which anticipates the coming of the Easter resurrection while keeping both players and viewers in an interim state in contact with life and death. This sublime representation of messianism basically determining Polish mentality is an enviable achievement.

Zs. Sz.: If I understand correctly, you are hinting at a kind of apocalyptic vision of time in the case of *Acropolis*. I think this is the key to Purcărete's staging of *Gulliver* as well. However, while the director of *Acropolis*, Anna Augustynowicz, represents an utterly transfigured, minimalist approach, the Romanian director exposes bloodied naturalistic visions of existence collapsed into matter. The production noticeably divided audiences but undoubtedly confirmed the aesthete's lines

praising Purcărete's artistic stance: "With such possible predecessors as Artaud, Grotowski or Kantor, the art of Silviu Purcărete is to be understood simply LITERALLY. Everything is as it seems: plain truth – it is far from making any accusations and it liberates from all predecidedness. It returns the ecstasy of your contradictions, which does not bring fulfillment but makes you free."<sup>4</sup> Believers in Western Christian eschatology may regard this crude and brutal approach



Stanisław Wyspiański: *Acropolis*, Teatr Współczesny, Szczecin (Poland), d: Anna Augustynowicz (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



*Gulliver's Travels*, Stage exercises inspired by the work of Jonathan Swift, Radu Stanca National Theatre, Sibiu, Romania, d: Silviu Purcărete (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Popa, S.-V.: 'A dráma celebrálása' (translated into Hungarian by Kulcsár, E.), *Szcenáriumi*, February 2014, pp 5–6

to reality – which does not hesitate to show the procedures of infanticide and cannibalism overtly – as beyond tolerance and the director may even be accused of ungodliness on this basis. However, if we come to think of this sort of cruel theatre from the viewpoint of the iconography in Eastern Orthodoxy, it is worth considering that in it Christ in hell and the related demonology are more extensively treated than in the West and it is closer to the notions of folk belief systems, too. This worldview reckons as equal the negative and positive aspects of the apocalypse, that is, the alternatives of collapse and/or redemption.

Á. P.: We hoped that the Belgrade Serbian National Theatre production, *The Patriots*, would not go completely unnoticed (although tickets were not selling rapidly at first). But for my part, I would not have thought that this premiere would attract so much publicity in Serbia as well as Hungary. You may not agree with me, but I think that András Urbán's former direction, *Neoplanta* at the Újvidéki Magyar



Jovan Sterija Popović: *The Patriots*, Belgrade Serbian National Theatre, d: András Urbán (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Színház (Novi Sad Theatre) raised the issue of national identity and the co-existence of different ethnic groups in a more exciting manner. Perhaps it is because the piece was adapted from a Hungarian author's novel and young Hungarian actors appeared in it, the traumas of the past were also successfully made present. In the case of *The Patriots*, the caricature-like character of self-criticism, I think, made the performance slightly insipid and at certain points banal.

Zs. Sz.: I agree with you in that *Neoplanta* was, artistically speaking, a multi-layered and more complex production. Still, I cannot dissociate myself from looking at *The Patriots* as a military action proper from the perspective of the contemporary evolution of Serbian national self-image. Which proves that art may, even today, have a function of directly shaping society. There is every indication that for Serbs the emotional ventilation of the traumas caused by the lost war in Yugoslavia has gradually become possible due to this very production, too – that is what I was convinced of by the utterances of the company's leading artists as well as the director of the Serbian theatre at the “meet the artists” event.

Á. P.: At the time we were making the interview with András Urbán in Zenta we did not see the piece, either. Although the director mentioned in advance what forces and emotions had been liberated in the course of staging the production, I was astonished at the extremities characterising this culture so little known to us, and at how the light-hearted enjoyment of life and many times



irrational bellicosity, imperial overambition and everyday pettiness can coexist. I must concede that a social satire cannot be expected to soar into metaphysical heights, after all, it is not meant to do that. The manner in which the Serbs present the piece, overtly using the popular tone of folk theatre, also makes a particular audience's level of energy felt. And this in itself may be instructional to us, Hungarians, living our daily lives on the European scene in the crossfire of artificially induced emotions of hostility.

Zs. Sz.: *Force and energy* are also a concept pair well worth scrutiny in terms of theatre. I found *The Iliad* on the second day of the festival the most educational production in this regard. Since the topic of the epic poem, which they call a rhapsody in the old sense of the word, that is a story related by rhapsodos, is fight itself. The pointless fight of forces cancelling each other out, as the director Stathis Livathinos puts it. At the “meet the artists” event, classical philologist György Karsai noted in this respect that because the performance had not shown the duel of Menelaus and Paris, the two symbolic figures of the emotions triggering the war, no drama along the principle of causality developed at the outset, and it was only the compromise made at Hector's funeral which became the sole drama forming element on stage. Which, we might add, despite all the brilliant technical solutions, made the production energy deficient.



Homer: *The Iliad* Aeschylus and Hector's scene, Polyplanity Company, Athens, d: Stathis Livathinos (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Á. P.: I do not pin this lack of motivation in the dramatic sense on the directorial concept, but ascribe it to the general state of the world to which Livathinos is apparently very sensitive to. Because it is undeniable that – while the reflex to kill is being fed into the three-year-old child's brain by computer games and all Europe is terrified of the Islamic State terrorists – today we see the almost complete obfuscation of the Venerian motive behind the heroic Martian virtues, which is actually the cause and mover and, if you like, the power base of the war sung in *The Iliad*. As Plato has Socrates, quoting Diotima, say in *The Symposium*: the Greek warrior is in effect driven by Venus, the “desire to engender and to bring to birth in the beautiful”. This ancient heritage is a heavy burden today, the director confessed<sup>5</sup>, like the stone displayed on the stage, which

<sup>5</sup> Livathinos spoke of the burden the ancient Greeks represent at the roundtable discussion ‘National Theatres in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ at MITEM III on 13 April.



W. Shakespeare: *Titus Andronicus*, opening scene, Sakha P. A. Oyunskiy Academic Theatre, d: Sergey Potapov (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Scene *Aaron's execution* (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

the Greeks of today as well as perhaps the creator himself would most like to get rid of.

Zs. Sz.: “We are heading for the Sun to kill! Life or death! Üüüü!” Roman general Titus and his victorious warriors enter the stage by that rhythmic ancient Sakha battle cry in *TIIT* (Titus Andronicus). This very ritual element already carries the peculiar power quality which distinguishes this kind of acting from all the other ensembles’ we have observed at this festival. However, the tremendous success in their case was not only due to the introduction of an exotic culture we had not seen before, but possibly also to their choice of a Shakespeare drama which had never played in Hungary. As director Sergey Potapov said they felt a special affiliation with this early piece of Shakespeare’s, in which the basic motifs of his subsequent dramas already appear.

Á. P.: It is conceivably because Europe in the time of Shakespeare, like now, was going through a crisis of civilisation and culture which was forcing artists to seek the possibilities of revival in reaching back to antiquity. The Renaissance draws, at least in part, upon the “naïve” ancient predecessors for a model: for the buoyancy, tradition of form and worldview which give birth to “modern” art. And this ancient antecedent, which in this case is nothing more than a false historical chronicle, certainly bears a strong resemblance to the sakha tradition of *olonko*, which has been preserved in the sakha’s heroic epics relating their ethnogenesis. And in them, similarly to Greek epic poetry, struggles of tribal type are narrated. However, I think there is another aspect to Asian artists’ zeal for Shakespeare: to them he presumably means the initiating master who discloses the secret of the birth of the modern individual: Hamlet, Lear and Macbeth.

Zs. Sz.: I would not go to lengths to analyse the piece and the performance now (it is actually done by Márta Tömöry in the May 2016 issue). I would like to draw attention to the closing image only: with his depravity magnified to the

extreme, Aaron, the villain, crucified on a red cross, stripped of his facial skin, covered in a red cloth, is seen hovering high above the stage, while downstage, surrounded by the corpses, Lucius is sitting, collapsed, with Aaron's child in his lap. This is radically different from Shakespeare's work, where the evil, personified by Aaron, is buried under the ground. The loss of face as punishment equals annihilation in the East. However, in this case, it is rather a sort of absolution, a liberation from sins, an act of grace in the Christian sense. It redeems the child, who may thus start life with a clean slate. I believe that with this interpretation of the Shakespeare piece Sakhia and Europe are reconciled at the deepest layers of cult practice. This is an exceptional moment when religious syncretism comes into play.

Á. P.: My first thoughts after the production *The Raven* by the Alexandrinsky Theatre, Saint Petersburg, were that never before had I experienced such interoperability between radical modernity represented by the avant-garde and the mythical worldview inherited from antiquity. As a former Russianist, I was naturally aware that the other piece by Carlo Gozzi, *The Love for Three Oranges*, was set to music by Prokofiev on the recommendation of Meyerhold himself and that this opera has been in the standard repertoire of the Russian stage ever since. However, as for the Hungarian theatrical scene, Gozzi is present only through

Puccini's opera, *Turandot*, and *The Stag King* on the non-musical front. I think that the opus presented now is not less significant. Nickolay Roshchin's direction follows truly, scene by scene, Gozzi's "fiaba", fairy-play, but its original, period style and the rococo eroticism of the love story are radically erased, because on this stage the object of love, the female protagonist remains a dumb captive, a passive puppet all the time. That is why the

archaic motifs of the tale may become dominant and be made – by the director – to be seen straight through the existential experience of 21<sup>st</sup> century man. In this respect, I think it is worth taking a look at the central motif of *sacrifice* above all. What did it mean in prehistoric times and what does it mean today, for the generations which have experienced the historical turns of fate in the recent past?

Zs. Sz.: The Gozzi play itself is a multi-layered construction as it is. The dramatic story builds upon Jennaro's excessive self-sacrifice while the bloody chain of events is governed from the background by ruthless fate, over which not even the magician, Norando, quite importantly the father of Armilla, the female protagonist, has power. This fate, commonly called coincidence, is in effect



C. Gozzi: *The Raven*, Alexandrinsky Theatre, Saint Petersburg, d: Nikolai Roshchin (photo: Alexandrinsky Theatre)

nothing but subjugation to cosmic laws incomprehensible to man. That makes the sacrifice of man, and primarily of woman, inevitable, whichever age they may be living in. An artist of noble descent in the 18<sup>th</sup> century like Count Gozzi was still manifestly in full possession of the archaic system of images by which the so-called “man of old times” had been trying, and not unsuccessfully, to model these laws.

Á. P.: However, the imagery of the performance shows rather that modern man is the victim of unleashed technical civilisation, at the mercy of the sophisticated and lightning fast automatism of killing. This is demonstrated here by bomb-proof stage technology, almost a self-parody, triggering laughter among the audience again and again – just think of the shooting of the sea monster, the beheading of Armilla’s maid, or Jennaro’s torture, especially the masterfully concocted technology of turning him into a statue, executed to perfection by the machine as a gigantic mechanical puppet much to the spectators’ surprise. Well, well, in what an absurd manner Meyerhold’s demand was met for the immediate introduction of cutting edge industrial technologies into the theatre!<sup>6</sup>

Zs. Sz.: A possible reading of it is that machine, taking over the governing function of destiny, has subdued man for good. Still, it is not only machine ruling over him: there is a view-tower-like construction looming over the acting area throughout the performance, seating the orchestra, with Norando, the magician in charge as conductor. However, the gestures of the aging actor with an excellent tone of voice remind one much more of the omnipotent leaders of the former Soviet empire than the wizard of fairy tales or the practising artist. It is because of the permanent presence of this “superhuman man” that one feels at the end of the play that nothing has changed in fact: the acting area for us remains restricted to as much as this authoritarian power, which has survived itself, allows.

Á. P.: Norando raises her daughter from the dead as if he was only snatching up a puppet from the ground. And there is no happy ending, no lovers finding each other. Yet, the production had one cathartic moment: the resurrection of Jennaro cast into concrete – as if the fallible, beautiful man’s body had spun out of a rock-hard womb to be born again. Under the influence of this image, the spectator tends to forget that the price of this revival has been the brutal slaying of Armilla (and not her voluntary sacrifice, like in the original fairy tale).

Zs. Sz.: Although it carries a different weight, Victor Ryzhakov’s direction of *Anachronistic Concert*, presented by the Moscow Art Theatre School, may be worth mentioning at this point. Above all because its topic is the very same recent past as underlying in the frame story of *The Raven*: the question is the attitude of today’s Russian society to Soviet times. If we perceive Ryzhakov’s direction as a work of art in its own right under his name, we will, let us face it, be in for a sense of lack. Especially if we come to think of *Gogolrevizor* two years ago, an object lesson in the application of instruments which may make

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<sup>6</sup> See the study by Picon-Vallin, B. on Meyerhold, translated into Hungarian by Pálfi, Á. in *Szcenárium*, September 2015, pp 23–35



classics our contemporaries.<sup>7</sup> However, if the production is regarded merely as an exam performance in which undergraduates had a chance to try the techniques of verbatim theatre, we can say we have seen a loose string of cabaret scenes based on clever character-acting, accomplished brilliantly by the students – solo or duet – in possession of Stanislavsky’s method.

Á. P.: The entralling vocal, instrumental and dancing skills of the undergraduates testify to the invariably high standard of Russian actor training. But if we take that the students theatralised interviews with members of the war-stricken great-grandparents’ generation, we face the paradox of verbatim theatre. Since the humour in this stage play was, I think, much more demonstrative of the generation gap than of the social sensitivity which the believers of this school wish to aim at. It was only at the “meet the artists” event that we became convinced that children were genuinely shocked by these “spontaneous” encounters.

Zs. Sz.: Similarly to Ryzhakov’s production, *Psyche*, an adaptation of Sándor Weöres’s masterpiece, is a workshop production, the final exam performance of Attila Vidnyánszky’s third-year students. Probably it is no exaggeration to say that this production made Weöres a classic playwright. Which means, at the same time, that theatrical language in Hungary became suitable as late as forty plus years after the publication of the book to prove – for the second time following Gábor Bódy’s film – that provided there is a valid Hungarian postmodernism, this is really one such work and as imperishable as the 19<sup>th</sup> century classics.

Á. P.: Bódy’s film is now at the cutting edge of the world’s film history due in no small measure to the splendid selection of the two protagonists, Patricia Adriani and Udo Kier, who – according, among others, to György Cserhalmi who also acts in the film – do not represent such a quality in acting as do their Hungarian colleagues in the film. I pondered a lot on why Bódy had still chosen them. I concluded that it was exactly because of their foreignness and intangibility: they are like the heroes of a fairy tale for adults, existing not in ordinary reality.

Zs. Sz.: At the “meet the artists” event, Attila Vidnyánszky confessed to having searched for the actress to embody *Psyche* since 1989. Finally, in the course of this one-year workshop activity, he decided to cast seven persons in



Theatre poster for *Anachronistic Concert*, Moscow Art Theatre School, d: Victor Ryzhakov

<sup>7</sup> See Pálfi, Á., Szász, Zs.: 'Önazonosság és művészlét', *Szcenárium*, April 2014, pp 17–18



Sándor Weöres: *Psyche*, National Theatre, Budapest,  
d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Bea Ernyei – Péter Galambos: *Szeszélyes nyár*  
(*Summer of Caprice*), adapted from Vladislav Vančura's  
novel of the same title, National Theatre, Budapest,  
d: Péter Galambos (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

this role, that is all the girls in his class. Not only has this solution opened the door to presenting the postmodern concept of “split personality” on stage, but has also made the students complete the school of initiation to become an actress, in the course of which the narcissistic self-image, the greatest hindrance to ripening in this profession, needs to be destroyed. (Let us remember Péter Popper’s popular book, *Színes pokol* (*Coloured Hell*) on this problem.) The director’s inventiveness liberates, and not for a moment in a naturalistic manner, that natural eroticism on the stage which is peculiar to this Weöres piece.

Á. P.: We have got used to seeing a growing number of epic works on European and Hungarian stages since the 1980s. Even Dostoevsky, the greatest novelist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was already preoccupied with the question of the interoperability of major

forms/genres. His admonition for instance that no novel should be dramatized on stage in full provides us with food for thought.<sup>8</sup> Scanning through the Nemzeti Színház productions at MITEM III, we will see that all but one of them have a novel or a short story as their raw material (Weöres’s above mentioned *Psyche* includes – apart from Erzsébet Lónyai, the imaginary heroine’s poems and works by László Tóth, a real-life poet – a fictitious autobiographical diary, prosaic reminiscences as well as contemporary documents; *Don Quixote*, staged by Attila Vidnyánszky, was adapted by Ernő Verebes from Cervantes’ novel; Sardar Tagirovsky directed the production based on Chekhov’s short story, *Ward 6*; Péter Galambos, director of *Szeszélyes nyár* (*Summer of Caprice*), drew upon and continued to write Vladislav Vancura’s novel of the same title).

<sup>8</sup> See Király, Gy.: *Dosztoevszkij és az orosz próza* (Akadémiai Kiadó, 1983), pp 318–343

Zs. Sz.: *Galilei élete (The Life of Galilei)*, staged by Sándor Zsótér, also represented the so-called “epic drama”. This term, as we know, refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> century turn in theatre history, associated with Bertold Brecht, which may as well be regarded as the preliminary to the postdramatic school, unfolding towards the end of the century. A cornerstone of this concept is that dramatic dialogue in the classical sense is no longer thinkable on stage today. In our discussion apropos of *Don Quixote*, we dealt with the problem of dramatization from this aspect, too, and also with along what strategy cooperation had been realized between Ernő Verebes, who adapted the novel into a dramatic piece in its own right, and director Attila Vidnyánszky.<sup>9</sup> This issue is treated by writings published on the other productions, too.

Á. P.: The epic tendencies in theatre may stem from that changed condition of the world that the participants in dramatic events with global implications do not act in a shared space-time continuum, that is, in many cases, they do not even meet each other in physical space. In the virtual world of the film it does not pose a problem so to say because the function of the “superhero” is precisely to connect the distant points and characters in space-time. However, these “superheroes” today increasingly tend to be creatures without a personality, the humanoid operators of robotics only. The hardest task for theatre in this situation is to build a character, since the director is working with flesh-and-blood persons, with actors of their own individuality. It can equally be said of the productions mentioned above that in them these particular segments of space-time enter into a dialogic relationship, normally with a transmission similar to the authorial (or formal) narration in



M. Cervantes – Ernő Verebes: *Don Quixote*, National Theatre, Budapest, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



6, adapted from A. P. Chekhov's short story, *Ward No. 6*, National Theatre, Budapest, d: Sardar Tagirovsky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>9</sup> See 'A hősi hőbort ragálya' (A roundtable discussion with Tömöry, M., Szász, Zs. and Pálfi, Á. on the premiere of *Don Quixote* at the Nemzeti Színház), *Szcenárium*, October 2015, pp 62–70



Bertold Brecht: *Galilei élete* (*The Life of Galilei*), National Theatre, Budapest, d: Sándor Zsótér (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



A. P. Chekhov: *The Seagull*, Théâtre de Vidy, Lausanne, d: Thomas Ostermeier (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

a novel. The characters' dialogues fulfill their own dramatic and/or epic function only in the resulting dialogic space, which makes it difficult but not impossible for them in certain moments to, so to say, get right inside their part offered by the situation. In my opinion, this kind of major form/genre approach offers a nuanced system of criteria which could give way to explaining what the Nemzeti Színház represents across the Hungarian theatrical spectrum today.

Zs. Sz.: By contrast, there were three dramas featuring at MITEM where it was hard to decide why the directors deconstructed the original dramatic conflict: was it due to the changed condition of the world, or rather just yielding to the "new" instruments' pressure of form created in the wake of the postdramatic idea? At the beginning of *The Seagull*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier, Matthieu Sampeur in the role of Treplyov does in fact itemise today's "compulsory" clichés: have the actors frontally seated in a single line, facing the spectators, and so recite long texts; use handheld or stand microphones to crank up internal speech; use a megaphone if you want to talk aside; get naked if you mean to be frank; and let a lot of fake blood flow on the stage... Besides,

interacting with the audience is compulsory (in the case of *The Seagull* it took the shape of a current political foreplay, which I think was meant to be ironic about the obligatory style seen in today's theatre and provoke the hosts at the same time). Compared to that, acting seemed rather conservative: the company used the instruments of psycho-realism based on Stanislavsky's method.

Á. P.: Even last year, watching the Burgtheater production, I very seriously asked the question whether Chekhov's dramas were so topical as need to be put on stage year after year. As far as *The Seagull* is concerned, I can detect the flaw with artist dynasties much rather in that parents want stardom for their children too soon, and



not in wanting to delay their career success, as shown in this production.

Zs. Sz.: A similar thought came to me watching Shakespeare's last comedy, *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, directed by László Bocsárdi. In this play Shakespeare himself applied merely the top-flight comedy technique he had developed, where cross-gender casting could no longer contribute anything really new. In the original play the only novelty is the appearance of and teaching a lesson to the Puritan Malvolio, which is an anticipation of Molière. However, this role here – even though played by Tibor Pálffy, who was admired in *The Miser* last year – was going to be simply one among the many caricature-like, overillustrated characters.

Á. P.: If there are two diametrically opposed directorial concepts, the interpretations of *The Lower Depths* last and this year might well be called so – the former is a tribute to Victor Ryzhakov, the latter to David Doiashvili. On Ryzhakov's stage, the man of today appears in Act two as someone beyond good and evil, to use Nietzsche's famed term, lying on the deckchair turning in on himself – though in the company of others –, as if he was offering his body to the beams of the sun in order to recover from his troubled past, trusting only in the redeeming power of recreation. Doiashvili's reading represents just the opposite extreme: as though the fierce battle between good and evil in the human soul would never come to an end, and we were condemned to never find our peace of mind, even after death.

Zs. Sz.: I had similar feelings about the production. However, it seemed as if the play itself was merely an excuse to Doiashvili for drumming his conviction in its physical concreteness into us that we cannot or probably do not want to break free from the captivity of the struggle between good and evil. That is why the role of Luka, the wandering philosopher, becomes weightless on this stage. As



Tibor Pálffy as Malvolio in W. Shakespeare: *Twelfth Night, or What You Will*, co-production between Aron Tamási Theatre (Romania) and Gyula Castle Theatre (Hungary), d: László Bocsárdi (photo: Zolt Eőri Szabó)



*The Lower Depths*, Tbilisi Music and Drama State Theatre, d: David Doiashvili (photo: Zolt Eőri Szabó)

a consequence, the production finds itself outside the horizon of interpretation offered by the Gorky piece, which phenomenon is surely not unique in today's theatrical directorial practice – and may even turn out a success, like in the case of the above mentioned *Gogolrevizor*. Still, in that case, I would question whether this Gorky play is really suitable for Doiashvili to present his obsession in its entirety, with all its layers.

Á. P.: The frame of Federico Garcia Lorca's play, *The Audience*, is similar to the prelude in Goethe's *Faust*, where the poet, the clown and the director discuss what contemporary theatre ought to be like and what the audience wanted. The



Federico Garcia Lorca: *The Audience*, co-production between Teatro de la Abadía, Madrid, and Catalan National Theatre, d: Alex Rigola (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

low-lit stage set, against the backdrop of the silvery vibrant strip curtains, evokes the profane world of cabarets and the ethereal, surreal abstractions of poetry simultaneously. However, in the foreground there is the sand, the earth, which is the instantiation of physical concreteness, just like the naked bodies are there not only to indirectly refer to "otherness", but also to make the elementary attraction and repulsion of sexuality felt in its primary form and induce it in the audience, too.



Scene with the "horses" (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Zs. Sz.: The question may arise whether the real intention of director Alex Rigola with this production was to test and demonstrate the effect on the audience of the theatricality of sexuality. Or, rather, to bring over and shoulder in full Lorca's attempt to create surrealist drama, also as something which may serve as a model for a possible contemporary theatrical discourse. I am saying all this because in the structure of the play the topoi of the two previous great eras of the history of drama,

the ancient Greek and the Spanish Golden Age (for example the sun's horses, the infante), carry at least the same weight as the dramatic cases in Freud's depth psychology (sibling love, homosexuality, the Oedipus complex). I admit these are no petty points. However, they did not fall into place to provide a holistic experience to me like the contemporary Buñuel's film, *An Andalusian Dog*, which overwhelms one time and again.

Á. P.: It reminds me of the paragraph in Kantor's above-mentioned text, in which he says that for his part he no longer really believes in the "power of dream-like vision" cultivated by the surrealists, which, so to speak, "brings imagination to life". He thinks that the "freedom of ideas and associations" is not created by vision, but "by the intensity of meditative activity". This enables one to disengage from "rational relations, the utilitarian association of realistic elements". The emphasis on the "primacy of liberated thought"<sup>10</sup> I think is very timely now that we live in an age when there is a profusion of images and visual effects. Maybe that is why none of us are really impressed by the kind of surreal vision which in this production – at least according to the director's interpretation and commentary – characterises Lorca, one of the most outstanding representatives of the trend.

Zs. Sz.: The production *The Breeding Pool of Names* by Valère Novarina both as author and director closes on a philosophical aside, a miniature epilogue if you like, that this scenario will never come to an end because there is always a next line. This enigmatic utterance, like the title of the production, concretely indicates that we see a word theatre here. A production, which is based on the author's philosophy of language attitude focussing on the world of theatre. It is in many respects an abstract but still continuous reflection grounded on artistic practice, the central idea of which is that word cannot possibly be non-situated on stage. As Novarina puts it in a TV interview during MITEM: "the stage is a living laboratory of language"<sup>11</sup>. So it is a playing space which

operates and transforms things, language included, into real with – as a result of its artificiality – higher efficiency than it is experienced in everyday life. However, it is a question whether this transformation has taken place in this case or not.

Á. P.: Based on the premiere in Debrecen of *Imaginary Operetta*, we had every reason to hope that we were then witnessing a similar success, but, unfortunately, it did not turn out to be the case. I wonder why. If one comes to think of it, the creation and reception of the production were greatly eased in the case of the *Imaginary Operetta* by the fact that operetta is a national genre in Hungary. The cabaret has a long tradition also, so it is not surprising that Queneau's neoavantgarde piece, *Exercises in Style*, was bringing down the house for decades. However, this



Valère Novarina: *The Breeding Pool of Names*, a L'Union des conaires production, partners: Festival d'Avignon / CDN de Montluçon, Le Fracas, d: Valère Novarina (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>10</sup> Cf. op. cit. P 34

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Éva Andor's interview with the author, Faktor television, 16 March 2016

variant of the avant-garde represented by Novarina, which is reminiscent of the Dadaists' artistic process primarily, is less cultivated here, though not unknown.

Zs. Sz.: I have the impression that Novarina's popularisers in Hungary prefer the "elevation" of this philosophy of art, and do not so much stress that Novarina is actually a "comedian making a cruel theatre", as he himself underlined it in the above-quoted interview. Nevertheless, we can be grateful to them, especially to Zsófia Rideg, who has been engaged in the "naturalization" of this oeuvre for more than a decade. Novarina was deservedly the guest of honour at MITEM III, by two theatrical performances and a professional discussion as well as a musical reading recital.

Á. P.: It is also owing to the mediatory role of Zsófia Rideg and Arwad Esber, the director of the Festival de l'Imaginaire, that we could see the Korean Jindo island shamanic funeral ritual. For me it was real theatre, probably because I was not in the first place socialised in stone theatres: Péter Halász's room theatre was not one, and nor were the productions of the Living or the Street Theatre Festival, Nyírbátor, or the IDMC workshops. Therefore I did not quite understand why the Hungarian audience became so divided over this performance.



*JINDO island Ssitgimgut shamanic rite,  
Republic of Korea (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)*

Zs. Sz.: We must concede that it was no theatre for the Pest public, reared on bourgeois theatre. I think it proved once again that such events ought to be prepared in a different way. In addition to the specialized articles we published in *Szcenárium*<sup>12</sup> on this ritual as well as Korean theatre, a different kind of intro and publicity would have been necessary so as not to have to raise awareness directly before the production, right on the stage, in two languages, and at great length. I also badly missed the

usual "meet the artist" event where I as a moderator could have drawn attention to a parallel or two with rites in traditional Hungarian folk culture, such as the conceptual similarity which is discernible between Korean funerary rites and Hungarian wedding rituals. The Koreans' symbolic coffin of the dead betrays in almost every element the same construction as the symbolic object used at weddings in the village Boldog, Heves county: the 'menyasszonykalács'<sup>13</sup> ('bridal cake'), with the function of rendering the wedding ceremony as a ritual to bury maidenhood. This rite was celebrated here even not so long ago by women, in the same way as the Korean funeral ceremony is performed by women to this very day.

<sup>12</sup> Birtalan, Á.: 'Oldás és kötés', *Szcenárium*, February 2016, pp 16–24; Tömöry, M.: 'A koreai népi színjátszó hagyományról', *Szcenárium*, December 2015, pp 5–14

<sup>13</sup> Both have the designation of the four corners of the world, the three phases of the sun, the dead body with the germs of life sprouting forth, and the rooster as a symbol of death and resurrection.



Á. P.: The Hungarian public still seems somewhat aloof from traditional Chinese opera. As far as I know, tickets even to the world-renowned Beijing Opera's production were not easy to sell at POSzT (Pécs National Theatre Festival) two years ago. So the great success of the Sichuan opera (Chongqing Sichuan Opera Theatre) may as well be considered a breakthrough – which may primarily be due to the fact that this kind of Chinese opera is reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic and verist Italian opera. But the success is also attributed to the fact that the company is led by an artist like Shen Tiemei, who, in addition to being a “living national treasure”, is an excellent communicator. He proved this after the production when he addressed the audience from the stage “as a civilian” already, and did even more so at the workshop where, following a demonstration, he brought the public close to understanding what makes Chinese theatre culture so unique and viable: he talked in the most natural way of the day by day sacrifices taken not to let the smallest element of the centuries-old tradition waste away.



Luo Huaizhen, Chongqing Sichuan Opera Theatre, China, d: Xie Ping'an (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Zs. Sz.: Hungarian recipients badly need workshops like that, which amount to an initiation. The most important lesson I have learnt from this one is that artists in the East, even to this day, base themselves in every respect on *techne*, which is by no means the same as what we in the West mean by the technical skills of the artist.<sup>14</sup> We came to know that they spend at least three hours preparing before stepping onto stage. We were shown how for example the headwear characterising a figure was being made, and meanwhile we also found out why those countless props – like ribbons, beads, hairnets, wigs, human and animal hair –, which seem so superfluous to European eyes, were necessary to make the very appearance of the figure carry the same complexity as conveyed by the broad spectrum of its gestures and voice during the performance. This complicated sequence of operations also substantiated strongly that Eastern high cultures have preserved their faith in the magical power of hair to this day. Just as they also consider very important that which is out of the sight of the audience, but which – like a secret gene that enables you to become initiated – every one of us in fact is bearing inside, both in the East and the West.

*Translated by Nóra Varga*

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<sup>14</sup> *Techne* is defined as when mythological semantics generate the image of 'creation' in terms of cosmic rebirth and the birth of the cosmos; see Freydenberg, O.: 'Metafora' in Hungarian, in Kovács, Á., V. Gilbert, E. (Ed.): *Kultúra, szöveg, narráció* (Janus Pannonius Egyetemi Kiadó, Pécs, 1994), p 244

# Let's Focus on the Secret Lines of Force!

Flash Report on 'MITEM 2017' Productions  
by Zsolt Szász and Ágnes Pálfi

Zsolt Szász: The idea to thematise these festivals has presented itself with the organisers of Madách International Theatre Meeting year after year. In 2013, when planning the first festival programme, we thought that the event should be a forum for national theatres and we should start getting to know one another by presenting a drama emblematic of each nation. In it, beyond our curiosity, there was an element of defiance, too, because we wanted to prove that opinion leaders holding that national theatres were, by definition, conservative, anachronistic and uninnovative were not right. However, it turned out that Poland had a festival of this kind already, so we tried to find a new path. Nevertheless, the professional programmes during MITEM 1 and 2 had the current state and responsibility of national theatres as their central theme. We also undertook public debates on the topic with representatives of, for instance, Burgtheater from Vienna or Thalia from Hamburg. Now, after the fourth festival, we can say that our practice has proven effective: instead of imposing conceptual thematisation, we prefer to focus on those secret lines of force which provide a true picture of the changing world



Giuseppe Chierichetti: *Valse*, Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo, d: Renzo Vescovi (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

and the current state of theatre culture through the invited productions year by year. The openness of our philosophy, that it is not only the most famous professional stone theatres which may represent theatrical elite but so are prospering independent companies, has been justified. This year's MITEM was advertised by the slogan "World-Famous Directors,

Celebrated Performances”, with megaproductions as well as small theatre and solo productions featuring in its programme.

Ágnes Pálfi: It was not before the fifth day of the festival that we came to realise that nearly all of the latter productions were variations on the theme of death. Although the opening street theatre performance by the stilt-walking actors from Teatro

Tascabile, Bergamo, fell victim to the stormy weather, the parts performed in the theatre lounge still implied that the emblematic dance of bourgeois Europe, the waltz, gives the impression of some nostalgic and elegiac dance of death today. This reading was also reinforced by their production *Rosso Angelico* two days later, as an unequivocal persiflage of the shared grand European tradition of the genre of the danse macabre.

Zsolt Szász: It is important for us to know that the company founded by Renzo Vescovi has been one of the most significant representatives of theatre anthropology associated with Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese. In the production dedicated to the memory of the founding director, the spirit of Eastern tradition was alloyed with European tradition at such a high standard as unparalleled even at this illustrious festival.

Ágnes Pálfi: And yet I, as a member of the audience, was not simply impressed by their technical skills but also by their personalness which made me believe that “nice death”, endorsed by Eastern philosophies, does in fact exist.

Zsolt Szász: At the meet-the-artist event, the artistic director of the company, Tiziana Barbiero emphasised that they – unlike Odin – never use an inset by an oriental artist in their productions. Instead, they just scrutinise the spiritual surplus in oriental thought and harmonise it with their own, rooted in the spirit of



Tiziana Barbieri: *Rosso Angelico*,  
*Dance for a Light Traveller*, Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo,  
d: Tiziana Barbieri (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



*Salt*, based on the short story *Letter in the Wind*  
by Antonio Tabucchi, Odin Teatret, Denmark,  
d: Eugenio Barba, with Roberta Carreri  
in the photo (by Tony D'Urso)

European Christianity. We noted this distinction because for six months prior to MITEM we were publishing in *Szcenárium* Barba's essays on nothing but the chances of synthesizing European and Eastern theatrical art.

Ágnes Pálfi: Julia Varley's performance called a ritual, *Ave Maria*, commemorates an actress, while Roberta Carreri's solo production (or rather duo, on account of the presence of Jan Ferslev through a complex sound montage), *Salt*, I think is a personal confession about the road she travelled as an actor, inspired by Antonio Tabucchi's short story. However, both initiate the viewer into the mystery of life after death and reflect the elemental yearning in man to take possession of his own death. Actually, the very function of death dance originating from the Middle Ages is to have us consider death as part of our life rather than some remote fatal event. In fact, theatre itself has been maintained



*Ave Maria*, Odin Theatre, d: Eugenio Barba  
(photo: Tommy Bay, source: odinteatret.dk)

by this primordial drama because it alone is able to make evident to our senses the paradox that while breathing new life into the dead on stage, the actor himself seems to belong to that other world already. Take Tadeus Kantor, who placed this paradox into the focus of his aesthetics. Roberta Carreri sensualises the permeability of the borders of existence in an astonishingly suggestive manner when she closes the seance with the image of the floating masque of her own face appearing through the screen of salt, like a delicate veil of water, trickling down and down.

Zsolt Szász: In the course of celebrating her "service", Julia Varley chose an entirely different way of theatricalising the death theme. The performance dedicated to the memory of Chilean actress Maria Cánepa, who fought against Pinochet's regime,

is a sort of puppet representation because Julia Varley is present hiding in a giant puppet during the first and last third of the production, plus her face remains masqued in the second third, too. The skeleton donned on herself is meant to evoke the dead Maria as live, apparently indicating that in South America the commemoration of the ancestors, the day of the deceased, with enflowered skeletons and colourfully painted skulls, is the greatest holiday of all. Unfortunately, for me as a puppeteer familiar with the way the genre works, this indirect manner of communication characterising the whole performance thwarted the reception of the drama in the two actresses' personal relationship and the quiet sorrow of remembrance. However, I found Eugenio Barba's masterclass with Julia Varley, which was the third, open rehearsal of *Red*, Odin's



production in the making, immensely convincing. The Maestro used some poetic prose by Borges to demonstrate his working method: he had the actress “act out” her free associations arising in the wake of the active verbs in the text. This mimetic sequence of gestures gradually formed an etude in its own right, which did not illustrate the story but re-wrote it in another language.

Ágnes Pálfi: With the method of “ostranenie”<sup>1</sup> (“defamiliarisation”) mentioned repeatedly by Barba, the actress expressed exactly that symbolic meaning encoded in the text which is the crucial point in the current situation of the world: does mankind realise that they are the very cause of ecological disasters? Or, to put it more specifically, why are we surprised when the red sand we have thrown up into the air is falling back onto our head?

Zsolt Szász: The possibility of creating a tale on stage to validly mirror the dramatic quality of the current world situation occurred to me after the premiere of *The Tree* last year. This mode of storytelling has been new in Barba’s oeuvre, too – so I myself am looking forward to the promised new opus, of which an important element was already offered for consideration at this year’s MITEM.

Ágnes Pálfi: As an expert in theatre and literature, one is gaining the ability to embrace more and more. But it is fine if we do not try to suppress the natural question arising as to what extent the story being presented belongs to us. And audiences during the decades following the end of communism were not really spoilt in this respect. That is why I was hit hard out of the blue by *Porn*, the production of the Northern Theatre Harag György Company, Satu Mare (Szatmárnémeti), Romania, about an unborn child and the death of its young mother. *Because while I did not take the role of a politically exposed person of the opposition at the time, I was the same internal migrant as the heroine of this piece, saying no, like her, to everything around me even if it was equally life-threatening to me as a woman and my coming through as an artist. “Although the play is over, the story is not”* – said playwright and director András Visky at the meet-the-artist event, which, based on my experience, I can but



Csilla Albert in András Visky: *Porn*, Northern Theatre Harag György Company, Satu Mare (Szatmárnémeti), Romania, d: András Visky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>1</sup> One of the basic concepts of Russian formalists, often identified with the term ‘alienation’. However, this is much more about capturing or extracting some from the original text context, in order to look at the elements of the text with fresh eyes, suggesting a wider range of meaning.

confirm only. Even though Eastern European dictatorships are over, sometimes we ourselves do not understand the vulnerability encoded in our genes, which we have apparently passed down in the same breath.

Zsolt Szász: In our country, the slogan that the primary task of contemporary Hungarian theatre is social responsibility still echoes loudly in theatrical discourse. It carries the implication as if theatre alone was supposed to answer the question why things have happened here the way we see them to have happened in the spheres of economy, politics and culture. The 2016–2017 season commemorated the anniversary of the 1956 Revolution. The dramaturgical workshop of the National Theatre in Budapest was also greatly concerned by how to vividly dramatise the nature of dictatorship, revolution and subsequent retaliation so that all generations would be presented a credible reading. Besides Tóth Ilonka (Ilonka Tóth), *Porn* demonstrates the simple truth of art that the



Viktorija Kuodyté in Franz Kafka: *The Hunger Artist*, Meno Fortas Theatre, d: Eimuntas Nekrošius (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

weakest one is always the strongest one in the dramatic sense, as the heroes of antique dramas already made it clear.

Ágnes Pálfi: The Lithuanian production based on Franz Kafka's short story *The Hunger Artist* is about the absurd situation when the artist, without having any other means of communicating with the world, exposes his own destruction, his voluntary death, to the public eye. This theme

was discovered in Hungary in the 1960s and 70s, during the time of self-menacing performances, and the most memorable one of the adaptations carried a definite political overtone at that time, in a uniformly controlled cultural environment.<sup>2</sup> The present production has no such demonstrative gesture whatsoever. There is no cage, the actress moves freely along the stage, which is, after all, the confined space of a theatrical production, no matter how puritanical, quotidian, or say negligible everything we see may seem. The director is apparently resolute to drive the audience to the verge of labelling the minimalistic actions of the likeable actress Viktorija Kuodyté as uninteresting,

<sup>2</sup> The lead in the 1975 short film, *Kopplálóművész* (A Hunger Artist) was played by the world-famous director of the film *Szindbád* (Sinbad), Zoltán Huszárik. Screenwriter and director of the film: Judit Felvidéki

only to shift the emphasis on the virtually uncut text of Kafka's short story. This method serves to bring about the effect which the young director, Sardar Tagirovsky also mentioned at the meet-the-artist event: it is after an awkwardly long and increasingly funny introduction that Nekrošius exposes the drama itself, which, through the confrontation with Kafka's text, deepens step by step. I think that this awry dramaturgy calls attention to the apparent elimination from the world today of that kind of pathos which was still at work in the background of Kafka's absurd story. The one which was yet present in Tadeus Kantor's provocative title *Let the Artists Die*, this counter-manifesto-like, avant-garde gesture.

Zsolt Szász: I wonder how the Soviet-Russian author Nikolai Erdman's 1928 satire, *The Suicide*, would go down today with the public of such a young nation state as Macedonia, where the institution of national theatres was reorganised only a few years ago. This

play became known and had a decent career in Hungary right prior to the regime change, exemplifying through the failed artistic ambitions and suicidal inclinations of the little-man hero that the socialist world order proclaimed to be advanced and beatifying had shown symptoms of agony as early as the period of the proletcult.

The current concept of director Alexander Morfov, however, prefers to present the prevailing conditions

and mentality on the Balkans, which culminates mostly in the lap-dissolve of the successive scenes of the banquet in honour of the protagonist sentenced to death and of the funeral repast, which even beats the Gogolian absurd of trading with dead souls. It is hard to interpret this production other than a crude and naturalistic self-revelation, which makes it clear that that the director is blurring the border between real life and stage reality purposefully. The vitality and narcissistic exhibitionism of the minor characters' ecstasy, reminiscent of a death dance, allow it to go almost unnoticed that in the meantime, behind the scenes, someone – the dumb boy – did in fact opt for putting an end to his life. The very same superior force makes the "happy end", the "idyll" of the re-union of the simple-minded couple also weightless.

Ágnes Pálfi: The bitter irony in the title change gains meaning in the light of this closing image. Since the life presented in the play is just as remote from



*Life is Beautiful*, based on Nikolai Erdman's *The Suicide*, National Theatre of Macedonia, d: Alexander Morfov (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Attila Bartis: *Tranquility*, National Theatre, Tompa Miklós Company, Târgu-Mureş (Marosvásárhely), Romania, d: Radu Afrim (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

beauty as the protagonist, Podsekalnikov is from becoming an artist who can sound that particular tuba.

Zsolt Szász: *Tranquility*, however, is the existential drama of three genuine artists, at least according to the novelistic fiction. Even a system of relationships similar to that of a Greek tragedy could be constructed on the stage of the triangle of the actress mother, her violinist daughter and the would-be author, who is depicting, plus further complicating in life the

conflict between them. Or, looking at it from the aspect of bourgeois drama, the conflict in *Tranquility* may be compared to the idea in Chekhov's *The Seagull*: the outside world is unable to judge the value of talent and the accomplishment of the artist in both pieces.

Ágnes Pálfi: But in this case it is far from obvious that the characters are destroying and grinding down one another for that reason. The excellent "civilian" acting of Erzsébet B. Fülöp, the mother, gives a vivid rendering of the process of the self-elimination of the personality, but – presumably on account of the director's concept – she hardly shows flashes of the one-time stature of the artist. I believe it is not the boy's mother complex but this sense of lack which is making the viewer feel embarrassed at Radu Afrim's direction, asking: what has really been at stake in this story?

Zsolt Szász: However, it can be said of *Mourning Becomes Electra* by the Norwegian Theatre, Oslo, that O'Neill's drama, on which it was based, raises a family conflict to the rank of ancient Greek tragedy which turned fatal during the American Civil War (1861–1865). The performance itself suggested, at least to me, that these worlds – of antiquity,



Eugene O' Neill: *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Det Norske Teatret, Oslo, Norway, d: Erik Stubø (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century – are light-years apart. It is as if the characters were only the narrators of the figures they were rendering, deliberately avoiding the psycho-realistic mode of acting all along. This emotionlessness was interesting for a while, but then, especially in the first part, it turned tedious.

Ágnes Pálfi: This production reminds me of *Hippolytus*, directed now by Sándor Zsótér at the National, an unconventional adaptation of Euripides' drama, which convinced me that such an alienating acting style is highly suited to present larger text corpora on the stage. In *Electra*, however, I feel it far more productive than the handling of the text that the Greek chorus is replaced with a jazz trio and that familiar rock ballads are played by the actors, articulating and liberating the suppressed instincts in this space burdened with Freudian complexes. I believe that it is by all means worth experimenting with this kind of multilingualism, which anticipates a new genre here: jazz opera.

Zsolt Szász: *Hedda Gabler*, directed by Anna Pettersson, and the stage adaptation of Dostoevsky's short story, *The Crocodile*, directed by Valery Fokin, are also interesting experiments on the symbiosis of video and theatre. The naturalistic scene setting as well as the virtual reality of the bourgeois home interior in *Hedda Gabler* may even remind the viewer of a soap opera on TV from which the heroine has escaped one way or another, and now, like some terrorist or even more like a gunslinger of a western film, she wants to make a showdown with those, stranded within, who messed up her life (a good question as to whether this breakthrough of dimension boundaries can succeed), before she finally kills herself.

Ágnes Pálfi: What really made this production memorable to me was what the likable actress playing Hedda Gabler, Electra Hallman, said at the meet-the-artist event. It is that she had never met the actors in the video recording during the rehearsal process, while she had to be communicating with them as flesh-blood people. So when she welcomed them as acquaintances at the banquet after the premiere, they looked at her blank and misunderstood her approach.

Zsolt Szász: The little-man hero of *The Crocodile* is eventually released from the captivity of virtual reality, which is the belly of the beast in this case. The production opened at the National Theatre in Budapest last autumn, and ever



Henrik Ibsen: *Hedda Gabler*, Dramaten – Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm, Sweden, d: Anna Pettersson (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



F. M. Dostoevsky: *The Crocodile*, National Theatre, Budapest, Hungary, d: Valery Fokin, Attila Kristán on the left (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

background video-animation, which was meant to document what was happening to the insignificant little man in the crocodile's stomach and how he turned into a significant personality, so to say. But it may well be too hard a nut to crack, and it may not be by accident that this strange short story of Dostoevsky's has been left incomplete.

Zsolt Szász: "A hidden territory exists buried within each of us, an underground graveyard", say the creators of the production titled *The Underground: A Response to Dostoevsky*.

Ágnes Pálfi: Since I translated this text, I remember not at all wanting to use the Hungarian word meaning "appeal" for "response" because it would refer to a kind of debate situation. In retrospect, however, I say it might have been a better choice. For it seems as if they wished to provide a kind of prophylactic solution

since then I have been meditating about why no really successful performance was born of this superb directorial idea.

Ágnes Pálfi: If, perhaps, the scenes abundant in absurd humour had taken place in a smaller space, closer to the viewer, the excellent performance of the actors would have worked better (I was impressed most by Attila Kristán's touching Russian little man and Augusztá Tóth's delicately stylised acting). Smaller space would have also helped the

for all of us to rid ourselves of the psychosis of the "absorbing" attraction of this existential situation. But how does this world state concretely materialise in the production?

Zsolt Szász: We can see two statements realised on the stage: the first one is that too many ideologies are a major problem with the world, and the second one is that the financial sector is wallowing in filth. But as we have no way of confronting these forces, the solution can only be the artistic practice of self-



*The Underground: A Response to Dostoevsky*, Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards Workcenter, d: Thomas Richards (source: mitem.hu)

liberation – as suggested by this performance. Continuous workshops can indeed be suitable for such a programme. Still, along with Sardar Tagirovsky, I say that “A good workshop does not guarantee creating good theatre”.

Ágnes Pálfi: In the case of Victor Ryzhakov, however, direction and instruction prove to be mutually reinforcing activities. His direction in the Budapest National Theatre repertoire, Ivan Vyrupaev’s *Drunks*, owes

its striking success to the participation of a new breed of Hungarian actors, which allowed us to witness a sort of generational soundcheck.<sup>3</sup> The presentation of the piece at MITEM will also be remembered by Vitaliy Kishchenko, the actor in the Moscow production, pinch-hitting without difficulty for Zsolt Trill, who suffered an accident, in Max’s role, playing his part in Russian – for which, beyond the flexibility of the company, the credit goes to Ryzhakov as well.

Zsolt Szász: The same Ryzhakov-students from the Moscow Art Theatre School appeared in *Fro* as did in *Anachronistic Concert* last year. Since then, this class has been transformed into an independent company as the ninth studio of MAT. Similarly to their previous “verbatim” production, this one also questions grandparents and great-grandparents’ bygone times. But now they did not have the survivors of the Great Patriotic War speak, but slipped into the skins of the twenties’ proletcult working class heroes, caricaturing the optimism which permeated even the fifties.



Ivan Vyrupaev: *Drunks*, National Theatre, Budapest, d: Victor Ryzhakov (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Andrei Platonov: *Fro*, July Ensemble – Studio 9, MAT, Moscow, Russia, d: Mikhail Rakhlin (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>3</sup> Discussing the production are Márta Tömöry, Ágnes Pálfi and Zsolt Szász in: ‘Life-and-Death Struggle of Stage Selves at the National Theatre – Roundtable on The Drunks’, in Szcenárium, MITEM English, April 2017, pp 95–104

Ágnes Pálfi: This company has used film as a medium in a completely different way. First the auditorium had an air of the cinema about it: lively young faces were radiating from the film screen the ideology of schematicism: that they were living in the “the best of all possible worlds”. Only after that did the background of this poster-reality open up: the stage space where the acting of the figures painted dead-white revealed a completely different world. It is as if we were witnessing a floor show assemblage, like in Bulgakov’s novel, of absurd Gothic drama, burlesque and a clown’s buffoonery – the full range of theatrical accessories from Russian avant-garde in the beginning of the twentieth century.

Zsolt Szász: However, this maelstrom of genres in the performance has, I think, led to a decreased awareness of the kind of radical provocative attitude so characteristic of the black humour of Russian avant-garde. It also occurred to me that the director, Mikhail Rakhlin, could have been overcome by some sort of nostalgia.



*Black Milk* (Based on a Collection of Interviews),  
New Riga Theatre, Riga, Latvia, d: Alvis Hermanis  
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Ágnes Pálfi: Anyway, I have no idea what we should call the kind of humour that was holding the entire house captive during the production of the Latvian company. Never have I laughed so hard in a theatre as during *Black Milk*. At the meet-the-artist event theatre historian Nina Király called director Alvis Hermanis’s production an eco-theatre. Rightly so, because its topic, obvious to everyone, is the ecological disaster threatening our entire civilization today. The “folklore” texts collected in the

traditional Latvian countryside as well as the anecdotes and credible reports of the old men who were going to die all prove in the performance that this sense of catastrophe has already reached the peripheries.

Zsolt Szász: If you ask me what makes this humor irresistible, I would start from the fact that the most rewarding task for an actor is to play old men and animals. Actually, acting began with animal imitation, which served to curb larger forces than humans and to humanize the spirit world embodied in animals. Whether we know it or not, we are affected by its magic in an elementary way even today. It is enough to think of our children’s instinctive role play – true though it is that their minds are no longer occupied by domestic animals in the first place but by dinosaurs which went extinct. This experience of the animal level of existence sinks into our deep strata of consciousness before adulthood. When I am watching the adult actors playing cattle in *Black Milk* I am constantly



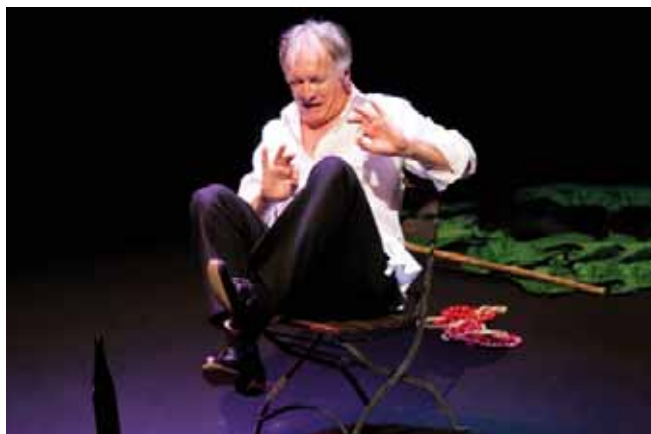
switching back and forth between my rational self and the depth of my consciousness – the resulting laughter can be so unsettling because it activates this uncontrolled sphere, too. I wish we could see many similar productions at home as well!

Ágnes Pálfi: I think *Asik Kerib* was the only odd one out during the whole festival, eagerly awaited though – which is perhaps also due to the success of previous years’ “exotic” productions. But it has been worth seeing this Middle Eastern wayfarer’s tale for adults, too, if not for anything else but for the sake of singer-songwriter Eduard Fagimovich Latipov in the role of the spirit of the title character, giving an authentic rendering of the best of Tatars’ traditional love poetry in this bustling but pretty much patchwork-like performance.

Zsolt Szász: Unfortunately, the Budapest National Theatre production of *Richard III* was cancelled because of Trill Zsolt’s accident. Yet, MITEM was not left without Shakespeare, thanks to world famous actor Andrzej Seweryn, director of Teatr Polski, Warsaw. As he said, he returned to his own Polish audience with this performance after a triumphant period of nearly thirty years in Comédie-Française. While I was watching the recital composed of monologues from Shakespeare’s best works, the figures of Hungarian actors like Iván Darvas, Zoltán Latinovits, Imre Sinkovits or Ferenc Bessenyi were brought to my mind. Which proves to me that these classic plays require classical rendering, labelled outdated and seen less and less nowadays, although there is continued demand for it in the audience.



M. J. Lermontov: *Asik Kerib*, Almeteyevski Tatar State Drama Theatre, Almeteyevsk, Tatarstan, Russia, d: Iskander Sakayev (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



*Shakespeare Forever!*, Arnold Szyfman Polski Theatre, Warsaw, Poland, directed and played by Andrzej Seweryn (photo: mitem.hu)

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*Faust*, Based on J. W. von Goethe's Tragic Play, Radu Stanca National Theatre, Sibiu (Nagyszeben), d: Silviu Purcărete (photo: mitem.hu)

Ágnes Pálfi: At the professional event<sup>4</sup> accompanying the presentation of *Faust*, George Banu stated that it was not necessary to know Goethe's work to be aware of what this phenomenon was. By which he supposedly meant that – whether we want it or not – we, as Europeans, all carry the Faustian man inside. It sounded like an unchallengeable axiom, ab ovo excluding members of the audience from asking: but who is this Faust, is he still the protagonist of Purcărete's staging at all? As a

university professor I studied this theme for eleven years, and perhaps because of that I would encourage teenagers to get acquainted not only with Goethe's work, but also with Marlowe's and Thomas Mann's *Doctor Faustus*, Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, or even the basic work in the German Volksbuch (Folk Book) from 1587, and also – especially if one has some affinity for the theatre – with the puppet versions playing on European stages throughout centuries. Since, as we know, the young Goethe's interest in the subject was raised by such a puppet performance.

Zsolt Szász: This production has been the largest enterprise at a Romanian theatre over the last ten years. When Nagyszeben (Sibiu) was designated the European capital of culture in 2007, two million euros of the 50 million euro budget were spent on this production alone. And indeed, an emblematic performance was born, which has since conquered the audiences of numerous big cities in Europe. Thanks to that, Romania has become a theatre giant. And the promised magic in Budapest, with Hungarian actor Miklós Bács in the title role, worked very well. Even in years to come, said one of our friends in the trade, we are going to remember this presentation as a shared experience, with all of us looking at each other differently from now on. Nevertheless, there is no denying that the production itself divided the audience as did *Gulliver's Travels* at MITEM last year. Just as the unconcealed presentation of child murder and cannibalism blew a fuse there, here pedophilia and the natural act of bloody incest provoked repugnance.

Ágnes Pálfi: Actually, pedophilia is already thematised by Goethe when Faust asks Mephistopheles whether Margaret is over fourteen. But this bloody

<sup>4</sup> 'Faust or Silviu Purcărete's Poetic Theatre'. The participants of the roundtable on April 28 were: director Silviu Purcărete, scenic designer Helmut Stürmer, composer Vasile Șirli, critic George Banu and Constantin Chiriac, director of Radu Stanca National Theatre in Šibenik.

and, at the same time, absurd incest, which is committed by Mephistopheles and not by Faust with Margaret, is indeed a decisive turning point in the history of interpretations, with Purcărete radically erasing any presence of Eros from the performance. And nor is eroticism the driving force in the last scene as it is with Goethe, where Faust's soul is saved by the spirits successfully distracting Mephistopheles's attention on account of his sensuality. To my mind, a major component in the director's concept is to be found in this definite move. Just as Raskolnikov tells Sonia at one point in Dostoevsky's novel that "... it was the devil that killed that old woman, not I" so does Purcărete lift responsibility off Faust for what is happening to Margaret; since he on the stage is like one of the audience, a mere witness to this crime. I consider this interpretation overriding the moral approach to be far more unsettling and topical than for instance Michael Thalheimer's one in 2004<sup>5</sup>, which made Faust seem as a remorseless sex-killer with a fascist inclination.

Zsolt Szász: While keeping themselves aloof from the interpretation of the performance, the creators still disclosed at the round table discussion that Romanians, as orthodox believers, relate to the divine, diabolical and, in general, demonic spheres differently from Western Christians. By this they apparently referred to those archaic contents of consciousness which are also present in the Hungarian system of images concerning, for example, the devil (take the saying "ördöge van" meaning "he has got a devil", which carries no negative connotations at all, but indicates surplus knowledge and creative ability). I think Mephistopheles is the protagonist of this production, since it is his vitality and surplus energy that in fact pulls the world-weary Faust, ready to kill himself, out of his apathy.

Ágnes Pálfi: This hermaphrodite and vigorous Mephistopheles reminds me of C. G. Jung's reasoning formulated in 1947 as a result of the inevitable experiences of World War II: as long as the Evil One is *me on* (non-existent), no one takes the shadow seriously. *Hitler* and *Stalin* will remain cases of a "fortuitous lack of perfection". The future of mankind will largely depend on the recognition of the shadow. "Evil is – psychologically speaking – terribly real. It is a fatal mistake to diminish its power and reality even merely metaphysically." Because of this, Jung proposes the extension of trinity to quaternity, since, in his view "... the opposites latent in the Godhead separate in the begetting of the Son and manifest themselves in the opposition of Christ/Devil."<sup>6</sup>:

Pater  
Filius + Diabolus  
Spiritus

<sup>5</sup> The Hungarian public could see this performance in the National Theatre, Budapest, in 2006.

<sup>6</sup> C. G. Jung: *A szellem szimbolikája*, Bp., Gondolat, 1997, p 165, English in Carl Jung, Letters Vol. I, pp 539–541



Mephistopheles and Faust set off for the Walpurgis Night, test photo at the Eiffel Hall venue (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Zsolt Szász: A lifeblood of the Faust myth is that Diabolus makes a manifest appearance in it. Its stage representation moves on a wide scale from a fallen angel through “batman” to a modern, manager-like mass man. Ofélia Popii’s astonishing appearance, face covered in dead-white paint and suggestive acting can, in themselves, convince the viewer that they are capable of dominating with demonic

power the sphere commonly known as hell. Moreover, she does not only appear here as the guide of Faust’s soul but also that of the audience’s souls, when she breaks through the acting area in the first part and leads us up to the backdrop of the Walpurgis Night, which is a hall-sized stage. The viewer undergoes a dual experience because while the director involves viewers in physical activity by moving them off their seats, he also alters their sense of space, and does it all so that they attribute this liberating experience to the demonic energy of Mephistopheles. This psycho-physiological change enables us to perceive with a cleansed awareness the images that Pucărete and the visual designer Helmut Stürmer are using to represent hell as the reality around us, here and now.

Ágnes Pálfi: Where everything is “what it is”, to quote Sebastian Vlad Popa in his study on Pucărete<sup>7</sup>. Indeed, it is a “concrete theatre”<sup>8</sup>, with the emphasis on perception and not on interpretation. From this extended dimension, the drama of Margaret’s tragic life appears in the rear of the acting area as a comic, miniaturized scene from a puppet show. Now it is no longer this story which we perceive as reality but that closely observable mechanized world, which overbears – by its whirl and exaltation – the audience, having been sheperded in as a mass.

Zsolt Szász: I realised that the majority of spectators were fascinated above all by this carnival experience. To several of our actor colleagues this middle section of the performance felt like the harrowing of hell. I, however, as a director who celebrated festive street theatre productions of even larger scale than this, was not shocked by this stunt of Pucărete’s. At the same time, I dare say that although this demonstration did not take place under the open sky but in a devastated industrial hall, it was still able to create a similar “cosmic” experience as the natural medium. Presumably this is also why the director’s “psychotropic

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Sebastian Vlad Popa: *A dráma celebrálása*, in *Szcenárium*, February 2014, pp 4–15

<sup>8</sup> Cf. István Bessenyei Gedő: *Posztdramatikus jelenségek Silviu Pucărete rendezéseiben*, in *Szcenárium*, January 2016, p 99



experiment” on viewers was successful again: when during the third section of the performance we are back on our original seats watching the denouement – the fate of Faust’s soul – in the baroque stage space, we find ourselves with an awareness, or rather sense of afterlife encoded in us. This is reinforced by the “celestial choir” present during the performance from the start, composed by Vasile Şirli of medieval musical motifs, and now it can be heard again at the end of the closing scene as a final memento – or as atonement to a house struggling with ambivalent experiences.

Ágnes Pálfi: After all, Purcărete interpreted Goethe’s work through this production, following the convention that only the first part and the final chapter of the work are fit for the stage. He is not faithful to the story, nor to the stylistic, tone-specific features of the work, but to the primeval drama within the story, which is the innermost mover of a human being; he makes visible the driving force that arises from the conflict between our subconscious instinctual life and our conscious existence. This might as well serve as a common point of view when it comes to staging *Crime and Punishment*, since Raskolnikov’s drama, too, stems from his courage to ask questions about the intellectual, psychological and existential motives of a human being.<sup>9</sup> Attila Vidnyánszky, however, does not use this perspective to approach the novel. In an interview made during the first rehearsals<sup>10</sup> he says that Dostoevsky’s dialogues can be presented on stage almost unchanged because they are still so vivid and relevant today.

And the production is really surprisingly close to the novel in its language, however, we cannot say that it is a mere illustration of Dostoevsky’s prose fiction.

Zsolt Szász: It is common knowledge that Dostoevsky’s works are also called novel-tragedies by literary scholars. In the case of *Crime and Punishment* the idea of staging emerged right after the publication of the book. The study on this dilemma of genre and poetics based on Dostoevsky’s letter of January 1872 was published in *Szcenárium*, February 2017. The writer warns against putting a full-length novel on stage, saying to his correspondent that it is different though if you transform the novel as much as possible and only keep an episode or its starting idea, while utterly alter the plot.<sup>11</sup> Because, according to Dostoevsky, it is the plot which connects most to the poetic line of thought that determines whether the work asks to be cast in a narrative or dramatic form. So, in dramatizing the narrative epic, a different kind of poetic idea is to be elaborated. Attila Vidnyánszky, apparently, has taken an approach distinct from this poetic consideration, since he has shouldered the burden of staging the novel as a whole: “now I need the epic spaciousness of time” – he said in an interview in

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<sup>9</sup> See Gyula Király: *Dosztoevszkij és az orosz próza*, Akadémiai, Budapest, 1983

<sup>10</sup> ‘Nekem most szükségem van az idő epikus tágasságára (Vidnyánszky Attilával Szász Zsolt beszélget)’ in *Szcenárium*, September 2016, pp 32–40

<sup>11</sup> See Gyula Király: *Az elbeszélői és drámai formák elhatárolásának kérdéséhez*, in *Szcenárium*, February 2017, pp 32–41



F. M. Dostoevsky: *Crime and Punishment*, Alexandrinskij Theatre, St. Petersburg, Russia, d: Attila Vidnyánszky, the scene of Marmeladov's burial feast (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

so far as to eliminate the genre boundaries considered Holy Writ by European aesthetics since Aristotle until recently? As for me, I doubt it. However, it is worth discussing what kind of tool kit and stage dramaturgy Attila Vidnyánszky used to stage this intricate epic construction so grandly and impressively.

Ágnes Pálfi: The kind of dramaturgy which stages segments of reality separated in space and time simultaneously is especially well suited to this novel by Dostoevsky. Raskolnikov represents such a magnetic centre where multi-threaded life stories converge and become dialogically connected. They are mostly collated in Raskolnikov's consciousness into a fresco demonstrating the untenability of Russian living conditions, but as the novel proceeds, there is more and more interaction going on between the characters at the level of the



Sonia and Raskolnikov, duet scene (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

*Szcenárium*.<sup>12</sup> After the production brought down the house in St. Petersburg, it received a standing ovation from Budapest audiences as well. Right after the performance, elite scholars of Russian studies started conferring with us about how this staging could at many points trigger the same excitement in the viewer as in the reader of the novel. Does it mean that the distinction Dostoevsky drew our attention to 150 years ago has vanished into thin air by now? Or is it the case that theatre art has evolved

the external story, too. This process already commences before the act, but only turns determinative when the murder has been committed, justifying in retrospect the legitimacy of Raskolnikov's rebellious indignation. Attila Vidnyánszky blends these two time periods together: he creates a sort of dialogic medium on the stage from the start, pulls viewers into the external story right away, dispensing with the monologue-condition in which Raskolnikov's

<sup>12</sup> Op. cit.

struggles take place before he commits the crime<sup>13</sup>, but the presence of which is made felt throughout the novel. Therefore, it is not Raskolnikov's internal drama that is in the focus, but the stories, no less shocking, around him, which add up to a kind of ethical reading of Dostoevsky's world of novels.<sup>14</sup>

Zsolt Szász: In our interview last year, Attila highlighted that the most important thing for him in stage direction was to sort of bring the story over to the present day. As a person intimately familiar with Soviet-Russian reality, he was in fact able to create the experience of time continuity by moving about the "chorus", recruited of young drama students. This group, dressed in shabby prisoner's clothes and a uniform ushanka, makes the continuous Gulag-existence ever-present. In my opinion, this is the connective tissue of story-telling here, which must be resonating elementally with contemporary Russian viewers. As they are surely better at understanding the significance in this production of Raskolnikov yielding not to a worldly law court but as a consequence of common-law convicts expelling him from among themselves as a foreign body intellectual.

Ágnes Pálfi: We know it from Dostoevsky's memoirs that the most shocking experience of his life was not the moment in front of the execution squad but when it dawned on him in the course of his four-year detention at the Perm prison camp that the Russian intelligentsia got alienated from the people it had wanted to save with its incendiary ideas.

Zsolt Szász: I was most impressed by Raskolnikov and Porfiry's dialogues in this production. Not only because they informed those viewers who happened to be unfamiliar with the novel of certain precedents which made Raskolnikov – at least according to the prosecutor – commit the crime. But because it is Porfiry who undergoes the most spectacular character development during the performance: the easy-going 21<sup>st</sup> century man of the world turns into a monk in the last scene where he appears with the protagonist, which indicates that he is over / on the point of a psychological change enabling him to arrive at a deeper understanding of what happened.

Ágnes Pálfi: However, we had better be careful here. It is true that the majority of interpretations reflects the directors' conviction that Porfiry is the only person in the novel who is intellectually



Final scene of Raskolnikov and the inquisitor (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

<sup>13</sup> See Ágnes Pálfi: *A belső beszéd metanyelvi funkciója a Bűn és bűnhődés narratív építkezésében*, in: *Studia Russica* XI, 1987

<sup>14</sup> See Gyula Király: *Az elbeszélői és drámai formák elhatárolásának kérdéséhez*, in *Szcenárium*, February 2017, pp 177–202

compatible with Raskolnikov. Yet, the ultimate explanation for the crime committed by the protagonist can no longer be found in the article he had written months before and got into the hands of the prosecutor who looks upon it as a proof of Raskolnikov's Napoleonism. In this regard I consider it most fortunate that it is not the "novel of ideas" interpretation which dominates Vidnyánszky's stage, but it is an ethical reading with the focus on external circumstances.

Zsolt Szász: My basic experience as a viewer was that I could see an entity, a stage work of art in its own right, also interpretable independently of the novel, in which spatial design plays a crucial role. In the opening scene, the one-piece glittering white stage setting bursts into pieces during Marmeladov's ecstatic monologue with the audience watching, suggesting the idea of "Everything Whole is now broken" (Endre Ady: *Night Wagon*). The continuous tension between the parts and the whole makes both the matching and the interplay of the episodes variable, which may even be translated as the constantly changing stage set of the Tregubov couple is mapped onto Raskolnikov's movement of consciousness. We do not perceive a step-by-step linear construction, but the dynamic interaction of stories, which, similarly to Bakhtin's conception, draws attention to the polyphony of Dostoevsky's novel.

Ágnes Pálfi: *Eugene Onegin* by Pushkin, just like *Crime and Punishment*, is one of the pillars of literary education in Hungary as well – even if they are not compulsory reading, these two pieces may be selected for secondary-school leaving examination topics, too. Still, it is a question how close these heroes are to the youth of today. It first occurred to me twenty years ago when one of my distinguished students (a dramaturge, theatre practitioner since) protested against having to write an essay on *Onegin* at the grammar school. And then years later, as a university professor already, I had to face the fact that the dilemma of Raskolnikov, the possibility or the impossibility of becoming a great person, did not really stir the imagination of humanities students (ninety percent of whom were women, of course).

Zsolt Szász: And I am curious to know how those recent drama graduates, some of whom are already members of the National's company or cluster around Attila Vidnyánszky Jnr, director of *Richard III*, view these heroes, who could belong to their peer group on account of their age and who have long been on not only the Russian but also the world stage as dramatic heroes.

Ágnes Pálfi: Literary awareness has Onegin as the prototype of Oblomov, the Russian líshniy chelovék, superfluous man. Contrary to this, semiotician Yuri Lotman says that Onegin foreshadows Dostoevsky's such rebellious "Napoleonic" heroes as Raskolnikov.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, re-reading Dostoevsky's study on Pushkin for the occasion, I was astounded by the vehemence the creator of this rebellious hero is using to crush Onegin, pointing out even that the author should have made Tatyana, symbol of the Russian folk soul, the title character of his work. How do you see it? Who is the protagonist of this story with Tuminas?

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<sup>15</sup> Jurij Lotman: *A valóság költészete* in *Szcenárium* March – April 2017, pp 64–73



Zsolt Szász: My answer is pretty unambiguous. The production shows the drama of Tatyana and not Onegin – so in this sense she is the absolute hero here. At least according to the psycho-realistic concept, which is the basis of story-telling on Tuminas's stage, too. This is so even if Onegin outnumbers her, since there are two, or rather three actors playing his character. The presence as fiction of old Onegin serves the creation of stage reality here, paradoxically.

It resembles Tadeus Kantor's gesture directing his own performance as a conductor. It is as if the actor, Sergei Makovetsky, was both the author as well as interpreter and director of the Pushkin piece. At the meet-the-artist event following the performance, he in fact turned out to be so deeply familiar with the topic as was able to substitute Tuminas, not present, to his credit. On this occasion, the stage and civil presence of the actor combined to authenticate the particular quality, hard to describe, beyond aesthetics, which Lotman calls "the poetry of reality" apropos of this Pushkin piece.

Ágnes Pálfi: I think the female side is more dominant here in numbers, too. Because beauty and aesthetics are represented here by a whole group of ballet dancers, which, in the language of ballet, make the tenderness and sublimity of Tatyana's psyche perceivable. In certain moments it had the same effect as Sándor Weöres's *Psziché* directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, in which drama students as duplicates of the poetess formed together the female genius created by the author and made heard as "co-creator" in various tones of voice through a series of poems. To me the most memorable moment of "the poetry of reality" on Tuminas's stage was when the books, placed on a board and opened by Tatyana one by one, began to have their pages turned as if by the wind only, sending into the sky the snow-white birds of the desire for freedom in our imagination – referring back, at the same time, to the group of ballet dancers as metaphor of the soul. And on the female side there are also elderly women showing up who, like the ballet master or the person dressed in blue, guarding the dream of



A. Pushkin: *Eugene Onegin*, Vakhtangov State Academic Theatre of Russia, Moscow, Russia, d: Rimmas Tuminas (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Tatyana with the books, scene from the production (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Farewell of Onegin(s) and the death of the ballet master  
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



The scene with the name-day productions  
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Tatyana, are as much part of stage fiction as old Onegin, and can therefore be considered in a sense as the duplicates of Tatyana. In fact, they rather mark the stages of women's life path: the death of the ballet master symbolises the end of maidenhood and the soul-killing nature of marriage without love; the woman dressed in blue in the dream scene embodies the future matron who never denies the love of her youth and keeps harbouring the mysterious dream which is to return in the surreal vision of waltzing around with the bear at the end of the performance. In this scene, Tatyana, transformed into a child, dances with the dreaded beast of her nightmares without any more fear, liberated, while the bear is commonly known to be a symbol of Russia, too.

Zsolt Szász: The parodistic character of this stage direction is also worth mentioning. There is an apt term for this in Hungarian, "kifigurázás", which is not a means of satire and devastating mockery but a special manner of character building, using the technique of overdrawing in order to capture and show the essence of a given person or phenomenon. The whole production is permeated by a particular duality: the director has the topoi of Russian national characterology come out in a procession while also developing and maintaining a self-reflective attitude, which, true to Pushkin's work, alternately uses long-shots to alienate from this world and close-ups to pinpoint phenomena related not only to 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian reality but to the mentality of 21<sup>st</sup> century Russian man, too. The spirit of parody culminates in the scenes of the ceremony held on the occasion of Tatyana's name day where the enthusiastic performers of amateur productions fail one by one – the faithful mirror of the snobbery of the Russian countryside stylised by appreciators of art. I also feel that this sequence of scenes is Tuminas's confession about the theatre where you can still find the increasingly scarce family spirit as well as a sense of familiarity which preserves cultural identity.

Ágnes Pálfi: This production has been bringing down the house at the Vahtangov Theatre for four years. But if you saw one of the first performances on You Tube, you might be surprised at how striking the change in the tone of voice

that took place since that time is: while parody there was much more pungent (take for instance the recitation of Tatyana's letter in the manner of a drama exam going wrong), here, beyond the personal drama of Tatyana, the "common inspiration" holding the nation together is also manifested, attaching a new meaning to the commonplace that *Eugene Onegin* by Pushkin is "the encyclopedia of Russian life".

Zsolt Szász: Tuminas's stage direction has restored the tattered dignity of Romanticism as well. Because by Lensky's alter ego surviving the duel, the Romantic poet – Pushkin's double – is made immortal. And perhaps Rostand's *Cyrano* is worth mentioning at this point, which was presented at MITEM by David Doiashvili. The director has Christian as the alter ego of Cyrano just as Tuminas has

the surviving poet. Also, the shared 'object of their love', Roxane, is played by as many as five actresses here in respective ages and situations. The duel of the ageless men's double appoints the greatest theme of poetry, the passion of love as the supreme motive. The entire stage is dominated by Eros, as if the full cast as well as the complete stage machinery was dynamised and filled up with energy by it.

Ágnes Pálfi: As contained in Plato's famous dialogue, *Symposium*, Eros is the demon of the desire for beauty and harmony. Where else would the "emotional and musical harmony" of Pushkin's verse spring from, which Tuminas, as he stated, wanted to evoke by this stage direction of his? Although it is true that Tatyana failed to win the "mysterious object of desire", she – as proven by her flourishing beauty – becomes an emancipated being, a mature personality through unfulfilled love.

Zsolt Szász: This is the domain that the world today is most lacking in – as indicated by the programme at this year's MITEM as well. However, these two productions have brought the hope that contemporary theatre is to return, sooner or later, to this fountain of life.

Translated by Nóra Varga

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Edmond Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*, National Theatre, Budapest, Hungary, d: David Doiashvili (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

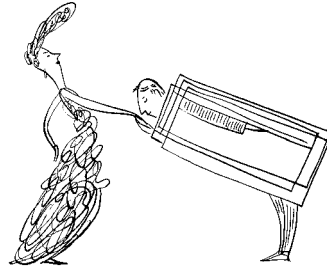


Tatyana's letter scene (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



## national theatres – differently

STEPHEN WILMER



# National Theatres and the Construction of Identity in Smaller European Countries<sup>1</sup>

Almost two hundred years ago, the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen premiered a Danish play by Johan Heiberg called *Elvenhill* (*Elverhøj*). Since then *Elvenhill* has become one of the most often performed Danish plays and many people understand it as a representation of Danish national identity. Written for a royal wedding and inspired by folk music and folk tales, it represents the Danish King Christian IV as a wise and omnipresent ruler who, on a hunting expedition in the land of the elves, solves a dispute whereby two unhappy love stories are turned into two noble weddings performed by the king himself. The original performance integrated the efforts of the opera, ballet and acting company at the Royal Theatre.

In 2006, the same theatre decided to stage a new version of the play that made ironic reference to the effects of globalization and economic change on National Theatres in Europe. They explained that, “The cultural industry is in tough competition, and if The Royal Theatre is to keep its position in the market, lessons have to be learned from the business world and use made of the opportunities of the global market. We are therefore outsourcing the performance *Elvenhill* to Bangladesh – the third poorest country in the world. We have gone to Bangladesh to find actors and a director who shall produce the performance *Elvenhill* – one of the crown jewels of Danish culture. The actors have to live up to

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Global Changes – Local Stages. How Theatre Functions in Smaller European Countries, Rodopi, Amsterdam – New York, 2009, pp 23–40.



Danish standards, but at the same time produce the performance for one tenth of what the costs would be in Denmark. It is emphasised that the Bangladeshi actors resemble known and popular Danish actors so that there are no visible differences. It has to look like a 100 percentage Danish quality product – without any marks of ethnicity.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the subsequent performance of *Come on*

*Bangladesh* at the Royal Theatre was an ironic comment on their own work in somewhat questionable taste, it reveals some of the issues facing National Theatres today, such as globalization, competition in the cultural marketplace, international co-productions, and the role of National Theatres in preserving a sense of national identity. At a time when the borders between nation-states in the European Union are becoming increasingly porous, especially with the Schengen agreement now applicable to nine accession states in Central and Eastern Europe, we might ask whether National Theatres are still regarded as important and what functions they perform. In this chapter, I will consider National Theatres in countries of various sizes in Europe, while placing the greatest emphasis on some of the countries with smaller populations (many of which became independent states since 1989). The national identity of larger countries could be regarded as more stable or taken for granted. However, the citizens and governments of smaller countries might feel more vulnerable to major international movements such as globalization and Europeanization, and



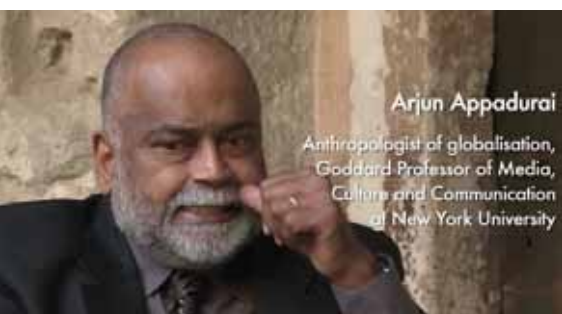
Scene from *Go Bangladesh*, 2006  
(photo: Ida Wang Carlsen, source: nordjyske.dk)

<sup>2</sup> *Come on Bangladesh, just do it!* <http://www.old.kglteater.dk/turbinehalleme/bangladesh/index.htm> [accessed 21 February 2008], The play that was eventually produced commented provocatively on the business practice of outsourcing work to Bangladesh. According to a news report, “Tracing the genesis of the play, Azad [Abul Kalam, who was one of those hired from Bangladesh] said, ‘The concept of *Come on Bangladesh*... is innovative in the sense that it’s a satire on ‘cheap labour’. The rich nations, using the cheap labour of the Third World, have successfully set up a garment business. Similarly in the play, a rich nation (Denmark) using the cheap Bangladeshi labourers (actors) ‘orders’ the latter to create a theatre performance titled *Come on Bangladesh*... which is based on a Danish fable... We made the first two acts of the five-act play in Bangla. The third act was done in English and the other acts were done in Danish.’ ...Using multimedia in the play *Come on Bangladesh, just do it!*, the whole process of ‘cheap labour’ business – order, manufacturing and export – has been portrayed on the stage... A narrator unfolds the whole process on the stage. To portray ‘the export process’, a huge container was used on the stage in which the actors performed.” See Kamol (2006).

fears about the disappearance of national cultures (and of the nation-state itself) might be more pronounced, especially where independence was only recently achieved (or re-achieved), as in the Baltic and Balkan states, or where it is still being sought, as in Scotland. Therefore it is interesting to investigate whether the National Theatres of small European countries continue to promote national cultural values.

The National Theatres, which were created from the late eighteenth century in Europe, played an important role in developing a sense of national identity and national character, especially in emergent nation-states. In the twentieth century the functions of such institutions underwent considerable change, as they became heavily subsidized flagship institutions with the obligation, in many cases, to reach audiences throughout the country and to represent the nation internationally.

Moreover, many of them created international links, and developed multilingual



Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (b. 1949), professor of Globalisation and Civilisation at New York University (source: youtube.com)

and transnational performances, thereby seeming to contradict their roles as guardians of the national culture. In the twenty-first century, the combined effects of a global economy, transnational communications, and the expansion of the European Union seem to make the concept of a National Theatre obsolete. For example, Arjun Appadurai remarked that because of globalization, nationstates

“have certainly eroded as sites of political, economic and cultural sovereignty” (Appadurai 2005: 18). Nevertheless, there is evidently an ongoing interest in National Theatres with, for example, Hungary, Spain, Lithuania, Italy, Slovenia, and Scotland creating new institutions in the last decade, and a massive new National Theatre building complex being planned in Dublin, Ireland at a cost of more than €150 million.<sup>3</sup> In addition, English- and Welsh-speaking National

Theatres are being planned for Wales, and discussions are taking place for a National Theatre of Northern Ireland.

Before considering National Theatres in the twenty-first century, I will first briefly discuss their historical development from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and their changing functions in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> The first point to make is that each National Theatre was unique in that it reflected a specific originary moment, location, set of goals, language, history, and mythology, as well as the idiosyncratic beliefs of its individual founding members. Thus it is difficult to establish a definition or a prototype for a National Theatre. In general, what

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Garvey; see Garvey (2007)

<sup>4</sup> Parts of this essay have appeared in Wilmer (2008), and Wilmer (2006).

I will be discussing are theatres that have called themselves National Theatres, made a claim to represent the nation in their cultural work, and which were recognized as such by their audiences and national governments, though in many cases the legitimization process was long and problematic.<sup>5</sup>

As well as variation in their practices, one can point to some distinctive patterns in the overall development of National Theatres. There were two general types of National Theatre developed during the early period. The first type was established by stable autocratic governments, e.g. the Comédie-Française in Paris (1680), the Burg-theater in Vienna (1741), the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen (1748), and the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm (1788). The second type of National Theatre arose in association with nationalist movements in emerging states under the yoke of foreign rule, such as the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen (1850), the National Theatre in Prague (1881), the Finnish Theatre in Helsinki (1872), the Abbey Theatre in Dublin (1904), etc. In addition, there were National Theatres that fell outside these two patterns. For instance, in Germany, where the National Theatre in Hamburg, established in 1767, represented an interesting but short-lived experiment in the attempt to create a citizens' theatre, although subsequent attempts at National Theatres in the late eighteenth century evolved into court theatres. In Poland the National Theatre followed *both* patterns, since it was first created in 1765 under the Polish monarchy, later taking on the role of a National Theatre within an emerging nation, as Poles tried to regain their sovereignty after being carved up between Russia, Prussia and Austria. Meanwhile, some major countries in Europe such as the Netherlands and Switzerland never created National Theatres, and others such as Italy are still trying to establish them.<sup>6</sup>



Stage and auditorium of Comédie-Française in 1790, watercolour by Victor Louis (source: wikipedia.com)



Old building of Warsaw National Theatre in 1791, drawing by Zygmunt Vogel (source: wikimedia.org)

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of prototypical National Theatres, see Bruce McConachie (2008). For a discussion of the legitimization process of National Theatres, see Kruger (1992).

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the complicated recent history of the attempts to create a National

## 1. National Theatres in emerging nations

Following the French and American Revolutions, nationalist movements arose in many parts of Europe such as Hungary, Norway, Finland, the Czech lands, and Ireland, fomenting demands for self-determination and disseminating ideas about democracy, citizenship and national distinctiveness. They encouraged the use of theatre for forging notions about national character and national identity. Many National Theatres were established with a nationalist remit and they participated in the construction of national identities and in legitimizing the aspirations of nationalist movements. While playing a powerful role in instilling a sense of national commitment and future citizenship, they relied on essentialist and exclusionary notions of identity. The ideas of philosophers such as Gottfried von Herder encouraged intellectuals in countries throughout Europe to search for the unique aspects of cultural expression amongst their own peoples that would testify to separate and distinct national identities. In seeking to formulate their own notion of what tied their people together and made them unique, cultural



Pesti Magyar Színház (Pest Hungarian Theatre) in 1837, watercolour by Joseph Kuwasseg (source: mno.hu)



Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), watercolour by Anton Graff, 1785 (source: wikipedia.org)

nationalists to some extent reinvented the past, often writing ancient national histories that came to justify the creation of separate nation-states.

Cultural nationalists investigated and exploited folklore, myths, legends, and local history, and also romanticized the lives of the rural folk. Medieval epics such as the *Nibelungenlied*, the Nordic sagas and other legends were suddenly regarded as important and used as raw material for creating new works of art. In most European countries, the interest in folk culture did not start from scratch during this period, but had evolved over centuries. However, from the late eighteenth century, folklore and folk culture or ethnography (as well as philology) became important reservoirs for notions of national identity.

Drama in the vernacular language was one of the principal and most visible forms of this cultural nationalist movement of

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Theatre in Italy, see Patricia Gaborik (2008).



‘recovery’ and mythification in emerging European states. Opera, symphonic poems and folk music also proved to be powerful media for National Romanticism, for example in the work of Wagner, Verdi, Smetana, Dvořák, Janáček, Chopin, Grieg, Kodály, Bartók, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Liszt, and Sibelius. Poetry and novels (e.g. by Pushkin in Russia, Sándor Petőfi in Hungary, Karel Mácha in the Czech lands, Adam Mickiewicz, Julius Słowacki and Stanisław Wyspiański in Poland, Alexis Kivi in Finland, and Preseren in Slovenia) as well as painting and sculpture (e.g. by Hans Gude in Norway, Gallen-Kallela in Finland and Alphonse Mucha in Czechoslovakia) were also important modes of nationalist expression.



Curtain of National Theatre in Prague, painted by Vojtěch Hynaise, 1883 (source: zlate-mince.cz)

The act of building a National Theatre edifice was often a way of spreading the ideas of nationalism from the intellectual few to the masses and celebrating their communal endeavour. In Bohemia, Hungary and Finland, for example, monetary collections were made around the country in aid of the construction of the theatre, and so the theatre became a commonly owned enterprise (at least in spirit if not in law). The foundation-laying ceremony for the Prague National Theatre took place at a time of patriotic protest as a result of the Czechs’ disappointment in failing to gain autonomy from Austria. When the Prague National Theatre was finally constructed twenty years later, the curtain tapestry facing the audience as they awaited the beginning of a performance reminded them of their spiritual ownership of the theatre in its depiction of images of the national collection of money organized to subsidize its construction.<sup>7</sup> In Finland, in response to the February Manifesto by the Tsar in 1899 that threatened the country with a policy of Russification, nationalists seized the opportunity to assert their cultural independence by building a massive granite temple near the centre of Helsinki.<sup>8</sup> A national collection was made and the foundation-laying ceremony in 1900 occurred amidst a three-day singing event.

The linguistic identity of National Theatres was often one of their most crucial aspects. In Prague, the theatre staged plays and operas in Czech to challenge the hegemony of German culture. In Norway the National Stage in Bergen introduced the Norwegian language to demonstrate its ascendancy over Danish

<sup>7</sup> This was, in fact, the second curtain because the first, with a different design, was destroyed in a fire shortly after the opening of the theatre in 1881.

<sup>8</sup> Although the location was somewhat peripheral to Senate Square, it was located next to the central train station and across from the Atheneum art school. The organizers were disappointed that they could not obtain a more central location.

(and Swedish). In the Finnish theatre, although some of the leading nationalists (such as Topelius) favoured two branches of a National Theatre, one performing in Swedish and one in Finnish, this position was rejected by Finnish-speaking nationalists who stressed the importance of creating a Finnish-language National Theatre.

The repertory of each theatre was of course a major concern to the nationalists. The nationalist canon often included plays about historical or legendary figures engaged in the nation-building or national liberation process or in some way representing nationalistic ideals. While Wagner exploited the *Nibelungenlied*, Finnish dramatists used the *Kalevala* and Irish playwrights the *Táin*.

## 2. National Theatres in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

In the twentieth century National Theatres continued to proliferate, and their functions transformed in response to changing political environments as empires disappeared. New nation-states were established, and fascist and Soviet eras of control were succeeded by increasing democratization, multiculturalism, balkanization and globalization. Today in the twenty-first century, National Theatres are facing enormous challenges as they seek to adapt to changing social, cultural, and economic conditions in Europe. National Theatres frequently suffer from being located in large inflexible spaces, and from being subject to cumbersome organizations operating an expensive repertory system with numerous technical staff and an ensemble company of actors (and in some cases opera choruses, ballet companies and orchestras). This large infrastructure with its numerous personnel harbouring their own vested interests in resisting change has arguably created an impediment to rapid transformation. Nevertheless, in a competitive economic climate with numerous alternatives for entertainment and diversion, National Theatres seek new ways of attracting audiences, responding to the interests of culturally diverse populations, creating transnational and intercultural links, and trying to balance their budgets.

These institutions encounter considerable difficulty today in an environment where nationalism and national identity are increasingly contested by global, transnational, regional, pluralist and local agenda and where economic forces create conflicting demands in a competitive marketplace. They struggle to legitimize themselves in the eyes of the government, the decision-makers, the critics and the general public. This is equally true in Central and Eastern European nation-states, which evolved from under Soviet influence only to see their sovereignty threatened by a new (Western, capitalist) European identity. For example, the Ljubljana National Theatre has been advised by the present

right-wing government to make their enterprise more economically self-reliant.<sup>9</sup> Thus, National Theatres have to negotiate between the residual values of the nation, and the emergent values of a pan-European culture.

The National Theatres often serve as the flagship of theatre culture, receiving the highest state subsidies and being expected both to achieve the highest production standards and artistic creativity within the country and to reflect the legacy of national theatre traditions. In some cases their subsidy represents a disproportionate slice of the national government's

expenditure on culture. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin, for example, received €10 million in 2008, which was almost ten times as much as the grant for the second most subsidized theatre in Ireland, and 10% of the total Arts Council budget.<sup>10</sup> The Austrian government grant to the Burgtheater in Vienna, one of the most heavily subsidized drama theatres in Europe, amounted to almost €50 million in the same year.<sup>11</sup> In Slovenia, the only theatre that is fully subsidized by the government is the Ljubljana National Theatre, which received a grant of €1.2 million for productions in 2008 plus a further subsidy to cover the salaries of the company.<sup>12</sup> Some of the National Theatres maintain enormous companies, especially those which operate a three-part enterprise of drama, ballet and opera. The Belgrade National Theatre, for example, engages a company of approximately 800 employees.<sup>13</sup> They also often reflect the cultural achievement of the nation at home and serve as an advertisement for the national culture abroad. Regardless of their origins and the process that they went through for legitimization with the general public, National Theatres are almost always



100-schilling 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary coins  
for Burgtheater in 1976  
(source: wikimedia.org)

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- <sup>9</sup> Interview with Janez Pipan, Artistic Director of the Slovenian National Theatre, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>10</sup> The next most highly subsidized theatre, the Gate Theatre in Dublin, received an annual grant of just over €1 million for 2008. [http://newsletter.artscouncil.ie/e\\_article000959155.cfm?x=%5C,w,w](http://newsletter.artscouncil.ie/e_article000959155.cfm?x=%5C,w,w) [accessed 13 April 2008].
- <sup>11</sup> The subsidy listed in the *Geschäftsbericht 2007–2008 der Burgtheater GmbH* is €46 million. Janez Pipan, Artistic Director of the Ljubljana National Theatre estimated that the subsidy was divided approximately in half, allocating €25 million for salaries, and another €25 million for productions. Interview with Janez Pipan, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>12</sup> Interview with Janez Pipan, Artistic Director of the Slovenian National Theatre, 2 April 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> Interview with Janez Pipan, Artistic Director of the Slovenian National Theatre, 2 April 2008.

subsidized by the national government and to some extent are influenced by government policy. The national government is thus a partial source of finance, legitimacy and control for National Theatres, and it promotes their activities at home and abroad. Since the policy of the national governments in the European Union promote European identity and foreign trade as well as the health and welfare of national institutions, National Theatres are often regarded as having not just a national but also an international status and orientation. They help to sell the national culture abroad in foreign tours, and provide economic benefits as part of the tourist industry to international tourists. This is especially true of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the National Theatre in London, which frequently tour abroad with the help of government subsidy and which are used by their respective national tourist industries as part of international tourist packages.

### 3. New types of National Theatres

There has been a major transformation of National Theatres since the 1960s. In Western Europe we have seen the decentralization, devolution, democratization and proliferation of National Theatres in France and Sweden. Some countries have established National Theatres outside the capital or instituted a policy of touring. France, for example, has created five National Theatres and many regional National Theatres. In Sweden, in addition to the Royal Dramatic theatre in Stockholm, there is a national touring theatre (Riksteatern) that has no theatre building of its own. In Spain, following the end of the Franco regime, regional theatres were created, including the Teatro Nacional de Catalunya which opened in Barcelona in 1997 and performs in Catalan rather than in Spanish. A more recent example is the new National Theatre of Scotland which, like the Riksteatern, has no building of its own but develops productions in various theatres and sites around the country. Having no building can help to foster a more local or regional relationship with the audience (by regarding audiences as distinct rather than homogenous) and can generate more local or regional types of repertory and events.

Moreover, it seems that National Theatres in Western Europe have become more transnational in their approaches in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. They seem keen to promote more performances by foreign companies in National Theatres in foreign languages (often with the aid of simultaneous translation and surtitles). In particular, two of the French National Theatres, the Odéon-Théâtre de l'Europe and the Théâtre National de Strasbourg, have adopted a transnational policy, with the Odéon regularly staging international theatre, and the Théâtre National de Strasbourg performing frequently in German as well as in French. Other National Theatres such as the Abbey Theatre in Dublin and the National Theatre in London invite foreign productions which are staged with surtitles. Moreover, networks of theatres such as the Union of the Theatres of Europe (started by Giorgio Strehler) and



the European Theatre Convention link National Theatres with other prominent theatres across Europe, fostering theatre festivals to showcase their work abroad as well as organizing co-productions and other forms of transnational cooperation.

In Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union, some National Theatres, as in Poland and Bulgaria, have continued to thrive and remain important places of experimentation and excellence despite the political, cultural and economic changes since

1989.<sup>14</sup> However, 2002 saw the opening of the new Budapest-based National Theatre, which resembles a nineteenth-century building and yet is trying to find a position for itself as representative of the national culture in the twenty-first century (by, for example, inviting theatres around the country to perform in the new playhouse). The new building indicates that the Hungarian authorities still take the concept of the National Theatre very seriously, even though the theatre community has laughed at the result, and the National Theatre has drifted towards becoming a commercial enterprise.<sup>15</sup> The National Theatres in the small new nation-states created out of former Yugoslavia have managed to survive and increase in number amidst ethnic and linguistic rivalries, territorial transformations, and conflicting local, national and transnational governmental structures. In some cases, such as the new National Theatre of Nova Gorica in Slovenia, the establishment of a new National Theatre is clearly an attempt to attract government and European funding as well as to achieve an enhanced status.<sup>16</sup>

In the rapid transformation of the Baltic States from Soviet control to a brief period of national sovereignty, to entry into (and subjection to) the European Union, the financial and structural problems in these countries caused by the



Facade of new Abbey Theatre building, 2007, Dublin  
(source: abbeytheatre.ie)



Auditorium and stage of National Theatre of Catalonia,  
built in 1996 (source: chemtrolstage.com)

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the success of the Bulgarian National Theatre during the last decade, see Kalina Stefanova (2008).

<sup>15</sup> Dragan Klaic calls the building “a gross misunderstanding between the performing arts and architecture!” See Dragan Klaic (2008).

<sup>16</sup> See Barbara SuSec Michieli (2008).

introduction of a market economy and limitations in government subsidy have resulted in major changes since independence. All three of the Baltic national cultures are endangered by their neighbours – the overbearing Russian presence from the east and the effects of a capitalist economy and Europeanization from the west. In Lithuania, the National Theatre was founded in Vilnius in 1998, out of the old State Theatre of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. However, the new artistic director tried to dismiss the permanent ensemble company of actors, whom he regarded as limited in talent and too expensive to maintain, and to open up the theatre as a venue for theatre companies from around the country. He failed to do so and lost his job in the process of trying. Now the company has difficulty balancing its budget because of having to pay its large repertory company of actors and technicians, and so it rents the theatre out for many different kinds of events.<sup>17</sup>

The Estonian Drama Theatre in Tallinn also made a bid in the 1990s to become a National Theatre. However, other theatre companies, who were afraid that their own state subsidy would be jeopardized if the Estonian Drama Theatre succeeded in its ambitions, resisted the move.<sup>18</sup> Thus, while it has a national opera house,<sup>19</sup> Estonia remains without an official National Theatre for drama, although the Estonian Drama Theatre resembles a National Theatre in terms of its prominent position in the capital city, the quality of its actors and directors, and its repertory of national and international plays performed in Estonian.<sup>20</sup> As in the other Baltic countries, Estonian cultural and political sovereignty is maintained at a price, as the Estonians discovered when they removed a Soviet war memorial from a central square in Tallinn to a more remote site and, as a consequence, suffered a severe and prolonged Russian cyber attack in 2007.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the problems facing the National Theatre in Vilnius, see Edgaras Klivis (2008).

<sup>18</sup> The issue was raised again in 2007, but on this occasion the Vanemuine theatre in Tartu claimed that it had an equal right to such a status. See Hanson (2007).

<sup>19</sup> See the chapter by Kristel Pappel in this book.

<sup>20</sup> According to Professor Anneli Saro, "The Estonian Drama Theatre does not have the attribute 'national' in its name but everybody considers it to be national or a paragon for others." Personal communication, 8 November 2007.

<sup>21</sup> According to *The Guardian* on 17 May 2007, "A three-week wave of massive cyber-attacks on the small Baltic country of Estonia, the first known incidence of such an assault on a state, is causing alarm across the western alliance, with Nato urgently examining the offensive and its implications. While Russia and Estonia are embroiled in their worst dispute since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a row that erupted at the end of last month over the Estonians' removal of the Bronze Soldier Soviet war memorial in central Tallinn, the country has been subjected to a barrage of cyber warfare, disabling the websites of government ministries, political parties, newspapers, banks, and companies." <http://www.guardian.co.uk/russia/article/0,,2081438,00.html> [accessed 29 December 2007].

#### 4. The construction of identity in new National Theatres

In the smaller countries of Europe, the use of the vernacular language is especially important in retaining a sense of national culture in the face of international influences. Unlike in France, Britain or Russia, where the preservation of the language is not in danger, the nationalist movements in smaller countries such as Finland, Hungary, Latvia, Estonia, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia have resisted the assimilation efforts of larger empires and struggled to preserve their languages. National Theatres in such countries frequently regard one of the more important aspects of their mission as performing plays written by national authors (as well as hiring national dramatists to translate international classics into the national language). One could imagine that some of these National Theatres, especially in the recently independent small Baltic and Balkan states, might have reverted to an originary nineteenth-century function by becoming vehicles for reasserting national cultural values in the face of international interference. There are, of course, many individual instances of this. For example, during the break-up of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the subsequent wars in the Balkan peninsula, the National Theatres in Serbia and Croatia (during Tudjman's presidency) presented an aggressively nationalistic programme, featuring nationalist plays glorifying the past and recalling wars against various enemies. (Significantly, Serbia and Croatia have remained outside the borders of the enlarged European Union).<sup>22</sup> However, the Slovenian National Theatre aligned itself with artistic developments in Western Europe and aimed at becoming a European rather than a nationalist theatre, though it continues to stage some national plays such as Ivan Cankar's *Romantic Souls*.<sup>23</sup> (Slovenia eventually joined the EU in 2004). Amongst the Baltic states, many new Estonian plays have appeared in the Estonian repertory in the last few years, such as the nostalgic *An Estonian Funeral* at the Estonian Drama Theatre, which shows city people going to the funeral of a relative in the countryside and remembering their roots and their complex history and sense of identity.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, there are new interpretations of national classics in the National Theatres of other countries, such as in Finland which produces a large proportion of plays in the Finnish

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<sup>22</sup> Naum Panovski (2008: 157).

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Janez Pipan, Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Ljubljana, 2 April 2008.

<sup>24</sup> A Finnish play, *Puhdistus*, by Sofi Oksanen, dealing with some of the same experiences of Estonians being exiled to Siberia during the Soviet period was presented alongside *Estonian Funeral* both at the National Theatre in Helsinki and the Estonian Drama Theatre in Tallinn in 2007. While the Estonian play was comic and affectionate in its nostalgic reminiscences, the Finnish play was much more brutal and disturbing for the Estonian audience, revealing the rape and torture of Estonian women by Russians. Interview with Marja Liisa Nevala, Artistic Director of the Finnish National Theatre, 26 February 2008.



Väinö Linna: *The Unknown Soldier*, Finnish National Theatre, 2007, d: Kristian Smeds (source: yle.fi)

language.<sup>25</sup> In Kristian Smed's 2007 adaptation of the classic novel *The Unknown Soldier* at the Finnish National Theatre, Smed's interpretation represented, as well as ironized, numerous nationalist icons on stage, including the national flag, Sibelius' 'Finlandia', women in national costume, and war heroes such as Marshal Mannerheim.<sup>26</sup>

This pattern of representing versions of national identity is

also very clearly seen in Scotland where the creation of the National Theatre of Scotland heralds a Romantic nationalist spirit at a time when the possibility of political independence has appeared on the horizon. In the Scottish Parliament in 2003, Frank McAvety, the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport, revealed the important implications of establishing the new theatre by asserting that it was "emblematic of much of the debate about Scotland's identity and cultural future" (Leach 2007: 172). The nationalist impulse behind the enterprise became clear when the National Theatre explained its intended goals in its newsletter later in the same year: "The National Theatre of Scotland will develop a quality repertoire originating in Scotland. This will include new work, existing work, and the drama of other countries and cultures to which a range of Scottish insights, language, and sensibility can be applied" (Leach 2007: 174).

Without a theatre building but with a €6 million subsidy from the Scottish government, the National Theatre of Scotland in 2006 launched a series of events in ten venues around the country under the title 'Home'. This turned into an opportunity in specific instances for nostalgic reminiscence and for identifying what was culturally distinct about particular areas of Scotland. One of the pieces, *Home Shetland*, was a multi-media event aboard a ship that travels between Shetland and the mainland of Scotland, and featured Scottish music and

<sup>25</sup> Pirkko Koski has provided some useful statistics: "Altogether there were 476 different productions in the repertoire of Finnish theatres in 2004, of which 71 were world premières of Finnish plays and 46 Finnish premières of foreign plays..." In 2004, 180 Finnish plays were produced, representing 45% of all performances, accounting for about 877, 365 tickets or 45% of all tickets sold. This is about the average over the decades. The number has always been high, especially compared to other small countries with their own languages." See S. E. Wilmer and Pirkko Koski (2006).

<sup>26</sup> In discussing the controversy around his production, Smeds explained in interview that his interpretation, while ironizing national icons, addressed the needs of national survival and unity.



local stories about Shetland Islanders. According to one of the reviews, “It was therefore a perfect choice for the ‘launch’ of the National Theatre of Scotland in Shetland, and the performance transported the small audience groups on a stunning and very personal emotional journey... Personal headsets guided the visitors (a more appropriate word than audience) around the boat, the public areas, private cabins and a spectacular ending on the cavernous car deck” (Haswell 2006). According to Robert Leach, the National Theatre reflected “a new Scottish consciousness [that] had emerged. Scots began to re-examine their past, and to seek alternative historical narratives, different from those that had been accepted for so long” (Leach 2007: 172).

Following the series of events on the theme of ‘home’, the NTS produced over twenty productions in their first year, often with national historical themes about Scotland, such as Schiller’s *Mary Stuart* in a version by the Scottish playwright David Harrower and *Project Macbeth*, a devised piece with “The real Macbeth at war with Shakespeare’s myth in a battle to redefine his twenty-first century identity” (National Theatre of Scotland 2006). Perhaps the most notable production was *The Black Watch*, a new play commissioned by the NTS from Scottish playwright Gregory Burke, about a Scottish regiment that was being amalgamated with other regiments after 300 years of distinguished service. At the same time as being a well- choreographed and dynamic piece of theatre, it was also an exercise in nostalgia and national pride, recounting the history of the Black Watch regiment as well as its final deployment in Iraq. Owen Humphrys commented in a review for the Royal United Services Institute journal: “Running as a ‘red thread of courage’ through the play is the Black Watch’s ever-famous and exclusive red hackle. The Watch’s pipe-tunes and their songs are used, and adapted, from the ‘Black Bear’ to ‘[en]list bonnie laddie and come away’ wi’ me’. And in one five-minute scene, three centuries of Black Watch history are played out on a red carpet that is rolled out down the drill hall. One soldier is kitted out successively in the garb of 1739, the uniform of Waterloo and the kilt apron of the trenches in 1915. It is a magical moment.”<sup>27</sup> Commenting on the “standing ovations from audiences” in Edinburgh, the *Guardian* reviewer wrote, “This is a true piece of ‘national’ theatre – telling the urgent contemporary, human stories that lie at the back end of grand politics and the sweep of history... To all the scepticism and debate about Scotland’s



<sup>27</sup> Owen Humphrys. ‘Theatre Review: Black Watch’, RUSI, 25 October 2006, <http://www.rusi.org/publication/defencesystems/> [accessed 13 February 2008].

even needing a national theatre, to all the sometimes self-lacerating, politically fraught recent inquiries into the devolved nation's culture, the new NTS has slapped down the best kind of answer: rather than more words, a most eloquent piece of work."<sup>28</sup> When the Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond visited Dublin in February 2008, he drew a parallel between Irish and Scottish history, and spoke in favour of Scotland similarly becoming independent of England. I asked him if he saw a parallel between the role of the Abbey Theatre in helping the nationalist movement for Irish independence at the beginning of the twentieth century and the role of the National Theatre of Scotland at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Although he didn't answer the question directly, he clearly demonstrated that he was a firm supporter of the new National Theatre of Scotland, and told me that he had managed to send the play *Black Watch* to New York, and would like to send it around the world, if possible.<sup>29</sup>

## 5. Summary

Many challenges face National Theatres in the twenty-first century. The question still stands as to how to operate in the future in a changing Europe, where transnational agenda compete with national concerns, where polyethnicism and multilingualism are displacing assertions of homogeneity, and where National Theatres and their artists and productions spend as much time abroad as at home. The twentieth-century dichotomy between the capitalist West and the communist East (and their alternative ideological approaches to the functions of a National Theatre) has broken down and in some cases reversed itself. For example, the National Theatre in London has quietly deleted the word 'Royal' from its name and is arguably acting as a venue with civic responsibility by promoting a new form of socially-engaged writing,<sup>30</sup> whereas the National Theatre in Vilnius has become more of a commercial venue, rented by anyone who can afford it. While it is difficult to generalize about National Theatres because there are so many of them (35 in the Balkan states alone),<sup>31</sup> with such diverse practices and social contexts, there are many common problems facing National Theatres today and various possibilities for their survival. Some National Theatres are continuing to build a notion of national identity while others are laying more emphasis on creating a sense of European identity. However, what seems clear is that one of their original, ongoing and special functions is the preservation and encouragement of the national dramaturgy, providing a home for old plays in the national canon and producing new work by national authors

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<sup>28</sup> Charlotte Higgins (2006).

<sup>29</sup> Conversation with Alex Salmond, First Minister of Scotland, 13 February 2008. He proudly told me that the *New York Times* had voted it the best play of 2007.

<sup>30</sup> See Michael Coveney (2008).

<sup>31</sup> Barbara Susec Michieli (2008:197).

in an act of self-representation by and for the national community.<sup>32</sup> This we can see in the current work of the National Theatre of Scotland as well as the Finnish National Theatre, the Abbey Theatre and many other National Theatres in Europe, looking to the past and to the present for aspects of national identity, and thereby resisting the trend towards globalized homogeneity.

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<sup>32</sup> Fintan O'Toole in a speech called 'Facing the future' delivered during the Abbey centenary in 2004, argued: "At the simple core of the Abbey's foundation was a perception that representation has to be in some sense a self-representation." [www.abbeytheatre.ie/pdfs/FintanOTOole.pdf](http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/pdfs/FintanOTOole.pdf) [accessed 13 April 2008].

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ILDIKÓ REGÉCZI



# Chekhov's Plays on the Hungarian Stage – With Special Regard to the Performances of *Ivanov* and *The Cherry Orchard*

*“The rural estate is in ruin, forests crash down under the axe”<sup>1</sup>*



A. P. Chekhov (1860–1904)

The reception of Chekhov started in Hungary even while the Russian writer was still alive: in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century certain newspapers such as the *Budapesti Napló* (*Budapest Journal*), which was read by liberal professionals, the literary daily of *Fővárosi lapok* (*Budapest Pages*) or the *Hét* (*The Week*), which defined itself as a progressive journal, all published short stories by Chekhov with the intention of publishing significant contemporary authors of world literature. Furthermore, in the last years of the century Chekhov's selected short stories could be read in independent volumes<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Chekhov, A. P.: *Ivanov*. Transl. Elbert, János. In: Anton Chekhov: *Drámák*. Bp., Európa, 1978. 242.

<sup>2</sup> Chekhov, A. P.: *Falusi asszonyok és egyéb elbeszélések*. Vál. Szabó, Endre. Bp., Lampel, 1891; Chekhov, A. P.: *Chekhov Antal beszélései és rajzai*. Vál. Ambrozovics Dezső. Bp., 1899.



The publications by the prose writer Chekhov are important forerunners of the outstanding attention paid to his plays which also appeared on Hungarian stages a few years later. The strong coherence between the epic oeuvre and the scripts of the plays as well as the composition reflecting the monumental world of epic through dramatic mastery is a well-known phenomenon. (Nikita Mikhalkov's film titled *An Unfinished Piece for Mechanical Piano* (1977) provides an amazing artistic adaptation of the idea of unified text-flow, which according to its basic concept was adapted by Mikhalkov from Chekhov's early play, *Platonov*. However, the director intends to create such a wide range of associations, in which the repetition and variations of certain motifs in the short stories become apparent and are incorporated into the language of the movie.) Dezső Kosztolányi, the great Hungarian storyteller, played a very important part in the rendering of Chekhov's epic in this age, as he was absolutely carried away by the writer's style, which he first studied in German translations and thus developed his admiration.<sup>3</sup>

Kosztolányi is mostly impressed by the description of the indifferent and tedious everyday existence in Chekhov's prose<sup>4</sup>, while he is seriously interested



Dezső Kosztolányi  
(1885–1936)

in Chekhov's style and technique balancing refusal and sympathy based on higher orders.<sup>5</sup> The central thematic element in Chekhov's oeuvre, which also appears in *Ivanov*, as well as the narration necessary for the subject become dominant elements in Kosztolányi's interpretation since they are close to his own poetic practice. On the other hand, they also provide a key for him to Chekhov's dramaturgy.<sup>6</sup> Because in addition to the repetition of the themes, which has already been mentioned, the novelty of Chekhov's dramas lies in the double tone which is different from the classic dramatic tradition; it alternates between comic situations of

ironical distance-keeping and also some lyrical and tragic qualities provoking situations of sympathy and compassion. Therefore, this kind of sensitivity towards this special atmosphere becomes part of the whole Chekhov experience gathered by Kosztolányi, who also contributes to

<sup>3</sup> Zágonyi, Ervin: *Kosztolányi és az orosz irodalom*. Bp., Akadémiai, 1990. 77. Cp. Kosztolányi's personal confessions: "What is written by Chekhov, is felt like the whole thing, and it does not come to our minds to say that this is a short story, that is a novel, the other one is a play." Kosztolányi, Dezső: *Ivanov*. (Pesti Hírlap, 1923. szept. 30.) In: K.D.: *Színházi esték*, I. k. Bp., Szépirodalmi, 1978. 331.

<sup>4</sup> Kosztolányi, Dezső: Alföldi por. In: Uő.: *Álom és ólom*. Bp., Szépirodalmi, 1969. 467.

<sup>5</sup> Kosztolányi, Dezső: Thury Zoltán. In: Uő.: *Írók, festők, tudósok. Tanulmányok magyar kortársakról*, I. k. Bp., Szépirodalmi, 1958. 121–122.

<sup>6</sup> Cp. in detail: Zágonyi, Ervin: *Kosztolányi és az orosz irodalom*. Bp., Akadémiai, 1990. 76–84.

the translation of Chekhov dramas (he translated *The Three Sisters* from a German script), and then he acts as a theatrical critic of the contemporary Chekhov drama performances.

Árpád Tóth, who is another well-reputed poet of the Nyugat generation, following a similar path to Kosztolányi's by also working from German translations, renders *Ivanov* in 1923 for Vígszínház (however, this translation is never published). A year later the original "Sour Cherry Orchard" (*Вишнёвый сад*) title (based on August Scholz's translation in 1918) appears as *Cseresznyés kert* ("The Cherry Orchard") on the Hungarian stage and becomes popular under this title. Árpád Tóth prepares a more poetic script with individual and even more poetic style for the Hungarian translation of Chekhov's last drama.

These translations and the professional interpretations of Chekhov's dramas were absolutely indispensable in the process of staging them, which was initiated for both dramas relatively. The Hungarian audience was able to see the classic pieces by Chekhov as early as in the 1820s: *Ivanov* is directed at Vígszínház in 1923 by Daniel Jób, and just a year later *The Cherry Orchard* is also staged. And then again we come back to Dezső Kosztolányi who acts as a theatre critic for both performances as an active journalist. On one hand, in his *Ivanov* interpretation, Kosztolányi speaks very highly of the musicality of the drama. He finds Chekhov's voice the most similar to Tchaikovsky's art, in which the characters seem to have a tone of slowness as well as a mixture of undefinable but also some sweet senses.<sup>7</sup> Yet, Kosztolányi still does not primarily emphasize the suffocating and at the same time lulling atmosphere of the environment, but rather the



Frida Gombaszögi and Pál Lukács in *Ivanov*, Vígszínház, Budapest, October 1923 (photo: Angelo, source: oszk.hu)



Irén Varsányi's cover photo in the role of Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard*, 1924 premiere (photo: Angelo, source: oszk.hu)

<sup>7</sup> Kosztolányi, Dezső: *Ivanov*. (Pesti Hírlap 1923. szept. 30.) In: K. D.: *Színházi esték I. k.* Bp., Szépirodalmi, 1978. 331–332.

characters which are not fully developed, therefore result in quite distorted half personalities just as alluded to by the play-wright. The “half-man characters”, i.e. the pettiness of Chekhov characters and also their inclinations for compensation appear in several critical works about the Russian writer’s scripts by Kosztolányi in which this phenomenon is described as a simultaneous appearance of Chekhov’s irony and sympathy.

Kosztolányi’s description is poetic when he revives the stages of “Silence”, “Desperation” and “Hush” as allegorical figures in the performance.<sup>8</sup> The writer’s key definitions are essential moments of the play, indeed. On one hand, with their primary meanings as they turn out to be significantly constructive factors in the writer’s instructions. On the other hand, Kosztolányi’s expressions are related to the contemporary Hungarian intellectual trend, the categories in existential philosophy, by which the basic problem lying at the depth of Chekhov’s drama appears. Namely the dilemma that is lived through by the protagonist Ivanov, who is while aware of his disability of identifying with the general moral and the fact that he is unable to meet the expectations raised by his environment (to live his life according to “the usual norms”<sup>9</sup> that is to play a role while taking care of his sick wife). However, he is not capable of finding a way out of the current situation. He could be thrilled by more sophisticated ideas (the love of Lebedev’s daughter, Sasha makes him feel deliriously happy, and promises him the opportunity to build a new life), he longs for more space, while at the same time he does not really understand how to move on; therefore, he opts for the ultimate reaction of a man facing absurdity<sup>10</sup> and commits suicide at the end of the play.

It is not incidental that Lev Shestov, the existential philosopher of the Russian fin-de-ciècle refers to *Ivanov* as a drama in which Chekhov –for the very first time in his oeuvre (similarly to the *Boring Story*, which was simultaneously composed) appears to be such a playwright who “openly despises accepted ideas and ideologies”,<sup>11</sup> and forces his heroes to “create something out of nothing”<sup>12</sup>, that is to reconsider the reality of the metaphysical perspective. “Chekhov in contrast with previous views – claims the Russian philosopher – shows way to mindfulness and hands over its rights to the »soul«, to dark and foggy endeavours: when it stands on that fatal borderline, which separates a human being from that upmost secret, he trusts the soul instinctively better than the bright and clear consciousness, which tends to set perspectives after death.”<sup>13</sup> Although Ivanov as

<sup>8</sup> Kosztolányi, Dezső: Gombaszögi Frida. *Színházi Élet* XIII. évf. 1923. okt. 7–13. 2, 4.

<sup>9</sup> Csehov, A. P.: *Ivanov*. Transl. Elbert, János. In: Anton Csehov: *Drámák*. Bp., Európa, 1978. p.204.

<sup>10</sup> Cp. Camus A.: *Absurd and Suicide* Transl. Vargyas, Zoltán. In: Uő.: *Sziszüphosz mítosza. Válogatott esszék, tanulmányok*. Bp., Magvető, 1990. 195–201.

<sup>11</sup> Sesztov, L.: *Teremtés a semmiből*. A. P. Csehov. Transl. Patkós, Éva. *Medvetánc* 88/4–89/1. 283.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 282.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 282.

the leading role may be regarded as “the spirit of destruction” or even “a villain”<sup>14</sup>, he is still lifted above the sphere of the trivialities of meticulous every-day life, moreover, is over even the seemingly “honest” Doctor Lvov, whose seemingly humane behaviour as well as his rationalised reservations and critical remarks about Ivanov’s behaviour suggest no sympathy for other people’s emotions.

Nevertheless, there may be some doubts about Shestov’s contemporary interpretation of the relevance of the staging of the piece in Hungary. What Kosztolányi, as an expert of Chekhov’s art, could realise about the essence of the drama may not be so obvious in every situation. For instance, Károly Sebestyén praises actress Irén Varsányi as Anna Petrovna and at the same time he makes this female character the central role of the piece, the recognition of whose poetical quality creates merely the background for the love between the “soulless” man and the “young and healthy rival”.<sup>15</sup> When approaching the role of Ivanov, Aladár Schöpflin senses the lyrical quality needed for the male character as well, the “thick air of the play”.<sup>16</sup> He emphasises its complexity, the tragic elements in “strong desire”, “lack of will”, unhappiness and the loss of vitality.<sup>17</sup> At the same time he underlines the Russian quality of this peculiar life,<sup>18</sup> as the character is associated with Slavic temper in Kosztolányi’s critical notes, too.<sup>19</sup>

After the premiere performance of *Ivanov*, Dániel Jób turns to another play by Chekhov, and stages *The Cherry Orchard* at Vígszínház which he is the director of at that time. In 1924 there is a detailed article about the performance in the theatrical journal *Színházi élet* (*Theatre Life*), Iván Sipos shares the opinions of some respectable spectators of the show.<sup>20</sup> In his article Dezső Kosztolányi repeatedly refers to *The Cherry Orchard* premiere as the “prestige performance of Vígszínház”, and regards it as “the most magnificent event in the theatre and acting.”<sup>21</sup> However, on this occasion the critics do not distance the central topic of the play and make an attempt to show the struggles Chekhov’s characters live through as special Russian features, on the contrary, they put an emphasis on the “painfully natural” feature of the performance, which allows an insight into “ordinary peoples’ lives”, “whose characters could be any of us and out of us”.<sup>22</sup> It is also Kosztolányi who remarks on the possible abstract meaning of the Chekhov drama. He believes that the key to the symbolic interpretation of The

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 284. The adjectives are taken from the drama, expressions by Lvov.

<sup>15</sup> Sebestyén, Károly: Varsányi Irén. *Színházi Élet* XIII. évf. 1923. Oct. 7–13. 1.

<sup>16</sup> Schöpflin, Aladár: Lukács Pál. *Színházi Élet* XIII. évf. 1923. okt. 7–13. 5–8.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>19</sup> Kosztolányi, Dezső: Ivanov. (Pesti Hírlap 1923. szept. 30.) In: K. D.: *Színházi esték I. k.* Bp., Szépirodalmi, 1978. 331–332.; Kosztolányi, Dezső: Gombaszögi Frida. *Színházi Élet* XIII. évf. 1923. okt. 7–13. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Sipos, Iván: Cseresznyés kert. *Színházi Élet* XIV. évf. 1924. szept. 21–27. 3–9.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 3–4.

Cherry Orchard in the play can be found in the collection of short stories titled “Ifjúság” (*Youth*) by the director, who is also well-known as a writer: “The Cherry Orchard, whose trees are cut down, is not a geographical place but rather the soul and a memory of its fragile idylls, house parties, bohemian figures. Its melodic title can be translated into any language: Ifjúság”<sup>23</sup> (Translator’s note: while the Hungarian word is really melodious, the same cannot really be said about the English word “Youth”).

In connection with staging, as well as the significance of the drama, Zsigmond Móricz, the great Hungarian writer of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who was also watching the play, deserves to be quoted also. The writer leaves the theatre during the interval, but according to his confession the reason for his leaving is being deeply touched and having to hide his stirred up emotions.<sup>24</sup> He praises the artistic ways of depicting a milieu: “It is the culmination of the depiction of a milieu which is achieved in this play by the playwright, the translator, the actors and the director!”<sup>25</sup>

Taking into account all the critical remarks received for the premieres in 1920 and 1922 and the casts for different roles in *Uncle Vanya* and *The Three Sisters*, it can be established that the Vígszínház already has “its well definable special Chekhov-style”<sup>26</sup> in the 1920s. In this aspect it is an especially important event in theatre history that in the middle of the decade the Moscow Art Theatre has a guest performance in Budapest and the ensemble performs *The Cherry Orchard* to the Hungarian audience. Stanislavski’s actors also stage a show at Belvárosi Színház (Downtown Theatre) in 1929. Among the others these performances<sup>27</sup> apparently contribute to the fact that when *The Seagull* is staged at the Nemzeti Kamaraszínház (National Chamber Theatre) in 1930 (directed by Sándor Hevesi)

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Móricz is deeply influenced by Chekhov’s play and it is also supported by the fact that in his novel *Kivilágos kivrattig* has a dialogue with what he saw on stage by the Russian writer. Cp. Szilágyi, Zsófia: Lopahin és Lichtenstein (Csehov Cseresznyéskertje és Móricz Zsigmond *Kivilágos kivrattig* című regénye). In: *Közelítések – Közvetítések*. A. P. Csehov. Szerk. Regéczi, Ildikó, Debrecen, Didakt, 2011. 123–131.

<sup>25</sup> Sipos, Iván: Cseresznyéskert. *Színházi Élet* XIV. évf. 1924. szept. 21–27. 8.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 8–9.

<sup>27</sup> Dezső Kosztolányi’s reflexion on the two guest performances emphasises the special features of the Russian director’s artistic principles which are different from the European ones. Cp. “What makes them different from any other actors? The fact that they are much closer to reality than »Europeans« are. They seize the play not with their brains but with their bodies, with all their five senses...” Kosztolányi, Dezső: Orosz vendégjáték. Anton Pavlovics Csehov: Cseresznyéskert. [Pesti Hírlap, 1925. május 23.] In: K.D.: *Színházi esték II.k.* Bp., Szépirodalmi, 1978. 545). Also in: “His realism is different from the Germans’. Brahm is an intellectual from the beginning to the end. Stanislavski is inspired by his emotions...” (Kosztolányi: Oroszok. Stanislavskiék vendégjátéka. [Új Idők, 1929. február 10.] In: K. D.: *Színházi esték II.k.* Bp., Szépirodalmi, 1978. 564).



the show is obviously dominated by Stanislavski's principles, empathy and psychological realism.

Nevertheless, Chekhov's plays are not crowned with success by wider audiences, only by those who have had a deeper understanding of the theatre and literature. Hungarian recipients needed a new type of performance so that they could find their way to Chekhov's dramaturgy. Endre Marton stands out of the theatre staff representing these new approaches when he stages *The Three Sisters* at Vígszínház in 1947, and then *Ivanov* at the National Theatre in 1971. In the 1940s classical and "actual", i.e. political Soviet plays are equally performed

at Hungarian theatres. Marton himself contributes substantially to making the Hungarian audiences more familiar with contemporary Russian drama by staging shows by Aleksey Arbuzov and Aleksandr Gelman. At the same time he demonstrates keen interest in Chekhov's plays. In the 1940s several Chekhov's one act plays are staged, such as *The Bear* starring Gyula Csontos and the monologue *About the Harm Caused by Smoking* performed by Jenő Törzs, then in the 1960s and 70s Chekhov's plays meet a great second wave of popularity. At that time several theatres in both Europe and the USA stage some of Chekhov's plays. Marton faces Chekhov's active presence on the world stage while travelling and he finds Chekhov's dramaturgy a very important milestone on the path to modern theatre. In his view the updated version of the Stanislavski-method also plays a relevant role in the creation of Chekhov's theatre: "Staging Chekhov without the Stanislavski' system is like performing Brecht while ignoring his theatre theory."<sup>28</sup>

In 1971 Marton's interpretation of *Ivanov* reminds the critics of Efros Anatoly's<sup>29</sup> Russian and Otomar Krejča's<sup>30</sup> Czech directions. As Tamás Koltai



A. P. Chekhov: *Ivanov*, National Theatre, Budapest, 1971, d: Endre Marton, with Ferenc Bessenyei in the lead role (photo: Éva Keleti, source: mandadb.hu)

<sup>28</sup> Barta, András: A modern színházhoz sok út vezet. Beszélgetés Marton Endrével. *Film, színház, muzsika*. 1970. 12. 05. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Anatoli Efros was one of Stanislavski's students and at the same time an innovative Soviet-Russian director, whose Chekhov adaptations excel with their topicality from contemporary theatre. His *The Three Sisters* direction is rather revolutionary, feels like a comedy with some absurd elements in the second half of the 1960s (Moskow, Malaja Bronnaja Theatre, 1968).

<sup>30</sup> In 1970 the *Ivanov* production of "Za Branou" Theatre directed by Ottomar Krejča was a great sensation at the Theatre of Nations in Paris, later it was awarded the Grand Prix of BITEF (Belgrad International Theatre Festival). The novelty in staging is a "speaking setting" (cp. Hungarian context See later István Horvai's direction) and the expressive surrealistic style. In Krejča's view the greatest sin weighs on the



A. P. Chekhov: *Ivanov*, Csiky Gergely Színház, Kaposvár, Hungary, 1978, d: Gábor Zsámbéki, with Ádám Rajhona in the lead role (photo: László Iklády, source: színhaz.net)

refers to it: “The »boniness« of the play motivates those directors who prefer focusing on the more restless, louder and faster-paced Chekhov to the melodramatic-dreamy-birch tree atmosphere.”<sup>31</sup> The new translation for the new performance prepared by János Elbert also serves the more modern style of the play which aims to centre around the crisis of the “personality”. Elbert’s rendition contains everyday Hungarian expressions which makes his use of the language different from the former melancholic sometimes quite subtle tones of the Hungarian versions of *Ivanov* (In 1950 Andor Gábor translates the play before Elbert does it), which gives an opportunity to deal with a more general and valid human issue.<sup>32</sup> According to many critics the title hero Ferenc Bessenyei could live up to this opportunity<sup>33</sup> and he convincingly acts out the state of “being fenced off” as well as the conflict between the man with great talent and a calling, and the environment which takes advantage of his internal weaknesses.<sup>34</sup> The elaborate work with the dominance of grey in both

the setting (scene-designer: Árpád Csányi) and the costumes (costume designer: Judit Schäffer) contributes to the demonstration of the petty and spiteful ordinary surroundings.

In 1977, a few years after the Marton-interpretation, Gábor Zsámbéki stages the play at Csiky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár and actualizes *Ivanov*’s intellectual figure. The characters are walking on a thick layer of tree bark (designer:

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surroundings, which impudently picks on the individual who differs from ordinary folks, and then witnesses its tragedy without getting emotional about it. (Mihályi, Gábor: *Ivanov – avagy a tragikum visszavonása*. In: id: *A modernről a posztmodernig*. Bp., Új Világ, 197–209).

<sup>31</sup> Koltai, Tamás: *Ivanov*. Csehov drámája a Nemzeti Színházban. *Népszabadság*. 1971.01.26. 7.

<sup>32</sup> See detailed comparison of the translations by Andor Gábor and János Elbert in. Cs. Jónás, Erzsébet: *A magyar Csehov (Csehov-drámák műfordításelemzése)*. Nyíregyháza, Stúdium, 1995. 14–40.

<sup>33</sup> András Rajk’s critical remarks differ from the average as he does not believe that Bessenyei was able to act out *Ivanov*’s “challenging role” really well. He is primarily missing Bessenyei’s suggesting the “great opportunity”, the talents that *Ivanov* used to have. (Rajk, András: *Ivanov*. Csehov drámája a Nemzeti Színházban. *Népszava*. 1971. 01. 31.)

<sup>34</sup> Barta, András: A modern színházhoz sok út vezet. Beszélgetés Marton Endrével. *Film, színház, muzsika*. 1970. 12. 05. 9.

Gyula Pauer), which is meant to make their steps uncertain.<sup>35</sup> The lack of a solid surface repeatedly orientates towards Shestov's idea of the "apotheosis of groundlessness",<sup>36</sup> who finds means for separation from the conventional ways of clinging to existence (rationalism, humanistic ideas) in Chekhov's plays. The performance still concentrates on the absurd rather than the tragical aspect of this state. As István Eörsi remarks on the play: "In Chekhov's plays the tediousness of everyday life steps over the boundaries of absurdity without the hyperboles of fantastic satire. It creates the impression that reality itself is absurd. Zsámbéki's direction stresses this basic question, in his case it is not the reality that ends in absurdity but rather absurdity becomes realistic."<sup>37</sup>

During the Chekhov cult in the 1970s *The Cherry Orchard* is also renewed. In 1974 István Horvai redirects the play in Vígszínház, in which such excellent actors as Éva Ruttkai as Andreyevna Lyubov (previously she was seen as Nina in *The Seagull*, Elena in *Uncle Vanya*, and Masa in *The Three Sisters*) and Iván Darvas as Fiers. Similarly to Marton, István Horvai had been experienced at staging Chekhov plays: he staged *The Three Sisters* at Madách Theatre in 1954; he directed *Uncle Vanya* in Miskolc in 1962, then the same at Vígszínház in 1970. He explains his personal interest in Chekhov the following way: "Time is marching on, however, the same issue excites me from time to time: the fate of the old, the fate of certain layers, their slow disappearance from our lives, – and the appearance of the new ones."<sup>38</sup> In his adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard* the audience could see "an embittered



A. P. Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*, Vígszínház, Budapest, 1974, d: István Horvai, with Éva Ruttkai in the role of Ranevskaya (photo: László Iklády, source: szinhaz.net)

<sup>35</sup> György Harag, a director from Cluj-Napoca uses a similar technique in his *Three Sisters* production in 1978 (Novi Sad). Zsolt Kölönte also, who makes the stage unstable by covering it with shredded sponge, which also results in the actors' unstable movement (Cp. Mihályi, Gábor: Csehov-előadások nyolc változatban. In: *A modernről a posztmodernig*. Bp., Új Világ, 184–185). But there is a similar concept in István Horvai's *Seagull*-direction in 1982 in the dialogue by Trepljov and Nina (Act 4) which takes place on the slippery surface of the frozen lake (Setting by David Borovski) (Cp. Mihályi Gábor Ibid. 191–192).

<sup>36</sup> Cp. Previously quoted Sestov-essay: Sestov, L.: *Teremtés a semmiből*. A. P. Csehov. Translated by Patkós, Éva. *Medvetánc* 88/4–89/1. 271–296.

<sup>37</sup> Quotes Mihályi, Gábor: Ivanov – avagy a tragikum visszavonása. In: *Uő: A modernről a posztmodernig*. Bp., Új Világ, p 206.

<sup>38</sup> G. Szabó, László: Csehovot rendezni... *Néző*. 1973. 12.

and sad comedy”<sup>39</sup> of some “belated men”, characters overliving their ages. In the closing piece of “Chekhov’s trilogy” the director, who was constantly looking for new forms, takes care of even the sounding of the drama: as the protagonist Ivan Darvas’ mother was Russian by birth he made the script adjusted to the original text, thus changed Árpád Tóth’s translation to “unpoetic”. The critics of the play still seem to be quite reserved regarding the stage adaptation. As if this direction had not reached the level of the director’s previous Chekhov interpretations (the comparison seems to be inevitable). Supposedly partly the stronger gestures of alienation, the grotesque quality of the play as well as the tones of harsh judgement<sup>40</sup> instead of the more lyrical tone and emotional identification result in rather the opposite impact than expected. At the same time, there are some graver critical remarks than the ones above, demanding a more consistent concept of direction.<sup>41</sup>

In spite of the ambivalent evaluations almost every reflexion about the performance emphasises the poetic quality and strong symbolism of the scene which almost exceeds the performance itself. The scenic arrangement is the Russian guest scenic-designer David Borovski’s work: on the stage there is a space that is divided into two, whose lower level is limited by the height of the mutilated cherry tree trunks, which make the actors walk with a stoop, the inspiring spatial arrangement is profoundly related to Chekhov’s poetics. The truncated tree trunks hold the upper floor on which there are interior signs of the old time children’s room – covered with a white veil, which is associated consistently with funerals in analyses. Both in the writer’s prose and drama scripts the play taking place on the lower and upper floors of the house, the spatial arrangement of characters or its change always carry a figurative meaning.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Fencsik, Flóra: Cseresznyés kert. Csehov a Víg színházban. *Esti Hírlap*. 1974. 01. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Cp. Lukácsy, András: Az újrafogalmazott Csehov. Cseresznyés kert-bemutató a Víg színházban. *Magyar Hírlap*. 1974. 01. 27.

<sup>41</sup> See. e.g. Tamás Koltai’s critical remarks, who speaks about “a performance that is *done*, but not *well-done*” (Koltai, Tamás: Cseresznyés kert. Csehov-bemutató a Víg színházban. *Népszabadság*. 1974. 02. 02.).

<sup>42</sup> According to a former arrangement of a country mansion downstairs is inhabited by servants while upstairs is occupied by the landlord and his family. However, in Chekhov’s turn-of-the-century short stories this traditional arrangement is not so consistent and the landlord often stays downstairs as an expression of his scattered identity (See in e.g. the arrangement of Aljohin’s house in *Gooseberries*) or it may refer to the indecisiveness in lifestyle by moving to and fro between the two floors (as in e.g. the heroine in the short story of *Petticoat Government*). See more details about changes in the meaning of a house as one’s own world, also about the act of alienation and the motif of death in relation with Chekhov’s dramas in V.V. Kondratyeva and M. Cs. Larionova: Кондратьева, В.В. – Ларионова, М.Ч.: *Художественное пространство в пьесах А.П. Чехова 1890-х – 1900-х гг.: Мифопоэтические модели*. Ростов-на-Дону, «Foundation», 2012. 54–85.

The “change-over” in *The Cherry Orchard*, which is also mentioned by István Horvai, basically means that a world that has its definite old norms gives way to an indefinite new system. It is such a familiar phenomenon at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> that it is quite natural from the 1990s to refer to such a state as a real Chekhov boom. There is only little room to allude to a few stage adaptations, so we are quoting only a few reflexions related to the performances which are the most often referred to by critics. As for *Ivanov* it is the direction by Gábor Székely in Új Színház in 1996 starring György Cserhalmi as Ivanov (Sasha: Erika Marozsán, Anna Petrovna: Ildikó Tóth) which is based on a meticulous and realistic technique. The dramaturgy of the show also applies the poetics of Chekhov’s sound effects when mysterious sounds are used for foretelling the future, most often in connection with Anna Petrovna and Ivanov as the omen of imminent death.<sup>43</sup> In a Slavic mythological context such imminent sound effects, which were frequently applied by Chekhov, have an especially relevant role, but even the Hungarian audience may sense the symbolic meaning of such sounds.

In 2004 Tamás Ascher, the director of the cultic performance of *The Three Sisters* in the 1980s stages *Ivanov* at Katona József Theatre. Similarly to the former Chekhov interpretation the later adaptation was also very successful: it had guest performances in several countries worldwide, in 2008 it was given the Golden Mask Award in Moscow. At the same time, this staging is substantially different in concept and style from the previous very powerful *Three Sisters*



A. P. Chekhov: *The Three Sisters*, Katona József Színház, Budapest, 1985, d: Tamás Ascher (source: katonajozsefszinhaz.hu)



A. P. Chekhov: *Ivanov*, Katona József Színház, Budapest, 2004, d: Tamás Ascher (photo: Lenke Szilágyi, source: katonajozsefszinhaz.hu)

<sup>43</sup> Sándor, L. Iván: A realizmus változatai. Csehov Ivanovja Zsámbéki Gábor, Székely Gábor és Ascher Tamás rendezésében (Variations of Realism. Chekhov’s Ivanov directed by Gábor Zsámbéki, Gábor Székely and Tamás Ascher). *Ellenfény* 2004. 4. 33.



performance whose main strengths lie in its detailed close-ups which shape the psychological subtleties and momentary impressions into theatrical events. Here the location is also shifted into the reality of Socialism in the 1960s which the audience is more familiar with: it reminds us of cultural centres, the various kinds of encounters, the space that functions as a sort of modern saloon providing opportunity for human interactions. Zsolt Khell's setting is described by Tamás Tarján as a terrible place that "lacks cosiness and cause goose bumps to anyone who has good taste"<sup>44</sup>. This effect brings the tragic connotations behind the series of comical scenes – sometimes even with farce elements – depressingly close to the audience – both in space and time. Ivanov's (Ernő Fekete) every day life is overshadowed by the already mentioned ghost of his metaphysical homelessness. Due to his wife's deadly decease his home and family life is just about to fall apart, which cannot be replaced by anything else, and the main



A. P. Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*, Miskolc National Theatre, Miskolc, Hungary, 2006, d: Radoslav Milenković (source: port.hu)

reason is not any moral dilemma but rather the overwhelming feeling of uncertainty that affects Ivanov's whole existence. Ivanov's stripping is a crucially important scene in the performance as it can be interpreted as a metaphor of self-exploration and self-examination, since it is a symbolic act of showing his inner self which is so eager to receive the right answers to his queries. Ivanov's homelessness and alienation may have various interpretations, and it culminates when he steps over

the threshold in the closing scene. He does not commit suicide, but stumbles (loses the ground under his feet), he falls out of the form and order of human existence while he starts falling into *another*, contourless world.

In 1984 Tamás Asher at Csíky Gergely Theatre in Kaposvár starts thinking about Chekhov's scripts especially about how to perform them just a year before the above-mentioned performance of *The Three Sisters* takes place. Perhaps the most important novelty of the show is to request György Spiró to translate the play again, renew it and create a closer Hungarian version of the drama.<sup>45</sup> Thus Spiró contributes to such a Chekhov interpretation by reflecting the craggily raw and sometimes even fragmented original text which is quite harsh in certain

<sup>44</sup> Tarján, Tamás: Járás; helybenjárás. *Népszava* 2004.04.21.

<sup>45</sup> The translation by György Spiró is available at *Közelítések – Közvetítések (Approaches-Interpretations)*. A. P. Csehov. Edited by Regéczi, Ildikó, Debrecen, Didakt, 2011. 169–215.

characters' replicas, moreover sounds like meaningless nonsense and by which he breaks away with the melodramatic and sentimental tone in the history of *The Cherry Orchard*, furthermore intensifies the passivity of the characters who neither communicate well, nor give verbal or active help to each other.

When Radoslav Milenkovič, as a guest

director from Novi Sad was staging *The Cherry Orchard* in Miskolc in 2006 he also relied on Spiró's translation. Let us recall the poetic force of the closing scene of the play in this fragmented review of theatre history. Everyone leaves, and after a moment Fiers, the old servant enters the stage. He has been forgotten in the country mansion. He lies down. And he will probably never wake up. It is snowing, the melody of a French chanson lends a nostalgic (but not tragic) mood to the moment of decay while in the cold, ghost-white space a lively sour cherry red billiard ball is released by Fiers' hand. Something has necessarily and irrevocably disappeared from our lives but we are unable to take our eyes off the vision that was believed to be utterly beautiful and perfect, due to our illusions.

One of the most decisive issues regarding the current Hungarian *Cherry Orchard* and more currently – owing to the translated versions by György Spiró as well as Júlia Ungár,<sup>46</sup> – *The Sour Cherry Orchard* adaptations are raised about the language of the play. In the most recent productions – directed by Péter Valló at Radnóti Theatre in 2005, Róbert Alföldi at Vígszínház in 2007, or Sándor Zsótér Örkény István Theatre in 2013 – whichever translation is chosen it ultimately orientates both the actors and the audience. In the Géza Morcsányi's, György Spiró's and Júlia Ungár's versions there are such elements of the spoken language which – due to the huge lapse of time since Chekhov's time – are suitable for duly alluding to actualities of the new cultural context. This use of language affects the productions, and becomes their elemental component, and when the visual effects, the symbols as well as the plays are combined with it they altogether and in all cases reflect the situations which refer to the disappearance of the values of the near past in both the theatre and real life (See the danse macabre-reminiscences in Alföldi's direction or Zsótér's strong references to the



A. P. Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*,  
Örkény István Színház, Budapest, 2013, d: Sándor Zsótér  
(photo: Zsolt Szigetváry, source: 7ora7.hu)

<sup>46</sup> Júlia Ungár's version: *Csehov-újraírások*. Szerk. Regéczi, Ildikó. Debrecen, Didakt Kiadó, 2016. 195–237.

disappearing reality of the 1980s), and possible visions of the future may also be expressed with it.

In 1999 Georges Banu, who is a significant theoretician, also *animator*<sup>47</sup> and great enthusiast of contemporary theatre, explains the topicality of turn-of-the-century *Cherry Orchard* productions with the aggression experienced in forcing cultural changes in our times. "... we have arrived at the end of a cycle. – he claims. The essential centre-point of our anxiety is the orchard-complex."<sup>48</sup> This complex is related to the moment of the admittance of fall and loss, to the sensation of such a final state in which it is impossible to identify with any further potential strategies for further existence. The question of "How to move on?" is unpostponable, however, the situation requires a serious existential experience, the experience of taking responsibility for our human existence (free existence). The most straightforward *Cherry Orchard* adaptations aim at expressing such a dramatic experience. Even if the characters' gestures on stage are rather about warding the experience off, the in-depth meaning of the text still always gives away the overshadowing tension originating from homelessness and alienation. The illusion of the past yields no protection (in no Chekhov play), will not contribute to the approval of the choice, yet – as it is suggested by the text alluding to the poesies of the past – the memories of the past need to be cherished, otherwise the future will offer inhumane solutions. And how about any anticipations for the future in the stage adaptations of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? The response is always there in the very production of *The Cherry Orchard*.

Connecting *Ivanov* to this idea comes naturally. Ivanov in his groundless and unbalanced state as it has been referred to several times represents an early version of *The Cherry Orchard*-roles in Chekhov's oeuvre. While he will not prove like Carlotta that he has no idea of his roots (so seemingly he has no problems with his identity) and does not desperately cling to any earthly relics<sup>49</sup>, notwithstanding he is still very uncertain about his own inner self and his sudden "responsive step" underlines the seriousness of his internal struggle.

Returning to Banu's essay, which opens up the dimension of "the cherry orchard as our theatre",<sup>50</sup> there could not be a more topical theme about the state of contemporary theatre than the issues about these two plays by Chekhov.

*Translated by Anikó Kocsis*

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<sup>47</sup> The clever title is given by Anca Măniuțiu: Georges Banu or Theatre as One's Fate. In: Banu, Georges: *Színházunk, a Cseresznyéskert. Egy néző feljegyzései*. Kolozsvár, Koinónia, 2006. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Banu, Georges: *Színházunk, a Cseresznyéskert. Egy néző feljegyzései*. Kolozsvár, Koinónia, 2006. 23.

<sup>49</sup> Such as the roles in *The Cherry Orchard*. For an existentialist view on the play see: Regéczi, Ildikó: A kétségbeesés forrása (*Cseresznyéskert*). In: *Csehov és a korai egzisztenciabölcsélet*. Debrecen, Kossuth Egyetemi, 2000. 128–144.

<sup>50</sup> Banu, Georges: *Színházunk, a Cseresznyéskert. Egy néző feljegyzései*. Kolozsvár, Koinónia, 2006. 128.



written by this year's guests

ROLF C. HEMKE

## "My Home Is Now Where I Am"

Iraqi and Syrian theatre makers and their working conditions in European exile



Mokhallad Rasem

"My home is now where I am. You must believe in the place where you are. Important is to have a safe life, to have feelings, to have work and contact with people. Speaking to people, listening to people and people listening to you," says director and choreographer Mokhallad Rasem, born in 1981 as a son of a famous Iraqi actor in Baghdad and one of the first Arab artists to migrate already in 2006 to Western Europe. "I came to Belgium for very simple reasons because I knew here one person who would help me. At the beginning I was in Germany, that was when I came and attended your festival. At this time there was peace in Syria but already a big conflict in Iraq. My family migrated to Syria at that time and I went to Europe."



Muhaned al Hadi

The author and director Muhaned al Hadi, born in 1972, chose already soon after the American invasion in Iraq in 2003 to leave his home country but to stay in the Arab world: he migrated to Iraq's then peaceful country Syria to continue his artistic career. He settled in the Palestinian refugee camp Yarmuk until July 2012 when the infamous bombarding of the poor suburb of Baghdad strengthened. He returned for two years to Iraq and decided in 2014, when the situation in Iraq newly declined to migrate to Western Europe. His wife who had studied in France received the offer of a six months research stay and

the whole family was able to settle in Lyons. He says today: "I feel well at home where I can do theatre. I felt at home in Syria while I was able to work there and realise my own productions. Of course Iraq is my home country, but I was never really able to do theatre there as I wanted to do it. I always felt a stranger there. Now in France I was able to realise some projects which I really liked, which I would have never been able to realise back in Iraq."



Rafat Alzakout

Syrian director Rafat Alzakout, born in 1977, faces another year long history of exile: "When the revolution in Syria started, the young people and the artists in particular were very excited about the possible change of the regime and I had a lot of energy to work and to demonstrate in the streets. It was during this time that I founded an undercover group of artists and we founded a kind of arts movement and we started to combine theatre and film, we developed a satirical puppet theatre programme which we filmed and put on youtube. We mocked the regime and the main character in those

short films was Bisho, which is a nickname for Bashar Al Assad and it became a real puppet film series against the regime. We wanted to show the people that as well the artists are with them and the revolution. But in the middle of 2011 the situation declined and one day some friends who were connected to the regime told me that it would be better for me to leave as fast as I could. This is why I went to Lebanon and we continued the puppet videos there. Besides that I did a couple of shows in Beirut. In 2014, I started to work on my first full length documentary film "Home" which I finished in 2015, it dealt with the situation of artists in Syria. In this period, the situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon became worse and worse and my German wife and me decided to migrate again – to Germany, to start again from scratch. Now I am here in Germany, able to continue working as artist and I am able to talk about my experiences I made living now for seven years in exile. This is as well what I was trying to talk about in my last project "Ya Kebir". The central theme of the show is about images and memory of a past and lost life... it's about the difficulty of living in between to worlds... the one here and this other past life which you cannot forget and leave behind you. Everybody who watches this project will understand that the images are shifting between a here and a there, the scenes are fragmented. And this is one of my questions nowadays, what an artist in exile can tell, should tell through his art."

The main subject of all three artists in their work is their current living situation – in exile, although their working approaches and themes differ highly. Mokhallad Rasem who is today an associate artist at the leading Belgian theatre Toneelhuis in Antwerp realises a show in St. Pölten, Austria in late winter 2018. He says: "I am producing at the moment a new show with five women, from Syria, Turkey, Austria and Germany and some dancers. The piece is called "Mother



Song” and it is about motherhood and the strength and resistivity of women. I was recently in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to meet with many women who are mothers and living near borders. I questioned them about what it means to be mothers, how they are living, about their situation – for example as refugee.

And now I am working with the footage I have taken there. Only two weeks ago I came back from my last trip to Syria and Iraq. In my play five fictional women meet at a border and they borrow the real voices of those mothers I filmed at the borders. All have lost something, a country, their home, a close person – like their husband or children. I started to think about this play when my own mother had to leave Iraq and she migrated to the US, to Texas two years ago. But that was only the start of the reflection. Because I make theatre out of the material I collect when researching, filming. On the other hand I am always working on projects which bear reflections or themes of my own biography. But the important thing for me is that the themes I am working on have two sides, a personal and a universal. I try to stretch the personal into the universal, let’s say. Art for me means reading the personality. Take my production “Waiting”: it’s a simple theme and it becomes complex by the different and contradictory perspectives people are throwing on the matter.”

“I think that the personal circumstances I was confronted with had from the very beginning a direct influence on my theatre work”, said Muhaned Al Hadi about his time between Iraq and exile in Syria. “My shifting between genres – from theatre to television and back – and my constant back and forth between the war that Iraq experienced for all that time, and the peace I found in Syria, between the concerns for my theatre projects and the constant concern for my own personal safety and that of my family. This has changed both man and artist.” His situation changed again fundamentally when arriving in France: “Unfortunately those French artists I knew from international festivals from before where not very motivated to help establishing me in the arts world although I offered multiple project ideas and my language skills to work in French. But this didn’t



Mokhallad Rasem: *Body Revolution*, performance. 2018, Toneelhuis, Antwerpen, d: Mokhallad Rasem (source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



Muhaned al Hadi: *Camp*, National Theatre Company of Iraq, 2013, Baghdad (source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



: Mudar Alhaggi: *Your Love is Fire*, Theater an der Ruhr  
 – Collective Ma'louba, Mülheim an der Ruhr, 2017,  
 d: Rafat Alzakout (source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

discourage me. I have continued to find other opportunities to work and so I got the possibility to realise my production “The Smell of Coffee” inspired by Mahmoud Darwish’s “Forgotten As If You Never Were”. It’s a monodrama speaking about the secret feelings and dreams of an old woman sitting alone in her house while a crazy civil war is devastating her country. I have as well worked on

different occasions as actor. But these remain modest working experiences. My dream is it to be able to work as director as I did it before with professional actors and with a financial budget which allows a decent work. But my professional situation at the moment is not as I would have liked it to be. But this will not prevent me from looking further to find new production opportunities like for example in Sweden and Italy where I have worked years before.”

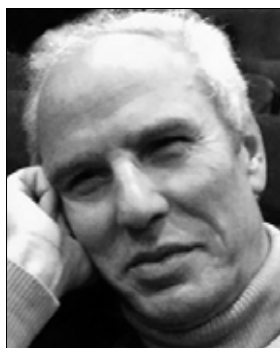
The start into a new theatre career in Europe is probably the toughest challenge for any artist in exile. Rafat Alzakout was happy enough to have the backing of his German wife Christine Lüttich, who describes the first steps of the couple in Germany as follows: “Generally speaking it is a real challenge to set up an independent production in Germany, so I think it was probably not more or less difficult for us than any other independent production to set up. We were coming from the Middle East with a much smaller scene where everybody more or less knows each other. Our first shock though was, when we called people in

October 2015, wanting to premiere in May 2016, that they told us `oh dear, you are so late`. While we thought beforehand that we were very early. The second problem was obviously, that it was a Syrian production with a new Syrian text, with Syrian actors and a Syrian director. Nobody knew us and the theatres are very much used to producing only German language works and not projects in other languages and particularly not in Arabic. We knocked on the doors of so many theatres. Many did not answer, others said, yes that might be a nice `refugee project`. But we wanted to realise a professional project... Syrian professionals, working

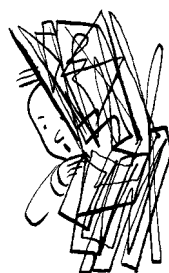


on a professional level and being paid more or less like professionals are paid in Germany. But then we were very lucky, because at least we got the support of the big festival Ruhrfestspiele in Recklinghausen at a very early stage which really helped us to convince other partners to believe in the project. Ruhrfestspiele knew us from before because we were invited there already previously with another project, so they knew us already. This helped us to say we will realise the project anyway, even with very little money. The next problem was, since we had a Syrian cast, none of them was based anymore in Syria, but the community is dispersed over Western Europe, some of the actors were living in France, others somewhere in Germany. So we always had the question how to organise ourselves, where to meet, where to set up the rehearsals. We finally got the help of quite a lot of different partners, but it remained all somehow improvised. So for example we had rehearsals in Paris in four different theatres because each institution gave us a rehearsal room for a week. But this didn't solve the problems which arise in an advanced rehearsal situation when you start to need technical equipment, lights, a stage, but also technicians to give a helping hand. Then again we were really lucky to find Theater an der Ruhr which was adopting this project and gave us a professional framework to produce the show and we were very happy with the result and as well with the reviews."

As well Mokhallad Rasem had difficulties to find a start in Belgium: "At the beginning my life in Belgium was very difficult, because people don't understand you, don't relate to you, don't believe you, don't believe that you are an artist and you don't speak the language of the country yourself. You need time to recreate yourself in the beginning, but I think it just needs time, it takes times for people to start a new life. And this is what I am reflecting in my work. You know, I am working about what is happening with me over here. I am no longer questioning of what happened over there, but I am thinking about my life in exile, or to be more correct I am taking my themes from my life over here and when I am reflecting about my life back over there, like in *Body revolution*, I am trying to reflect the contradictions of what we see in media and how I perceive the reality. So my perspective stays a kind of perspective which is at least partially a European one. I think that is as well the fact that I am already longer in Europe than the newly arrived who are stuck reflecting and working on their home stories, those stories who led them into exile. I am already a step further. Sometimes I really don't see anymore my past life, it's finished. But I try to describe the transformations you can experience when living in exile, which is a better, often a much better situation. It is better to think what is going to come and to try and influence this than to think what has happened. And this is what I speak about with the refugees when I go to refugee centres in Brussels or in Paris or in Valenciennes: You lost your country, your home, you lost your family, perhaps you lost even your children, but you are living, you have a new home, you must create your new life."



MOHAMED MOUMEN



## Dreaming of Chaos – the Theatre of Fadhel Jaïbi



Without doubt, Fadhel Jaïbi can be considered one of the true pioneers of modern theatre in Tunisia and the Arab world. A figurehead of modern theatre, he has taken theatre away from its traditional paths in order to explore new forms and new content. Ever since *The Marriage* (1976), his first production with Nouveau Théâtre and a product of improvisation, this director, who is committed to collective and open forms of creation, has interrogated the everyday myths that move and shake Tunisian society. From the start, his theatre rejected all forms of alibi and utopian (or even atopian) figures, in order to concentrate

on the real, in its current and present dynamics, and to question it. His work does not attempt to evoke a distant past (on the pretext of revising, revisiting or rewriting heritage), but focuses on the present as the only field of interrogation and investigation. Jaïbi's theatre puts present and current realities on trial, it shakes them, it accuses them. It constantly questions and interrogates power in its totalitarian forms, in its tyrannical figures and its degraded or corrupt mechanisms.

It takes many varying, changing forms: marriage and family (*The Marriage* in 1975, *Al Wartha* in 1976, *Arab* in 1987, *Familia* in 93, *Special evening dementia* in 97 and *Jūnun* in 2001), school and university (*The Lovers of the deserted Cafe* in 95), the police and the entire judicial system (*The Instruction* in 1977, *Lem* in 1983, *Khamsoun* in 2008, *Yahiya Yaïch* in 2010), the press and the media (*Gasselet-Ennoueder* in 1980), health and hospitals, psychiatric hospitals in particular (*Comédia* in 1991), music and art (*El Awada* in 1989).

As subjects for questioning and denunciation, these institutions are polymorphous, varied and changing manifestations of power. But beyond the multiplicity and diversity of the 'forms and substance' of its expression (Louis Hjemslev), power is always deciphered and portrayed as a force of injustice, tyranny and oppression. Whether during the Nouveau Théâtreor Familia-Productions period, Jaïbi's plays do not hesitate to tackle and describe power as a source of violence and death. It thus appears only in dark and dysphoric guises, with a sinister and terrifying face. Power, we could say, is the black sun, the dark heart of Jaïbi's theatre. From play Tunisia to play, it is always dramatised and questioned, through constant imbalances, tensions, crises, disturbances, conflicts and confrontations; in short, through madness and chaos. Jaïbi's theatrical imagination really is carried by dreams of chaos.

By obstinately seeking to highlight the absurdity and monstrosity of unjust tyrannical systems, it is ultimately the inhumanity of all 'power relations' that is called into question. In this sense, there is no doubt that the dramatic universes sketched out by Fadhel Jaïbi's plays are essentially political in nature. Nevertheless, from *The Marriage to Al Awada* (Nouveau Théâtre) and from *Familia to Yahia Yaïch* (Familia-Productions), the material does not just expound any simple social thesis. Far from being politically doctrinaire, this theatre is, rather, a type of critical theatre, but which offers an open and very dynamic, progressive and changing, rarely partisan critique. Despite making use of certain procedures vaguely inspired by the principles of epic poetry – although always revisited – it manages to remain distinct from a Brechtian theatre which, extolling political consciousness and engagement, calls for certain forms of indoctrination. Although it agitates, it's careful not to turn into propaganda.

Fahdel Jaïbi's theatrical work is distinguished by its very strong unanimity, which is the basis of its character as a body of work. This unanimity, however, does not prevent us perceiving an indisputable evolution from his first plays to his latest productions. Leaving aside the brief periods spent in regional troupes in Kef and Gafsa, we can distinguish two main periods – two theatrical lives, as it were: the Nouveau Théâtre period (1976–1987) and the Familia-Productions era (1993–2012). The first period is characterised by collective work (or, although rare, jointly-authored work, as with *Arab* in 1987). The creative path taken in the second period is, however, more individual and therefore much more personal.

It's easy to see that Jaïbi's theatrical work, from its beginnings in Familia-Productions, started to abandon the practice, so characteristic of a certain kind of modern theatre, of using a script written collectively on the basis of improvised scenes. Abandoning those textual adventures known as textual scores, from *Familia* (1993) onwards, his script-writing took on a more personal quality. After having been dismissed during the whole Nouveau Théâtre period, the (individual) author seemed to return with force: we were no longer in the era of the death of the author, but in a new age, probably that of the author's resurrection. Authorship and ownership of the text seemed to be rehabilitated.





Jalila Baccar – Fadhel Jaïbi: *Violence(s)*,  
National Theatre of Tunisia, d: Fadhel Jaïbi  
(source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

Apart from the scripts for *Searching for Aïda* (1998) and *Jūnun* (2001), *Araberlin* (2002) and *Khamsoun* (2006) which were written with his partner and favourite actress Jalila Baccar, he established himself as a playwright with *Familia* (1993), *Black out Tunisia* (1993), *The Lovers of the deserted Cafe* (1995), *Special Evening* (1997), *House cleaning* (1998), *Yahia Yaïch* (2010), *Médéa* (2010). Nevertheless, the changes in Fadhel Jaïbi's artistic

work did not only concern the text, they also affected the entire staging, and the evolution here was similar. This change was expressed mainly through the search for new spaces. The theme is typical, if not to say commonplace, in contemporary theatre work. However, and above all else, for Jaïbi this search led to him placing fundamental demands on his stagecraft. It corresponds to his desire for an innovation in theatre that dreams of changing the audience's gaze, of tearing them away from their old passive viewing habits. It's an experiment that strives to make this gaze more dynamic, more active, to make the spectator participate in what is happening on stage. Watching a play means living it in some way. This dramatic and scenographic revolution can only be carried out through experiments with dramatic space (theatres and stages) in order to construct new dramatic places and spaces. However, if Tunisia we had to describe the treatment of space, we would say, in a general sense, that there is a clear preference for small spaces and enclosed or enclosing places, in short for spaces which connote captivity and confinement, imprisonment and the absence of liberty. This poetics of space takes a number of forms but never really undergoes significant or fundamental changes: prison space remains a key element of the dramatic and scenographic imaginary. Physical or moral confinement characterises Jaïbi's dreams. Actors are at the heart of script-writing in this theatre, which fights against all forms and forces that seek to degrade humanity. The actors' performance is what gives Fadhel Jaïbi's work its theatricality. It is what grounds it. Since *Acts without words*, artistic performance has constantly been the object of multiple and different experiments. However, no matter what form it takes, the actor's performance always leads towards that axiom that shapes Jaïbi's truth, morality and aesthetic: taking responsibility for a role is a vital experience. It's an existential and maybe even ontological adventure: to act is to exist, to be. This equation, which establishes an equivalence between living and acting, has been thoroughly tested by Jaïbi in his theatrical career. For an actor, living does not mean identifying oneself with the character, but drawing as close to the character



as possible. This is what explains the massive – although always playful – effort required to construct the characters in Jaïbi's theatre.

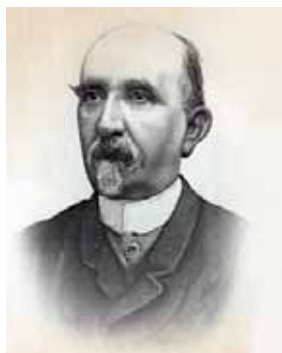
From Comédia and especially Familia onwards, however, these techniques and procedures for drawing close to the character were only loosely practised. It became more a question of assembling the characters. This option finally gained the upper hand amongst Jaïbi's actors. They would from now move towards the role, to travel between the person ('the real being') and the character ('the fictional character'). And so we find ourselves once more, after the age of the actor who lends his identity to the character whilst remaining essentially the same, in the age of the actor who kills his own identity to be nothing more than the other, modifying his own identity as much as possible. In fact, we seem to have reconciled ourselves to the idea of performance as a craft, as technical ingenuity and creative act: performance for its own sake in a very positive sense. Whether it's a matter of drawing close to and building up, of indentifying with or distancing from, the play is always the result of a certain vision of how the actor has been directed. That is and remains at the heart of the performance in Fadhel Jaïbi's oeuvre.

*Translation from French: Karen Tucker*



# The Nose Grows On Those Who Invent Another Language

A conversation between Antonio Latella and Andrea Bajani<sup>1</sup>



Carlo Collodi (1826–1890)

In writing *Pinocchio*, Carlo Collodi gave his own language to Italy. It was returned, given to those who spoke it. That which came from their mouths entered the eyes of the Italian people. This is what we are, said Collodi. Then he created a wooden puppet and a father who said “this is what you must be”. But as soon as he was made, the puppet rebelled. He refused to accept his father’s language and his ABC: his nose pushed ahead of him, and the puppet went in search of a language that was new, which also contained mistakes. “This is what I would like to be”, he said.

The *Pinocchio* staged by Antonio Latella blends words, it creates worlds with language, it undermines it. It brings together scandal and candour, as has never happened before. Don’t lock the dictionary shut, *Pinocchio* seems to cry. Give body to the language, give it love, and only then will it live.

*The version curated by Fernando Tempesti, which you have chosen to use, is preceded by a celebration of the dictionary. Dictionaries are the hangers in which the words are kept when they aren’t flying, when they are resting. Writers, who pilot airliners, take on board an entire nation and its language. Collodi’s *Pinocchio* was the true airliner for unified Italy.*

Collodi’s language is a language which is alive, beautiful. It has body, it is full of expressions which touch on life. The question of language is fundamental in a

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Programma\_PINOCCHIO.pdf

text like this, which speaks of life and death, with expressions which I have tried as much as possible to preserve. You know, I am the son of emigrants, I grew up for the first five years in French Switzerland. Once we came to Italy, it took a while before I started to speak, and I am also dyslexic, something which I found out much later. Therefore, I am also biographically sensitive to the matter. In Pinocchio, the relationship with language is fundamental. It is the discovery that the only infinite thing that mankind has is language. And that we have to carry it. We are particles that carry language.



*Your Pinocchio is an irresistible generator of language, it plays with words, it makes the alphabet dance. It is a beginner in life, and like all children it sabotages the world, making mistakes with grammar, while the adults around defend it with a red pen. Putting oneself in contact once again, as an artist, with the language of infancy means risking banality, while at the same time opening unexpected doors...*

This is what happened, in a completely surprising manner. In working, re-entering Pinocchio, I found myself coming to terms with infancy. It was as though I had decided to forget certain things about myself, as though I had done everything I could to not remember. And it is there that I understood that I could no longer put it off, that I had to face up to my personal Pinocchio, or rather with creation. As I worked, everything gradually started to come out, and this led to a continuous re-writing, which was further modified once the work with the actors began. For example, an unexpected sweetness emerged which took away much of the nihilism of the first drafts. All of this came about while also discovering Pinocchio's suffering. Reading your novel, *Un bene al mondo*, what struck me particularly was the fertility of suffering, how much it can be a true help. This is why your book accompanied us throughout the work.

*Suffering is an ally. In my book, it is a kind of animal which accompanies the child, without which they would not find the strength to change their own situation.*

This is exactly what happens in Pinocchio. That which you manage to do in the book is always keep the two levels together, realism and fable, like in Pinocchio. Suffering becomes creative strength. The ability to discover, through it, that it is possible to transform that which exists. As he gradually discovers the existence of suffering,



Piccolo Teatro Strehler  
dal 19 gennaio al 12 febbraio 2017

# Pinocchio

drammaturgia Antonio Latella,  
Federico Bellini, Linda Dalisi  
regia Antonio Latella



Pinocchio discovers a chance to exist. It is at this point that he begins to ask himself whether he should continue being a puppet or become a boy. The first true pain that he feels is when he discovers that the fairy is dead. In that moment, he cried for the first time, he discovers tears. And it is at that moment that something new opens. It is however a circle of hell: Pinocchio becomes a living being, but he is a donkey and he suffers greatly. It is as though Collodi, at that point, had chosen to make him discover suffering.

*His pain is tied to his condition and his desire for metamorphosis. Or perhaps for simple free existence. Before Geppetto goes to beg a piece of wood from the Masterful Cherry tree, he doesn't exist. In reality it is the call of his father that brings him into existence, that asks him to exist and that throws him into the vortex into which he falls.*

There is a fantastic passage in your novel, in which the father hands suffering to his son and tells him that it is his duty as his son to deal with it. It is monstrous:

a child cannot do it, cannot support it. Geppetto does the same thing: Geppetto lies. This is a fundamental point. Geppetto lies. A puppet son does not exist. He is telling a lie. Geppetto, he who passes for the fragile carpenter, lies blatantly. And at the same time, he says something terrible: he says that he wants a puppet according to his desires, one that can "fence" and let him travel the world, making money. What parental relationship is there



*Pinocchio*, stage adaptation by Antonio Latella, Federico Bellini, Linda Dalisi, of novel by Carlo Collodi, Piccolo Teatro di Milano – Teatro d'Europa, Milano, 2017, d: Antonio Latella (source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



in this? You can't create someone just to resolve your own problems. You have to face up to your black dog and then you can have a son. Even when Geppetto leaves for the New World he says he is off to find Pinocchio. But it seems to me that he is escaping instead...

*Your Pinocchio is a game of upheaval. Geppetto is the opposite of the Geppetto that has been presented up until now. Even Pinocchio, from the quintessence of liars seems to be the only one that tells the truth, creating scandal.*

The wonderful thing is that he is surrounded by people who lie. Lies which he believes. This has been presented in a different way because it was decided that Pinocchio should be used to educate. Instead, his nose does not grow at all for lies, but due to instinct, Pinocchio's irrepressible instinct for life. This is what they wish to clip, in the end. His corporality is unacceptable. But by moving the focus to the lies, they say that this is why his nose grows...

*And yet on stage, performed by Christian La Rosa, Pinocchio has a vitality which is both desperate and very gentle; he is a puppet who fells, through pure instinct, where the reality and the lies are that surround him.*

It took me a long time to find the actor who was to play Pinocchio. And if I don't have an actor I can't even write the script. Then I understood that it was Christian. Because he is an actor who is elegantly, wonderfully Fantozzian. In the sense that you, as an Italian, recognise yourself in him. He doesn't scare you because you recognise his fragilities, you feel they are yours. This is what brings him close to you. Christian is a very contemporary actor: he doesn't survive on repetitions, on clichés, he doesn't carry the weight of studies. He brings a new language to the stage. He is Pinocchio.



Scene from the play  
(source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



Scene from the play  
(source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



PARVATHY BAUL



# Song of the Great Soul

## Baul: The Performer's Path

The Baul is a master story-teller, performer and a good actor too. Both my *gurus*, Sanatan Baba and Shashanko Baba, have spoken to me about their involvement in the *Jatra* (a Bengali folk theatre form). They have told me of professional acting in *Stree Beshas* (female roles). The *Jatra* form of folk dance-theatre became popular from the time of the British. Those days, the actors danced and sung without microphones. The dance and footwork were taught by specialists.

Baul singing is a complete performance; yet it is free from the norms of the conventional ideals of performance and performer. It is even said to be methodless,

free; to sing like a Baul, however, one must go through the rigour of training under an authentic *guru*. The Disciple must perfect herself/himself in each step of learning, and then go to the higher one. The whole process of learning is different from whatever learning process we know about generally. The *guru* never teaches. He says: "Learn from Nature. Nature is our *Pāṭasala* (school)."

The knowledge is imparted slowly and gradually, according to the Disciple's ability to grasp. None of my *gurus* have ever sat with me, not



Sanatan Baba and Parvathy Baul  
(source: hu-hu.facebook.com)

even for a single singing class. They have always said: “Listen carefully while we sing; follow me.” So, most of the time in the evening *satsang*, they sung and I followed them. Yet, my *gurus* were very particular that I must memorise the text very well before I followed them in singing. The text is the most important part in Baul singing. So, one has to spend several hours to correct the pronunciation to let the *Mahajānērpād* flow through them.

In the beginning years, while I went to my *guru* (Sanatan Baba), he did not teach me anything for days. I was impatient, even a little hurt within, because I had taken considerable effort to reach his Ashram. Suddenly one day, he asked me to go with him for a walk. On the way, he started humming a song. He asked me to follow, while we continued to walk. Finally, the humming became louder and louder. By the time we returned, I had memorised a full *Mahajānērpād*, in all its meaning and recitation method.

## The Singing

Baul songs are the expression of their *tatwa*, or the set of guidelines in their inner practices. Baul singing aims not just to produce a pleasant voice or a sweet tune. However, the Baul has to catch the attention of the people to the poetry of the Mahajan. Therefore, they have to train themselves to bring precision to their singing. Again, it is not akin to the precision of classical singing. We do have different use of the *Bhāva* and *Rasa*; but we do not identify them as the *Rāga* in classical music. Rather, it is the inner score of the Baul performer.

The voice of the Baul is ‘one flow’ of song alone, with the *Bhāva*. When a performer handles two musical instruments, sing the poetry and dance at the same time, she/he has to let the song flow. Thus, a Baul makes an uninterrupted meditative journey through each song. The *Bhāva* and *Rasa* which flow through the song is only from the ‘seeing’ in the Baul’s song. That is why the people of Bengal love to listen to the singing, even if the singer’s voice sometimes seems to go out of the pitch, or it cracks with the overflow of *Bhāva*!

## The Dance

The Baul sings and dances. But the dance element is not common to all Baul singers. Dance was inherited from the Vaishnav *parampara*. This dance is learned from the master, because it has a certain way of movement and style. Fakir singers do not dance much; they have a very spontaneous body movement.

The footwork dance of the Vaishnav Baul is known as the *Kartok*. It has two types: *Bej Lagano Nach*, the dance of weaving with different footwork; and the *Bera Pak Nach*, the dance of the bamboo fence loop, a dance with spins. The body movement along with the singing is known as *mudra*.

Though a Baul singer should perfect herself/himself in all these aspects, once she/he starts singing in a performing situation, she/he must forget all the techniques, surrender totally to the spontaneity of her/his inner self. As my masters guided me, the Baul does not sing, the singing arises of itself. The Baul does not dance, the dance occurs. She/he does not play the instrument, it just springs to life.

## Baul the Body Practitioner

The Siddha Yogis take the body as the vehicle. They consider the human body is the only wealth of a human being. They hold bodily desire as the source of unconditional love. Usually, Bauls do not like to speak about the process of the practice. As the *guru* says: Never speak/Of your inner practices;/Be on your alert, always,/Even to yourself.

Generally, we can say that the *sādhana* of the Baul is to grasp the *Aadhar Manush* (The Essential Man). *Aadhar Manush* is also described as *Atol Manush* (One Who is Stable in His Attitude), *Sahaj Manush* (Spontaneous One), *Shonar Manush* (Golden One), *Moner Manush* (The One of My Heart), *Bhaver Manush* (One Who Keeps the Stance She/He has Once Adopted), etc.. To unite with Him is a yogic process. Bauls say that He is present in all humans, the form of *Bindu* (Primordial Source of Semen). To follow the flow upward is the practice of Baul (*Urdhwa Roti*).

The *guru* says that whatever you see in the Universe, you will find it inside your own body. Something which one has not seen with one's eyes, one cannot worship. They call it *Anuman* (Hypothesis), the created miracle word. What is present here, in this body, is *Bartaman* (Present). Bauls are the practitioners of the *Bartaman*.

Most of the Baul practitioners are *Hata* Yogis (practitioners of yogic exercises). Different types of breath-control techniques or the *Pranayama* is a must for all the Bauls. Yet not all *Hata* yogis are Bauls. The difference between other yogic practices and those of the Bauls is that the Baul is a *Yugala Sadhana*, the practice of togetherness. The male and female practitioners together accept the path of denial. They are neither *sanyasins* nor householders. Nevertheless, they have certain ways of communication with both the ways of life.

*Mahājan* says: Follow the custom of people/When you are with people/Open your heart/In the presence of the *Sadguru*.

## Silence

The inner discipline of the Baul practitioners is certainly inherited from the Siddhas of the South India. How and when, we do not know. In our own Ekatara Baul Sangeetha Kalari in Keralam, my Siddha guru of the South visits me almost

regularly. Sometimes, he laughs and sings: *Ete ezhuthiyavan/Ete keduthen;/Pate padiyavan/Pate keduthen;/Manapute udaithavan/Karuve pathen.*

This Tamil saying can be roughly translated as: One who wrote the page/Spoilt the page;/One who spoke the speech/Spoilt the speech;/One who broke the lock of the mind/Saw the essence.

This is exactly what the Bauls mean when they say: If you speak too much of your inner secret, it becomes polluted. In this tradition, the day-to-day material life and the *sādhana* life (the practitioner's inner life) subsist in parallel. The latter is more important, though. In this tradition, for both the male and the female, the retention of the semen is important. It is also known as *Rasa Sādhana*. One who has mastered the *Shahojia Sādhana* is a Rasik.

Piercing the 'four moons' or the *charichandrabhed* is a unique *sādhana* of the Baul. This is different from the *Shatachakrabhed*, piercing of the six lotuses. *Charichandrabhed* is a very discrete subject of the Baul. Usually, according to the practitioner's progress, the *guru* reveals the *sādhana* of this to the Disciple. The type and way the Disciple has to adopt, it is for the *guru* to decide ultimately.

## The Clothing

I have witnessed both my masters spending a lot of time dressing themselves up before going to a *sadhumela*. They are very interested in collecting different kinds of beads. Sanatan Baba, Shashanko Goshai, and Goshai Ma have explained to me that there were no particular costumes for the yogi bards. Some put white cotton material, some wear saffron or a single-cut *hal*. Later, saffron become the predominant type. After India's independence, social changes brought about severe restrictions on movement; so it was essential that Bauls distinguished themselves in dress and demeanour.

Wearing different beads denoting the kind of initiations the Bauls have had has been in vogue, as part and parcel of their attire. The beads, including seeds, stones, special wood, roots, tulasi, rudraksha, bel, hira etc., are a preferred part of their attire. In addition, many Bauls wear transparent crystal beads. Mostly, the costume depends upon the attitude of the performer. The male singer-performers deck themselves beautifully and tastefully in

multi-colored *hals*. They collect pieces of textile from different places, knit them together. This, in essence, is a way to say that all people are one, irrespective of religion, caste or class. Some of them preserve their *gurus'* used garments and stitch them into a *hal*.

The male performers also wear *pak* (turban). Some of them grow their hair long. According to their initiation, they keep or take away their beards. Bauls belonging to Vaishnav practices paint *tilak* (painted sign of the Vaishnavs, starting from the tip of the nose and ending in the upper cortex) on their foreheads with white earth, known as *Braja-mathi* (the soil of Vraj or Vrindavan). This is done in order to mark



the *Rāsa Mandir*, in between the eyebrows. There are 64 kinds of *tilak*. They also wear bangles made of silver; this is to commemorate their *gurus*.

Fakir Bauls usually wear long *hals* of white or black. Some of them go in for green and red. They also wear different beads. Some of them keep their beard and hair. Usually, they do not wear the *pak*. But sometimes they tie a piece of cloth around their head. Some of them paint or mark their forehead. They also wear bangles of different metals.

The female Bauls also used to wear *hal* or a piece of cloth, according to Goshai Ma. They did not wear either a blouse or a full saree. However, from her time onwards, they started wearing a saree of saffron. Now, female performers wear saffron saree and different beads. Some wear multi-coloured *hal*. Some practitioners carry a small shoulder bag, called *Vairagir Jhola* as the symbol of non-possessiveness. Inside the *jhola* will be a collection of tid-bits. They also carry a small coconut shell.

/.../

The Baul songs are written in simple language. The language is colloquial, using regional vocabulary. The poetry is written to suit the song; they are not only poetry. So the pattern of poetry is very rhythmic, with minimum words. Baul poetry is metrical. The images of Baul songs are born out of nature and the simple village life. Through simple objects like the husking paddle, or the potter's wheel or the sweet maker, one is associated with the inner world. Take, for example, one of the *Mahājanērpad*s.

In the void, a *shōjne*  
Bears two mangoes;  
Inside these mangoes,  
A *jām* blossoms.  
A river flows below, meandering,  
Here, the glacier melts  
For unconditional love...



It seems to us that this *Mahājan* has written something very strange. However, these are the ways Bauls express their visions. Sometimes, the *Mahājan* deliberately writes this way, especially when they are talking about inner practices. Even for the seeker of Baul, these meanings are not very clear, until one finds the answer, when the process of finding goes on inside, like a continuous meditation. Perhaps that is the aim: to provoke thoughts. In this poetry, when the Baul talks about the tree, it is about the human body.

Take another:

Even a snake and a mongoose,  
A rat and a cat, enemies otherwise,  
Live, to survive together.  
Seeing, even the dead dance in Joy.

Here, the *Mahājan* is telling us about our *riṭus* (enemies) and *indriyas* (senses) through the image of rat and cat, snake and mongoose. The poem is speaking about the conscious moment of the *sādhaka*. When ego falls, there exists no duality. The dead man is a *sādhaka* who has gone beyond all his senses, and attained the state of *samadhi*, the Ultimate Bliss.

A serpent curls around a huge egg,  
The Universe; Inside the egg,  
Fourteen worlds and the magic market.  
Possessions are bought and sold  
Prices fixed.

The serpent is the Kula-Kundalini; it holds the egg. Inside this egg, after a long process, after 10 months and 10 days, a human body has been created. In the human body, we can find the entire 14 worlds. Now, without more explanations, let's go to the poems themselves.

### Madness, True and Fake

I couldn't find true madness,  
So I didn't become mad;  
I saw fake madness all over,  
I couldn't find a real one.

Some are mad for wealth,  
Some others for glory;  
Some turn mad with poverty,  
Some others for aesthetic forms.

The flavours of feelings,  
Some are mad with love;  
Submerged in attachments  
They see not the truth.

Siva, the maddest of the mad,  
He, the one who drinks poison;  
Rejects elixir,  
Leaving a palace of gold,  
Enjoys abode in a *Shamshān*<sup>1</sup>




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<sup>1</sup> Cemetery

Prahlad is the best among the mad,  
 Heard the name 'Hari,'  
 Lost consciousness,  
 Suffered the bums of fire and poison,  
 Not stopping the chant of 'Hari.'  
 In the age of Kali<sup>2</sup>, mad in Gouranga,  
 The little boy of Sachi won the world;  
 He sang the name of Radha,  
 Disappeared in the dark sea.

*Unknown*



## The Dark, Slithering One

Oh, friend! Have you seen my man,  
 His body slithering like a serpent?  
 Tell me, where can I find him?

I saw him a while ago;  
 Mischievous One.  
 But now he's lost somewhere in my soul,  
 How can I attain this intangible one?  
 Darkest of the dark,  
 His sight to me, is beautiful.  
 His darkness illuminates the  
 Dark recesses of my heart;  
 I desire none but that Black One.  
 Charming his hands  
 Hold the enhanting flute;  
 Steals the hearts of naive women of Vrindavan.  
 Oh, mad woman! Don't hurry,  
 Just retain him, heart's door open.

*Sanatan Das Baul*



*Woodcuts created by Ravi Gopalan Nair and Parvathy Baul  
 (source: Parvathybaul.com)*

<sup>2</sup> Kaliyuga

# Countries and companies that have attended MITEM (2014-2018)

- Austria:** Burgtheater (Vienna, 2015)
- Belgium:** Toneelhuis (Antwerpen, 2018)
- Bulgaria:** Ivan Vazov National Theatre (Sofia, 2014)
- China:** Sichuan Opera Theatre (Chongqing, 2016)
- Croatia:** National Theatre (Zagreb, 2018)
- Denmark:** Odin Teatret (Holstebro, 2015, 2017)
- Estonia:** R.A.A.M.A. (Tallinn, 2018)  
City Theatre (Tallinn, 2018)
- France:** Lest Ateliers Contemporains (Paris, 2014)  
Compagnie La Piccola Famiglia (Rouen, 2015)  
Collectif Kahraba (2015)  
Avignon Festival, L'Union des cntraires (Paris, 2016)
- Germany:** Thalia Theater (Hamburg, 2015)  
Berliner Ensemble (Berlin, 2018)  
Theater and der Ruhr (Mülheim, 2018)  
Collective Ma'louba (Mülheim, 2018)  
Compania Sincara (Leipzig, 2018)
- Georgia:** Vaso Abasidze Music and Drama State Theatre (Tbilis, 2014, 2016)
- Greece:** Polyplanity Company (Athens, 2016)
- India:** The Group of Parvatty Baul (2018)
- Iraq:** National Theatre Company (Baghdad, 2014)
- Italy:** Piccolo Teatro (Teatro d'Europa) (Milan, 215, 2018)  
Sud Costa Occidentale (Palermo, 2015)  
Teatro Potlach (Fara in Sabina, 2016)  
Teatro Tacabile (Bergamo, 2017)  
Jerzy Grotowski and the Thomas Richards Workcenter (Pontedera, 2017)
- Latvia:** National Theatre (Riga, 2014)  
New Theatre (Riga, 2017)
- Lebanon:** Company of Ali Chahrouh (Beirut, 2018)
- Lithuania:** Little Theatre (Vilnius, 2014)  
Meno Fortas Theatre (Vilnius, 2017)
- Macedonia:** National Theatre (Skopje, 2015, 2017)
- Norway:** National Theatre (Oslo, 2014)  
Det Norske Teatret (Oslo, 2017)
- Poland:** Maska Teatr (Rzeszow, 2015)  
Teatr Powszechny (Radom, 2016)
- Teatr Współczesny (Szczecin, 2016)  
Arnold Szyfman Polish Theatre (Warsaw, 2017)
- Republic of Moldova:** Eugène Ionesco Theatre (Kishinev, 2014)
- Romania:** I. L. Caragiale National Theatre (Bucharest, 2014, 2015)  
Radu Stanca National Theatre (Sibiu, 2016, 2017)  
Tamási Áron Theatre (Sepsiszentgyörgy, 2015, 2016, 2017)  
Szatmárnémeti Northern Theatre, György Harag Company (2017)  
Tomcsa Sándor Theatre (Székelyudvarhely, 2018)
- Russia:** Alexandrinsky Theatre (St Petersburg, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018)  
Art Theatre – Studio (Moscow, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017)  
Tovstogonov Bolshoi Drama Theatre (St Petersburg, 2014, 2018)  
Vakhtangov Theatre (Moscow, 2017, 2018)  
Tatar State Drama Theatre (Almetyevsk, 2017)  
Galiaskar Kamal Tatar Academic Theatre (Kazan, 2014)  
P. A. Oyunskiy Academic Theatre (Yakutia, Sakha Republic, 2016)
- Serbia:** Serbian National Theatre (Novi Sad, 2014, 2018)
- Slovenia:** National Theatre (Ljubljana, 2018)
- South Korean Republic:** Jindossitgimgut (Jindo, 2016)
- Spain:** Teatro de La Abadia (Madrid, 2015, 2016)  
Catalan National Theatre (Barcelona, 2016)
- Sweden:** Dramaten – Royal Theatre (Stockholm, 2017)
- Switzerland:** Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne (Lausanne, 2015, 2016)
- Tunisia:** National Theatre (Tunis, 2018)
- Turkey:** National Theatre (Ankara, 2014)
- Ukraine:** DAKH Centre for Contemporary Arts (Kyiv, 2015, 2018)  
Voskresniy Teatr (Lvov, 2018)

“The United States of Europe or a federation of equal European nation states? – this is a topical and poignant question in cultural life as well, shedding a new light on the place, role and current mission of national theatres, too. I firmly believe that we must further explore our national identity within a European context, while remaining open to dialogue with cultures outside Europe. This strategy has already been part of the institution during my leadership and we wish to further strengthen it beyond the stage, in the fields of cultural diplomacy and education.” (*Attila Vidnyánszky*)

“...after the fourth festival, we can say that our practice has proven effective: instead of imposing conceptual thematisation, we prefer to focus on those secret lines of force which provide a true picture of the changing world and the current state of theatre culture through the invited productions year by year. The openness of our philosophy, that it is not only the most famous professional stone theatres which may represent theatrical elite but so are prospering independent companies, has been justified.” (*Zsolt Szász*)

“In Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Soviet Union, some National Theatres, as in Poland and Bulgaria, have continued to thrive and remain important places of experimentation and excellence despite the political, cultural and economic changes since 1989. However, 2002 saw the opening of the Budapest-based National Theatre, which resembles a nineteenth-century building and yet is trying to find a position for itself as representative of the national culture in the twenty-first century (by, for example, inviting theatres around the country to perform in the new playhouse).” (*Stephen E. Wilmer*)

“Sometimes I really don’t see anymore my past life, it’s finished. (...) It is better to think what is going to come and to try and influence this than to think what has happened. And this is what I speak about with the refugees when I go to refugee centres in Brussels or in Paris or in Valenciennes: You lost your country, your home, you lost your family, perhaps you lost even your children, but you are living, you have a new home, you must create your new life.” (*Mokhallad Rasem*)

“In writing *Pinocchio*, Carlo Collodi gave his own language to Italy. It was returned, given to those who spoke it. That which came from their mouths entered the eyes of the Italian people. This is what we are, said Collodi. Then he created a wooden puppet and a father who said «this is what you must be». But as soon as he was made, the puppet rebelled. He refused to accept his father’s language and his ABC: his nose pushed ahead of him, and the puppet went in search of a language that was new, which also contained mistakes. «This is what I would like to be», he said.” (*Antonio Latella and Andrea Bajani*)

