

szcenárium

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A Flash Report on MITEM III

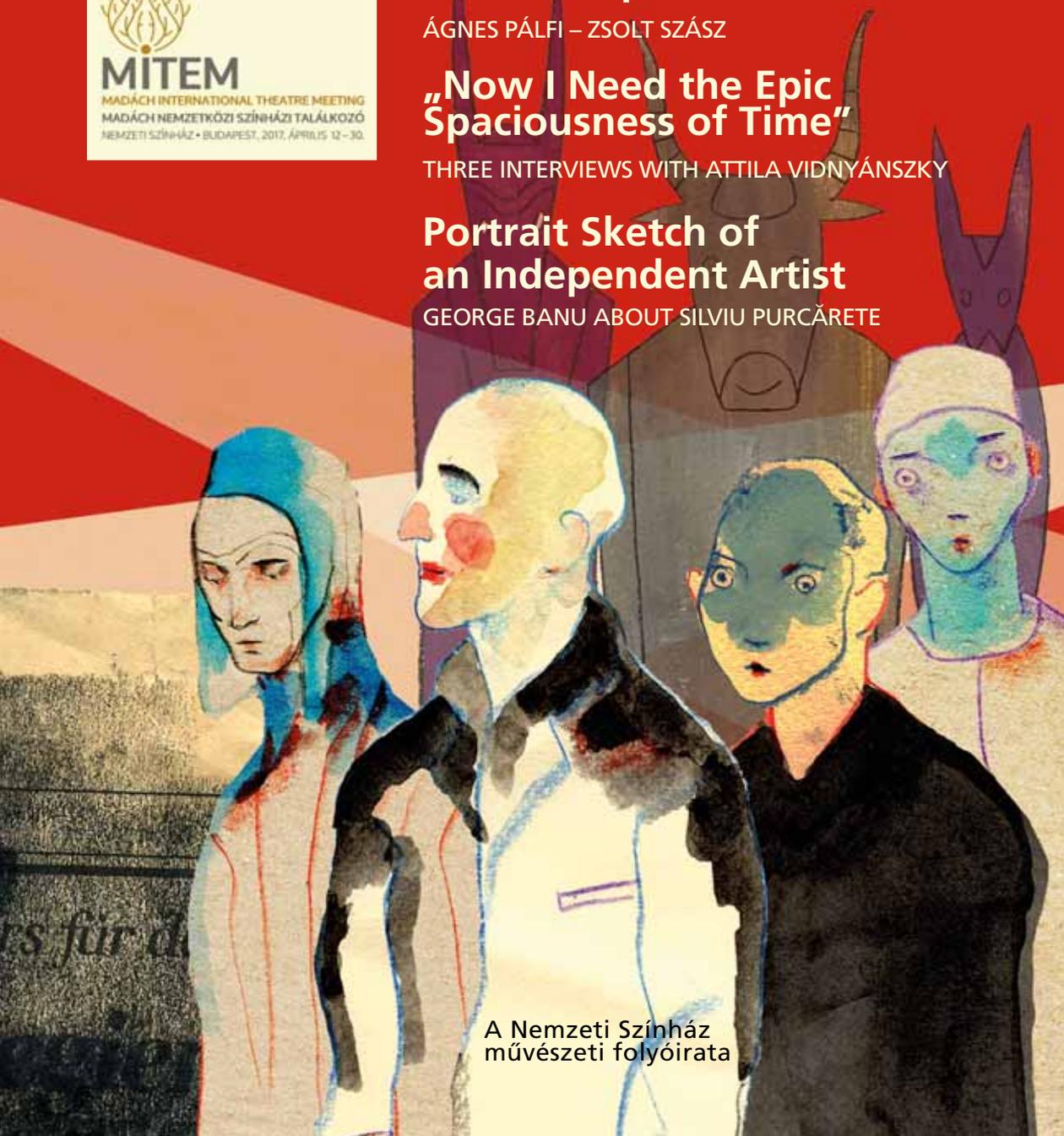
ÁGNES PÁLFI – ZSOLT SZÁSZ

„Now I Need the Epic Spaciousness of Time”

THREE INTERVIEWS WITH ATTILA VIDNYÁNSZKY

Portrait Sketch of an Independent Artist

GEORGE BANU ABOUT SILVIU PURCĂRETE



A Nemzeti Színház
művészeti folyóirata

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Illustration by August von Kreling to Goethe's *Faust*, lithograph, 1873 (source: yandex.ru)

"Grasp the Life of Man Complete!"

inaugural

Goethe: *Faust*, Prelude On Stage

Dear Readers,

You are looking at the first dedicated English-language issue of our journal. We now feel the time has come to offer the outside world a comprehensive image regarding the profile, mission and programme of the festival as well as of the spirit of mental preparation that is mirrored in *Szcenárium*. It was a surprise even to us when it turned out that since the very first MITEM of March 2014 until today we have published no less than 60 articles related to the meeting which can be considered studies in their own right. Some of these have been penned by such internationally renowned authorities as Eugenio Barba, George Banu, Jeanne-Pierre Tibaudat, Beatrice Picon-Vallin or Sebastian-Vlad Popa, but the majority of the articles reflects a Hungarian understanding.

Last year, on the occasion of the third MITEM, we already published a mostly English-language issue concerning the 2015 and 2016 festivals. Its table of contents can be found on the back cover of the current issue and the articles themselves can be retrieved from the English-language MITEM homepage.

With regard to the current issue, we deemed it essential to hold a mirror to ourselves as hosts of the festival. In a three-part series of interviews, the director of the National Theatre in Budapest, Attila Vidnyánszky gives an overview of the current stage of his artistic career and of the present shape of the institution he has been heading for four years now.

Like last year, we also publish a summary of the previous festival's performances. Let us be frank: even though we call this a meeting, the attending companies seldom have the luxury to see all the other performances. This way – at least through this flash report – they will have a chance to get acquainted with one another and have some feedback on how the Hungarian audience (as represented by the two editors) has received their productions.

For the past fifty years, Eugenio Barba has been carrying the message that theatrical practices, despite their diversity, are guided by the same fundamental principles both in the East and West. If we accept that, we must also have the confidence that theatre can be the most effective tool for dialogue among cultures, helping us to avoid a clash of civilisations threatening with a global catastrophe. This threat stems from the inability to communicate through political discourse alone. In our view, this dramatic situation can elevate the mediatory role of the Central European region as a whole and that of Hungary in particular. Our current publication wishes to emphasize that the increasingly prominent presence of major European issues at MITEM signals a welcome step change.

Zsolt Szász, managing editor of *Szcenárium*



William Blake's watercolour illustration of *The Grave* by Robert Blair, 1805 (source: blakearchive.org)



Three Interviews with Attila Vidnyánszky

Stage and film director Attila Vidnyánszky (b. 1964), holder of Kossuth Prize and Meyerhold Prize, has been the director and general manager of the National Theatre in Budapest, since 2013. Prior to that, from 2006 to 2013, he led Csokonai Színház (Csokonai Theatre), Debrecen, and is director to this day at the Beregszászi Illyés Gyula Magyar Nemzeti Színház (Gyula Illyés Hungarian National Theatre, Berehove (UA)), which he founded in 1992. He established the annual festival MITEM (Madách International Theatre Meeting) in 2014, which has by now earned the profession's respect both nationally and internationally. Attila Vidnyánszky has staged some twenty performances over the past four seasons. He dramatised Hungarian literary classics: Tamási, Áron: *Vitéz lélek (A Knightly Soul)*, 2013; Petőfi, Sándor: *János vitéz (John the Valiant)*, 2014; Krúdy, Gyula: *Szindbád (Sinbad)*, 2015; Sarkadi, Imre: *Körhinta (Merry-Go-Round)*, 2015; Weöres, Sándor: *Psyché*, 2015; Vörösmarty, Mihály: *Csongor és Tünde (Csongor and Tünde)*, 2016. He created productions based on historical themes: *Zoltán újratemetve (Zoltán Reburied)*, 2013; *Fekete ég – A fehér felhő (Black Sky, White Cloud)*, 2014; *A Gulág virágai (Flowers in the Gulag)*, 2016; *Tóth Ilonka (Ilonka Tóth)*, 2016. He loves to stage the classics of world theatre and world literature: Claudel – Honegger: *Johanna a máglyán (Joan of Arc at the Stake)*, 2013; Cervantes: *Don Quijote (Don Quixote)*, 2015; Dostoevsky: *Bűn és bűnhődés (Crime and Punishment)*, 2016. The best-performance award at the Pécsi Országos Színházi Találkozó (National Theatre Festival in Pécs) went to the Budapest National Theatre production on Attila, the king of the Huns, *Isten ostora (Flagellum Dei)*, and its director, Attila Vidnyánszky earned the award for best director in 2015. His latest staging beside *Crime and Punishment*, *Csíksomlyói passió (Passion Play of Csíksomlyó)*, can be seen during MITEM, too.

Dialogue with the Spectators

– What were your guiding principles when taking over the National Theatre and where do you stand now?

Some of the principles stemmed from international commitments, others from my belief and yet others from strictly professional, aesthetic convictions. I had the firm belief that the National Theatre is a special place and I still hold that to be true. It is a spiritual place, one that must be home to a part of the national spirituality, where the audience can reassess themselves. This institution is so much more than just another theatre. This also means that we have our duties towards our audience, the countryside, Hungarians in neighbouring countries and the underprivileged regions. But I also have a strong Christian commitment, one that I must represent in a turbulent Europe that is losing its faith and convictions. This requires openness, courage, lack of bigotry and fortitude at the same time. There are many corollaries to this. I believe in a theatre that is willing to tackle major issues guided by noble thought and also evoking strong sentiment, looking for specific national ways of expression, our unique intonations and rhythms. The past period and our successes have proven that such a direction is indeed possible.

– What do you believe to be your biggest success thus far?

Primarily the fact that we managed to find our place in Budapest. This is not an easy city to conquer: it is obviously home to many kinds of people and its basic state of mind is quite different from the one radiating from our theatre. The theatre-going people of Budapest have grown up to a different way of thinking than the one we wish to promote. This also means that we have to raise our own audience base and this has to be done cautiously, without alienating the existing audience. It would be very easy to simply accept that I am misunderstood and that the audience is incapable of embracing my kind of theatre. Any artist can easily say that about their audience. For that you don't have to make or lead a theatre. We have to carefully guide the audience, convince them and increase their numbers. I am actually quite proud that the model envisioned by me seems to be working. We have to expand our presence and become a true theatre for and of the nation. This also means that we have to host a large number of productions which, honestly, is a significant burden. It would be much easier to only promote our own productions rather than those of theatres in the countryside or beyond the borders. But I remain committed to this course, even if I have to fight my own colleagues to do so. The other side of this undertaking is that we have 30 to 40 performances away from home including one-person shows, spanning the Hungarian language space from Targu Mures (ed – in Romania) to Beregovo (ed – in the Ukraine), from Vasvár to Nyíregyháza. We

have a presence that we wish to enhance further. We have also undertaken – at a significant cost and effort – to bring the countryside audience to the National. Currently they represent 10–15 percent of the audience but I could easily imagine 20 to 30 percent. These things are quite important and the last period has confirmed that the system is viable. We also have the MITEM (ed – international theatre festival), a huge success in the rather parochial Hungarian theatre world that has not had such a festival previously. It is fair to say that due to this gathering Budapest is becoming a major theatrical centre for the last two of every April. Proof of that is that this year we will be hosting seven of the world’s twenty most famous directors. The audience has also taken to it and we are no longer apprehensive of hosting a major international production only to have a half- or quarter-house. All but two of last year’s performances had a full house and I couldn’t enjoy some of the plays myself because I handed out my own tickets and watched the performance from the technical room. I am also proud of our cooperation with the University of Kaposvár in training the future generation of actors. Their students are an integral part of our productions, gain invaluable professional experience and we try to infuse them with an emotional and intellectual openness to raise thinking people who also have a backbone. I consider it of particular importance that they shouldn’t grow into conformists without personal values, but rather bright-eyed, thinking young artists. This approach to artistic education is also a success I am proud of. Sure, there are also many things that don’t work as they should.

– *How unified is your company?*

We do share the same views in some fundamental issues. I don’t, however, think that I should standardize my environment: the world isn’t like that and diverging ideas can contribute to expanding our views. We certainly have a set of basic principles that are clearly displayed in our repertoire. Regardless, we must stay open-minded. The theatre – just like our country – has many different people. Someone once made a tally and found that we have people in eighty different professions, from “top intellectuals” to simple labourers. They all pull in the same direction and all of them are needed for our institution to remain functional. They may all have their own thoughts and feelings but we can still march in the same direction even if I’m aware that we don’t necessarily share the same views with regard to fundamental national issues. This has to be accepted and I don’t insist on every single employee sharing my point of view.

– *What is it that the audience likes most? What are their favourite productions?*

Spectators come in many flavours and we may not even have a congruent audience. The director of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Cyrano* (ed – the Georgian director) David Doiashvili has his own fan base. The same is true for (ed – Russian director) Victor Ryzhakov some viewers are particularly fond of his style and this year’s *Részegek (The Drunks)* is already sold out. Yet other viewers are partial to our performances reflecting our basic national philosophy, such as *János vitéz (John the Valiant)*, *Csongor és Tünde (Csongor and Tünde)*, *Vitéz lélek (A Knightly Soul)* or *Tóth Ilonka (Ilonka Tóth)*. We have one viewer who has seen *Mesés férfiak*



Sándor Petőfi: *János vitéz (John the Valiant)*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2014, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

szárnyakkal (Fabulous men with wings) twenty times. Sándor Zsótér is yet another director with his own followers who only come here to view his productions. An audience does not necessarily have to be homogenous. I would like to have spectators who appreciate our efforts for a dialogue with them – even if these efforts are not always successful. I think we have already gained a measure of confidence.

– *What about your short-term plans?*

Operationally, this theatre is running at full tilt, to the point where it would be almost impossible to assume additional duties. We are in the process of employing six students from my class at the University of Kaposvár and we will also have interns from the class below them. They will form a “commando”, if you want, a group who will travel the country by minibus with performances that can be played anywhere, such as *János vitéz (John the Valiant)* and *Csongor és Tünde (Csongor and Tünde)*. This initiative should be launched by May, while the second play should be ready by autumn and *Az ember tragédiája (The tragedy of man)* towards the end of the next season. I hope we can conquer the Carpathian Basin. The other elements of our programme are already well-oiled. We are also making inroads in expanding our international connections: this March we will perform *Tóth Ilonka (Ilonka Tóth)* in München, embark on a Transylvanian tour, in June we are due in Italy and later in Sibiu (ed – Romania). We also have invitations from Estonia, St Petersburg and Moscow.

Interview by Vera Prontvai

Broadcast on Mária Rádió on March 20, 2017

Translated by Dénes Albert

“Now I Need the Epic Spaciousness of Time”

– In the previous season you have staged “the great narratives” of narrative epic with both plays you directed. Besides Don Quijote (Don Quixote) and Szinbád (Sinbad) by Krúdy, Psyche by Weöres may be listed here, which – in similar fashion to the previous two encompasses a historic age and may be read as a story about fate or a novel. But even in the National Theatre’s repertoire there are more and more theatrical adaptations of novels and short stories (see the Szeszélyes nyár /Summer of Caprice/ by Vančura production, and 6 /Ward No 6/ by Chekhov which is also a production based on a reading experience). How would you explain this? How can the theatre benefit from the productions of such great works which also require quite a lot of intellectual investment?

Theatres are continuously looking for texts and topics, the hic et nunc relevant ways for expression. And probably this is the main reason why we turn to these great literary achievements because these days there are not many really significant new texts. Contemporary authors do not address theatre audiences in either a very shallow, lurid way or by contriving intellectual acrobatic stunts, they do not really reach the directors’ hearts. Meanwhile there are some miracle-works, which force a man to express himself, his environment, his feelings about life through them. There are no consciously thought-out, simple concepts through which these epic works attract attention, but they demand to be performed by their own power.

– This summer I started to read five or six contemporary pieces but I soon gave up dealing with them. As they either have a superficial, didactic pathos with a negative slant or they may try to affect people in a humorously sly way as if they were intellectual plays of some kind. There is no strong impulse, genuine, profound passion, there are only boring and repetitive clichés. At the same time when one gets engrossed in these great works they may give the impression that they have managed to deal with a mystery and find the essence of it. It is extremely hard to cope with them, now I am facing this challenge when staging *Crime and Punishment* in St Petersburg. Nonetheless, such works may offer so much that even if the end-product is different they still remain much more exciting. And I hope that they are more exciting for a certain part of the audience as well than if I staged a well-done and popular or humorous contemporary play.

– Is it possible to relate to the great classics as contemporary, as it was suggested by the slogan of MITEM (“the great classic writers are our contemporaries”) this year?



Theatre poster for *Crime and Punishment*, St. Petersburg, (source: spb.carpediem.cd)

Certainly. Actually I will never understand how it can be an issue if a work may become contemporary or up-to-date. For instance Dostoevsky will always remain a contemporary author and so does Cervantes in a certain sense.

– *Our theatre is still held responsible for how these productions may contribute to our every day lives.*

They actually add to our lives what is most essential. And here is the misunderstanding, or to be more precise the idiotic idea of some leading voices in the profession that making a contribution to our every day lives means lowering the standard of expression to the level of the daily media. I am not in favour of this kind of “up-to-date” theatre and have no intention of directing it.

– *Can the information explosion in our world be the reason why the contemporary authors have lost their sense of direction and as a result they feel that the old style of writing is not suitable for this new world? And also, do they just feel that the great classics are just too slow for the current pace of life?*

But Shakespeare does keep up with the pace of life today. This is indeed the paradox. And it thrills newer and newer generations.

– *Is the reason for this that in his plays there is always an absolute protagonist, especially in the great plays about kings who may always seize young creators’ imagination, as it has happened with the new *Richard III*,¹ which was staged this year.*

But the younger generation also dust off Chekhov plays again and again while they do not centre around one hero. What can be the reason? Because they may say something about human beings and the human soul that is still relevant. Something that is permanent, that will not change. In spite of the information explosion reading through a novel by Dostoevsky is still gripping today. Because his sentences are still valid. There is no part about which I would say that although it is well-written, it sounds old-fashioned. All of his sentences are so up to date. But I feel the same about *A krokodilus* (*The Crocodile*), which I did not know before, it will be staged as a production by

¹ *III Richard* by Shakespeare was staged on 13 July 2016 in the event of the Shakespeare Festival in Gyula (Director: Attila Vidnyánszky Junior, Title hero: Zsolt Trill).

Fokin at the National Theatre in the autumn. This short story is also very fresh and crisp.

– *At the beginning of this conversation you have mentioned that it is extremely challenging to stage these epic works. They require a completely different background and set of artistic skills on both the directors' and the actors' parts.*

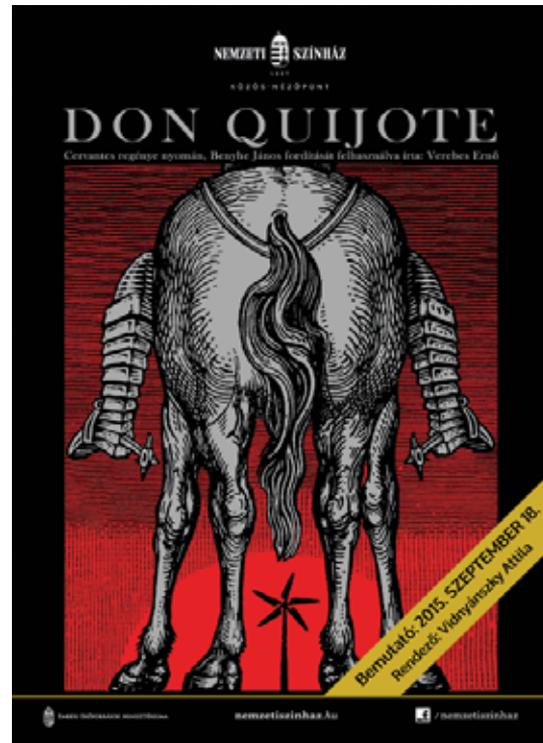
Time proceeds in a completely different way in a novel than it does on stage. I had a cathartic experience when I was directing *Don Quixote*. What I had to realise was that one is looking for the truth of a situation the same way as Cervantes did and narrated, then on stage it becomes dead and simply will not work. It is a fascinating thing because on the other hand Dostoevsky's dialogues still function the same way as he wrote them. If someone figures out how to address something, if their analysis manages to reach the heart of the situation, then the text works almost unchanged on stage. However,

I would not say the same in connection with Krúdy's or Cervantes' works. But the question of time – the difference between stage time and novel time – is also an issue with Dostoevsky. This Raskolnikov-novel with its six or seven hundred pages, until one has worked through all of its subplots, and reaches the climax confronting the protagonist is a huge adventure, volume is needed for it. Now I am preparing a six-hour adaptation in St Petersburg. Even in the very first minute it was questionable if I should deal with the novel as a whole or would rather need to focus on a “flash” giving a perspective to the whole story. At the beginning of the rehearsals it was very difficult for me to make up my mind. But eventually I decided that then I needed the whole story. It is also possible that some time somewhere a fifty-minute performance will be staged too. But now I need the epic spaciousness of time. For a long time I used to resist the temptation to tell classic stories on stage. But now I

need Raskolnikov's full perspective, everything that he has lived through.

– *The question is if in a repertoire-theatre there is enough time for the actors' to study the basic literary works to be staged in due depth.*

Of course, there is not, never has been. The rehearsal process is not long enough, either. It is quite understandable that Stanislavsky only let the critics see the show after the tenth or thirteenth performances. Any audience may come,



István Orosz: Theatre poster for *Don Quixote*, National Theatre, Budapest

but he requested, that critical comments may only be made on the play after a certain number of performances. In the adaptation of *Isten ostora* (*The Flagellum Dei*) when László Mátray as Attila acted in Kazan during a guest performance he did it completely differently than on the debut of the play a year before. Therefore even a certain number of performances is required – on condition that the whole production has a good grounding-so that it could be as effective as possible. Should there be any problems with editing, as when *Sinbad* was staged, one is forced to change: I would like to make changes in this production and would shift it to January next year to a smaller stage. Because when an actor is on a larger stage he is inhibited from proper realisation of the role. – To reach this point in fact a much longer rehearsal period is needed. Now in St Petersburg we have been allotted nine weeks for the rehearsals, which sounds like a lot compared with the six weeks we normally have in Hungary. But for the Russians even this nine-week period sounds unusually short. Time is never enough, yet, three, four, five performances are needed for a production to wing its way.

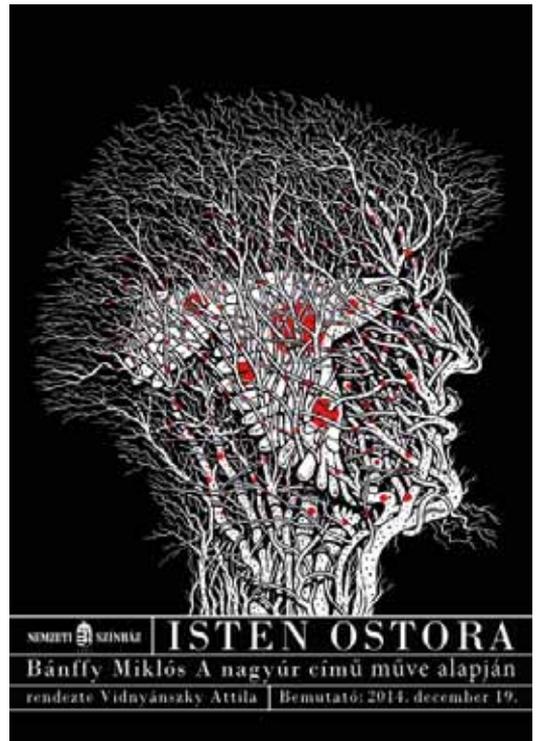
– *The Weöres production directed by you was exceptional as the cast had almost a year to come to terms with it. Furthermore, for your students it was a learning opportunity at the same time.*

But it does not compare with my other current directions for this reason either. Previously we had been working for a long period of time on productions like the *Szarvassá változott fiú* (*The Boy Changed into a Stag*) or *A három nővér* (*The Three Sisters*). The one year we spent on *Psyche* with the company was primarily about making the actors feel the poem. Make them feel that in a story inspired by a poet requires a different sort of existence on stage, walking and breathing are also different. My students managed to understand this more or less, some did better than others.

However, it was not the preparation of the production itself that lasted for a year, but the education of the cast. The production was staged within a relatively short time, as it had been prepared very well.

– *It is a completely different case when independent poems are recited in a performance as parts of a story than when the actors are playing in a poetic drama.*

But for instance Chekov requires a different kind of thinking. Different etudes are needed. – My students started to work on *Psyche* at the very beginning as if it were a Gorky or Ibsen play. And it did not result in any good. This is a completely



István Orosz: Theatre poster for *Flagellum Dei*, National Theatre, Budapest

different system that many people do not understand. I often experience crazy unprofessionalism in this respect when critics attempt to criticise what is on stage from the point of view of a different system. This is a disaster. I also had to reset my students' brains which took me many months by the time I began to feel that well, this is an etude, the kind of music, the sort of voicing of the different lines that brings the essence of the work to the surface. I lived through this to a certain extent when directing *The Boy Changing into a Stag* too in Beregovo. The first rehearsal in 1998 (?) ended up with a failure: we had been rehearsing for four months when I admitted that it was not worth continuing. I only resumed the whole thing five years later and then the production was staged.

– *In my view this workshop activity helped you develop your language in directing whose codes you would like to share with your students. But my question is how in the past three years the current troupe of the National Theatre has been able to identify with your idea that it is not the individual actors but rather the company as a whole that is actually able to create a valuable art theatre.*

This is very difficult. And in ninety per cent of cases one tends to give it up and just gives instructions. So *Don Quixote* is not the end-product of a great common brainstorming, and this is why I am missing something from the production. While in this case I tried to work in a different way for the first time. Do not misunderstand me, during the direction of *The Flagellum Dei* I also gave instructions. I did not even ask the actors to think together with me. What I enjoyed is that my actors had confidence in me. By the end of the play they understood the intention behind these instructions. In case of *Don Quixote* there was a different situation: I spent a month on making them work together. But in vain.

– *But what is the reason for this? Is it the same as the attitude taken by the critics?*

Yes, indeed. Different education as well as the repertoire-theatre context, which turns the theatre into a factory. In such a situation one keeps looking for points to break free. Some actors are still willing to embark on some adventure with you, however, the majority has been educated to serve this factory. Anyhow, I truly believe that even within this factory existence there are still situations in which we can rise above this industrial production process.

– *In an interview at the beginning of the nineties Vasilyev is talking about Hungarian theatres having no educational background, which astonishes him as in spite of this fact he has met actors with significant achievements.*

The origin of this is in our character. Hungarians are great material to become actors. But it is very difficult to put it in words how it is related to education.

– *Obviously Vasilyev takes his own Russian point of view. Today you are staging Dostoevsky in Russia, which offers an opportunity for comparison of actors' mentality. In the background of the Russian school there is a century of avant-garde experiments and theory. I assume that a Russian actor finds it easier to have brainstorming sessions with a director.*

In spite of all revolutions in the theatre Russian actors' education is still based on the Stanislavsky method. Up to the present they still start with the

situation and insist on looking for it. It is not the script that arranges the stage but the situation, a conflict. This is fundamentally different from what we have in Hungary where the script organizes the space and everything is built on the text. This is typical of at least the majority of theatres, besides, there has been a great number of changes in the past fifteen years. Russian actors focus on the situation, while always looking for a real situation. This difference is very exciting. While Hungarian actors continuously turn to the audience, and it is very difficult to make them act like partners, it is rather the opposite with the Russians: I can hardly get them to face the audience as they constantly focus on their partners, I have to direct them to turn to the audience sometimes. Russian actors always want to stick to a real situation in the theatrical space.

– *According to this the Hungarian theatre has not even got as far as the acquisition of the Stanislavsky-method?*

Yes, indeed, it is exactly what I realized some ten-fifteen years ago. Because according to Stanislavsky it is made clear who wants what and why and how they want to take part in a certain situation before actually dealing with the script. This is followed by the etudes and only then comes the text. Hungarian actors may not be independent of the script until they have memorized it; they are unable to break away from it. Only then can they focus on interpreting which of course may take them to the true message of the situation. But this is a different style of direction. I either start with the script and look for the situation, or the other way round, and then I say: here is a set of ideas, a conflict, and it may culminate in such and such contexts.

– *But besides the Stanislavsky school the Russian theatre may be characterised by brave experiments with forms. And I suppose that Russian actors are rather more familiar with these than their Hungarian counterparts.*



M. J. Lermontov: *Masquerade. Memories of the Future*, Alexandrinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, 2014, d: Valery Fokin (source: gazeta.ru)

Even in Russia the majority of theatres are conservative, classical, traditional and narrative theatres. But it is indubitable that Russian actors are more familiar with several more traditions and styles. Now I am working in a theatre that is “the theatre” in Russia.² It is fairly well-balanced with no extremes. In the 2016 jubilee production of *Carnival*, Fokin tried to present what the traditional Russian theatre is like, and how this theatre relates to reformist trends. This is the main reason why I would like to bring this special performance to Hungary to enable our audience to see it. The Russian theatre is amazingly rich, one can witness the greatest variety of extreme effects in it. There are even some absurd workshops which dare from time to time to explode walls. There are some extremely talented actors at the Aleksandrinski Theatre who represent the classic Russian theatre. I just need to mobilize and activate them somehow. Some of them are more open-minded, some others are less. I would like to tune them into what my ideas are like about the production with the costumes, too. Raskolnikov’s mother, Puhleriya Pavlovna has a 19th century costume. With the actor’s play I would like to communicate how we can reach the current scenes. For instance Svidrigajlov is a modern person to the core. The way he works in this performance represents modern theatre for me. For instance his performance is similar to how Zsolt Trill acted in *Ancestors*: his gestures, words, movements and the music together were making an impact on the audience. In my concept Raskolnikov holds together the actors and the different styles like an axis.

– *Perhaps the most extraordinary production of MITEM this year was also staged by the Aleksandrinsky Theatre: The Raven by Gozzi was directed by Nikolay Roshchin and in this performance he showed off the whole spectrum of Russian avant-garde theatre.*³ *When we were composing the relevant paragraph about this in our report about MITEM*⁴ *we were watching the film about the adaptation of the play in St Petersburg, too. Based on the elemental reactions of the audience my impression was that this theatre addresses not only the so-called “elite” theatre but also functions as a true peoples’ theatre.*

The audience in St Petersburg is believed to be more reserved and conservative than in Moscow. Besides this the reception of the production was really very good. The theatre managements there welcome young and experienced directors with their own styles and working methods. This is how Roshchin ended up in this classic world of theatres, as well as Andrey Moguchy

² The Alexandrinsky Theatre established in 1756 was the first professional Russian language theatre. It has been in this current building since 1832. The new wing opened in 2013 was inaugurated with Attila Vidnyánszky’s production based on *Crime and Punishment*.

³ About the production see Ágnes Kereszty: *Morbid történetek – 21 századi köntösben (Morbid Stories – in 21st Century Disguise)*, Scenárium, 80–89, May 2016

⁴ Ágnes Pálfí – Zsolt Szász: *Ez egy valóságos színházavató volt!* Gyorsjelentés a harmadik MITEM-ről (*It Has Been a Real Inauguration of Theatre*. A Flash Report on MITEM III, 41–60, May 2016 Scenárium

in former times, which shows Fokin's greatness as a director. He is open to new approaches while he navigates the ship of the theatre with a firm hand.

– *The situation in Hungary is not so rosy at all. The reform trends at the National Theatre are received in a hostile way mostly by even theatre professionals as this is proved by debates at this year's POSzT. On the other hand, what you said at the end-of-the-season meeting is that the audience is getting accustomed to this new style. Where are we in reality in this respect?*

I have already given up trying to convince the professionals or the critics. My interest is that the number of our theatregoers should increase year to year. So that there will be more of those who comprehend and appreciate authors like Doiashvili or Purcărete, and the kind of theatrical language which is represented in the repertoire of the National Theatre by the most outstanding foreign directors. But our most important objective is to work out our very own Hungarian theatrical language.

– *Obviously the pre-requisite of this is that the company should feel responsible for this programme.*

It is mainly the younger generation who can identify with this. There are two such graduating classes in Kaposvár (Translator's note: it is the capital of Somogy County in South-West Hungary, famous for its theatre), which were educated in this new way. Péter Uray and I certainly have a good ten to twelve students who may be suitable. I have been waiting for a new radical generation for a decade; and now there are some actors in their late twenties and early thirties who are



Eugenio Barba during ISTA 6, in 1990 (photo: Fiona Bemporad, source: odinteatret.dk)



J. W. Goethe: *Faust*, Radu Stanca National Theatre, Romania, 2007, d: Silviu Purcărete (source: citynews.ro)

worth paying attention to. I would be very pleased if the National Theatre were in the forefront of discovering their talent. My pupils are very gifted, in three or four years they have got used to this new language, they feel more comfortable using it.

– *Their educational system also contributes to their approaches as during their training they gather more experience on stage and with various styles of direction. But in connection with this let me bring up one more topic. The novelty of this year's MITEM was the opening up towards oriental theatrical traditions. Productions from those cultures led to a reinterpretation of the relationship between tradition and modernity. What impact may this broader horizon make on this Europe-centered theatrical approach? How may this openness to world theatre affect the next MITEM?*

This kind of admiration of oriental theatres could already be witnessed fifty or sixty years ago and it revolutionized the European theatre. There is a good reason why we like Eugenio Barba and connect to what his generation achieved by finding out more about different cultures. This is actually MITEM's mission to have the Hungarian audience acquainted with productions brought from distant corners of the world that have never been staged in Budapest before. But it is not only about guest appearances but we would also like to encourage closer co-operation: besides Barba we are having talks over a co-production with the world-famous director Tadashi Suzuki. I would be delighted if this unfamiliar oriental theatre were always present in our theatre. But this would not mean at all that we should give up the expressions and traditions of our own theatre. MITEM's mission implies not only the facilitation of familiarisation with different cultures but also the presentation of the most excellent achievements in Europe, which may make an impact on the creators of theatre, primarily on the mindsets of the young.

Interview by Zsolt Szász, published in Szenárium, September 2016

Translated by Anikó Kocsis

“...We are Now Witnessing a Welcome Change in Pace”

– When we spoke last August, it was before the St Petersburg premiere of *Crime and Punishment* on September 10. This was closely followed by two other major directions by you at the National Theatre. The premiere of *Tóth Ilonka* (Ilonka Tóth) was in Warsaw, on the 60th anniversary of the 1956 anti-Communist uprising, on October 23, 2016. The premiere of the *Csíksomlyói passió* (Passion Play on Csíksomlyó) was on March 10 this year. These topics seem unrelated: the first is the theatrical adaptation of a classic novel, the second is a contemporary docudrama, while the third is a contemporary mystery play based on 18th century school dramas, the latter staged in cooperation with the National Dance Ensemble. Is there a common theme to these sweeping narratives? What were your current preoccupations that motivated these choices?

The answer is not an easy one, because these major topics are only linked within me, or more exactly my past. The parallel between the Dostoevsky-novel and the *Passion Play on Csíksomlyó* is rather more evident: both are stories of human path-finding, including my personal one. Reaching for the skies from the horrors of sin in the case of *Crime and Punishment* and the hope for redemption of a sinful world in the *Passion*. Both are essentially stories of Jesus, of the crucifixion.



Csíksomlyói passió (Passion Play of Csíksomlyó) adapted from 18th-century Franciscan school dramas and *Passion* by Géza Szöcs, National Theatre, Budapest, 2017, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



F. M. Dostoevsky: *Bűn és bünhődés (Crime and Punishment)*,
Alexandrinsky Theatre, St Petersburg, 2016, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (source: en.alexandrinsky.ru)

I can even find a link to Ilonka Tóth: martyrdom. But it was not an intentional choice to have these three productions side-by-side within the same season. There were other, inscrutable factors at play, unrelated to my person. I think that both myself and our theatre has now reached a level of confidence required to stage the *Passion Play on Csíksomlyó* and to tackle the issue of 1956 at this level.

– I came to roughly the same conclusion, but regardless: what is the importance of the sacrifices of Jesus, Raskolnikov and Ilonka Tóth?

First of all, everyone walks its own path. Every human has the opportunity to redefine himself again and again. Try to understand our inner motivations and reshape ourselves through that. They also say that the subject of one's art is oneself. This certainly seems to apply to me. On the other hand, if the intent is not gratuitous, then you want to address the world, do something with it and for it – in a narrower interpretation for the audience that feeds you, within which you must exist. These three topics also have commonalities in this sense. It also elucidates the source of self-sacrifice in humans. Here I would like to mention that just today I saw the premiere of my son's play about the life of (ed: prominent 19th century Hungarian poet) János Arany, which – shockingly – deals with the exact same topic. So the issue is in the air. We have been toiling with ourselves for seemingly interminable decades, which begs the question: did we not overlook to cater for the audience? Did our self-centred existence really overrule everything else? I now seem to perceive a revival of notions such as nation and folk.

– I also have the impression that the audience has a renewed sensitivity for a community approach. But is it still true what (ed: 20th century Hungarian poet) Attila



Andor Szilágyi: *Tóth Ilonka (Ilonka Tóth)*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2016, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

József said, that “the nation is the common inspiration”? Can theatre actually appeal to the mythical and historic memory of a nation?

It certainly can. Because if it were not, we could only spin our tales in a very meagre way and advance in the dust in a primitive, pedestrian manner. Maybe today’s generation no longer understands many things, as if it had forgotten things, symbols and gestures of importance. But those are still there, infused somewhere in the depths of our souls. Just like with birds, whose souls know where they must fly.

– We are talking about our inner compass that works even without deliberation.

Exactly. And if we speak the truth with due humility and openness, than these inner reference points will reveal themselves. And things will work, even if not on a conscious level. Halas, on a community level we lost many contributing factors.

– Could we perhaps say that these major topics are being tackled and put on scene exactly in order to restore this kind of sensitivity?

I firmly believe that this sensitivity is still there in each generation. Case in point is the recently mentioned Arany-premiere, that evokes the milestones of the poet’s life in thirteen scenes. I have seen that children in their mid-teens will follow the play in silence, with rapt attention. They can be exceptionally quiet if they feel that they are really being honestly approached, that the actors on the stage are dead serious, that what happens is not just pointless exercise. The audience dumbed down by the idiotic soap operas on commercial television will come to the theatre, they will attune themselves and be touched. At such times I feel that all is not yet lost.

– In one of his diary entries Dostoevsky wrote that “the whole nation is the church”. I think what he was suggesting is that a real community is necessarily a cult community – and I believe that this concept applies to all three plays at hand.

Functional communities are invariably held together by their cult. Even families, even we look beyond the mundane. They also need reference points, rituals, relational networks that must be kept functional; otherwise the very concept of families and their cohabitation would be rendered meaningless. Yes, Dostoevsky nailed it. And as this bond loosens, as the world loses faith the larger community, the nation will also inevitably falter and crumble to dust.

– *You recently said that the mission of the National Theatre first became evident and clear to everybody in this season (including the play about St Francis, God’s Comedians). What did you mean by that?*

It could be said that we should have more clearly stated out intentions and direction from the very beginning. Even though our first season was launched with *A Knightly Soul* followed by *Joan of Arc at the Stake*. But I really believe that the company has now reached maturity. We already have a growing core audience. Our weekly attendance is above 90%, which is quite good. Our audience is not here for light entertainment, some of them are willing to feel, believe and think with us. This is also why our core mission has become evident by the fourth season.

– *This mission does also include successful productions that are different from your way of expression.*

Yes. (ed – Georgian director David) Doiashvili speaks an altogether different artistic language and his grandiose *Cyrano* has found its own fans. (ed – Russian director Victor) Ryzhakov’s theatre of words also works along different lines. But what we all have in common is that we all tackle classic and major issues with courage. We don’t just give hints about what we mean but make definitive statements, take up positions in accordance to our values. And this is very important.



Áron Tamási: *Vitéz lélek (A Knightly Soul)*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2013, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

– In light of the current season, how would you rephrase the mission of the theatre – and within it, that of the National Theatre? With relation to your 2012 application (ed – for the position of managing director), what areas would you underline?

I probably wouldn't make substantial changes. In truth, the years since have reinforced my conviction that the principles we committed to paper in 2012 are sound. These are fundamentally the same ones already written down during my Debrecen period and the first bid for the National Theatre position in 2002. Namely, we wish to build bridges and offer faith in a world that treats everything with irony and cynicism. Partly due to our own efforts, the constraints for conformity in Hungarian theatre that stifle creative energies are no longer as imposing as they used to be. Our international orientation and openness may even be followed.

– What is the relationship between the philosophy of the National Theatre and the productions of this year's MITEM?

We essentially invite theatres that take themselves seriously. They may not all share our values, but they firmly believe in the theatre's role in shaping societies and communities, they believe that theatre can influence the medium they live in and they also take theatrical art seriously. They tend to both refer back to the great theatrical innovators and bring in new ideas, possibly seeking synthesis.

– It seems that this year national classics are major European topics are dominant.

And perhaps not by accident. I think this is the advent of an era when significant artists return to major topics. The previous post-modern, relativistic attitude did not favour absolute values and we are now witnessing a welcome change in pace.

Interview by Zsolt Szász, published in Szcenárium, March–April 2017

Translated by Dénes Albert



Paul Claudel – Arthur Honegger: *Johanna a máglyán* (Joan of Arc at the Stake), National Theatre, Budapest, 2013, d: Attila Vidnyánszky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



ÁGNES PÁLFI



ZSOLT SZÁSZ

It Has Been a Real Inauguration of Theatre!

A Flash Report on MITEM III

Zsolt Szász (b. 1959) has been managing editor of the professional journal *Szcenárium* since its foundation in 2013, and dramaturge at the National Theatre in Budapest (*Vitéz lélek /A Knightly Soul/, 2013; János vitéz /John the Valiant/, 2014; Csíksomlyói passió /Passion Play of Csíksomlyó/, 2017). Formerly he directed two productions at the Attila Vidnyánszky-led Csokonai Színház (Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen): *Talizmán /Talisman/, 2008; Csongor és Tünde /Csongor and Tünde/, 2010). He was art director of Nyírbátori Szárnyas Sárkány Nemzetközi Utcaszínházi Fesztivál (Winged Dragon Street Theatre Festival in Nyírbátor) from 1993 to 2013. In cooperation with puppet theatre dramaturge Márta Tömöry he created the Nemzetközi Betlehemes Találkozó (International Meeting of Nativity Players) in 1990. He received several national and international awards as an actor, puppeteer and director of the companies established by himself. For his puppeteering activity he was awarded the Blattner Prize in 2007.**

Ágnes Pálfi (b. 1952) has been editor of *Szcenárium* since 2013. Between 1980 and 1993 she edited the Népművelési Intézet (Institute for Culture) journal entitled *Kultúra és közösség (Culture and Community)* as well as the poetry column of the journal *Polisz (Polis)* from 1998 to 2005. She had a teaching job first at Toldy Ferenc Gimnázium (Toldy Ferenc Grammar School) from 1994, then, between 1999 and 2009, she was professor at the Department of World Literature, Miskolci Egyetem (University of Miskolc),

where she obtained her PhD in 2005. The subjects she taught included the comparative analysis – along the year-cycle model of organic culture – of the grand narratives of the four canonical Gospels and the four modern European “heroes” (Hamlet, Don Juan, Don Quixote, Faust). She has published two collections of essays and five volumes of poetry. A selection of her poetry, *Móbiusz (Mobius)*, was published in 2014.

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. It also makes one think that it was not until this season that the facade has finally received the inscription “Nemzeti Színház” (National Theatre).

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 festival¹ 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 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.

¹ See Szász, Zs.: ‘Genius Loci’, *Szcenárium*, April 2014, pp 27-33

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.

Á. P.: To my surprise, despite the late hour, quite a few children under ten or so appeared among the audience, apparently having a great time. They must also have felt that those adults had not yet given up hope and trusted that the world was transformable in our image. And that this was just what *playing* and *theatre* were for.

Zs. Sz.: 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.



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)



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

Á. P.: We had better be keeping our concepts clear. Tadeusz Kantor, called the greatest 20th 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.² 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."³

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 developed in a different way had Kantor's oeuvre been integrated into

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

³ Cf. op. cit. Part 3 in *Szcenárium*, February 2015, pp 16-7

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 Smigaszewicz'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-remembrance. 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 *Acropolis*, 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



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



Stanislaw 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)

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 Wyspiański'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."⁴ Believers in Western Christian eschatology may regard this crude and brutal approach

⁴ Cf. Popa, S.-V.: 'A drăma celebrăsa' (translated into Hungarian by Kulcsár, E.), *Szcenárium*, 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 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



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

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



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

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.

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 confessed⁵, like the stone displayed on the stage, which

⁵ Livathinos spoke of the burden the ancient Greeks represent at the roundtable discussion 'National Theatres in the 21st Century' at MITEM III on 13 April.

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 “naive” 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



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)

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.

A. 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



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

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 21st 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

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 18th 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!⁶

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

⁶ See the study by Picon-Vallin, B. on Meyerhold, translated into Hungarian by Pálfí, Á. in *Szcenárium*, September 2015, pp 23-35



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

classics our contemporaries.⁷ 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 enthralling 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 theatricalised 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 19th 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

⁷ See Pálfí, Á., Szász, Zs.: ‘Önazonosság és művészlét’, *Szcenárium*, April 2014, pp 17-18

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 19th 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.⁸ 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).



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)

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 20th 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



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

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.⁹ This issue is treated by writings published on the other productions, too.



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

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

⁹ See 'A hősi hóbort 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

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



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)



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



The Lower Depths, Tbilisi Music and Drama State Theatre, d: David Doiashvili (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

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 Bocszárdi. 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 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 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.

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.



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



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

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"¹⁰ 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.



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)

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"¹¹. 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

¹⁰ Cf. op. cit. P 34

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

piece, *Exercises in Style*, was bringing down the house for decades. However, this 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.

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*¹² 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'¹³ ('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,



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

¹² Birtalan, Á.: 'Oldás és kötés', *Szcenárium*, February 2016, pp 16-24; Tömöry, M.: 'A koreai népi színházi hagyományról', *Szcenárium*, December 2015, pp 5-14

¹³ 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.



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

in the same way as the Korean funeral ceremony is performed by women to this very day.

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 19th-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

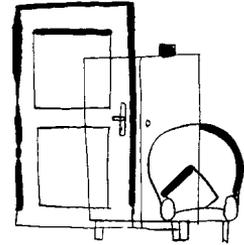
brought the public close to understanding what makes Chinese theatre culture so unique and viable: he talked in the most natural way of the day by day sacrifices taken not to let the smallest element of the centuries-old tradition waste away.

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.¹⁴ 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.

¹⁴ *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



JUSTYNA MICHALIK

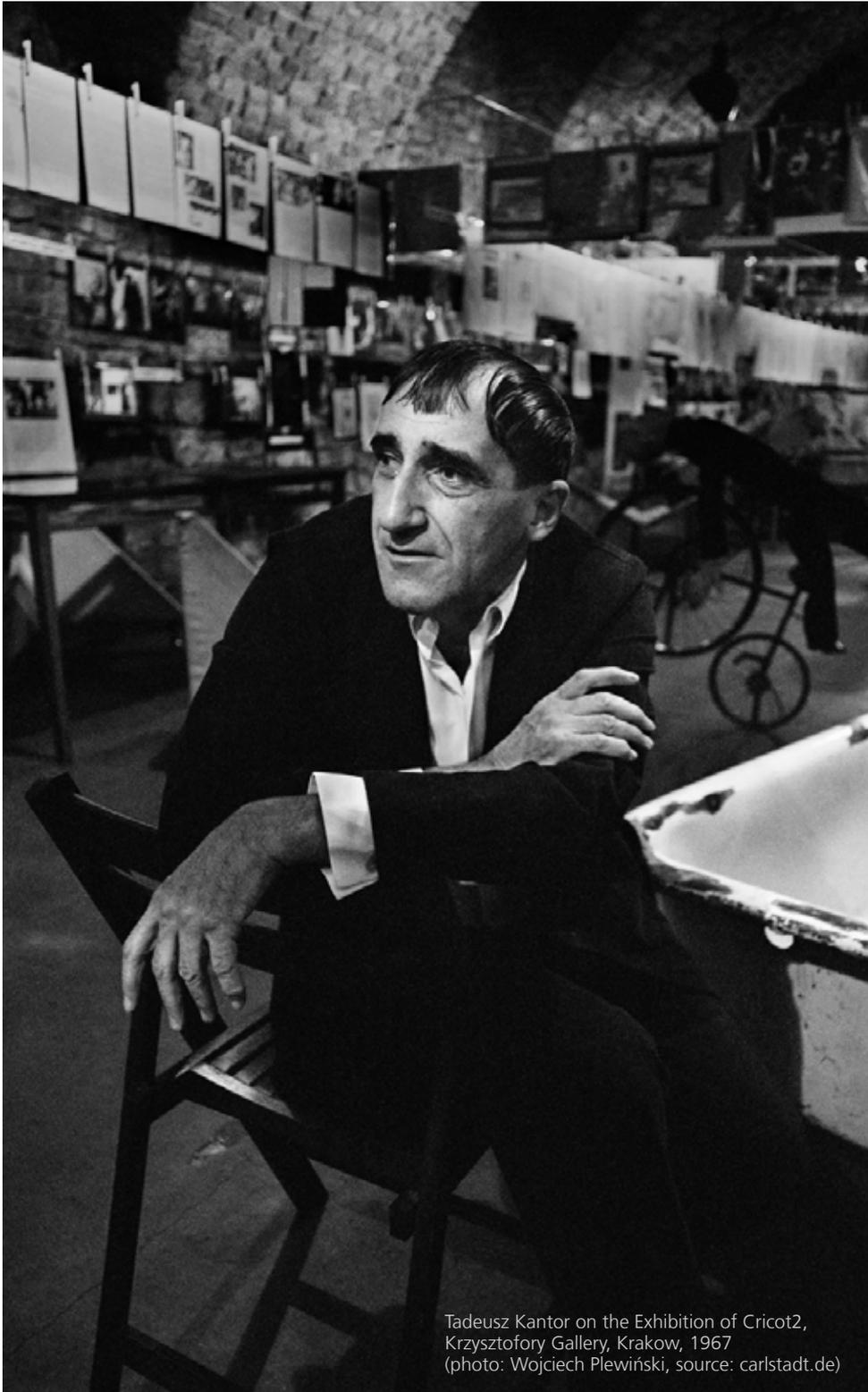


Tadeusz Kantor's Experiments in the Theatre

Notes for The Space of Memory Exhibition¹

The success of “*The Dead Class*” still has an impact on the contemporary perception of Tadeusz Kantor’s entire working life, says Justyna Michalik, curator of the Kantor-exhibition at MITEM III. However, in this paper of hers, which was presented at the professional conference accompanying the exhibition, she criticises the tendency restricting the appreciation of Kantor’s activity to his theatre-of-death-period only. She considers the now increasingly prevalent approach, which examines the oeuvre as a whole, together with the process of its evolution and its relationships, more productive. This is also reflected by the exhibition she set up under the title *The Space of Memory*, which was meant to show the artist’s earlier stages of development. Tadeusz Kantor’s *Milánói leckék. A színház elemi iskolája* (*Milan Lessons. The Elementary School of Theatre*, 1986), appearing in *Szcenárium* in serial form in 2015, is to be published in the series *Nemzeti Színház Kiskönyvtára* (Mini-Library of the National Theatre) this year. It will include Justyna Michalik’s present paper as well as studies on Kantor’s aesthetics and the reception of his work in Hungary. The book will be edited by theatre-historian and Kantor researcher Nina Király, staff member at the National Theatre in Budapest.

¹ The exhibition was on from 12 until 24 April 2016 during III. MITEM at the Hungarian National Theatre in Budapest. On 15 April there was a conference of *Metamorphosis – Tadeusz Kantor’s Theatre* which featured this essay by Justyna Michalik, the curator of the exhibition.



Tadeusz Kantor on the Exhibition of Cricot2,
Krzysztofory Gallery, Krakow, 1967
(photo: Wojciech Plewiński, source: carlstadt.de)

Tadeusz Kantor's most significant works in the theatre include the productions of his last period, the so-called Theatre of Death: *The Dead Class* (1975), *Wielopole, Wielopole* (1980), *Let the Artists Die!* (1985), *I Shall Never Return* (1988), *Today is my Birthday* (1990). In these performances the common motifs are death, demise and memory – both at a private and historical level – placed in “the most menial reality” surrounded by “humble objects reconstructed with the most variable cultural symbols of the past on stage.

However, Tadeusz Kantor started his activities in the theatre a great deal earlier. It had always been inseparable from his works as a painter, which were inspired by new trends in art in the world while he was always looking for new expressive ways in the theatre. He wanted to include the theories and principles of avant-garde art in his performances, this experimenting and path-finding determined the development of Cricot 2 Theatre whose periods were marked and defined by the artist himself: underground independent theatre, informal theatre, zero theatre, happening theatre, impossible theatre and eventually the Theatre of Death.

The enormous success of *Dead Class* had made such a huge impact on the contemporary perception of Tadeusz Kantor's art that led the public to limiting him, practically and exclusively identifying his art to the above-mentioned *Dead Class*. Today this is still the period of his art that is referred to the most often, this is analysed, and debated continuously.



The Dead Class, Cricot 2 Theatre, 1975, d: T. Kantor (source: flickr.com)



Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes, also known as *Lovelies and Dowdies*, 1973 (source: uni.wroc.pl)



Exhibition installation to *Lovelies and Dowdies* (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

Moreover, there are still some of the audiences alive who have seen Kantor's last performances, therefore they can be called to act as "surviving witnesses" of Kantor's genius. Nonetheless young audiences are the most likely to hear about the Theatre of Death should their interest be raised in the Krakowian artist. However, this picture – as it can be seen later too – has a lot of missing elements, and is not entirely satisfactory.

It should not be forgotten that "the most familiar" does not mean "the most important". It should also not be forgotten that *Dead Class* and the Theatre of Death would not have come into existence without the artist's previous activities and works. This preceding period, which is approximately 40 years, is equally relevant, moreover, crucial in Tadeusz Kantor's lifetime achievement.

The Space of Memory exhibition devoted to Tadeusz Kantor's lifework intends to recall primarily the previous stages of the artist's development. In the specially designed theatrical spaces of the selected performances those ideas, visions and theatrical realisations were presented which lead Kantor to the peak of his career, which is the Theatre of Death. The characteristic Kantor objects of the exhibition such as the "Cloakroom" from *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*, the scenic place from the performance of the *Dead Class* as well as the reconstruction of the scene from the third adaptation of *The Country House*. The objects are complemented with the photo and film documentation of the performances. It is not incidental that Tadeusz Kantor's art is described as a totality. For me the word that is equally adequate for describing his work is *experiment*, which without a break, almost continuously, at the same time consciously and very consistently characterised him.

The Underground Independent Theatre – *The Return of Odysseus*, 1944



Stanisław Wyspiański: *The Return of Odysseus*, Słoty Teatr Studio, 1945, d: Tadeusz Kantor (source: encyklopediateatru.pl)

This artistic experiment started in the 1940s when Kantor as a recent graduate from the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow established his very own illegal Independent Theatre. It was wartime and the period of German occupation when staging any Polish plays, especially the ones that belonged to the "romantic repertoire", was strictly forbidden and the consequence could be the death penalty. Tadeusz Kantor's performances – *Balladyna* based on Juliusz Słowacki's and *The Return of Odysseus* based on Stanisław Wyspiański's works – were prepared in

complete secrecy. The performances were staged only a few times in some private apartments in Krakow and the actors were his friends and acquaintances. In the primordial forms of his works the same ideas and concepts can be observed which soon play a very important part in Kantor's artistic development, as he himself often emphasised it. The first appearance of the idea of "the most inferior reality" can be found in *The Return of Odyssey* which he most often identifies with a simple and very real object, which he elevates from the world of reality to the world of art. Even here he starts referring to death, which he continues to do almost without a break. Moreover, he begins to look for places especially erected for this purpose outside which he can "make the theatre happen". Nonetheless, it should not be ignored that these "theatre solutions" were direct consequences of the very concrete situations and circumstances in which Kantor was living at that time. It could be said that he chose what he had to choose. He had no opportunity to create fancy stage-sets therefore he had to put up with those objects which he found. He had to create a theatre at his own expense when general shortages were so bad that it was necessary to steal even from the occupying power. This is why an ordinary wooden board or muddy cartwheel was used in the performances. Furthermore, the shows were staged in private apartments which meant that the audience were in the same small place as the actors. There was no such a thing as the traditional division of stage and audience as it was simply impossible. And all these were being performed in the "company" of raging death; evidently, there was an essential context of the content and message of the staged piece.

After the war in 1955 Kantor launched the Cricot 2 Theatre, where he was continuing his experiments with the theatre until the end of his life, and to a certain extent he was benefitting from the experience he had gathered from his works during the war.

Informal Theatre, *The Country House*, 1961

By realising the idea of informal theatre Kantor presented his actors in a wardrobe packed with clothes, rugs and sacks in *The Country House*. He treated them as objects and deprived them of their identities, he dressed them in clothes which were torn and tattered during the theatrical actions. The dialogues by Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, whose work the performance was based on, were recited in the mesmerising chaos of bodies and sacks while the actors were assuming strange postures. As in informal pictures the chaotic elemental force destroys the structure of the picture, the actors' casual and incidental movements messed up the traditional story line of the performance. Furthermore, they had very limited space for movements. The actors were hung on special racks in the wardrobe and they remained in such a rather uncomfortable, and depressing position.

The *The Country House* occupies a special spot in the history of Cricot 2 Theatre. This is basically the only performance which was redirected by Kantor



Exhibition installation at the National Theatre, Budapest, April 2016 (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

once again in different circumstances and with different actors. The second adaptation titled *Der Schrank* was shown in 1966 in Baden-Baden Stadttheater. However, Kantor prepared a third, this time a film adaptation of the play titled *Säcke, Schrank und Schirm* (Sacks, a Wardrobe and an Umbrella) in the former Yugoslavia in 1969. But we have to put great emphasis on the fact that in spite of the obvious differences, which were the direct consequence of the changes of circumstances, the two later adaptations followed the same formal and semantic principles of the first performance.

Zero Theatre, *The Madman and the Nun*, 1963

In the performance of *The Madman and the Nun* there was a wooden board that functioned as a stage. Almost the whole stage was occupied by the centrally positioned construction which consisted of folded and stacked wooden chairs which were tied to each other. This annihilating machinery was called “aneantisational machinery” by Kantor adapting the French terminology. In the middle of this chair pyramid an actor was hiding, who was operating the whole masterpiece of machinery by pulling ropes. The suddenly moving structure and the chairs which were knocking against each other were “annihilating” the actors’ play. The actors had to struggle to be able to remain on stage and recited their roles. Making it harder to act the play with the permanent threat from the *Machinery* (which was well expressed by the intimidating noise that it “made”) drained off the actors’ energy and eventually forced them to discard the realistic (illusionistic) rendition of the characters based

on the script of the play. However, little could be understood of the spoken replicas. The dramatic elimination of the plot, the movements and speech were interwoven with the comical symbolism of clowns in circuses. In the end they faced the extreme situation where communication between the actors and the audience simply ceased to work. The state of oppression and threat became obvious again.

Impossible Theatre, *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* (also known as *Hairies and Dowdies*)², 1973

A similarly extreme situation can be observed in Kantor's impossible theatre, in which the lack of communication between the actors and the audience was stretched to an ultimate limit. *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes* was staged simply in the Cloak Room of the theatre, where two brutal male cloakroom attendants do their jobs. The real performance was taking place behind the closed doors under the script of "Entrance to the theatre", which was an unapproachable place for the audience. But sometimes the door opens and an actor falls out of it saying a part of his role as if he is "still" in his role. Their appearance lacks purpose, it has nothing to do with the logic of the plot, it turns out to be perfectly "useless" and "uninteresting". According to Kantor the actors only need to represent themselves, of course with certain objects so they make movements to demonstrate this. The audience – after tons of various impacts – is overwhelmed by the impression of the whole being fully unknowable. This time Kantor wanted to create an "impossible" theatrical procedure, which is "closed in its own circle, not subjugated to any perception, and directed to »nothing«"³.

The Happening Theatre, *The Water Hen*, 1967

The happening also appeared during Tadeusz Kantor's theatrical career whose significance – as the artist himself emphasised several times- could not be overestimated. Despite the fact that Kantor organised his first "official" happening in 1965, he often expressed that his earlier works, even the ones that he did during the war, were of the happening type. In this statement there must be a slight exaggeration, we still cannot say that is not true to a certain extent.

It is enough to refer to the *Anti Exhibition* (also called *Popular Exhibition*) which was set up in the Krzysztofory Galéry in Krakow in 1963. This enterprise was the result of the ideas that the artist came up with when he had been wondering about

² Normally the Hungarian translation of this title is: *Szászorszépek és piperkőcök* (*Hairies and Dowdies*). See this latest appearance: Géza Balogh: *Tadeusz Kantor és a Cricot 2*, *Szenárium*, 93, April 2016

³ Tadeusz Kantor: *Metmorfozy. Teksty z lat 1934–1974*, Wrocław–Kraków, 2005, p 554.



Popular Exhibition – Anti-Exhibition,
Krzysztofory Gallery, Krakow, 1963 (photo:
Tadeusz Chrzanowski, source: cricoteca.com)

the status of a work of art. Protesting against the conventional attitude of an artist, he goes as far as to “deprive art of every kind of risk, adventure, rebellion and the unknown, moreover, he makes it stronger by taming it, while he is adding more earnestness, dignity and prestige to it.”⁴. Kantor exhibited works which were not ready-to-consume unfinished pieces but which had references to the process of creation. A gallery was filled with “937 exhibited objects, drafts, drawings, plans, ideas, definitions, analyses, manifesta, albums, recipes, prescriptions, notes and scripts”⁵, which

were all hung on clothes lines and fixed with staples. A few of them appeared in Kantor’s former performances, among the others the *Aneantisational machinery* as well. Besides the *Popular Exhibition* the artist intended to degrade the definition of a detached piece of art which is locked up in its own structure and a given system of art, while he proposed to make an experiment to bring about changes into the conventional functions and meanings of fine art displays and the perception of the audience. “The lack of pictures, as Kantor put it in his manifesto, converts the audience’s analytical and contemplative perception into a fluid and almost actively participating presence in the living reality”⁶. We must add, in the “ready reality”, which in this case was actually his own art. Among the drawings and drafts there are a few comments which were handwritten by Kantor. He wrote the following somewhere: “Collect and cram a lot of things of the same kind. Persist doing this at such length that the activity shall become indifferent and you shall become obsessed with it (...), and the objects shall lose their overused and previously identified features. I ventured out with the current exhibition based on this scheme.”⁷ The comment above which emphasizes the process as well as the collection of material instead of the final result shows well the characteristics of the happening of *Anti-Exhibition*. The excellent Polish art historian Piotr Krakowski says that the *Anti-Exhibition* was “a frozen and stopped happening”.⁸

⁴ Cf. 225.

⁵ Cf. 231.

⁶ Tadeusz Kantor: *Anti-Exhibition*, translated by Judit Kálmán, in: *Death Theatre*, Prospero Könyvek, Budapest–Szeged, 1994, p 42.

⁷ Kantor’s commentary on one of the photos by Tadeusz Chrzanowski. The negatives of the photos are safeguarded in the Warsaw art collection of the Art Institution of the Polish Academy of Science.

⁸ This view is quoted from the chapter Polish happening of the unpublished book about Polish art after 1945 by Piotr Krakowski.

It should be emphasised here that the happening is on the borderline of fine arts and theatrical art reflecting provocative situations which are either results of spontaneous activities or are mostly designed by a creative director. The structure is determined by illogically disorganised elements and improvised play. The happening encourages greatly the intervention of coincidence, spontaneous behaviour, moreover shocking effects and scandalous behaviour both by the performers (organizers) and receivers. It is characterized by openness. It serves many purposes: it removes the borderline between life and art, breaks rules in the usual daily functioning of people and objects, and activates the audience. The audience enters the situation, experiences it and becomes part of it.

Kantor's happening period lasted for seven years. He staged a lot of happenings both in Poland and abroad. However, only the first ones namely the *Cricotage-happening* and the *Dividing Line* (both from 1965), as well as some later formally and structurally convergent actions may fully comply with the principles and conditions that were set by the artists of this art trend. Kantor's friends and acquaintances, who took part in the event, did just some banal habitual "acts of life", such as eating, using a bar of soap, shaving, sitting, or they were just taking certain objects or boxes from one place to another, while one of them was continuously reading an essay about art...etc. Nonetheless, the activities made not even a little practical sense, they just existed by and for themselves, without any logical connection. All this happened in front of the very eyes of the audience, rebelliously, and was taken to absurdity. The absurdity of these situations as in the above quoted performances also originated from the lack of communication and the fear of threat. Primarily the audience in the same room as the performers of the happening could feel the same way, as they were



Cricotage, TPSP Cafe, Warsaw, 1965 (photo: Eustachy Kossakowski, source: artmuseum.pl)



The Water Hen, happening by Tadeusz Kantor, Warsaw, 1968 (photo: Eustachy Kossakowski, source: digitizing-ideas.com)

exposed more or less incidentally to the happeners' interventions to a great extent.

The happening as an art movement did not last long. After roughly one decade it was symbolically "sentenced to death" which meant that its opportunities had been exhausted. Its believers and cultivators made attempts again and again to come up with a decent definition for what the happening was. It was not an easy task. Paradoxically, it turned out to be a simpler task to define what was not a happening. Many theoreticians, among the others Tadeusz Kantor too, simply contrasted it with the traditional theatre. According to this theory the happening was different from the theatre due to its formal openness and spontaneous character, even if it had a written script, for the happeners it was just an outline of acts for further improvisations. By breaking away from the context of the traditional theatre building, the actors of happening staged their actions in a space which according to contemporary traditions was perfectly well suited for the purpose (art galleries, abandoned factories, open spaces, on the streets etc). They also denied that there was a division between stage and public areas, the most important drive for them was the intense activation of the audience, so that they could be forced to influence directly the outcome of events.

Such a contrast between theatre and happening had a somewhat more profound meaning in Kantor's case. Kantor seems to have understood that certain principles in the happening could never be fulfilled as they had a utopian character. He concluded that the happening is a sort of convention, which he incorporated in his own theatrical traditions. He regarded the trend aiming to pull down the illusion of the theatre and at the same time denying the role of reproducing literature as a characteristic omen of this reverse solution. In this spirit in 1967 he staged *The Water Hen* which was a stage adaptation of a play also titled *The Water Hen* by Witkiewicz', which became the basic work of the new age of Cricot 2 Theatre, in other words of the *Happening Theatre*.

These formal-semantic trends certainly appear in Kantor's Theatre of Death. Since the first performance of *The Water Hen* Kantor himself had always been acting on stage, which was a direct conclusion of his happenings, as he openly confessed. Standing on this undefined borderline, as in "illegality" he expressed that with this crazily talkative performer's gesture he was referring to his own "memories of the dead". Memory, as he wrote, contains only certain moments, situations and »clichés« (...) such as when the homecoming (vacationing) father always swears and picks up his belongings ... when the mother always leaves and disappears (...)"⁹. Tadeusz Kantor's best known and most characteristic theatrical works were built on these scattered clichés of memory which had no chronology, no beginning and no end. His actors melded together with the different objects were endlessly repeating their familiar banal activities well-known from his

⁹ Tadeusz Kantor: *A Child's Memory*, transl. Jolán Cservenits, in: *Theatre of Death*, Prospero Könyvek, Budapest–Szeged, 1994, p 190.



Exhibition installation at the National Theatre, Budapest, April 2016 (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

former happenings. In the subsequent performances of the Theatre of Death Kantor used his own curriculum vitae and history as “ready objects” and he linked them to other elements which he “found” in history and world culture, the pictures of wars, catastrophes, holocausts, the themes of Christian theology and Judaism, also with the

tragic figures of some excellent artists, some of whom were his friends and others who provided him with great inspiration to his art. He contrasted and dramatized these things with incredibly suggestive power, yet, in a madly simple way so that he could bombard the audience’s consciousness and sub-consciousness with the acts which were often full of irritating tension. Nevertheless, he consistently exposed the same basic and for him obviously the most important question. He was always talking about the individual and the exploited human being. About the individual who is governed by an incomprehensible or non-cognitive dynamic force. Among the others this is what makes Kantor’s theatre incredibly relevant and updated.

Today’s researchers of the Kantor oeuvre often debate, moreover, negate the somewhat stilted phasing which was suggested by Kantor himself. Researchers deal with the period “*before the Dead Class*” more and more when they are searching for new inspirations and occasions for the interpretation of the oeuvre. The oeuvre is analysed as a whole or I would rather say as a total unit. When I was working on the concept of *The Space of Memory* exhibition, I wished to do the same. By juxtaposing the stages representing the various periods of the Kantor Theatre I was not following a chronological order but just intended to create the opportunity to have a view of the stages from different sides as well as levels in order to inspire the audience to familiarize themselves with the great oeuvre independently and spontaneously and encourage them to come up with individual interpretations.

*Translated from Polish into Hungarian by András Pályi
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English translation: Anikó Kocsis*



Lajos Ottó Horváth in Dostoevsky's *A krokodilus* (*The Crocodile*), adapted and directed by Valery Fokin, National Theatre, Budapest, 2016 (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Dostoevsky in Kafka's Clothes

An Interview with Valery Fokin

Valery Fokin (1946) is a stage director, artistic director, People's Artist of the Russian Federation and the recipient of several prestigious awards. He won the top award of the most famous Russian theatre festival, the Golden Mask, twice. In 1991 he established the Meyerhold Centre in Moscow, one of the capital's notable contemporary art centres which he also led for two decades. He is currently the artistic director of the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, established in 1756. He participated at the first Madách International Theatre Meeting (MITEM, 2014) with *Zero liturgy*, an adaptation of Dostoevsky's *The Gambler*; in 2015 with Gogol's *Marriage*. He has taken an active role in the professional programmes of MITEM (*Memory and Oblivion – The Mission of Theatre in the Context of Contemporary Culture*, 2014; *National Theatres in the 21st Century – Roundtable Discussion with the Participation of Directors of National Theatres and other Theatre Professionals*, 2015; *Meyerhold Conference*, 2015; *National Theatres in the 21st Century – A Harmony of Many Colours*, 2016). The present interview was published in the *Nemzeti Színház Magazin (National Theatre Magazine)* on the occasion of the October 2016 Hungarian premiere of *A krokodilus (The Crocodile)*, Fokin's adaptation of Dostoevsky's short story. The production is included in this year's MITEM programme as well.

– *It may be available in Hungarian, but Dostoevsky's The Crocodile remains largely unknown. Why did you choose it?*

The question actually answers itself: exactly because of its obscurity. It has never been put to stage either: I'm only aware of a single such attempt in Russia. And it is an incredibly opportune story, too! Dostoevsky's genius is clearly illustrated by the fact that he wrote about a future feeling that we feel incredibly contemporary: that of irrationality becoming a daily occurrence. The otherwise



Augustza Tóth and Lajos Ottó Horváth in the opening scene (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

bland and inconsequential protagonist of the story commands attention after being swallowed by a crocodile. He does not die, though, but begins to preach from the beast's innards. Lo and behold, everyone is fascinated by his drivel. All of a sudden this entirely absurd situation becomes the norm and we readily accept the lunacy of our world.

– *What hides behind this lesser known Dostoevsky?*

It is a major departure from his usual. This novella has a tragic-comical tone bordering on the absurd, reminiscent of Kafka and Mrozek. From this perspective, we can consider Dostoevsky the precursor of the absurd genre. In light of his major literary works such as *Crime and Punishment*, *The Brothers Karamazov* or *The Idiot* this is an entirely unexpected tone. For the uninitiated it is hard to believe that he did pen this work.

– *Humour is not one of Dostoevsky's trademarks...*

Indeed not. At the same time, his talent was quite multi-coloured. He has a number of fantastical-satirical writings, most prominent of which are *The Crocodile* and *The Double*.

– *This is your second work in Hungary, this time with the National Theatre, following a previous one at the Pécs National Theatre. What is your impression of Hungarian actors?*

I have been in many parts of the world and have met a wide variety of companies. It seems as though – beyond the differences and similarities – talented actors are alike in every country. Talent does not have a national specificity. The ideal actor – and I have met many of those here in Hungary – is a master of both

empathy on the inside and stagecraft on the outside, delivering the performance with conviction and confidence. This is what makes them authentic. More often than not the issue is that a particular actor will deliver stagecraft, lacking inner empathy. Russian actors can often be that way, delivering loud emotions on stage while lacking any inner feeling and believe this to be the pinnacle of acting. Technique alone will never convince the audience.

– *You have a hands-on approach during rehearsals. Not only do you explain what you have in mind but you also show what you wish to see on the stage. Are details that important to you?*

I cannot work any other way. The scenario has to be very meticulous while also striving to give the actors a similarly detailed inner “score”. Afterwards, it’s up to them to further refine it. A good performance is one where these two scenarios are harmonised. I don’t like inaccuracy or liberal approach. It benefits neither the director nor the actor. Granted, one often sees that anything can happen on stage, one way or another, but I cannot deal with that. Often the audience can’t either. A good performance is like a musical performance. Although we may not hear the actual musicality of the play, it is still there in the way the scenes follow one another, with everything properly placed and paced, with the appropriate rhythm changes. Just like following a musical score. Of course interpretation still has its place and it is up to the musician to decide the length of pause between “movements”. If, however, the delivery is not accurate, it will all fall apart.

– *Projected images have a crucial role in this play.*

If a performance can function without projections or other artificial additions, these have to be avoided at all costs. They are superfluous. Sometimes my students are quite proud of the frequent use of video projections. Why is that? – I ask. They say that it makes the performance contemporary and modern. This is a mistake. I seldom use this technique because it took stages by storm, becoming a fad, customary and to some point indifferent. In this case, however, I had to employ some footage to show how our protagonist is able to thrive in the belly of a crocodile.

– *Will you be back directing in Hungary?*

I can’t really say yet. For sure, the cooperation between our theatres is excellent. We have been featured twice in the MITEM and the National Theatre’s spectacular *Johanna a máglyán* (*Joan of Arc at the Stake*) and the play *Mesés férfiak szárnyakkal* (*Fabulous Winged Men*) have been performed at the Alexandrinsky. In September we had a very successful premiere of *Crime and Punishment* directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, which we would also like to bring to next spring’s MITEM. We are also in talks about bringing *The Crocodile* to St. Petersburg. We have also received a request to take these two plays to a third festival abroad. So the cooperation is continuing. As for the rest, we will see...

*Interview by Sándor Zsigmond Papp
Magazine of the National Theatre, September–October, 2016
Translated by Dénes Albert*



Tibor Fehér and Dénes Farkas in Edmond Rostand: *Cyrano de Bergerac*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2016, d: David Dolashvili, (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Why Did We Kill Romanticism?

An Interview with Stage Director David Doiashvili

Georgian stage director David Doiashvili (b. 1971) is a returning guest at the National Theatre in Budapest. He made his mark by *Macbeth* at MITEM I in 2014 with his company (Vaso Abashidze State Music and Drama Theatre, Tbilisi, Georgia); it was a success at numerous international festivals and won several awards. In 2015 he gave us a new vision of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he produced with the artists of the National Theatre in Budapest. His interpretation of Maxim Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, a production by his own company in Tbilisi, featured in MITEM last year. This year he will present *Cyrano de Bergerac*, with the company of the National Theatre, at MITEM. The interview below was published in the *Nemzeti Színház Magazin* (*National Theatre Magazine*) apropos of the opening of *Cyrano* last year.

– In the musical trailer of *Cyrano*, which premiered in your direction in Tbilisi in 2010 we could not find the enormous nose of the protagonist. Does that not rob the play of its dramatic tension?

In this performance everything has been turned around. The nose gains prominence as a comical, as opposed to a dramatic element. As such, the nose is a symbol of our complexes and frustrations. The other reason for this directorial decision is that a big-nosed *Cyrano* would simply be old-fashioned today. There are though significant differences between these two performances. To mention just a single example, the Tbilisi performance had period costumes while the current one does not use 17th century garments. Besides, judging *Cyrano* based solely on his huge nose is a superficial approach of the play. The nose itself only accentuates the comical situation – but this effect can also be achieved otherwise.

In fact, if we read the play itself we will find that of all the players Cyrano is the only one to state that he has a huge nose – all the others only react to this statement. Thus my belief that Cyrano only *thinks* that his nose is too big.

– *This nose is an imaginary trait similar to the way in which we attempt to create an image of ourselves in virtual reality? Most of the time we would want to present a more flattering image, while Cyrano paints himself in quite a depressive way.*

Actually, in the real world I am quite apprehensive of the virtual. While walking the streets I think that is my reality. When logging on to Facebook, however, I am confronted with an entirely different reality. I often ask myself: which one is the more real one? The virtual space or the actual one I live in? It is as if our dreams would continue after we wake up.

– *So can we say that the play is something like Cyrano editing Christian's Facebook page? He does "post" beautiful poems on behalf of Christian, after all...*

On the surface, Cyrano does seem to be courting on behalf of Christian, but I rather think he uses Christian as a proxy. But the Facebook metaphor falls apart in one meaningful way. In virtual reality, courting has all but disappeared. "Wanna have sex? Yes? Fine." That's all there is. It is so much more beautiful if people write elaborate letters! Why is it a bad thing that a man would want to accomplish great feats for a woman? Why should people be ashamed of their love? These things are evaporating from our world. Should we still meet such people, we would often ridicule them. The choice of using the best-known Hungarian translation of the play – that of Emil Ábrányi – was a deliberate one. The language of the performance is quite important to me because the romanticism and poetry of the original play must be kept intact. If I had to give a reason for staging this play, it would be something like: "Why did we kill our inner romanticism?"

– *According to the Cyrano calculus, the protagonist plus Christian add up to one full man. You did, however bring five Roxanes into the equation. Why?*

Whenever we think we have figured out a woman, she would do something entirely unexpected, baffling the man – as if this was the act of an entirely different woman. Whenever I read Cyrano de Bergerac I have the feeling that in every single one of its five acts Roxane does something quite inconsistent with her previous behaviour, as if it was another woman. Thus we have five of her in the performance. They will each appear as the story progresses, but in this stage of the rehearsals I can already see that the five will also appear simultaneously.

– *In your 2014 direction A Midsummer Night's Dream you turned a play previously known as a fairytale comedy into a tragic dreamscape. How would you define the genre of your Cyrano?*

That is a tough one. I would very much like to start with a light comedy, but at the current stage of the rehearsals I have no idea where we will end up. The actors are terrific and they have brought many exciting ideas into the process. I am also at a difficulty in answering the question as I cannot pinpoint the difference between comedy and tragedy. An important point in case is Chekhov's letter in which he states that in the manuscript he defined *The Cherry Orchard*



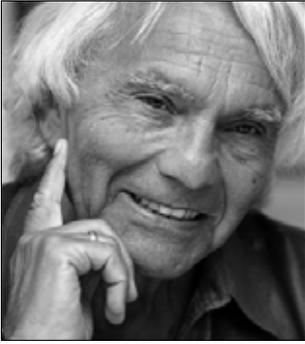
Tibor Fehér as Cyrano (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

as a comedy. He subsequently left the manuscript at the Moscow Art Theatre and went to Yalta. His wife, who remained in Moscow, later wrote Chekhov that all who read the play liked it very much but none of them could understand how it is a comedy. Chekhov replied: I am in Yalta, it is May, everything around me is in bloom and soon I will be dead. Isn't that a comedy?

– *A Midsummer Night's Dream in your direction was characterised as a grand display of stage technology. Can we expect something similar?*

I am always baffled by such criticism. The stage of the National Theatre has amazing technical capabilities and I'm quite surprised others don't use them to better effect. Of course we will make use of these in *Cyrano*. I tend to lean towards minimalism and dislike elaborate staging, I am quite keen on using available technology if that adds to the experience.

Interview by György Lukácsy
Magazine of the National Theatre, April–May 2016
Translated by Dénes Albert



“Self-Expression Was Our Rebellion”

Interview with Eugenio Barba

The relationship between the Eugenio Barba-led Odin Teatret and the National Theatre in Budapest has strengthened over the recent years. Odin presented *The Chronic Life* to MITEM audiences in 2015. At the same time, Barba's book entitled *Land of Ashes and Diamonds*, covering the author's decisive years in Jerzy Grotowski's theatre workshop, was published in Hungarian. The autumn of 2016 saw the world premiere at the National Theatre in Budapest of Odin's new production, *The Tree*. This year MITEM will host two productions (*Salt, Ave Maria*), two masterclasses and a workshop presentation (*Traces in the Snow*) by Odin. In the spirit of mental preparation for them, *Szcenarium* started a six-part series last October of Eugenio Barba's writings, published in his and co-author Nicola Savarese's book, *The Secret Art of the Performer. A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology*.

'Being an actor is the extension of myself because if I wish to establish a relationship with another person through the theatre it is only possible through an alter ego', says the founder and director of Odin Teatret, Eugenio Barba. The legendary creator and his troupe were invited to MITEM last year and this autumn they staged their most recent performance five times at the National Theatre.

– *The Odin Teatret has been invited to the Székény Theatre in Budapest several times since 1985. What memories do you have of your visits to Budapest?*

We have had wonderful experiences, and so we came again and again. However, the Hungarian connection goes back much longer! I had already been working with Jerzy Grotowski when Ferenc Hont (Note by editor: he was the Director of the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute at that time.) contacted him in 1962 and

offered to write a book about his theatre. Eventually Grotowski asked me to write the book which was soon published with Hont's assistance in Hungarian. Twenty years later I met János Regős when he was making a guest appearance in Vienna, and he invited us to the Szkéné (Note by editor: János Regős was the Director of the Szkéné between 1979 and 2010). During the last years of Socialism the alternative theatrical groups provided intellectual nourishment for a more advanced audience which had grown up during the oppression of dictatorship. Nonetheless, as I can see the illusions of regime change have been dispelled by now.

– *How did you get in contact with the Hungarian National Theatre? Where do you feel the intellectual relationship is with your current theatrical group?*



Attila Vidnyánszky, Eugenio Barba and Zsolt Szász on the terrace of the National Theatre, Budapest, at the opening of Barba's book, *Land of Ashes and Diamonds*, in 2015 (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

We are not really connected to an institution but rather to Attila Vidnyánszky, Zsófia Rideg and dramaturge Zsolt Szász, who have been following the performances at the Odin Teatret for a long time. Attila told me at MITEM last year how the shows and films he saw at the Odin in Beregovo had been an inspiration for his theatrical works. It is not about an aesthetic or ideological relationship but rather some sort of emotional community, which can hardly be expressed in words.

– *Although it did not work out in the end, it started off as an exciting project to stage János vitéz (Note by translator: John the Valiant is an epic poem written in Hungarian by Sándor Petőfi) in Holstebro, in the hometown of the Odin. What made you think that Sándor Petőfi's epic poem might interest Danish children – even if a bilingual adaptation based on the Hungarian National Theatre's performance was to be produced?*

Julia Varley, who is one of the founders of the Odin and also an actress there and one of my close colleagues was mesmerised by the fantasy world and the visualisation of the play. Ten years ago on the 40th anniversary of our theatrical ensemble we staged a Brazilian show for children as a present to the children of Holstebró. This year for the 50th anniversary we have planned to stage János the Valiant and we would have liked to invite every school in town. We have not abandoned hope yet, and we are looking for opportunities to eke out the budget for the cost of travelling and accommodation. In co-operation with The Hungarian Writers' Association we are intending to have the Danish translation published.

– *Recently The Tree has been presented at the National Theatre. Its main concern is the ethnic cleansing in Syria, Liberia and the former Yugoslavia. How do you pick a topic and how do you create a theatrical performance from it?*

Almost all of our performances are about conflicts, mostly about wars. European peace is closely connected with crises like the Korean and Vietnamese wars or the South American dictatorships which have made a huge impact on Western societies. Since the 1970s we have often been guest performers in these countries. Besides history we have concerned ourselves with individual micro stories from different points of view. Our latest production, *The Tree* borrows the language of tales and metaphors and has a global approach to speak about our age of wars, the contradictions, fears and hopes.

– *You move a lot amid distant cultures, when you lecture you search for opportunities for dialogues amongst them. What do you think about this when we are living through times with cataclysmic conflicts of different cultures?*

It is not only cultures that clash with each other but also certain individuals who represent war rhetoric and the attitudes of warriors. Islamic culture consists of hundreds of millions of peaceful and innocent people. The media and politicians communicate misleadingly when the false image is created that Islam is at war with Christianity. It is an inevitable fact that millions of refugees are waiting at the borders of Europe to be allowed to enter the continent; it is no answer that walls and fences are erected to defend ourselves while the rest of the world is indifferent. Between 1840 and 1910 Europe sent 60 million migrants to the world. I am also a migrant. Free movement is a fundamental right that we are fighting for. It is an enormous problem to receive refugees from wartorn territories, who are bringing their traumas along with them. It is very difficult to integrate them into society. These are real problems which need to be resolved. Art is a receptive medium: by its intercultural nature, it is easy to work together with people coming from different cultures. Conflicts can be sorted out through dialogues.

– *It is always a common question how updated a performance is, how interesting it is today. In your opinion what makes a kind of theatre topical?*

A theatre has several functions ranging from mere amusement to reflexion to presenting certain social problems. Our company's aim is to show and redefine social problems without banalizing them. The basis of updating for me lies in personalizing, what I basically try to look for is how we are able to recreate ourselves.

– *What does it mean for you that a theatre principally deals with politics? How does it happen at the Odin?*

At the Odin I had the opportunity to create a micro-society, which may be characterized by a certain lifestyle and ethics. We have the licence to prepare a production for even one or two years, which is in stark contrast with the general management of theatrical productions these days, which normally means only one or two months' probationary periods. At our theatre the emphasis is on the revelation and deepening of human relationships, on intimacy and the interaction between actors and audience independent of whether a production is staged for only eighty or five hundred spectators. You could say, I am obsessed with making connections among those people who do not know each other. Our policy is about addressing people individually and making them think together.

– *It was a political and revolutionary deed fifty years ago when the Odin settled in a little town in Denmark. What were you rebelling against? What has been left of your revolt?*

Although I had spent three years in Grotowski's theatre in Poland, I had basically no qualifications when I returned to Norway. I was there at the age of twenty-seven without work and connections. The only thing that thrilled me was to prove it to myself that I am able to create a theatre. The history of Odin Teatret is primarily a director's history, whose "experience of expulsion" made him close to those youngsters who were also expelled from drama schools. Studying by ourselves, hard work, thirst for knowledge and great belief were needed to establish a revolutionarily new alternative theatrical form and existence. Self-expression was our rebellion, and it still is.

– *In your publication in the series of books edited by the Hungarian National Theatre you take us to the 1960s when you went to Grotowski's theatre in Poland. Grotowski's most significant productions could only be seen by a privileged few, his radicalism went so far that he eventually abandoned his traditional activity at the theatre, he did not stage any more performances, but focused on teaching. His theoretical oeuvre cannot be ignored. He is regarded as one of the most important innovators and experimenters of the second half of the 20th century. What did you learn from him?*

Grotowski was completely unknown when I met him. He settled in the little country town of Opole with sixty thousand inhabitants. He had many problems with local authorities as he did not obey the rules. He did not even have one spectator. I was just sitting and watching how his theatre had turned into an articulation of the struggle of one individual, who was revolting against laws and norms. This is the most important lesson that I have learnt from him.

– *How would you interpret company, director and actor in the system that you have developed at the Odin?*

For me an actor is the extension of myself as if I want to contact another person through the theatre I can only do it through my alter ego. That is why it is essential that I only work with actors who are also passionately motivated to establishing contacts but have a different way of thinking from mine. The interplay of our different mentalities creates intense, and even incoherent moments. What the

spectators see is a mass of all these things that does not belong to a director, or actor any more but resonates to the audience's perspective, experiences and memories.

– How does your company function in the community that admitted you then?

Holstebro is a little town of thirty-five thousand people. We always make an impact on the environment where we live and create something. Actors do not only stage shows but they also simultaneously train themselves and contribute to a wide range of cultural events of the town. They catalyse initiatives and relationship building, organize festivals, hold film clubs, and they also work with their own teams, they stage shows at old people's homes and schools. Moreover, it proves that relationship building is the Odin's most important social responsibility.

– It is quite likely to be unprecedented that an alternative and experimental troupe has remained active for 50 years. What is the secret? How have you been able to preserve your creativity and overcome crises?

There are various components of this issue. One of them is that I have paid good enough salaries to my colleagues in order to make a living so that they can fully concentrate on their work. The other one is my fixation that I have wanted to work with the same actors throughout my whole life. I regard the actors as my masters, as they surrender both their bodies and souls to me in our co-operation. The danger of routine has been eliminated by several "earthquakes". Throughout numerous crises the dynamics and the development of the company have been maintained. When we ended up in a small religious community in Holstebro in Denmark, at first there was a distance, then we got supported after proving how hard we had been working there. The politicians and mayors of Holstebro have always supported us. And I must remember now the "mysterious people of the Odin", each and every spectator who has ever taken part in any of our productions or events, who have read our books and taken a piece of us away with them. Basically these mysterious people have helped us preserve our autonomy and made it possible for us to live without the various market and artistic trends and fashions.

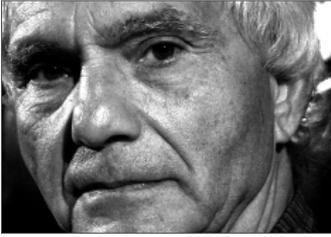
– Will the Odin be continued without its founders? Have you made efforts to have disciples or followers?

Once I established the Odin with four actors out of whom two have left us, one actress has died, so now Julia Varley is the only living founding member. Currently there are thirty of us working in the company. I have always refused strongly to talk about the legacy of a theatre as I have seen what has happened to the legacy of Stanislavsky's, Meyerhold's or Brecht's art. I have never wanted to have successors or heirs. So this is the main reason why something like a testament has been composed based on which once the last old actor of the company has died the name of the Odin needs to disappear too. All of our places will be taken over by the young. On their own behalf and with their own concepts.

Interview by Rita Szentgyörgyi

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Translated by Anikó Kocsis



EUGENIO BARBA



Eurasian Theatre*

The influence of Western theatre on Asian theatre is an acknowledged fact. The important effect that Asian theatre has had and still has on Western theatre practice is equally irrefutable. But a feeling of uneasiness remains: that these exchanges might be part of the supermarket of cultures.

Dawn

Kathakali and noh, *onnagata* and Barong, Rukmini Devi and Mei Lanfang – they were all there, side by side with Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Eisenstein, Grotowski, and Decroux when I started to do theatre. It was not only the memory of their theatrical creations that fascinated me but, above all, the detailed artificiality through which they attained an actor-in-life.

The long nights of kathakali gave me a glimpse of the limits which the actor can reach. But it was the dawn that revealed these actors' secrets to me, at the Kalamandalam school in Kerala. There, young boys, hardly adolescents, monotonously repeating exercises, steps, songs, prayers, and offerings, crystallised their ethos through artistic behaviour and an ethical attitude.

I compared our theatre with theirs. Today, the very word 'comparison seems inadequate to me since



Mei Lanfang (1894–1961)

* For Barba, the definition 'Eurasian Theatre' serves to conceptualise the characteristics and the value of his association with Asian artists. In the context of his book (*The Moon Rises from the Ganges*, Routledge, 2015), it represents a conclusion. Barba has changed the final part to strengthen this value. It was first published in 1988 in English (*The Drama Review*, 32 (3), pp. 126–30).

it separates the two faces of the same reality. I can say that I 'compare' Indian or Balinese, Chinese or Japanese traditions if I compare their epidermises, their diverse conventions, their many different performance styles. But if I consider that which lies beneath those luminous and seductive skins and discern the organs that keep them alive, then the poles of the comparison blend into a single profile: that of a Eurasian Theatre.

Anti-tradition

It is possible to consider the theatre in terms of ethnic, national, group or even individual traditions. But if in doing so one seeks to comprehend one's own identity, it is also essential to take the opposite and complementary point of view and think of one's own theatre in a transcultural dimension, in the flow of a tradition of traditions.

All attempts to create 'anti-traditional' forms of theatre in the West, as well as in the East, have drawn from the tradition of traditions. Certain European scholars in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries forsook the performance and



Julia Varley, I Wayan Bawa and Roberta Carreri at the rehearsal of *Ur-Hamlet* in Wrocław during ISTA 14, 2005 (photo: Francesco Galli, source: odinteatretarchives.com)



Matsui Sumako as Nora on the left, in Henrik Ibsen: *A Dolls House*, Tokyo, 1911 (source: ebisu.revues.org)

festival customs of their cities and villages and rescued the theatre of Athens and ancient Rome from oblivion. Three centuries later, the avant-garde of the young Romantics broke with the classical traditions and drew inspiration from new, distant theatres: from the 'barbarous' Elizabethans and the Spaniards in the Golden Century, folk performances, the *commedia dell'arte*, 'primitive' rituals, medieval mystery plays, and Asian theatres. These are the images that have inspired the revolutions of the anti-traditional Western artists in the twentieth century. Today, however, the Asian theatres are no longer approached through tales but are experienced directly.

Every ethnocentricity has its eccentric pole that reinforces it and compensates for it. Even today, in the Asian countries,

where often the value of autochthonous tradition is emphasised as against the diffusion of foreign models and the erosion of cultural identity, Stanislavsky, Brecht, agitprop, and 'absurd' theatre continue to be means of repudiating scenic traditions which are inadequate to deal with the conditions imposed by recent history.

In Asia, this breach with tradition began at the end of the nineteenth century. Ibsen's *A Dolls House*, the plays of Shaw and Hauptmann, the theatrical adaptations of Dickens's novels or of *Uncle Toms Cabin* were presented not as simple imports of Western models but as the discovery of a theatre capable of speaking to the present.

In the meeting between East and West, seduction, imitation, and exchange are reciprocal. We in the West have often envied the Asians their theatrical knowledge, which transmits the actors' living work of art from one generation to another. They have envied our theatre's capacity for confronting new subjects and the way in which it keeps up with the times. Such flexibility allows for personal interpretations of traditional texts that often assume the energy of a formal and ideological conquest. In the West, stories that are unstable in every aspect but the written; in the East, a living art, profound, capable of being transmitted and involving all the actors' and spectators' physical and mental levels but anchored in stories and customs which are forever antiquated. On the one hand, a theatre which is sustained by *logos*. On the other, a theatre which is, above all, *bios*.

Why

Why, in the Western tradition, as opposed to what happens in Asia, has the actor become specialised: the actor/singer as distinct from the actor/dancer and, in turn, the actor/dancer as distinct from the actor/interpreter?

Why, in the West, do actors tend to confine themselves within the skin of only one character in each production? Why do they not explore the possibility of creating the context of an entire story, with many characters, with leaps from the general to the particular, from the first to the third person, from the past to the present, from the whole to the part, from persons to things? Why, in the West, does this possibility remain relegated to storytellers or to exceptions such as Dario Fo, while, in the East, it is characteristic of every traditional theatre and their actors, both when they act/sing/dance alone and when they are part of a performance in which the roles are shared?

Why do so many forms of Asian theatre deal successfully with that which in the West seems acceptable only in opera which uses words whose meaning the majority of the spectators cannot understand?



Dario Fo (1926–2016)

Clearly, from the historical point of view, there are answers to these questions. But they only become professionally useful when they stimulate us to imagine how we can develop our own theatrical identity by extending the limits that define it against our nature. It is enough to observe from afar, from countries and customs which are distant, or simply different from our own, to discover the latent possibilities of a Eurasian Theatre.

The performers' village

The divergent directions in which Western and Asian theatres have developed provoke a distortion of perception. In the West, because of an automatic ethnocentric reaction, ignorance of Asian theatre is justified by the implication that it deals with experiences that are not directly relevant to us, too exotic to



Augusto Omolú, Sanjukta Panigrahi and Julia Varley, Holstebro, 1993
(photo: Jan Rűsz, source: odinteatretarchives.com)

be usefully explored. This same distortion of perception idealises, and thus evens out, the multiplicity of Asian theatres or venerates them as sanctuaries.

ISTA, the International School of Theatre Anthropology, has given me the opportunity to gather together masters of both Asian and Western theatres over a period of many years. Here we compared the different results and working processes of actors from various genres and reached down into a common technical substratum: the level of pre-expressivity. This is the level at which the actors engage their own energies according to an extra-daily behaviour, modelling their 'presence', their *bios*, in front of the spectator. At this pre-expressive level, the principles are similar, even though they nurture the enormous expressive differences that exist between one tradition and another, one actor and another. They are analogous principles because they are born of similar physical conditions in different contexts. They are not, however, homologous, since they do not share a common history. The application of these similar principles often results in a way of thinking that, in spite of different formulations, permits theatre people from the most divergent traditions to communicate with each other.

The work with Odin Teatret has led me, by means of practical solutions, not to take the differences between what is called 'dance' and what is called 'theatre' too much into consideration; not to accept the character as a unit of measure of the performance; not to make the actor's gender coincide automatically with that of the character; to exploit the sonorous richness of languages and their emotive force, which is capable of transmitting information above and beyond their semantic value. These characteristics of Odin Teatret's dramaturgy and of its actors are equivalent to some of the characteristics of traditional Asian forms, but those of Odin were born of an autodidactic training, of our situation as foreigners and of our limitations. This impossibility of being like other theatre people has gradually rendered us loyal to our diversity.

For all these reasons, I recognise myself in the culture of a Eurasian Theatre today. That is, I belong to the small and recent tradition of a theatre group which has autodidactic origins but grows in a professional 'village' where kabuki actors are not regarded as being more remote than Shakespearian texts, nor the living presence of an Indian dancer less contemporary than the American avant-garde.

Thought-in-action

It often occurs in this village that the actors (or a single actor) not only analyse a conflict, let themselves be guided by the objectivity of the *logos* and tell a story but dance in it and with it according to the flow of the *bios*. This is not a metaphor. Concretely, it means that the actor does not remain bound to the plot, does not interpret a text, but creates a context, moves around and within the events. At times, the actor lets these events carry him, at times he carries them, while at other times he separates himself from them, comments on them,

rises above them, attacks them, refuses them, follows new associations or leaps to other stories. The linearity of the narrative is shattered by constantly changing the point of view, dissecting the known reality and interweaving objectivity and subjectivity, expositions of facts and reactions to them. Thus, the actor embodies the freedom and the leaps of the thinking process, guided by a logic which the spectator cannot immediately recognise.

That which has often caused misunderstandings about Asian theatres, has confused them with archaic rituals or has made them appear as perfect but static forms is in fact that which brings them closest to our epoch's most complex concepts of time and space. These theatres do not represent a phenomenology of reality but a phenomenology of thought. They do not behave as if they belonged to Newton's universe; they correspond to Niels Bohr's subatomic world.

Tradition and founders of traditions

When we speak of culture, the subject of identity is always at the centre of our discourse. Our ethnic identity has been established by history. We cannot shape it. Personal identity is formed by each of us on our own, often unconsciously. We call it 'destiny'. The only profile on which we can work consciously as rational beings is the profile of our professional identity.

It is possible to develop a professional identity that can grow in contact with other cultures, also at the intra-cultural level, allowing for the discovery and absorption of that which is different, even in our own culture. For the European reformers of the twentieth century, some of the events belonging to their history were fundamental for revising their practice: classical Greek theatre, the *commedia dell'arte*, and different types of popular performances, alive today or extinct, accepted or marginalised.

It is through exchange, rather than isolation, that a culture can evolve and transform itself organically. The same process applies to actors. However, in order to make an exchange, you must offer something in return. Therefore, one's historical-biographical identity is fundamental when confronted with its opposite pole, the meeting with 'otherness', with that which is different. This does not mean the imposition of one's own horizon or way of seeing but rather a displacement that makes it possible to glimpse a territory beyond one's known universe.

Defining one's own professional identity implies overcoming ethnocentricity to the point of discovering one's own centre in the tradition of traditions. Here, the term 'roots' becomes paradoxical: it does not imply a bond that ties us to a place but an ethos that permits us to change places. Or, better, it represents the force that causes us to change our horizons precisely because it roots us to a centre.

This force is manifest if at least two conditions are present: the need to define one's own tradition for oneself and the capacity to place this individual or collective tradition in a context that connects it with other, different traditions.

It is not the traditions that choose us but rather it is us who choose them. An American can become a Buddhist and a Maori an excellent opera singer. Traditions preserve and hand down a form, not the sense that gives it life. Each of us must define and reinvent that sense for ourselves. This reinvention expresses a personal, cultural, and professional identity.

Traditions stratify and refine the knowledge of successive generations of founders and allow every new artist to begin without being obliged to start from scratch. Traditions are a precious inheritance, spiritual nourishment, roots.

But they are also a constraint. There is no identity without a struggle against the constraint of the forms inherited from 'tradition'. Without such a struggle, artistic life collapses. In art, the spark of life is the tension between the rigour of the form and the rebellious detail that shakes it from within, forcing it to assume a new significance, an unfamiliar aspect.

The actor who does not belong to a codified scenic tradition often risks feeling disinherited, rootless and without concrete points of reference to disobey. Those who do not have a tradition often idealise it and refer to it with a superstitious belief as though it could bestow a meaning on their work.

The tradition of traditions

A spirit of revolt and a longing for a set of values has permeated the theatre of the twentieth century. At a hasty glance, the distinction between



I Wayan Bawa and Roberta Carreri, ISTA 13, Sevilla, 2004 (photo: Fiara Bemporad, source: odinteatretarchives.com)



Parvathy Baul's recital at the National Theatre, Budapest, 2016 (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



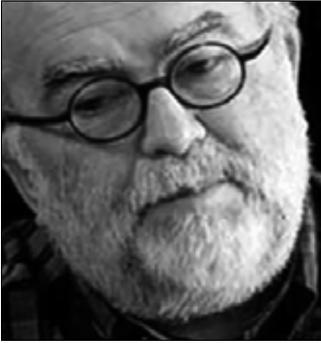
Keiin Yoshimura Kamigata, ISTA 15, Albino, 2016 (photo: Rina Skeel, source: repubblica.it)

tradition and founders of traditions is equivalent to that between classical schools and innovators, the orthodox and the rebellious, the Asian actor/dancer hidden beneath a golden costume and the restless and eclectic experiments of contemporary performers. But it is not like that. Even the most rigid tradition only lives on through reinvention by its interpreters. And the more subtle and imperceptible these reinventions seem, the deeper they run.

In daily practice, 'tradition' is the same as 'knowledge' or, rather, 'technique', a far more humble and effective word. Technique does not define us but it is the necessary instrument for overcoming the borders that confine us. Technical knowledge allows us to encounter other forms and introduces us to the tradition of traditions, to those principles that constantly recur beneath the differences in style, culture, and personalities.

The goal is not to identify oneself with a tradition but to build a nucleus of values, a personal identity, both rebellious and loyal to one's own roots. The way to achieve this is always through a minutely detailed practice that constitutes our professional identity. It is competence in one's craft that transforms a condition into a personal vocation and, in the eyes of others, into a destiny that is a legacy and a tradition.

It is for us to decide which history we belong to professionally and who are the ancestors in whose values we recognise ourselves. They may be from distant eras and cultures, but the meaning of their work is the legacy to be safeguarded and transmitted. Each one of us is the offspring of someone's work. Each one of us moves forward, leaving behind a past which we have chosen for ourselves.



GEORGES BANU

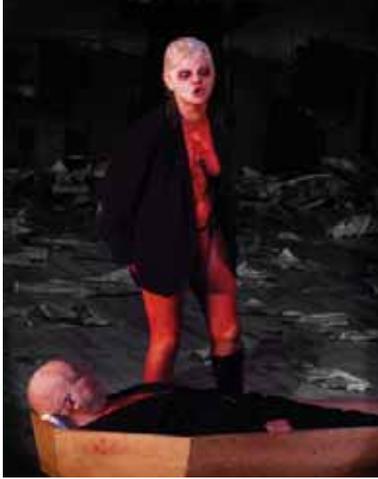


Silviu Purcărete

Portrait Sketch of an Independent Artist

The author of the article is George Banu (b. 1943) Romanian-born theatre critic, theatrologist, professor of Theatre Studies at Sorbonne Nouvelle, Honorary President of the International Association of Theatre Critics, who has lived in Paris since 1975. Five of his books have been published in Hungarian by Koinónia Kiadó (Koinónia Publishing House), Cluj-Napoca, Romania. He moderated the roundtable discussion entitled *Contemporary Scenography: Crisis and Metamorphosis* at MITEM II in 2015. His essay gives a vivid picture of the characteristic features of the art of Europe-wide famous Romanian stage director Silviu Purcărete. His most important stage directions are covered here, with Goethe's *Faust* among them, which, in Banu's opinion, is a synthesis of Purcărete's lifework so far. This production promises to be one of the greatest sensations at MITEM this year. (On Purcărete's stage directions in Hungary, see the Helmut Stürmer publication in the present issue).

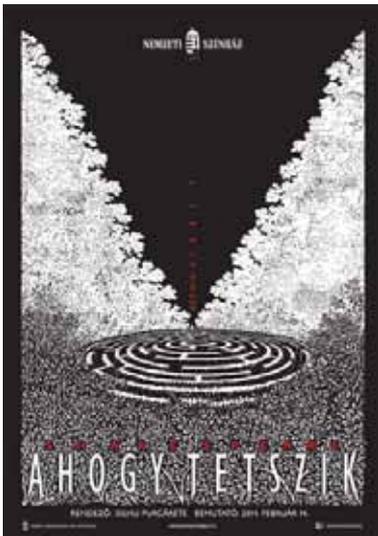
Purcărete is an independent artist reluctant of belonging to any institution or maintain long-term partnerships. He moves around various stages of the world driven by chance encounters, always looking to motivate a company and complete his mission regardless of the circumstances. A theatrical director quite unafraid of commuting, meeting with unknown companies but always surrounded by his loyal team. They are inseparable. Scenographers Helmut Stürmer or Dragoş Buhagiar and the composer Vasile Sirli are always by his side because Purcărete insists on relying on this time-proven core team. Providing each other with mutual inspiration, they immerse themselves to production after production, from St Petersburg to Sibiu, from Moscow to Porto or Ljubljana. Purcărete is a free artist, but not a lonesome one.



Mephisto (Ofélia Popii) and Faust (Ilie Gheorghe) in the funeral scene (source: br.pinterest.com)



Scene from *Titus Andronicus*, National Theatre, Craiova, 1992, d: S. Purcărete (source: mit.edu)



Theatre poster by István Orosz

The magic rulebook for choosing plays

Purcărete has a limited love affair with words and an endless one with pictures. His choice of plays may well be driven by the desire for variety, but his choices are still aligned along two reconcilable strands: one is the use of abridged, concentrated plays stripped to their core, while the other is the adaptation of literary texts, intruders from a world other than the theatre – from Ovid to Tolstoy. He is a two-faced Janus, whose choices fall into two categories, without either of them gaining dominance. Following the Molière’s *The Imaginary Invalid* he turned to the Napoleonic saga *War and Peace* and after the playful interlude of *Moliendo Café* delected himself with a comedy by Labiche. And so it goes on, without him becoming enslaved to anything. Still, the shining beacon of his oeuvre remains *Faust*, this adventure of epic proportions that began in Sibiu and which has been the defining element of the international festival there for a decade now. *Faust* encapsulates Purcărete’s aesthetic and while the performance may have changed and evolved over time, it continues to be the cornerstone of his art, like *The Servant of Two Masters* for Strehler, the *Mahabharata* for Brook, the *Antique Trilogy* for Șerban, *Oresteia* for Stein, and so on. All of these are essential performances carrying a specific identity while also validating a journey.

On the other hand, Purcărete invariably returns to Shakespeare, never giving up on or forgetting him entirely: this gravitational pull is a constant of his career. As a young director in Communist Romania, he created an unforgettable *Richard III.*, with the protagonist Stefan Iordache delivering a mesmerizing and complex king figure. Purcărete abhors oversimplification, gross disparagement and summary judgement. He later directed two plays at the Marin Sorescu Theatre in Craiova, at turn

tear-jerking and grotesquely savage, both of which brought him European fame. These were *Titus Andronicus* and *King Ubu*, the latter incorporating scenes from *Macbeth*. This is a dazzling display of serial murders set on a white canvas accompanied by Mozart's *Piano Concerto No. 24* and one of the most poetic theatrical performances I ever had the chance to see. Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to see his *Troilus and Cressida* at the Katona József Theatre, widely believed to be one of the best adaptations for scene. Purcărete returned time and again to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, delving on the night scenes – not so much in the forest, but rather the candlelit, magnificent inner spaces of the human consciousness. The lovers are lost and Puck, the almighty servant appears in a different form every time, making amends for his missteps first as a wild prankster, later as a humble slave. What the audience took home from this was the vision of a convoluted “dream”....

Purcărete shared his “Dreams” every now and again and as a fortunate witness I can testify that these always left a lasting impression. He devoted much time to comedies such as *Twelfth Night* and he recently revisited it at the National Theatre in Budapest. The latter performance is a veritable meditation on the link between characters and audience, the inevitable symbiotic relationships of theatre:

is theatre not the art of perpetually becoming someone else and then still returning to our own selves? The performance gave ample proof of that through the seemingly trivial, yet masterful display of the actors' tools: makeup, costume changes, special effects. Oscar Wilde said that theatre seduces us by “flooding us with the imaginary”, but this “falsehood” can only dazzle us through emotion.

Purcărete is familiar with the Shakespearian vistas and in the last of the plays, *The Tempest*, he paused just like Prospero – a Faust precursor, if you like – did on the black sand of his imaginary island as melancholy sage. Another such pivotal point was the ruthless debate in the centre of *Julius Caesar*, delivered as a political drama. Arguably, his greatest staging of Shakespeare was *Troilus and Cressida*, in which he succeeded in blending the grotesque with the playful, scathing satire with desolate elegy while also capturing the essence



W. Shakespeare: *Troilus and Cressida*, Katona József Theatre, Budapest, 2005, d: S. Purcărete (photo: Mayer Mária, source: gondola.hu)



The Danaïds, an adaptation of Aeschylus' drama, National Theatre, Craiova, 1995, d: S. Purcărete (source: tvr.ro)

of Shakespearian “totality of contradictions” as described by Peter Brook. He did, however, let two opportunities pass by, because – as he later confessed in private – “I don’t like ubiquitous plays for which I could only offer yet another variation”. Thus we are still waiting for his version of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. One of his greatest fascinations, though, is turning comedies into tragedies and the other way around. This, for him, is the definition of the art of stage direction, the kind of work that will confuse and flabbergast anyone inclined to pigeonhole Shakespeare’s greatest plays.

Purcărete is no stranger to Greek drama either: he directed a famous *Oresteia* performance and an epic *Danaïdes*, the latter having met with controversial responses in Europe. The play still did clearly exemplify the director’s concept of attempting to move the choir around while stressing the performances of emblematic Romanian actors in the key roles. *Danaïdes* was particularly challenging for Purcărete, because here he blended traditional Greek tragedy with Elizabethan stagecraft. But this unpredictable director whose professional staging is always sensitive to the peculiarities of the companies he works with is also on a permanent search for texts that are either obviously tailor-made for him or, conversely, seemingly ungraspable. As a Ulysses of the stage, he allows himself to be seduced without ever giving up his identity: he wanders from Molière to Labiche to Chekhov, from Pirandello to Beckett or Caragiale, the epitome of Romanian national identity. His choice of plays is a meandering journey. Purcărete is obviously in love with theatre, but never the slave of any single actor.

Of Goethe’s plays he only liked *Faust*. He treated it as a meditation on the power of the stage, in which theatre is the antithesis of science, a science whose boundaries are witnessed even by the sceptic scientist himself. The disciples of this scientist who sets upon his journey of discovery are modelled after the characters of Kantor’s *Dead Class*, in a thoroughly contemporary setting, surrounded by state-of-the-art computers in a classroom. Faust – a somewhat perverted entity with his neither male, nor female identity is seduced by Mephistopheles. His reason for abandoning his laboratory is not precisely defined, because Margarete takes multiple forms, snatches him out of his solitude and they embark on Walpurgis-night, give in to the power of the stage and the true flow of life in defiance of its frustrations. The stage curtain is contained within a huge frame, thereby the characters become mythological symbols of contemporary theatre. But one of the performance’s most poignant scenes of utter liberation is the one where Faust – as an old man nearing the end of his days – returns to his cradle that emerges from his coffin. We have come full circle.

While the international theatrical world awaits his next choice of play, Purcărete will complement his journey around the imaginary museum with other experiences gathered during his most travels on more esoteric paths such as the collages of Ovid* or those of various humorists’ texts which will

* Here the author is probably referring to Purcărete’s staging of *Metamorphoses* by Ovid (note of the editor)

end up as unconventional theatrical performances. But let us not forget his masterpiece, *Pantagruel's Cousin*, a silent play that is the essence and synthesis of Purcărete's theatre or *Palihula* (*Somewhere in Palihula – editor*), the motion picture counterpart of *Pantagruel*. These are, yet again, the works of an artist who will build on the elements of reality only to go beyond them and leave us hesitating in our desire for poetic charm.



Metamorphoses, based on Ovid's play, Radu Stanca National Theatre, Sibiu, Romania, 2009, d: S. Purcărete (source: youtube.com)

Purcărete is not one to be enslaved by the words he had manipulated, transfigured or transplanted, nor by the words put to the music of composer friend Vasile Sirlu. With him, we can always enjoy the sophisticated metamorphosis that progresses from words to tunes, temporarily suspending the authority of the original text in order to reach the shores of murmured chants and lyrical whispers. These are the poetics of a playful body overflowing its original boundaries, a fluid body in love with the sounds beyond, the words that have become hesitant in their meaning. His performances often evoke a saying by his great predecessor, Monteverdi, who was after the very same multi-layered meaning in his *Parlar Cantando* program.

Chorality and poetic materialism

Purcărete is partial to use chorality in expressing a bustling, mingling world in permanent rearrangement and disarray. This is whole in perpetual motion that can be shaped like putty, demolished like sandcastles and defies overly authoritative rules of construction. On his stage there is no posturing, there are no tableaux, he fascinates us by having everything in motion. He also fascinates us by occasionally presenting a fleeting, “Ubu-like” shadow, discrete hints of a self-portrait, the portrait of an artist who –unlike Hitchcock – only allows his doubles to take centre stage. Purcărete was never more



S. Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*, Radu Stanca National Theatre, Sibiu, Romania, 2012, d: S. Purcărete (photo: Ken Reynolds, source: theatermagazine.org)

melancholy then in creating the character of Vladimir in his unforgettable rendition of *Godot* in Sibiu. This Vladimir is a thoroughly defeated and misled figure, whose perpetual expectance of another meeting – as an unfulfilled wish – was born of the fascination of the paradise lost, whose advent he portrays in the light of a heroic herald. In this rendition, Purcărete lets loose his mostly reserved lyrical vein more than ever. He may be stubbornly chaste, but will still deliver the occasional confession!

Purcărete has studied arts – just like his partners, Helmut Stürmer and Dragoș Buhagiar – but will never let alien codes dominate the stage. He is very much in love with the specific virtues of the stage and will imagine corporeal beauty through the body's dialogue with painted canvases or organic matter, subjecting the above to the unfolding of words and the rhythm of the music. His arts background is never extrinsic, it is there only through the harmony of the theatrical components. He is sometimes blamed for truncating texts with extreme prejudice, whereas, in fact – something he doesn't even deny – he only robs the text of its central role, placing it in the democratic structure of his creation whose elements are equal in value. In this sense, Purcărete can be regarded as the precursor of contemporary “playwrights”, who favour the same unorthodox logic. In his work we can also find vestigial elements of medieval acting, where the written text was not yet predominant.

In the theatre of Silviu Purcărete nothing is ascetic or rigidly structured. He lets loose the desire towards the material, the tangible that is free of any realistic motivation. He thus creates a link between the stage and a material world where bread and earth, wine and milk have not been banished but are very much a permanent presence. Everything here hints to a reality he has no intention of sacrificing. Quite the opposite: he aims to liberate it. He does not devalue reality in the manner of the German directorial school, but will make us receptive to the feelings stemming from said reality, calls upon us to rejoice our senses by presenting us a contrasting reality that will fire the imagination. His imagination is of a Balkans type, reminiscent of the poems of Kavafis, the paintings of the great Romanian painter Petrescu or the motion pictures of Kusturica. In this respect, Purcărete rather belongs to the colourist school, as opposed to that of the drawers. He is not interested in the lines themselves, but in the texture that seduces him, and whose attractions he both accepts and enjoys. He has a need to immerse himself in it in order to mobilize on stage everything he deems crucial in life. His theatre embraces and glorifies the presence of rich and serene aliveness.

But, Purcărete also loves uncleanness and disorder. Nothing is more repulsive to him than symmetry and the censorship of energies. Energies are the lifeblood of his crowd scenes, while they also make the stage a place of permanent transformation without throwing in a metaphysical chaos after the fashion of Castorf or Zholdak. He will readily demonstrate that he loves to be lost, but he does not wish to eradicate himself; he enjoys shattering the stage but without rendering it nil. The ultimate reason of his beloved alternation between order



Scene from the film *Somewhere in Palilula*, 2012, r. S. Purcărete (source: youtube.com)

and disorder is embodied in the masterpiece that is *Faust*. This rendering is the synthesis of an accomplished artist.

Purcărete is not afraid to combine different registers, displaying an innate ability to alternate the tragic and the oniric, the tragic with the grotesque. He wishes to submit us to experiences that are free of preconceptions or ideological considerations. He finds joy both in being lost and finding the way anew, in the journey; he is driven by a respect for the complexity of reality and a desire to maintain the tension between opposites. During this process he will freely utilize the living matter so dear to him, a matter derived from the fertile ground of his connection to the real world. His motion picture, *Palilula*, is proof of his organic link to the so-called *magical realism* of South American novelists. Matter is not a natural given, but neither can it be denied. There are subtle hints to both nature and the buried forces governing it. Purcărete has an awareness of the material, he feeds on it and is permanently attempting to grasp it. Sometimes his performances are reminiscent of contemporary *installations* that illustrate the ephemeral dominance of matter and call upon exploiting it.

The theatre of Purcărete is a choir theatre, where the audience is reinforced by the company on stage, abandoning itself in this play with the living matter that goes round and round, surfacing here and there, from time to time disappearing and reappearing yet again. The presence of the living matter prevents the stage from becoming a two-dimensional image, allowing it to break through the surface and display depths that will open the audience towards the centre of themselves and the core of their lost childhood. The variations of the ancestral living matter are also the embodiment of a certain optimism, the optimism of rediscovering lost innocence of which we are offered a fleeting glimpse through an understated irony.

The theatre of Purcărete leads us back to Bahtyin's famous analyses of Rabelais, which are actually referred to by the director in one of his most famous works, *Pantagruel's Cousin*. Bahtyin's approach shows us a universe that we contemplate permanently from a perspective both material and raw physicality:



After Rabelais: *Pantagruel's Cousin*,
Radu Stanca National Theatre, Sibiu,
Romania, 2003, d: S. Purcărete
(photo: Pierre Borasci, source: tnrs.ro)



Silviu Purcărete

in the world of Rabelais people eat, drink, abandon themselves to debauchery – acts that went uncensored during medieval carnivals. This theatre dissociates itself from the upper body, it lacks any classical element; it is a theatre of the instincts with an utter disregard for feelings of the heart and the haziness of speech. It is also a theatre of concrete poetry and sensitive matter. A matter that reminds us of the *Alexandria Quartet* – after all, Purcărete, a devotee of excessive physicality and sensual metaphors is something of a Lawrence Durrell of the stage.

The theatre of Silviu Purcărete has the hallmarks of “poetic materialism”. With his approach, the stage incorporates the material world as a series of tangible, disjointed and evocative presences. This presence, although in small “bites”, is always there in its fragments that each represents the weight of reality. In *Pantagruel's Cousin* and some other plays directed by Purcărete food and other materials are part of the experience: a judicious dosage of tangible things allows the imagination to take root in the material world and soar from it. This is due to the concept I previously called “poetic materialism”: it gives some reference points to the audience who are thus neither overwhelmed, nor deprived of reality. It does not drown in matter but neither does it refuse matter. It gets up close with matter, carefully selecting the dosage whose presence will enable

us to partially divine the essence and primordial nature of the universe. This is the same poetic matter that has revealed itself to Faust, that attracted him, inebriating him and setting him on the much desired path towards fulfilment. The scientist immerses himself in the material of the theatre – and the world! And so he finds a cure for melancholy triggered by the knowledge whose boundaries Mephistopheles has revealed to him. Satan’s might lies in that he liberates desire. The scholar, in turn, will be granted previously unknown joys and unique experiences, albeit at the price of death, even if it is a happy one.

*From French into Hungarian translated by Eszter Miklós
English translation: Dénes Albert*



Ahogy tetszik (As You Like It), National Theatre, Budapest 2014,
d: Silviu Purcărete, visuals: Helmut Stürmer (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



Helmut Stürmer, poet of the Italian tin box

Helmut Stürmer (b. 1942) scenic and costume designer is a well-known artist of the international theatrical scene. Born in Temesvár (Timisoara), he studied painting in Kolozsvár (Cluj) and scenic design in Bukarest (Bucharest). Although he had a promising start to his career, he emigrated to West Germany in 1977, away from the “cultural revolution” of the Romanian dictatorship. In addition to his numerous international awards, in Hungary he was granted the Theatre Critics Award for the scene and costume design in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* at Katona József Színház (Katona József Theatre) in Budapest, 2005 (director: Silviu Purcărete, as in all productions see below), got an award for the same achievement at POSZT, where he also became the best scenic designer in 2012 for Molière’s *The Impostures of Scapin*, Csokonai Theatre, Debrecen). Also, he was the scenographer of Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, at the Nemzeti Színház (National Theatre, 2014).



‘Heti’ by Purcărete

In 2015 he attended the *Contemporary Scenography* workshop of the MITEM. He is the scenographer of *About Love and Other Demons*, an opera that premiered in January 2017 at the Hungarian State Opera. He is also the scenographer of the *Faust* (d. Silviu Purcărete, 2007) performance scheduled for this year’s MITEM. On April 13, in the Zikkurat adjacent to the National Theatre will be the opening of his personal exhibition, entitled *Spaces of the Imagination*.

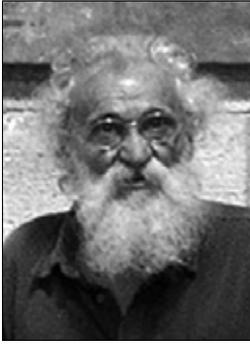
“Whenever we embark on a new performance, Heti (Helmut) will always break out a new, spectacular, exquisitely crafted notebook with black hardcover. Next to it will be two or three fine-tipped pens. He will draw elegant lines on quality paper.

I am timidly sitting opposite him. Whenever I would stumble in my explanation, Heti will obligingly offer me one of his artisan pens and the notebook, to make a drawing. Even the idea of soiling that aristocratic notebook seems preposterous, so I invariably ask for a piece of cheap, discarded paper. He will unblinkingly tear out a page from that wonderful notebook saying he has no other paper.

I am deeply ashamed. He also has a fine, pocket-sized Cotman Water Colours box from Winsor & Newton and a set of fine paintbrushes that he uses with the deliberate professionalism of a Japanese painter. A few days later that notebook will be full of masterpieces. The nostalgia of this notebook’s beauty stays with me well beyond the premiere.”

Silviu Purcărete

Translated by Dénes Albert



GYULA KIRÁLY



Hamlet and Raskolnikov – Renaissance and the 19th Century

Gyula Király (1927–2011), who established a new school of thought in the Hungarian research of Dostoevsky, published his study in a volume in 1983 (*Dosztojevszkij és az orosz próza /Dostoevsky and Russian Prose/*). The English version¹ of it is presented now in an abbreviated form. In his comparative analysis, the author focuses on the main difference between the ways these two iconic heroes ask questions about reality. He concludes that while Hamlet, the Renaissance man, had the opportunity before rising to action to test whether his assumption was true or false in the famous “Mousetrap” scene of the tragedy, Raskolnikov, a man of the 19th century, had no such chance. The publication of this study is relevant because of the two Dostoevsky productions at MITEM this year (*The Crocodile*, directed by Valery Fokin; *Crime and Punishment*, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky) and also the professional roundtable about the novelist’s oeuvre and his relationship with the theatre (of which an other study by Gyula Király was published in the February 2017 issue of *Szcenárium*).

Shakespeare is a landmark in the construction of tragedy: he intersperses tragedy with novelistic and dramatic threads – he opens the play with a novelistic drama and we are faced with this novelistic drama actually up to the actors’ play. Here

¹ Cf. *Acta Litteraria Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae Tomus 21 (1–2)*, pp. 15–43 (1979)

the drama does not, really cannot, yet slide into tragedy. Hamlet starts with a test: he needs to ascertain his apprehension whether time is really out of joint. Tragedy is still to follow; Hamlet would not be the tragic hero of modern times if he passed up this experiment, if he did not start with the intellectual's certitude and took combat with mere conviction or prejudice, if he simply accepted the revenge.

However, the test will whirl the experimenter himself into a new situation: having staged the play Hamlet gives his intention away to Claudius and his playing mad shows through. And from then on the crucial question is at stake whether the hero endowed with the ability to recognize and gauge his predicament is capable of carrying out the recognized historical task. But from



Mousetrap scene, L. Olivier's film, *Hamlet*, 1948
(source: wordpress.com)



J. Stapakov: "Raskolnikov's weapon", object, 2009
(source: livejournal.com)

the same moment onwards his enemy is constrained to put on pretence and accept a situation which contains the scheme of a subsequent murder – thus the possibility for a tragic solution comes about. Time can be set right, at the cost of the tragic clash of Hamlet and Claudius, though.

In Raskolnikov's story too a novelistic drama takes place except that, as opposed to Hamlet's drama, in reverse as to its chronological order: the actual drama will set in after the tragic plight, the execution of the murder. For the crucial point, the highest stake for Dostoevsky is not whether Raskolnikov gives himself up at the end of the novel or not; he is rather interested in what spheres of the social existence and consciousness the hero explores in the novel turned dramatic after the tragic situation, what truths he elicits, how he presses the world for an answer which he was unable to obtain in the tragic deed. The Russian life depicted in

the basic situation of Dostoevsky's novel necessarily accounts for the fact that Dostoevsky's hero is devoid of any moral support whatever for an experiment similar to that of Hamlet. It is this Russian milieu, inscrutable as it is, which compels him to act before having fully found out that his truth is really the truth of life as well, that time out of joint can be set right by the individual and that a person responsible for history or for its formation is to do as his speculations had led him to assume. Raskolnikov cannot delay the solution, cannot question again and again the world which he intuitively grasps but has not yet deciphered. Should we approach the basic situation of Dostoevsky's hero from the opposite direction, the same conclusion might be drawn. Could it really be taken to be a test, a "probe" into reality that a man, pernicious as he or she may have become socially, is slain by another, however useful, person? Seeking for an answer in either direction, we are bound, to say no. An act, an action with due consequence can never be regarded simply as a "test". Raskolnikov himself surmises with all his nerve that "test" and "act" have sinisterly intertwined in his conception, but how and why he is unable to understand throughout.

Already in Shakespeare's tragedy we may confront such a motif of "test", which is then brought into focus in the concept of Dostoevsky's novel. We have that "delay" in mind which at the same time indicates in Shakespeare's work the transition from drama into tragedy proper, the momentum when Hamlet, having had his father's visionary appearance, does not set about carrying out his revenge – which he had made an oath on – but embarks on confirming the vision, probing into the "psychological" truth of the vision. He is doing so because he wants to *put to the test* the authenticity of the vision in order to know whether Claudius is his father's murderer as his suspicion (and his father's ghost: in modern sense his psychological insight) prompted him. Thus Hamlet plays a role, the role of madness, for, Renaissance man conceived, the act cannot precede ascertainment, it cannot precede judgment and this is what accounts for Hamlet's delay, "vacillation" and "doubtfulness" not only *psychologically* but also from an *intellectual* point of view.

In Shakespeare's drama this passage is worked out extremely minutely and purposefully. Raskolnikov too finds himself in a *new* situation, as Hamlet did, so "knowledge" for him prior to the act may be hypothetical only. If, however, Hamlet's revenge took place when he is yet intellectually



Hamlet's father's spirit, L. Olivier's film, *Hamlet*, 1948
(source: wordpress.com)



Duel (source: wordpress.com)

uncertain as to Claudius' culpability, then Hamlet's notion of time to be set right would lose all its historical gravity and justification. So the pivot of dramatic construction is the ascertainment, the individual form of *cognition*, which in itself is part of the action and thus influences the preconditions of it, changes the basic situation. (...)

Surely, Hamlet's experiment is dearly bought, but in a different sense; the successful experiment reveals the make-

believer, the question-poser who is keen to know, it unmasks Hamlet's carefully concealed thought of revenge. The actors invited to dispel Hamlet's gloom, with the play they perform under Hamlet's direction, elicit the secret of Claudius, but at the same time Claudius also gains proof of Hamlet's pretence and purpose. Here he learns what he could not find out when eavesdropping on the meeting of Hamlet and Ophelia and what the schoolmates called on to entertain Hamlet were unable to spy out either. A new situation emerges where playing the fool becomes impossible – Hamlet cannot carry out his revenge. On the contrary: it is Claudius that has an opportunity to “scheme” against Hamlet. And this is justified psychologically as well; when we are questioning reality and the answer will actually be profound and true, then with the question we lose and give up our advantage inherent in the questioner's position, the possibility of an “incognito” existing prior to the questioning – we deliver up ourselves, too. Hamlet's chance for action will return only when Claudius' scheme has aborted, when it contributes for Hamlet to recover his opportunity of action in its original purpose: not as an act of revenge but as doing justice, judgment. (...)

Dostoevsky puts a finger on the truly essential problem of the divergent historical situation: for Raskolnikov test and act are inseparable. In vain does the hero try to play down the act as a mere test, in vain does he relegate the murder along with his later good deeds to the rank of redeemable evils, it is in fact here that we can detect the Toulon expected to give the answer. And the hero does eventually receive an answer to one level of those implied in the question. Namely, that is he really one of the great men who – in his concept – are the movers of history, or one of the crowd. True, here again remains one factor of uncertainty which is at least as decisive as the question some time before the execution of the act that the test was a *test* indeed or it was the act itself.

In the modern age the issues of history-shaping and of human responsibility continue to be indiscernable in the individual's *solitary* assumption of responsibility. At the same time the social situation compells to act and question simultaneously. This is Raskolnikov's "to be or not to be" dilemma, inner factor of uncertainty compared to Hamlet's outer one. (This factor of uncertainty will be expressed in Raskolnikov's question: would Napoleon have killed the old woman if he, say, had not had his Toulon.) (...)

Raskolnikov's situation is fashioned by Dostoevsky – in compliance with the development of the individual and historical relations of the 19th century – so that the hero should be forced to act before being able to mentally control its justification. Further action – that is, to regard the test as a test proper with a view to a subsequent act – is on this very account impossible. This "probe-test", unlike that of Hamlet, instead of liberating the person as act-doer, causes him to pretence. Whoever plays a role might question reality, but the answer will be incidental, his triumph relative.

The key to the failure of Julian Sorel's pretence is also to be found here: essentially good, he wants nevertheless to play the foul, just to attain his aim. Yet his aim does not serve to set time right, and therefore it is the *Evil* itself, the play *turns from role into reality* and this at one stage brings the dissembler into a detrimental position, or even exposes him, and no indemnification is to be had for this. A historically disadvantageous position of this kind is momentous in the scheme of Raskolnikov's play-acting, too. And the paradox of the situation is that he needs to play the role vis-à-vis Porfiry, who himself is under the protection of the "disjointed time" and defends it himself.

But to no avail is the aim more than that of Sorel in *Rouge et noir* or that of Lucien Rubempré in *Illusions perdues* – and in vain is the carrying out more consistent.

Raskolnikov's article written half year and published two months earlier expounds a theory which he had already discarded, that's why it is excluded from the novel, it is prior to the novel's time. Its function in the novel, put there after the act in a definite situation, is that the hero, by virtue of his being the author, should question after the act the arguments proposed in the article. Although the possibilities are accurately shut off by Porfiry, Raskolnikov does find a loophole all the time just on account of his surpassing the earlier concept. Porfiry can question Raskolnikov's "theses" – and in so doing he compells Raskolnikov to confront his theory with his new experimented worldview. Thus the ambiguous position of self-defence has a negative side to it. At first sight it seems – and this



Raskolnikov and Porfiry Petrovich, illustration by P. Revenkov to F. M. Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment*, drawing, 1964 (source: illustrators.ru)

is Porfiry's intellectual perspective as well – as though it had not been this reality, with extreme alternatives and dilemmas, to cause the hero to connect act and test. Apparently, the notion arises as if his world-view, ideology propounded in the article had been at work behind his “test”, that is, behind his real intentions and not a confrontation with the world and a gradual awareness of the world; as though it had not been the same reality which offered Raskolnikov to “make a choice” with its condition of “blood flows everywhere”, with its alternative “in case you do it you are unfortunate, you don't do it, you are perhaps even more unfortunate”, the catastrophe of the Marmeladov-family, the marriage threatening Dunya, the laws governing Porfiry's, Luzin's and Svidrigailov's wolds, in short the public conditions and the mood of the day.

The *argument-duel* between Porfiry and Raskolnikov is instrumental to qualify from a definite point of view the act-attempt of Raskolnikov, so that, in some kind of a distorted mirror, Raskolnikov's act should be rendered before the reader as an answer to the relationship of individual and society.

As a matter of fact, Raskolnikov's act continues to be unexposed before Porfiry and the majority of the characters; what does come to light is *unprovable*, so the play-acting remains what it has ever been, a denial of the act. Yet this does not protect Raskolnikov from being judged by the outer world any more than it protected Hamlet or Claudius, even though he goes on under cover of play-acting up to the last moment in order to dodge the *Qualification* of his purpose.

Hamlet's purpose remains in obscurity as long as he cannot but take vengeance on the invading power. After he exposed his purpose his open action presses Claudius to take on pretence with all its compulsive consequences: the irreversibility of tragedies. Because of pretence Hamlet was compelled to a frank monolog and a feigned dialog, just like Claudius here or Raskolnikov when he has committed the murder.

But in the case of Hamlet the fates of the characters surrounding him are not even a distorted mirror of Hamlet's state of mind or action, rather the other way round: Hamlet is the flawless mirror into which each of the characters is bound to glance some day and to judge his or her own way of life and actions. This happens to Polonius too, who was so confident when supplying

Laertes with his paternal advice for his long journey. When he undertakes to pry into the thoughts of Hamlet labeled mad, he senses wisdom from behind his partner's words, which is all at once a largely unfavourable qualification of his own principle of life. Ophelia came to realize that, taking advantage of her naive child-like goodness, her father and the king had actually meant her to “snatch” Hamlet's thoughts (in the church-scene), and it becomes unbearable for her that she has thus proved unworthy of Hamlet. Ophelia as a child shrank from condemning her father's overtly immoral deeds, but now – when Hamlet's random sword passes sentence on her father – as one who has been unworthy of her companion feels guilty herself, and this self-accusation is irresolvable: she has lost her father as well as herself. Laertes looks into this mirror right before his

death: (when the queen drinks from the chalice which turns out to be poisoned) suddenly he can see Hamlet's purity and the difference between Hamlet's revenge for his father and his own, and with his confession-admonition he is the only one to regain in the last minute the historical role.

Hamlet can at best look into the mirror of himself, and this commands him to be in a perennial state of monologizing. At one stage before the last act he might still withdraw from this

sate of monologizing, i.e. at the moment when he meets Fortinbras' soldiers. But these are *soldiers* and he a prince; the information acquired permits of a *monolog* once again.

Raskolnikov's situation is quite dissimilar. The monolog will last until the murder puts an end on several levels of life to this monolog-potential and transforms it again and again into dialog. The dialogs in Raskolnikov's situation are at the same time those of similar fates, the probes into reality of similar tests; they are answers of similar deeds and answers of another level, of different ethic motive and of different social outcome, but eventually common ones which concern the protagonist as well. Of *fates* and not of *tragedies*. That is why these alien fates and actions are themselves merely distorted mirrors of Raskolnikov's act, and for the very same reason further dialog will on one point always prove distorted, so a dramatic turn is impossible to reach. The role performed is therefore unacceptable, but in its time comes undone, spreads out, for the time challenged but left unconquered demands closure by a fate shirking thus the tragic possibility and dramatic clash alike. (...)

Raskolnikov's adventure in the realm of mind after the act tends to steal back something into the fact of the act which has, in the course of realization, been



Ophelia and Hamlet after Polonius' death
(source: wordpress.com)



Raskolnikov on Nikolaevsky Bridge, illustration by P. Revenkov (source: illustrators.ru)



Hamlet's "To be or not to be..." soliloquy, scene from the film (source: wordpress.com)

almost ousted: the questioning of reality. This is a fight, an intellectual adventure exceeding to a similar degree, coupled with extreme oscillations of answers given to the question, as it was in Hamlet's dilemma of "To be or not to be" (i.e. in the drama up to the turn into tragedy). Even the alternative "to die is better" or "to back out of the situation" arises in the same manner for Raskolnikov as for Hamlet. And this backing out, this "to die" is just as impossible here as there. In contrast with Svidrigailov in *Crime*

and Punishment or with Stavrogin in *The Devils* – for whom such a solution might in any moment be expedient since it belongs to the logic of their destiny within the milieu of the novels – the spiritual aspirations and the fates of Myshkin, Ivan Karamazov and Raskolnikov renounce to embrace such a solution: and renounce they must even though now and then they do encounter situations in which a way out like this seems to offer up as a solution.

In the novel, neither Raskolnikov nor the other characters are able to separate the questioning of reality from essential action. Their common dilemma is this inseparability: proper action is possible only when the test and knowledge of *human fate* have been achieved. On the other hand, human fate seals the active man's possibility, cuts him off once for all from a vital relation with the world.

Raskolnikov anxiously sets his own attempt and decision into opposition with those of Svidrigailov, Dunya and Sonya in spite of the fact that he "the elect" is not alone in sensing that "time is out of joint", but the others, "the crowd", too, senses it. Moreover, with no theory to refer to, they too violate the norm the upsetting of which seemed for Raskolnikov in his article written half a year earlier, to have been the sole privilege of the elect. This experience indicates the first step beyond the abstract theoretical thesis expounded in the article "great men have rights – the masses are a tool". Porfiry in his argument with Raskolnikov falls short because he cannot decipher this new Raskolnikovian experience from the article. Such an experimental world-approach originating in social practice is unfathomable for Porfiry. Porfiry – as well as Luzhin – considers the displaced nature of time not as a displacement but as an eternal human predicament, and from this both characters draw for themselves the necessary and advantageous existential conclusions. Both Luzhin and Porfiry, in respect of their social essence stand in opposition to those who are unable to adapt their human individualities to this social order proclaimed "world order".

Hamlet was alone in recognizing the displaced nature of time; 19th century man, however, senses it in social dimensions. And this is not merely a proof against the “single self’s” calling, but it is in favour of something which is alluded to in *The Devils* in its negative consequences. The positive allusion, which would come in the figure of Alyosha in the second part of *The Brothers Karamazov*, remains but a plan. But as regards the posing of the question, Dostoevsky is again the most profound compared with his contemporaries. In his novels starting from *Crime and Punishment* he causes almost every stratum of society to live through simultaneously the inhumanity and anti-individual nature of the prevailing order. (...)

Raskolnikov has to lend an ear to the blame of his environment, even of himself, in order to qualify his act: was it a murder, a theoretical “murder” what he had done or an attempt, an abortive deed, an act to be disclaimed, misunderstanding or a crime committed in an irresponsible state of mind? And the act shows now one face now the other in the second part labeled *psychological*. Raskolnikov’s entire struggle after the murder not to give himself up becomes justified on moral grounds by the fact that on the level of purposes, or even on the level of external – social-ideological – factors underlying the purposes the deed will not become clear by the sheer fact of its having been committed. Raskolnikov’s descent to hell lasts until he has given himself up, but should he give himself up – the opportunity for further questioning stops. Therefore, Raskolnikov tells Sonya that he has killed the old woman not only because Sonya “understands” him, because she would not reprove him – she herself is also beyond the limits both social-moral and human. Raskolnikov confesses to her rather because in the situation of play-acting into which he has got by the denial of the act – the deeper layers of the motives for the act are inaccessible. The duel with Porfiry may yield only the attitude “I’m not the murderer” or “even if I were, you couldn’t take me up on that” or “I’m not a murderer, I’m an avenger”.

Any debate more to the point would make a self-denunciation, as it surely does: the moment Raskolnikov forgets about the attitude of dissembling, about the necessity of forcing out essential answers which are decisive even for himself, about finding out the truth, he is suddenly faced with a malevolent, victorious Porfiry. The only theme where he might defend the truth of his theory is the article, but it has in the meantime lost its relevance. Then the thesis was held that one was free to kill. Whereas both before and after the murder the crucial question is: “is he free to do it? was he free



Raskolnikov's confession of his crime to Sonya, drawing by P. Revenkov (source: illustrators.ru)

to do it?" Sonya is the partner who before the giving up provides the situation for Raskolnikov where he can *withdraw* from the play-acting and he can supply an answer from utterly divergent points of view or can ask for one from his partner.

Svidrigailov, too, is ready in his dialog with Raskolnikov to create this situation devoid of dissembling. The snag is that the price is too high: an identification of the ultimate meaning of both their deeds: a kind of offer to put a stop to any further questioning, and this is why Raskolnikov cannot accept it (just as the acceptance of Porfiry's offer might involve such a price of giving an answer, excluding further inquiries). This again would be one kind of answer but, since the act cannot be traced back to a single motive, so the closure, the answer to the question "what was then the act?" cannot be one-dimensional either.

The second part of the novel is a polyphonic answer, closure, and almost every one of these returns in the conversations with Sonya. Raskolnikov is sincere only towards her, unconditionally and without play-acting. True, he does pay his price for this: Sonya is the one who eventually will bring him to give himself up before ever getting a positive answer to his own quandary. This also accounts for the fact that the Raskolnikov-question does not, cannot, in fact, come to a halt with Raskolnikov's fate, as it is of broader implication, so it rightly continues in the epilog indicating the interminableness of Raskolnikov's voice (similarly to Onegin's and Tatyana's encounter which could not close the philosophical problems raised by their fates, it could merely be instrumental in setting off a string of novels where we confront the rendez-vous and partings of so many Onegin's and Tatyana's). We do learn, however, that in this fate-closure the interpretation of Raskolnikov's act in the concepts of Porfiry, Luzhin, Dunya, Svidrigailov and even of Sonya has proved inadequate.

Of course, in the Dostoevskian concept of novel the issue is unresolved on the level of the characters and on the level of their mental horizons, for the question itself is central and decisive in the 19th century: how is it possible to separate the genetic and social ethics that are fetish-like entangled by means of an act shaping society; how can one undertake to shape history so that his action may give rise to essential changes and result in the abolishment of antagonisms prevalent in social coexistence; and is this really achievable by virtue of the ever so heroic and devoted action of the individual?

Thus Raskolnikov falters on the very point where Hamlet cannot have been uncertain, i.e. in the question whether he is the one born to set time right. Concerning whether he has found a substitute for the Napoleonic Toulon the brooding-self-consuming hero's answers will later on be digressing in different ways. It is undoubtedly proven, however, that one may not and must not question reality at the expense Raskolnikov thought was allowed. Not only because greatness, human greatness is the result of a process of actions and lacks *a priori* existence, but also because *becoming great is not an issue of psychology but a social-historical relationship*. Dostoevsky will then put it in terms of logic: a long series of intellectual and ethical efforts are needed on the part of the individual so that his questioning of reality should spring not from selfish curiosity but from reality-forming responsibility and endeavour.



MÁRTA TÖMÖRY



ZSOLT SZÁSZ



ÁGNES PÁLFI

Life-and-Death Struggle of Stage Selves at the National Theatre

Roundtable on *The Drunks*

Since its premiere at the National Theatre in Budapest last autumn, *Részegek* (*The Drunks*), directed by Victor Ryzhakov, has been bringing down the house. It is shortlisted for the summer 2017 POSzT (National Theatre Festival in Pécs), too, where the previous season's most highly esteemed Hungarian productions are presented each year. The original Hungarian language study was published in the December 2016 issue of *Szcenárium*. An interview related to the season's other production invited to POSzT, III. *Richárd* (*Richard III*), co-produced by the National Theatre in Budapest and Gyulai Várszínház (Gyula Castle Theatre), with guest artists from the Vígszínház (Comedy Theatre) (d.: Attila Vidnyánszky Jnr, opened: 10 January 2017), was published last September. MITEM this year offers a unique opportunity for the youngest generation of Hungarian artists to present themselves on the international stage in these two productions. Victor Ryzhakov (b. 1960) is currently artistic director of Meyerhold Centre, Moscow. He was guest director at the Attila Vidnyánszky-led Csokonai Színház (Csokonai Theatre) in Debrecen in the period between 2006 and 2013 already. His *Fodrászsnő* (*The Hairdresser*, 2009) won the award for best production at POSzT. As head teacher at the Academy of Dramatic Arts, Moscow Art Theatre, he has built strong links with the Kaposvári Egyetem Színházi Intézet (University of Kaposvár, Drama Institute) with students from the two countries taking part in regular exchange programmes.

Ah, with the Grape my fading life provide,
And wash the Body whence the Life has died,
And lay me, shrouded in the living Leaf,
By some not unfrequented Garden-side.

by Omar Khayyam

Zsolt Szász: It is a rare occasion that the same play is staged at two cutting-edge theatres in Budapest. The Europe-wide more and more popular contemporary playwright Ivan Vyrypaev's play titled *The Drunks* directed by Peter Gothár has been performed at Kamra at Katona József Theatre since last December, while this November it was also shown at the National Theatre. This discussion is first of all about Victor Ryzhakov's interpretation at the National Theatre, but it will also deal with the differences between the two directors' concepts of the play.

Márta Tömöry: I regard it as important that in contrast with the recent trend of altering the original plays to be staged both Ryzhakov and Gothár are loyal to the original structure of Vyrypaev's play: not only do they keep the two acts but also the order of the acts, moreover, the whole script translated by András Kozma as well as by Géza Morcsányi is staged without any changes.¹ Between the acts there is no interval in either production. At the National Theatre the first part as in the original script (except for the opening scene) is staged in interior sets which are continuously rearranged, while in the second part the outer space is filled with more and more water and is basically unchanged. Due to the limited dimensions of Katona Kamra there is no such contrast between open and closed space in the production directed by Gothár. The narrow air-raid shelter can be divided into three spaces: the audience is in the front, in the middle there is a suddenly narrowing corridor, which serves as the scenery itself, while at the farthest part of the stage there is a mirror wall. With this rather direct choice for the scenery the designer-director suggests that the audience (we) also belong to the world of *The Drunks*. This is underpinned by the foreplay as well: the nylon coated woman (Martha – Judit Rezes) climbs out of the audience while tumbling over us she lands on the stage causing cynical laughter in the audience. There are no concrete sets representing interiors, the changes of scene are indicated by the props and objects animated by the actors: for instance a water tank with gold fish or a coffee machine and other similar kitchen appliances.

Zs. Sz.: Unfortunately I myself have not seen this performance, but in one of the reviews² it appears what this arrangement of space is capable of achieving: the figures coming from the depth "[of a narrowing corridor] seem to be decreasing in size as they draw closer to us in the enlarging space: the figures who appear to be enormous at the bottleneck become nothing more or less than drunken people when they are in front of us".

¹ See the interview with András Kozma in *Szcenárium*, December 2016.

² Critical remarks by Ákos Török were published in *7óra7* (23. 12. 2015.)

M. T.: Certainly, in this staging the actors even exaggerate their drunkenness, which may be based on Vyrypaev's instructions. It is another question, as the quotation at the head of this interview suggests, drunkenness can have a different interpretation from the everyday interpretation of being under alcoholic influence: it can be considered as the holy state of elevation. Let us not forget that theatrical art had developed from the cult of Dionysos who used to be the God of grapes and wine. Vyrypaev himself had also chosen as his motto an Omar Khayyám poem whose few lines can be read on an "electric board" in the background; however, what I have discovered is rather the lovely euphoria which links the world of the living and the world of the dead. What Vyrypaev's intention was with this motto is to orientate both the reader and then the director so that they would not look for the meaning of the acts as what could be found in them is purely the form, the essence is invisible for everybody.³

Ágnes Pálfi: I had seen the production at the National Theatre first, and then read the play. This is why I was so much taken by surprise that the scenes are introduced with naturalistic directions by the author. In these directions there are lengthy and detailed descriptions of the mental states of the characters, their direct environments, objective reality, clothes etc. When Ryzhakov directs the play he lacks external or realistic characterisation. Both acts take place in an extremely abstract, homogeneous space in the theatre: the audience find themselves in a united, spherical and gradually enlarging psycho-space. The prelude of the "noise" band positioned at arm's length distance from the audience serves the same purpose. In the second part of the play it performs the same function when the actors are coming not from the front but rather from the background; they are also leaving for the background, and they are also seated there facing the audience even when they are not supposed to be on the scene. At the beginning of the last scene the opening and the illumination of the huge stage doors is a significant moment, when the festival director acted by Trill Zsolt says "the time for human beings is over". This connection is of key importance regarding the production as a whole: it is for opening up a new space-time dimension. In my view the metaphysical surplus of the show originates from this "as a whole" approach, which equally affects the scene, the Trebubov's concept of design as well as the whole staging. This kind of "spaciousness in view" would never have happened if it had only been for the "philosophical" contents of the script.

Zs. Sz.: I would like to emphasize two concrete ecstatic impacts made acoustically and visually on this psycho-space audience. However, as the use of the word 'ecstatic' is not so obvious for everybody, let me just refer to the so elaborate ecstasy technic in the Japanese noh theatre, which has been in use for centuries. In the noh theatre every performance starts with a five to ten-minute

³ See the last verse of Vyrypaev's choice for a motto: "Все, что видишь ты, – видимость только одна / Только форма – а суть никому не видна. / Смысла этих картинок понять не пытайся – / Сядь спокойно в сторонке и выпей вина!"

drum or flute play. The three drums are tuned in high, low and middle frequencies so that their repeated, forceful and monotonous sounding will result in a pain in the audience's stomach nerves centre, and then recover from it; at the same time the long sounds played on the flute result in a sort of oniric (sleeplike) state in both the actors and the audience. The square shaped stage which is marked with columns – with the pine tree symbolizing eternal life in the background marks both the external and internal world, the cosmic spaciousness of existence. The function of the noise band in the production is very similar to this technique whose composer, Alexander Manockov also takes into consideration this kind of physiological impact which the audience is unable to resist.

Á. P.: I have also seen some Japanese kabuki and noh productions in which indeed the audience ended up in an entirely different state of mind. On the borderline of dreaming and waking I was initiated into a completely different kind of perception than what I had experienced in European theatres before. As I have done yoga I do know that the purpose of breathing exercises is also to achieve this state of mind or at least reach the level where the coming and going of uncontrollable thoughts in the human mind can be calmed. The sound band's foreplay was perfectly suitable for achieving this here.

Zs. Sz.: Yet the visual effects make a similar impact. The white square-shaped play-field standing on one corner and the black square projected on its surface which continuously moves makes the audience's attention focused and at the same time makes them feel the delirium. This hardly sensible oscillation (pixilation) based on the physical laws of optics and physiological laws of vision causes irisation, which is the special effect of the uncertainty of the brain whether it sees white on black or black on white. The same is typical of the state of drunkenness when one is unable to distinguish a close object from a distant one, a fast movement from a slow one, as one loses one's realistic sense of space or time.

Á. P.: Now due to this complex impact – I must confess I have always sensed this square as white and illuminated – I understand why Attila József's Consciousness (Translator's note: József Attila is a famous Hungarian poet of the first half of the 20th century) came to my mind: "Silence gave ear: the clock struck one. / Maybe you could go back to boydom; / walled in with concrete dank

and wan, / maybe imagine hints of freedom. / And now I stand, and through the sky-dome / the stars, the Dippers, shine and burn / like bars, the sign of jail and thraldom, / above a silent cell of stone."
(Translated by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth and Frederick Turner)

Zs. Sz.: I was also surprised when seeing the photos taken of the production and I realised that



Redecorating the playing area (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

during the rearrangements on the open stage the light effects were inverted: then a white grid on a black foundation could be seen, which is another evidence of the conscious efforts that the designers and the director were making.

M. T.: These are all very exciting revelations. However, if I in the quality of a dramaturge rely on the script I consider it important to emphasize that this play has a perfect structure which is built upon the classical European rules, even complying with the triple unit principle by Boileau, this is a story of a night of drunkenness that lasts until dawn: three generations' confessions about life, love, death and God, which also has reference to the psychological grounding of a play by Stanislavsky. In the play every character has a decipherable and further developing motivation, based on

which they can also appear on stage as a concrete real person. We may witness crises and changes of human life in almost every scene: the couples divorce and remarry, confess old secrets of adultery, hold stag parties a day before their weddings. In the first act we just see flashes of the dramas that occur in ordinary people's lives, while in the second one it becomes obvious that in spite of the need for change nothing is really changing. Gothár often takes advantage of the role play that is based on psychologically realistic life situations. At the same time Ryzhakov's direction is quite similar. Seeing Mark the festival director (Zsolt Trill) and Rosa the prostitute (Ágnes Barta) in the last scene I had a real urge to uncover the intrinsic motivations of other characters too. Because this situation shows the final state with no way out: Mark, being aware that he is going to die soon, thinks over his useless life, while Rosa does the same when she faces the reality of living as a prostitute. In this dialogue there is a dramatic collision, which is the most relevant requirement in the European tradition from the Ancient Greek tragedies to contemporary theatre. Their meeting is the most complex linguistically too, as their fates are uncovered their characters also appear to be the most realistic and complex in the play; it also offers the opportunity for redemption. Let me add that in this act in Gothár's production the festival director (Mark – Máté Mészáros) would not want to face up to and account for his life: he has got stuck in his cynicism, he is an irredeemable character who just wants to cheat on the girl who sincerely opens up to him (Rosa – Eszter Ónodi).



The last scene with Zsolt Trill and Ágnes Barta (photo: Zsolt Eőri Szabó)

Á. P.: I agree with what you have just mentioned that written plays have a strong generational character: Vyrpaev primarily identifies his characters with their ages. At the same time the characters in their twenties, thirties and forties (fifties) still speak the same way even if they are in different life situations. And still about the Vyrpaev-text, stag party of the over-aged thirties in a vegetarian restaurant (Act 1, Scene 4) is a teenage-like, infantile romping, which is thematically linked to the previous four scenes and which is featured by some, so to say, “well-established” couples who are 15–20 years older (Act 1, Scene 3). From now on the relationship with God becomes the central topic of the play (the older generation’s theme is that every man is God’s body while the younger ones’ is that everybody hears the whisper of the Lord in their hearts). Jesus Christ the “Son of Man” as the Redeemer only appears in the closing act of the play, until then only the Lord is mentioned. However, in the scenes in which generations



The young people’s restaurant scene
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

conflict with each other (Act 2, Scene 1, Gustav, Lora and Martha; Act 2 Scene 3, Karl, Linda, Laurenz and Magda; Act 2, Scene 4 Mark and Rosa) the absurd gives way more and more to a melodramatic mood. This concept is closely supported by the director of the National Theatre production. What is dramatically different in comparison with the play is that in this performance there are only two generations of actors instead of three: those in

their thirties are also played by actors in their twenties. This is the reason why in the “marriage” scene of Act 2 (2/2) the “bridegroom’s” (Max, Attila Vidnyánszky Junior) monologue sounds like his very own manifesto of the unbearable nature of the current world state and the negative mood of his own generation: wage slavery, exaggerated liberalism, alienation from reality, general apathy, just to mention the most significant motifs. In my opinion this “virgo speech” asserts the national character of the play and makes it really Hungarian, hic et nunc the credibility of this production is established (the real age (25) of the actor is also mentioned in it). The fashion model who is converted into a “bride” (Laura, Eszter Ács) has a consecutive monologue about giving up liberty, and although it starts in the same mood and as if it were intended to be a programme manifesto about the real calling of a woman, it ends up at the other extreme: it becomes a grotesques apologetic for surrendering oneself.

Zs. Sz.: Yes, indeed, I do also feel that Attila Vidnyánszky Junior’s monologue is almost a 19th century romantic manifesto: an individual and a script almost fully overlapping each other. Self criticism and criticism of a society is expressed

in the style of an era when it was taken for granted that whoever speaks his mind will practice what he preaches. Yet, there is an interesting paradox which featured in our public debate over postmodernism and sacrality a few years ago.⁴ While according to postmodern (or post-dramatic) theory this world is over, in reality Romantic Aesthetics is still a point of reference, in which the individual ambitions and social responsibility as well as political and poetic rhetorics can still be overlapped by each other in the long run. He still relates to this ideal when he claims: there is no drama any more these days and there are no heroes. It is worth quoting what Attila Végh said during this debate: "... the expression "postmodern" is a typical romantic expression. It sounds like the sunset of the West. From this angle postmodern is the failure of the intention to create a new paradigm, and the reason for this is that our perspective, desire for catharsis or our aesthetical horizon are all determined by Romanticism. This situation has not changed ever since. (...) it is possible to have a romantic enthusiasm while wanting to remain exempt from romantic sentiments, but eventually the cat comes out of the bag."

Á. P.: This production has surprised me because it proves that the reason why a valid theatrical artwork comes into being may also be that the characters are unable to say what they mean because they have not been educated or socially conditioned to do so. I do miss something but at the same time all I have are commonplaces and clichés, I am overwhelmed by them. I have lost, or to be precise I have not even acquired a personal creative attitude to the language. In a certain sense this play is also about this kind of losing track of the language. But if we just focus on the production in question it is rather about what happens if you begin cultivating this minimalistic rudimentary "root language". When living



"Generational confession" by Attila Vidnyánszky Jnr
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)



The words of the "bride" in the oath scene
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

⁴ See the edited notes taken at the workshop held at DESZKA Festival in Debrecen in 2013 which was published in *Szcenárium* (47–57, December 2013).

people, vital theatrical beings voice it, it starts showing surprising vital signs, implying the pristine integrity of the world which is still Christianity with its own ethics and set of symbols.

Zs. Sz.: The structure of a piece of music which is characteristic of the whole play serves this purpose, the repetition of certain cantos, their articulation by a different actor within one scene or even through several scenes. This results in the kind of mechanism of action on stage that may be described with the expression “sacred parody.”⁵ This means that the essence of sacredness is referred to in a manner of parody. This is called the “festive laugh” by Bakhtin, when the verbally indescribable spirituality that links us is defined in a reversed, humorous way. This is what happens in the scene in the vegetarian restaurant when there are several variations of I/you/ he/she – all of us can hear the whisper of the Lord in our hearts. After this “text panel” has already been used for the third time and still makes the audience laugh, however, the end of the scene makes all of us think hard and obliges us to meditate.

M. T.: This procedure is not new, similarly wide range of tunes are familiar from absurd dramas by Queneau, Ionesco and Beckett, and first of all from *Waiting for Godot*, whose iconic language abounds in hyatuses, repetitions, mistakenly used as well as fragmented words, yet, it reflects closely the ecstatic struggle of European men for expressions and the faith for the true meanings of words. The characters of this Vyrypaev-play are not so abstract as *Godot*’s clown-like performers, who are meant to embody all the basic human characteristics. In *The Drunks* the characters have concrete positions and statuses, which they are sometimes made to express. The majority of the men are bankers or managers (Laurenz is the only man whose profession is unknown). Among the women there is a model (Laura – Eszter Ács), a prostitute (Rosa – Ágnes Barta), the two wives (Lora – Nelli Szűcs; Linda – Mari Nagy) and the girlfriend (Magda – Katona Kinga) have no reference to their occupations. BANK is a dominant metaphor even for the film festival director (Mark – Zsolt Trill) – see it in the last scene when a bank account, interest, loan and credit are mentioned, which culminates in the idea that even our lives are loaned to us when we are born.

Á. P.: Based on social roles a kind of realistic content may as well be constructed out of these reality elements, nonetheless the roles in the play are rather temporarily suspended due to drunkenness. In fact, the spectators do not really see the actors’ characters’ struggles but rather the actors’ life-and-death struggle; they like their stage selves⁶ become a kind of collective ego

⁵ See: Attila Végh: *Aranykori nevetés (Golden Age Laughter)*, as well as Zsolt Szász’s and Ágnes Pálfi’s publication titled *Széljegyzetek az Aranykori nevetés (Footnotes to Golden Age Laughter)* című íráshoz Szenárium, pp 30–39, October 2013.

⁶ See István Gedő Bessenyei’s writings: “*Halál, hol a te fullánkod!?*” Dedaramatizáló törekvések Vidnyánszky Attila rendezéseiben (“*Oh, Death, Where is Your Sting!?*” Endeavours of De-Dramatization in Attila Vidnyánszky’s Stagings), Szenárium, 16 October 2013

and the symbol of MAN during the performance. The expressive form of this life-and-death struggle is humour, moreover, the most archaic form of it, the special language of this world, face-painting reminiscent of clowns, caricature-like movements rich in acrobatic elements, speech that is too fast and too loud. If we had to exalt the virtues of this performance we could say that what we actually see on stage is the victory of virtuosic stage selves over the socially forced indignant roles. The two culminating scenes of the production (the vegetarian restaurant in the first act and the “nuptial ceremony” in the second one) may as well be regarded as a demonstration of young actors’ generation: they are not too old but almost teenagers, their crispness and anxiety are their primary qualities⁷. However, their provocative, youthful and impulsive play is characteristic of the whole play and all actors.

M. T.: If there were any chance to express in detail how the actors’ life-and-death struggle should be interpreted, I would definitely refer to how Nelli Szűcs walks in her stilettos on the slanting stage; Zsolt Trill’s and Estilla Mikecz’s entrée with their neckbreaking stunt; Attila Vidnyánszky Junior’s hitting his nose on the table while falling; the acrobatic fight reminding of oriental martial arts as well as American Western movie parodies (Sándor Berettyán as Rudolf; Roland Bordás as Gabriel; László Szabó Sebestyén as Gabriel); and I would like to recall the murderous tension and naturalistic corporality of the previously quoted last scene, too.

Zs. Sz.: Yet if the psycho-realistic and melodramatic scenes are listed, the actors’ confessions are counter-pointed and have multiple meanings owing to the surplus of gestures. This makes Tibor Fehér’s (Laurenz) and the two friends’ (Magda: Kinga Katona and Laura: Eszter Ács) love triangle scene very special, which – due to the brilliantly executed stage technique of turning heads (“headslashing”) bears close remembrance to a Molière scene in which *Don Juan* promises to marry two peasant girls at the same time. But we could also refer to László Tóth’s (Karl) and Attila Kristán’s (Gustav) allusion in the scene of the confession of adultery which reminds us of the style of dialogues in the world-famous *Beavis and Butthead* cartoon making the impression that there is a completely meaningless debate between two superannuated guys, a rocker and a punk.



The “love” scene (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

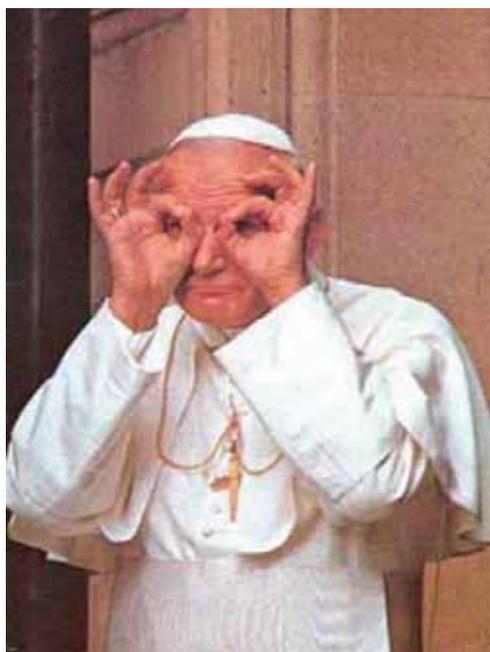
⁷ About this current generational trend see: *Milyen világ az, amelyben ilyen gonosszá válik az ember?* (What World Is It Which Makes Man So Evil?) – Zsolt Szász interviews Miklós Vecsei, *Szcenárium*, pp 41–49 September 2016



The „main message” scene (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

different mood from the others: this couple creates the “sex appeal” of unspoiled bliss and hope for a moment for the audience, which is not even overridden by the ironical sentence that Martha says when she leaves the aging couple alone and disappears from the scene: “Thanks a lot to your shitty families for this gorgeous pearl of love.”

Zs. Sz.: In this analysis the character of the play who is not shaken up by any everyday conflicts has not been mentioned so far. He is either so downtrodden that he gave up protesting ages ago against whatever insults he received or because he is so wise –as the poet puts it – that he oversees this “present pub”. Mari Nagy who acts as Linda got the shortest script from the playwright. Nevertheless, perhaps she has the toughest task when she has to target the audience with one



Pope John Paul II making the „Goggles” symbol (source: youtube.com)

Á. P.: The “love” scene between Attila Kristán (Gustav) and Estilla Mikecz (Martha) appears to be a relationship between two infantile kindergarten kids: this is expressed by their pitifully naive but at the same time silly clownlike facial expressions, when they face the audience holding each other’s hands; their objects such as a scooter and a balloon also refer to this. This scene has a totally

different mood from the others: this couple creates the “sex appeal” of unspoiled bliss and hope for a moment for the audience, which is not even overridden by the ironical sentence that Martha says when she leaves the aging couple alone and disappears from the scene: “Thanks a lot to your shitty families for this gorgeous pearl of love.”

Zs. Sz.: In this analysis the character of the play who is not shaken up by any everyday conflicts has not been mentioned so far. He is either so downtrodden that he gave up protesting ages ago against whatever insults he received or because he is so wise –as the poet puts it – that he oversees this “present pub”. Mari Nagy who acts as Linda got the shortest script from the playwright. Nevertheless, perhaps she has the toughest task when she has to target the audience with one exclamation containing the “main message” of the play to the audience which we have heard from Lorenz (Tibor Fehér) before. What makes this role even more challenging for her is that what she needs to make a dirty exclamation: “Ne fossatok!” (“Do not shit!”) However, Mari Nagy faces this challenge really well: she says this sentence by making the audience feel simultaneously that her self-esteem is hurt and she would like to break free, moreover, she even shows a preacher’s attitude, which can especially be touching to those who realize that this is the paraphrase of Pope John Paul II’s imperative message from the Bible: “Do not be afraid”.

Translated by Anikó Kocsis