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Shamanic ritual, 4,000-year-old rock engraving at the San Rafael Swell plateau, Utah
(source: unclewiggilyphotography.com)

ZSOLT SZÁSZ

We Stand at a Turning Point

"To hell with gadgets and computers – just go to the theatre, occupy whole rows in the stalls and in the galleries, listen to the word and look at living images! – it is theatre in front of you, do not neglect it and do not miss a chance to participate in it – perhaps the most precious chance we share in our vain and hurried lives." With these words, Anatoly Vasiliev addressed the esteemed audience on World Theatre Day in 2016.

For ten years now, we, too, have been sending our messages through the MITEM English issues of *Szcenárium* to the artists of theatres visiting us from abroad – in the hope that the art of the moment might also find a home through writing, on the pages of this 'paper theatre', in the eternal time of memory. *Vita Activa, Vita Contemplativa* – is our life an active or a contemplative one? The life of those of us who stand daily on the frontlines between stage and audience, striving to preserve that secret yet stronger-than-anything chain which has bound the living to the dead since the dawn of human consciousness.

The first rhythms still drum in our ears; we don the mask of the earliest actors; we cry out to the heavens the first prayers of the dithyrambic poets, even as we run our allotted earthly cycles back and forth in an ever-quickening tempo. What is the point of fidelity – what drives us, and you? Most likely, we provoke the same question in those who watch and listen to us.

The writings published in this issue of our journal, the voices of masters and disciples, the still-active artists and the benevolent spirits echoing from beyond, are all playing with real stakes. They urge us to listen, no matter how difficult it may be, even amidst the clash of arms, to the higher authority, who is always present as the third one, invisibly at work amid our squabbling dialogues.

This twelfth MITEM is notable for the fact that we have reached the turning point of our shared history. The great generation that found the language for the theatre of the decades after the last world conflagration is departing. We, too, cannot yield to the bloodthirsty spirits – we must listen to our conscience, so that we may remain capable of engaging in the world's discourse.

Translated by Nóra Durkó

Scene from the production *Mount Olympus,* 2015, directed and choreographed by Jan Fabre
(photo: Phill Griffin, source: nyuskirball.org)

JAN FABRE/LUK VAN DEN DRIES

From Act to Acting

Jan Fabre's Guidelines for the Performer of the 21st Century (Excerpts)

Jan Fabre (born 1958), a theatre maker, writer, and visual artist active since the 1970s, and Luk Van den Dries, a dramaturge and theatre expert, co-authored this book as the result of a decade-long collaboration. This guide, based on Fabre's extensive theatrical experience, sheds new light on the challenges contemporary theatre faces, including the high-level physical, mental, and vocal training required of performers. In the book's first chapter, titled '*Performative Principles*', from which we have selected excerpts, Fabre explores fundamental questions of theatrical art. In the section titled '*From Inside Out*', where the sixth principle is discussed, he argues that the key to a performer's authenticity lies in ensuring that whatever they do on stage stems from their internal reality, transforming their physiological processes into visible and audible signs. In the next subchapter, '*Transformation*', he outlines the continuous process of transformation that the performer undergoes, shaping it into form and figure. In the '*Real Time/Real Action*' section, he explores how time and space can be depicted and experienced on stage within the real-time performance and the fictional framework of theatre. Fabre's Antwerp-based theatre company, Troubleyn, made its debut at MITEM 9 with the production *Resurrexit Cassandra*. At MITEM 11 in 2024, the Hungarian audience saw their eight-hour production, *MOUNT OLYMPUS – To Glorify the Cult of Tragedy*. Last November, the National Theatre presented the Fabre-directed production *I Am Blood*, created with the company's ensemble. The book *From Act to Acting*, published in 2021, is already available in Hungarian. The book launch and the accompanying workshop at the National Theatre will be a key professional event at MITEM 12. The festival programme will also feature two productions directed by Fabre: *I'm Sorry* and *I Am Blood*.

From inside to outside

Many acting theories emphasize that the actor should not look for outer effect, but should act and react on stage from his inner truth. But what is inner truth? To Fabre it is situated in the body, in the most literal sense conceivable: inside. The performer needs to be constantly hyperconscious of what is going on inside his body. His body is his laboratory, an incredibly complex and ingeniously equipped apparel reacting constantly to the smallest of new inputs given to it. This body consists of about a hundred trillion cells organized in functional structures and systems such as the intestines, the nervous system, glands, muscular system, skeleton, fascia, all connected to each other, working together and bringing about homeostasis: the balance of all functions of the body (among others temperature, acidity, blood pressure, respiration). The body is an unbelievably intelligent machine that adapts itself constantly to environmental factors and reacts to the most divergent stimuli. Fabre's pedagogical project is about making the performer conscious of all the mechanisms at work in his interior, all these metabolic processes, chemical processes, physiological processes,.. to learn to perceive and use these as an input for performing. The performer perceives from the inside, he feels what happens to him on the inside, and he projects this outwardly.

If this physiological interior is a very layered and subtle mechanism, then this applies all the more to the imaginary world of the interior. As indicated before in the performative principle *Anatomical consciousness,* the imagination forms an inexhaustible food source, with boundless depths, bizarre shadows and labyrinths of dream imagines continuously within grasp. It is a tangible world, which means that the imagines abiding therein are made up of odors, sounds, tastes, they have their own feelers and inverted eyes perceiving more than what can actually be seen. It is the work of the performer to, not merely get into contact with it, but open the doors of the imagination wide, to dare to dive deep into it and time and again search for unsuspected depths.

From inside to outside doesn't follow a simple route from point a to point b but zigzags back and forth between several coordinates. Imagination is a trigger directing action causing physiological processes that in their turn can heighten the imagination. In other words, there is a continuous *feedback loop* between imagination, action and perception with which the interior world is converted into creative energy, that in her turn feeds and strengthens the interior world. The performer should therefore fill himself completely with the input of a specific imaginary phrase and then let the body devour this phrase completely and surrender to what is going on. The imagination is thus incessantly driven by physiological impulses, even more so, the imagination becomes physical. Through *autosuggestion* the performer can really feel the soles of his feet burning in the *Rice paper/Fire* exercise or feel a bullet penetrate his body in *The dying animal*. The input of the interior world creates output that burns a route back

to the inside. It is exactly this constant cycle that makes the performance alive and keeps the performer alert.

When Fabre advises a performer to connect with his heart, his liver or his stomach, it is not meant metaphorically. When he remarks that you should also look with your back, it is because your skin also has eyes. When he says your feet as well should think, it is because the nerves run from the soles of the feet to the brain. The inner body is the ultimate truth. The truth is these masses of cells, nerves, fibers, glands, reacting in this instant. The truth to a performer is in other words not psychological, but physiological: the whole of his perception starts from the here and now and from this inner organism and the whole of his art consists of transposing all this into visible and audible signals. The truth of the interior (ever momentous, ever provisional) transforms into the truth of the exterior (ever momentous, ever provisional). There's a resemblance between the inside and the outside. Feeling and showing become one.

To feel, to sense is a difficult concept in every acting method. Most of the time it is confused with psychology, with emotions. Feeling, in Fabre's approach, equals perception: the performer uses all his sensory abilities like a kind of seismographic receptor to discern what is happening inside his body. The performer will then push these perceived impulses from the inside to the outside and translate these into clear and convincing signs. The series of exercises is meant among others to sharpen and further develop these subtle and hypersensitive antennae observing the interior. In *Moonwalk* for instance, the performer will suddenly be cut off from all oxygen supply causing him to cramp up slowly: he feels that he's shrinking and the way his intestines start to cling to his skeleton. This real state of the body is used as an input for acting: the shrinking interior of the body causes a feeling of suffocation and with this real feeling the performer gets started, it is materialized into something else, into a convincing act on stage. This act is convincing because it starts from an acute state of the body: the interior is in a stir, and this stirs the performer, he is affected by it, and this effect is converted into visible and audible signs. Something similar happens in the exercise *the old people*: the performer starts to quaver, because it is an inner tremor that is being aroused. It starts within the nerves, the most tiniest fibers and then will start spreading across the whole of the body until it almost overwhelms him and he no longer can stop shaking.

It applies to all exercises that they want to bring the performer into a specific state of being, a state linked to the functions of the body (temperature, acidity, blood pressure, muscle tonus, respiration,…) manifesting themselves on the inside of the body. This real physiological state together with the muscle of the imagination form the creative material of the performer. These are the vital parts of his existence on stage. The performer acts to the measure of his heartbeat, he surfs on the waves of his imagination, his inspiration comes from his blood pressure and the scintillations of his nerves.

Transformation

The magic of theatre lies in the power of transformation. Something turns into something else. Fabre invests in that something else; it is up to the performer to dig up that something else, to explore its layers but also its essential groundlessness, and wallow in it. Then he can reveal its process and result and present it to the audience. Jan Fabre's stage is that of transformation: the energy of the performer seeks to constantly transform and, in that way, adopt new forms. It is a molting process on a massive scale, in which he strips off skin only to regrow it elsewhere. In all those constant transformations, there is no authentic core to be discovered, there is no truth or original nature that wants to expose itself. It is never about purity. True nature lies precisely in the transformation, in the never-ending process of change to which the performer has to succumb. His own layers and the endless scope of his imagination are the driving force behind his presence on stage.

Transformation in Jan Fabre's theatre is, in itself, a very layered and complex theme. It has many different facets that all signify different qualities of transformation. There is certainly a revelatory dimension to it: transformation is something that has a life of its own, something that is unknowable, unthinkable even. The essential basis of this revelation is that it emanates from a different dimension. In that sense, like in Catholic liturgy, transformation takes on the form of transubstantiation: the bread becomes the body of Christ. 'Take this

Jan Fabre: *Telling the Passion of Art and Christ* (1978); pencil, human blood, paper (source: finestresullarte.info)

and eat it, for this is my body which is being given to you.' The bread is placed on the open hand of the faithful who place it on their tongues, leave it there to disintegrate and subsequently swallow it without chewing. That way, the bodies of the faithful merge with the body of Christ. His body disappears on the tongue and palate and becomes one.

Transubstantiation is a special form of transformation, because it is the substance itself that changes. The body of Christ becomes bread. In other words, the atoms, the texture and cell structure of one form dissolve to change into another form, in this liturgical example, into a kind of bread concentrate. And actually, this is precisely the level which Fabre is after. Fabre does presuppose transformation in all possible directions and degrees, such as the transformation in all kinds of animal species, in monsters, in angels and many other guises, but the ultimate goal of this transformation is to become something else, to adopt another substance. This applies for instance to exercises such as *Incision, Eros and Thanatos, From the profane to the sacred*, or *Ecstasy* which attain a superlative degree of transformation, the performer dissolves into something bigger than himself.

In many acting theories, this transformation is at the heart of the theatre process. The actor takes on the role of a character and, by availing himself of all kinds of acting techniques, he tries to step into the shoes of the character as much as he can. So, he becomes a different person. Not so with Fabre. The performer does not become a different person, he becomes something else. His physical being changes. So, the process of transformation works at the most fundamental level, that of the cell structures and atoms. The substance alters, becoming something else. Something in which you can still make out the human form, but which has, at the same time, denied its human functionality in order to be absorbed by a new entity. You cannot call it identity, it is just 'something'. On stage, before the eyes of the audience, the performer's body has transubstantiated into something else. That is the true essence of Fabre's theatre: to become something else.

In liturgy, the bread is a transubstantial form which you can multiply and share. In that way, the body of Christ can be shared among the faithful, as can his blood, in fact. The very same transubstantiation happens in a performance on a Fabrian stage: the performer is looking for a form that can be shared and communicated. But not via the appropriate channels of gaze, understanding, meaning and reason. No, this is about a shared process from body to body, from matter to matter. The bread unifies via the tongue and palate. In a similar way, the birth of a new guise into which the performer has transformed looks for openings in the audience, where he can gain access, where he is welcome, or soft tissue which he can perforate, or fold up make a nest for himself. The warrior of beauty is, if need be, also a bacteria or a virus which causes itching, irritation and rashes.

What applies to liturgy also applies to alchemy, and this is another process similar to what the Fabrian performer wishes to achieve. The alchemist, too, is looking for a formula to intervene in the nature of matter and to turn ordinary metals into gold. The alchemist draws on the Aristotelian idea that you can change each of the four elements by combining them with another quality (hot, cold, humid, dry). These, and many other qualities, also form an essential set of tools for the performer in his alchemical theatre: he adds extreme heat or is dried out completely, he can become extremely light or slow down to zero, which, for instance, is the case with exercises such as *Moonwalk, Rice paper/Fire* or *The sick body*. He engages with matter by unleashing all kinds of qualities which deconstruct the structure, only to re-create new matter. Very typical of alchemy is this transformation of ordinary metals into gold. In other words, one starts from a trivial matter to change it into something more precious. It is this dimension of enlightenment that is very typical of the spiritual purport within alchemy, which also applies to the Fabrian performer. He wants to light up, become a torch, a lighthouse that spreads light. He wants to show what the body can do if you remove the shackles and inertia in which it is usually kept. In Jan Fabre's alchemical theatre, the body is melted into a more noble matter. A matter which, while not denying its basic and underground nature, can also sparkle and shine, like the multitude of stars in the sky.

So, there are different ways of defining that transformative power, which is so characteristic of the work of Fabre. Each time different facets of the process of change are at the core of the performative action. Only in relation to each other can an overall picture be created of what is meant by, or achieved with, transformation.

One final essential feature should be added, namely metamorphosis. Fabre is mesmerized by metamorphosis, his work is simply unthinkable without that dimension of transformation. Metamorphosis, in its turn, adds a whole new field of experience and meaning to transformation. It is a biological process in which, for example, a larva emerges as caterpillar and eventually transforms into a butterfly; or the pupa of a beetle which metamorphoses into an imago. The performer's work has the same amazing, almost shocking impact. It is unthinkable that a butterfly, or a heavily armored beetle, should emerge from such a pupa. Just as unthinkable are the performer's metamorphoses, as they appear in most of the exercises in this book: in a kind of magical twist of time he can change from a crying baby to an elder taking his last breath. He can get a taste of a different gender, or anything lying in between. He can take on the form of an animal and move about in this guise until another metamorphosis strikes him as more appropriate to engage in. From an animalistic shape to an object, unto something angelic or devilish. This metamorphosis is never effortless. It is a very fundamental transformation process associated with rupture, breaking the cocoon, a pupation that hurts. At the same time, it is a process of change

creating joy and jubilee, for nothing is as wonderful as being in a hybrid state, moving somewhere in between, swimming in between two shores: the in-between is a delightful area to explore. Yet, for the sake of clarity, the performer does not imitate, does not copy the outer edge, but digs deeper and deeper, his transformation is comprehensive, it salutes us from within and only then does it reach the outer shell. That internal process is painful and delightful at the same time, and this combination of feelings is even inherent to the intense wonder that follows. Metamorphosis is always a mixture of violence and beauty.

Needless to say, this biological, rupturing and revelatory form of metamorphosis also touches on mythical dimensions. In our collective memories, many stories lurk that are founded on the power of metamorphosis. There is, for example, Narcissus who changes into the flower of the same name, Actaeon who is chased by his own dogs after he is turned into a stag by the vengeful Diana (goddess of the hunt), or Zeus, who, with all kinds of ingenious metamorphoses, looks to release his ever-raging testosterone. Or the special fable creatures and half beings that slumber in our subconscious. That mythical dimension is typical of the imagination of man, who wishes to free himself of the restrictions of his own flesh and flee into another guise, into something else. He seeks solace in metamorphosis, which is the theatre's very archetype.

Real time / Real action

Many of the exercises Jan Fabre developed during his career are based on the simple principle *Real time / real action*. It is a motto that reached its peak in the Performance Art of the sixties and seventies, but also pops up in the early avant-garde movements like Futurism and Dadaism. In Performance Art the organic body of the artist will be the focal point of the work of art. According to Piero Manzoni and Robert Morris 'the body is a living symbol'[1] and this will be expressed even more radically in the Body Art Movement (from 1969) in which the artistic perimeter retreats even further into actions on and in the body of the artist himself, as Germano Celant indicates in his monograph on the performances of Jan Fabre.[2] *Real time / real action* is a paradigm affecting all the aspects of the performative medium: in contrast to theatre in which time as well as space are fictional, as well as the actor (because he fits himself into the identity of a character) everything in and about Performance Art is real: the performance artist does not play someone else, in fact he does not even play, because he's performing action; these actions are real and thus they have

[1] Quoted in Germano Celant, *Jan Fabre. Stigmata. Actions and Performances 1976–2013* (Skira Editore: Milano, 2014) p. 10.

[2] Idem, p. 11.

a real impact and do not take place on a stage, but in a real space, during a real time span.

Real time / Real action is a core concept of Performance Art, at least from a very specific movement within this genre, because ever since its birth Performance Art has fanned out extensively into all kinds of form of 'liveness' in the arts. The reality we are concerned with here was adopted by Fabre in his own actions with razor blades, cutting himself with them, subsequently making drawings with this blood, as in *My Body, My Blood, My Landscape* (1978), but also from the radical performances of Marina Abramovic[3] and Ulay, Bas Jan Ader, Chris Burden or Joseph Beuys, all of them artists that put their bodies to the test and worked with physical and mental boundaries of pain or exhaustion, always in the intermediate zone of what Celant describes as a 'coexistence of the terrestrial and the celestial, the masculine and the feminine, the heavy and the airy, the material and the immaterial, the real and the virtual, …'[4] In his nocturnal diaries Fabre will many a time refer to Performance Art as the last resort of theatre: "Theatre is in need of the mentality of performance art. This mentality will scour off the border between illusion and reality. An abrasion wound will arise, in which I will strew salt with pleasure."[5] But Performance Art isn't his only influence, the initial spark for these far-reaching performances he found above all in the classic Flemish primitives, like Gerard David (ca. 1450 – 1523) whose *The judgment of Cambyses* very explicitly shows incisions in the body. By implementing the principle *Real time / real action* in theatre Fabre has shaken the prevailing theatre conventions and codes right down to its foundations.

The exercises want to demonstrate the reality of the body and therefore affect real bodily functions. In the first place a performer should learn to listen to his body and learn to trust this body. His body is his *prima materia*, the most important material with which he will work. It is an incredibly rich source from which he can draw: if he learns to listen to all of his intestines, bones, joints, connective tissue, muscles, cellular structures, etc.. he will constantly receive new impulses which he can use on stage. In this body an enormous history is stored as well: the very particular history of our species containing remnants of our existence as a fish and the long road we travelled as a mammal. All these layers can be addressed and used by the performer as material for the stage. He should listen very carefully to the interior of his own body and be sensitive to the poetry abiding within his body. Ever again he needs to follow his own inner physical impulses.

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3 Jan Fabre and Marina Abramovič have a remarkable mutual artistic career: they saw each other's work, influenced each other and collaborated as well, among others for the performance *Virgin/Warrior* (2006)

4 Ibidem.

5 Jan Fabre, *Night Book 1978 – 1984* (Antwerp, De Bezige Bij, 2011) p. 64

This body does not lie. During a physically taxing exercise the heart starts beating faster, respiration becomes quicker. In extreme heat the sweat glands start toiling harder to maintain body temperature. In the run-up to an orgasm the flow of blood intensifies. These are physical laws which you cannot escape: each of these impulses bring about an adequate response in the body. And exactly this truth of the body forms the base of almost every exercise in this series. An exercise like *Rice paper / fire* for instance, works on the stress factors of danger and brings about increased adrenaline levels; *Laughing / slapping* is an action-reaction exercise in which the real slap in the face results in irritated blood vessels and frustration. *From the profane to the sacred* is a stamina exercise, a work-out of sweat.

Coping with the reality of time and action is the personal responsibility of the performer: he's the one who knows his own body the best, he knows its limits, he knows how far he needs to go to lure a real effect from his body. This is particular of each performer. But once in a while it is a good thing to really feel your limits, in order to store the imprint of this experience in the physical memory of the body.

Each of these exercises is aimed at addressing the reality of the body, during real time, from real action. *Real time / Real action* is the backbone of Fabre's series of exercises. And with the emotive and physiological reactions on these physical impulses the performers can start using it in their own advantage and manipulate them during a scene. This is precisely what is meant by the basic motto of these guidelines for performers *From Act to Acting*: the very real impulses taking place during all these exercises *are* the material for acting. So an effect like a burst of adrenaline, or a very slowed-down pulse can be used to affect a certain action. The body is not only a barometer, but immediately an incredible source of inspiration, because throughout all the exercises imprints are collected, more like physical memories, that will be deployed to call a specific kind of energy into being quickly, depending on the scene that needs to be performed. *From Act to Acting* will thus return frequently in the description of different exercises, but is briefly touched upon here, because it is inextricably connected to *real time/ real action.*

The real body in real time thus means in the first place experiencing the here and now of time, for instance in exercises like *Old people* and *Running.* The performer experiences the 'now' with the intensity of someone who has looked death itself square in the eye. He hangs on to the 'now' and wants to squeeze everything out of this present moment: it is now or never, all urgency of living is expressed in the penetration of the now. And this impregnation of the now brings about an explosion of intensity: a physical intensity in the first place, because the now is a physical time, but just as well an emotional and spiritual intensity, because the body is connected through many channels with the heavenly and hellish ascension of our existential households. Within our

brains this now is localized in our temporal lobe and temporal bone: it swings round the ear and middle ear and, among others, it is responsible for recognizing perceptive stimuli. Thus, we experience the now from this temporal brain area, each stimulus is a stimulus of time, and this sequence of stimuli results in an ever more fertile now. In exercises like *Old people* and *Running* these stimuli keep on coming, the performer does not slide back into repetition, he remains conscious of what each second does to his physical and mental powers. And each here and now is different. Each here and now is experienced as intensely as another.

But the reality of the now can also be experienced in a completely different way. In some of the exercises Fabre instead lets the intensity of the now, in which the performer is completely submerged, slowly disappear to make room for extremely banal seconds ticking away without anything of significance happening. This is for instance the case in *Running*, the exercise ends when the performers, naturally exhausted from a long series of running, drop to the floor and idly use this pause to eat or drink something, even smoke a cigarette. The here and now is inhaled as a moment of emptiness or neutrality. In the theatre work of Jan Fabre we can also find many of these moments, think for instance of the infamous smoking scene after a prolonged effort in *The Power Of Theatrical Madness* (1984), infamous because some of the spectators felt they were entitled to a cigarette as well. In *Mount Olympus* (2015) this kind of pause is pushed even further, because at some moments during the performances the performers are literally falling asleep on stage.

The Power of Theatrical Madness (1984), restaged in 2012; Troubleyn Company, dir. Jan Fabre (photo: Wonge Bergmann, source: troubleyn.be)

Mount Olympus (2015), Troubleyn Company, dir. Jan Fabre
(photo: Wonge Bergmann, source: troubleyn.be)

This is Theatre as Was to Be Expected and Foreseen (1982), dir. Jan Fabre
(photo: Wonge Bergmann, source: kaaitheater.be)

Another consequence of *real time/real action* is what you could call objective time. This means that some actions need an objective duration. The eight hour long piece *This is Theatre as it was to be Expected and Foreseen* (1982) for instance was constructed around actions that were installations in themselves. The most radical of those for sure was the yoghurt scene: bags of yoghurt, hung in a circle on long wires, tossed to and fro and then pierced, causing the yoghurt to leak onto the floor in leaving graphic traces and drops. In a scene that seemed to last endlessly the performers subsequently licked up the yoghurt with their tongue, until the last drop. Or in *The Power* a performer would undress and throw his clothing crisscross across the stage, whereupon a blindfolded performer needed to retrieve them all, before the next scene could start. These are all examples of objective time and this time principle also recurs in a different guise in exercises as for instance *Old people* in the distance crossed millimeter by millimeter or in *Dressing/undressing* playing with real time and repetition.

Still another dimension of the same temporal experience is the reality of building or deconstructing an installation on stage, which frequently occurs in the Fabre's oeuvre. The performers bring in all the ingredients necessary for a certain action on stage and after completion these are removed or swept up once more. This assembling and disassembling also takes place in objective time, that is passed through concretely, without any hint of a theatrical intervention. In the exercises we see this in, among others, *Respect for material is a form of talent.*

Duration and repetition

Beside the intensity of the now, in this series of exercises Fabre also handles other time strategies to force performers (as well as spectators) out of the habits of their bodies: of these, the stretching of time and repetition are the most important ones. Many exercises emphasize duration, it is a wearing and tearing caused by time, drenching the performer ever more in his experience. By stretching time this much, the reality of the body becomes palpable. An exercise such as *Cleaning* for instance only really starts to affect the performer by its duration: to really become a rag, or another cleaning tool, it is necessary to first completely wring out the subject, thus emptying your own identity. To achieve this takes time. *The sick body* as well is based on duration: the sickness needs time to contaminate the whole of the body. The sickness manifests itself locally first, but by intensifying it and by making it last, the whole body will be affected, until the performer indeed becomes feverish and starts feeling weak and pale. The same scenario applies to exercises such as *Laughing / Slapping* or *Stuttering*; only by constantly subjecting the body to the same discipline or terror will it

eventually start to resound its laughter or stutter for real. Only then does it no longer sound like an exercise, but like an inborn quality or deficiency. More often than not one has to commit to a phase of forced artificiality to eventually tap into its natural source.

Repetition has a similar effect as duration. By endlessly repeating the same set of movements, the real effect on the body becomes visible. Here the Sisyphus-law of labor and time reigns: with each displacement of the rock the effort becomes more strenuous, the amount of oxygen lessens, the body starts creating lactic acid, the muscles will cramp up. Through this real effect on the physical constitution it becomes impossible to repeat the cycle of movements in exactly the same manner. This is precisely what happens in an exercise such as *Heroes and princesses*: the weight of the princesses literally starts to weigh the princes down, wherefore the minute choreography slowly starts to implode. The exercise is aimed at experiencing this crumbling down of your own control and to use this as material to see the effort through. The same scenario applies to the *Adagio/Flying* exercise: as exhaustion increases, your resistance grows as well, and through this inner struggle, not merely pearls of sweat are formed, but also a specific kind of glow that starts beaming. "Repetition," Fabre jots down in his *Nocturnal* "is a terrible fabric of diversity. Repetition is visually structured visible time."[6]

The *Ecstasy* exercise as well is nurtured by repetition, but rather from a hypnosis strategy: the rocking movement to which the performer subjects himself, is continued for such a long time and in such a strongly intensified manner that a different mental dimension is reached and the performer merges into something grander, into something that transcends him. The endless repetition of ever and again the same movement thus results in a kind of disappearing, a hole which absorbs the control of the I. And this as well arises from a real physiological effect: the repeated flection during the *Ecstasy exercise* causes the pituitary to create more endorphin, which will contribute to the ecstatic feeling evoked.

Repetition is an important time principle in Fabre's vision on theatricality. Repetition does not merely alters the bodies putting themselves more and more to the test, but it also alters time itself: time is, as it were, cracked open more and more. Through repetition you become conscious of each new time cycle that has passed. This principle slightly stands in contrast with the here and now of Performance Art: it is unusual in that genre to repeat an act, or even to prepare these in rehearsals, rather on the contrary, the unicity of the performance done only once lends it a special glow.

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6 Jan Fabre, *Nachtboek 1978–1984*, (Antwerpen: De Bezige Bij, 2011) p. 133.

So Fabre mixes two contrasting time principles, letting them collide with and melt into each other. But also, in repetition the objective remains to retrieve unicity. The essence of this repetition is to find new traces in the substance of the repeated action, different obsessions, renewed insights. When an action is repeated – this applies to a whole lot of exercises – it is about performing this action as if it for the first time. In Fabre's realm "the repetition of the declaration of love and the declaration of love of repetition" reigns.[7] "Repetition" says Kierkegaard "is a beloved wife you never grow tired of, because you only grow tired of novelties. The old never bores."[8]

It is not just real time that is cracked open by repetition, objectification and duration, but actually matter itself is broken up as well. In exercises such as *Moved by matter* or *Respect for material is a form of talent* a very real materiality, as in Performance Art, is started from, from its form, the material, its colour, its surface,.. and this texture is perceived sensorially by the performer. But during the contact with the substance, the physical material dissolves very quickly to make room for different, more essential layers. In a kind of alchemical process matter not only changes shape, but more importantly its meaning changes, a certain kind of fluidity arises, because it is fertilized by the imagination. New layers come into being, intermediate zones, hybridity; and sometimes it is hard to tell if the little tree that at the beginning of the exercise *Moved by matter* was standing there very clearly, hasn't by now become a figment of our imagination…

In other words, many exercises do start from the simple principle *Real time/ Real action* but sometimes come into headlong collision with the contrasting principles that rip open time, reality, matter and space, in order to give shape to new forces, new energies, different constellations, which can no longer be defined by using the same concepts. Also, it's got nothing to do with pushing it into its negative (dematerialization, detemporalization), but rather with the in-between.

By means of these exercises Fabre encourages his performers to descend into deeper layers of time. Beyond the *chronos*, beyond the *logos*, in the basements, the garrets, the arid heavens, the labyrinthine reflections and dark caverns of borrowed time. Essential to Fabrian time is that it becomes ungraspable, that it escapes categories and every kind of calculability: only then another sense of time can be released in which you are catapulted to and fro between the reptile brain, in which the past of our species is stored, and the frontal lobe, where the making of the future is projected.

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7 Jan Fabre, *Giomale Notturno 1999–2005*, Cronopio, Naples, Italy.

8 Kierkegaard, S. De herhaling. Een proeve van experimenterende psychologie door Constantin Constantius, Budel, Damon, p. 10.

To remain in this same area of the brain in which our sense of time is marked, the butterfly-shaped sphenoid bone plays a significant part: it is the first bone formed in the embryo and it is the door between the conscious and subconscious, between dream and reality. There, our dreams flutter about and it is exactly there somewhere deep behind the eye cavity Fabre forces his performers to look again, differently, from other abilities than our 'normal' gaze. The intensification, stretching and repetition of time permits the performer to descend deeper into who he is or thinks he is, and this surely is not meant psychologically, but merely in a temporal sense: our brain houses many unthought-of temporal layers, many unconscious abilities that rise to the surface when normal time is 'lifted'. It is with strong reasons Fabre calls the brain "our most sexy body part".[9]

I Am Blood – A Medieval Fairy Tale, National Theatre, 2024, dir. Jan Fabre. In the photo: Rebeka Tóth and Zalán Nádas during a rehearsal before the premiere (source: facebook.com/troubleyn.janfabre)

[9] *Is the brain the most sexy part of the body?* Performance of Jan Fabre together with the scientist Edward O. Wilson (2007).

"This Kind of Theatre Is Equivalent to Therapy"

Roundtable Discussion on Jan Fabre Staging *I Am Blood*

The National Theatre and the Writers' Association continued their *Theatre Language, Theatre Language Renewal* series with an analysis of a special immersive production by Belgian artist Jan Fabre at the BAB Gallery on 7 March 2025. The production *I Am Blood*, premiered on 22 November 2024, was discussed by László L. Simon, writer and poet; Róbert Smid, literary and cultural scholar; Zsolt Szász, dramaturge and editor-in-chief of *Szcenárium*; and Réka Szabó, dramaturge of the production. Their discussion was moderated by Kinga Erős, President of the Hungarian Writers' Association. Below is a edited version of the roundtable discussion made by Judit Ungvári.

KINGA ERŐS: To kick off the discussion as moderator, I can't pretend to be unaware of the critical media coverage of this performance. Some public figures thought it absolutely necessary to speak out about it. What I'm sharing with those present is strictly my private opinion, and then you can argue with me. I cannot judge to what extent the media objections are true. But I think, if there's anything to object to about this play, it is certainly not as suggested by the title of article: "Men Drink Menstrual Blood Between Women's Legs".[1] In a way, the title we chose for this discussion is also provocative: "Drama or performance?" We always try to pick titles that indicate what we'll be talking about around the table. Sitting here, there are four of us who did not take part in creating the production, and here's Réka Szabó, who as its dramaturge knows so much about how it came to be. Therefore, I guess the right thing to do is to start with her. You might want to respond to the genre question I raised, but I'll go further: what does it mean this is a "medieval fairy tale" – which Fabre refers to via the subtitle of the production? I'd also be glad if you could talk about the artist himself. What do we need to know about Fabre?

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1 Noémi Sümegi: Men Drink Menstrual Blood Between Women's Legs at the National Theatre https://index.hu/kultur/2024/11/24/nemzeti-szinhaz-jan-fabre-ver-vagyok-bemutato/

RÉKA SZABÓ: Let me warmly welcome everyone to this discussion and thank you for inviting me. Actually, the only perspective from which I can respond is that I was involved in this work process. I can't judge how successful the production itself was. Just as I can't respond to the objections people have made about the project, to the extent those objections are not aesthetic in nature. However, I'm happy to talk about who the author of the play is, and whether we should consider it a drama at all, or what genre then it may belong to. We received the ready-made text in English, written by Jan Fabre himself. The fact that its genre is indicated as "a medieval fairy tale" may be of interest primarily from the point of view of Fabre's approach to fine arts and immersive theatre. This production is a kind of dialogue with painting, a dialogue between literature, poetry and painting. It is no coincidence that the key instruction on how to present the text was that the performers should try to interpret the sentences of the play to the audience as genuine lyrical and poetic utterances – it's a question, of course, how successful they were. Few people in Hungary are familiar with Jan Fabre's oeuvre. He is a Belgian director, artist, sculptor, performer and writer. We can say all that about him, but when you ask him who he really is, he always says of himself that he is a "servant of beauty" and that his actors are "warriors of beauty". In his book published in 2021[2], he built his own methodology along these lines, which he prefers to call "guidelines". Fabre came into the spotlight as a performer in the late '70s. In the '80s, Richard Schechner was the first to react very strongly to one of his theatre productions, created in '82, the title of which was something like this: "*This is Theatre as it was to be Expected and Foreseen*". The preface to Fabre's book, which has now been published in Hungarian, reveals that in this production he'd actually already done everything that was later given various technical terms. In his collection of essays on post-dramatic theatre, Lehmann[3] pointed out Jan Fabre as someone who had crossed a genre line that before him, theatre-makers had only been exploring. His courage and boundary-crossing towards sexuality, aggression and the human body characterised very few people at that time. It is very important and is often stated in the text of *I Am Blood* that the point in time people actually transcend their limitations is when they die. The moment of our death is the real border crossing, also a kind of redemption, in comparison to which nothing matters. This book by Jan Fabre and Luk van den Dries, published in the University of Theatre and Film Arts book series, gives me great joy[4]. Luk van den Dries is Professor

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2 Jan Fabre / Luk Van den Dries: *From Act to Acting*. Jan Fabre's Guidelines for the Performer of the 21st Century, St. Kliment Ohridski, 2021.

3 Hans-Thies Lehmann: Postdramatic Theatre. Verlag der Autoren, Frankfurt am Main 1999.

4 Jan Fabre / Luk Van Den Dries: *A cselekvéstől a színészi cselekvésig.* Jan Fabre iránymutatásai a 21. századi előadóművészek számára, SZFE – L'Harmattan, 2024.

Scene from *Mount Olympus*
(photo: Alwin Poiana, source: alwinpoiana.com)

Emeritus of the Department of Theatre Studies at the University of Antwerp, he has followed and studied Fabre's work for more than ten years, took part in rehearsals and training, and analysed them jointly to produce this *volume for guidance* – which, at Fabre's express request, should not be called a methodological rulebook. In it, we find 37 exercises, which sum up his acting style, seen in 24-hour performances at previous festivals[5], and Hungarian spectators could see him in an 8-hour performance at last year's MITEM. He calls his way of acting physiological. His signature statement is that the human body is beautiful, but its sexiest part is the brain, which cannot exist without the body, as mind and body cannot be separated from each other. This is a kind of opposition to the approach that originated from Stanislavsky's his laboratory. Psychological realism is a wonderful thing, it laid the foundations of acting, but what to do with the body is what Fabre is really interested in. Through the use of the body, he builds up the kind of drama everyone can experience as their own in his productions. The question is whether this drama can happen in the 1 hour and 20 minutes that the current *I Am Blood* lasts for those sitting in the auditorium. Some find this span too long, others find it not long enough. I think the most important thing is what is conjured up in my personal memory, my "sexy brain" as a result of what he tries to express on stage. And what ideas I can relate to, even through confronting taboo subjects on the National Theatre's stage, from which this culture of ours mostly keeps its distance, from which it distances itself. How do I deal with them? What is their place in my life? Where are they linked to my traumas? I think it's much more important to approach the issue from this human side, rather than from the point of view of why someone is outraged and why they disagree with what they see by Fabre. It is useful to know that Fabre has worked with his own company Troubleyn throughout his 40-year career. His oldest actor has been with him for 40 years, and the youngest for 20-25 years. The name of the company is not coincidental: it's a medieval Flemish word meaning "loyalty" or "commitment". This was the second time in Fabre's career that he had accepted an assignment with another company. And regarding the criticism voiced, an important question is what happens when a master leaves of his own environment. It's not easy to judge a performance when such a high-

[5] The production *I Am Blood* was premiered in 2015.

calibre artist comes to Budapest, to an audience accustomed to bourgeois theatre, and tells us to do something completely different, to start training. For example, let us try and talk and sing using tough physical exercises, and then get back to something else. Is an average six-week rehearsal process enough to create a production worthy of the Troubleyn Company at a professional level? What can we hold such a production, created in a setting that is foreign to the director, accountable for?

ZSOLT SZÁSZ: When speaking of Jan Fabre and the notion of fidelity, let's not forget that he hails from the Low Countries – a region divided into a Protestant north and a Catholic south. Fabre comes from the Flemish Catholic community in the south, which, even in the 16th century, was engaged in a struggle for independence against the Habsburg-ruled Spanish crown. As an emerging visual artist, Fabre first grabbed public attention by rewriting and reinterpreting Christian Catholic iconography, which earned him accusations of blasphemy. Drawing a parallel between the Passion of Christ and the suffering of the Artist is not a novel idea – but his gesture of drawing and painting with his own blood has since become Fabre's personal hallmark. In fact, his production *I Am Blood* could not have come into existence without such precedents. That's why I maintain that Fabre's artistic identity is inseparable from his relationship to Christian faith. The "Transformation" chapter of the Fabre volume mentioned by Réka draws a direct parallel between the artist's transubstantiation and the Eucharist. It is also worth noting that the golden age of painting in his homeland coincided with the late Middle Ages and the early modern period. In this sense, Fabre is a traditionalist artist, creating in the spirit of his national heritage – including painters such as Brueghel or Rubens. Critics here tend not to take this seriously, but elsewhere they do: in Naples, for instance, the clergy offered two churches as venues for a Fabre exhibition three years ago. When our critics pass judgment, it also reflects what Réka was talking about – namely, the provocative element that our so-called "bourgeois-educated" audience in Budapest finds hard to connect with. A recurring line in

Jan Fabre's coral installation in the Chapel of San Gennaro, Naples, 2022 (photo: Luciano and Marco Pedicini, source: stirworld.com)

Make-up Sketches, portrait of Tibor Hajas in a 1979 photo composition by János Vető (source: viragjuditgaleria.hu)

the performance is: *"It's 2024, and this is still the Middle Ages"* – a direct reference, in the context of the current war, to how Europe is grappling with its sense of identity. This kind of contemporization is extremely timely when we ask how we should relate to Fabre's oeuvre, or to one another, as well as to ourselves. It's often said that Hungary lags behind Western trends by several decades – but let's also remember that performance art was originally the genre of the so-called "great generation": those born after the war, rebellious youth who had fallen out of the old value system. It's a genre traced back to 1962 and one that has Hungarian parallels too. Think of performers like Tibor Hajas[6], who appears in Gábor Bódy's[7] film *Narcissus and Psyche*, Endre Szkárosi[8], who recently passed away under tragic circumstances, or even the now 83-year-old Katalin Ladik.[9]

LÁSZLÓ L. SIMON: I'd like to return to the question of reception. I disagree, for example, with the idea that Hungarians are several decades behind. This is not true. It's just that the audience that looks to the National Theatre with a specific set of expectations is not the audience that might like this play. For example, my particular problem – and this is what I wrote about in a short post on my Facebook page – was that this play tells you practically nothing new, nothing exciting, nothing more than you have seen over the past decades by world-class writers such as Marina Abramović, who wrote one of the epilogues to Fabre's book mentioned by Réka[10]. You referred to the Middle Ages, Zsolt, which I think is also nothing new, it keeps coming back in performances and fine arts projects. When it came to Hungary, for example, Hermann Nitsch's 1999 exhibition and performance[11]

6 Tibor Hajas (1946–1980) was a visual artist, performer, poet, and filmmaker.

7 Gábor Bódy (1946–1985) was a film director, video artist, and theorist.

8 Endre Szkárosi (1952–2022) was a poet, art critic, and professor at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE).

9 Katalin Ladik (b. 1942) is a poet, performer, and actress.

10 Marina Abramović (1946) is a conceptual and performance artist

11 Hermann Nitsch (1938–2022) was a representative of Vienna actionism, founder of O.M. (Orgy Mystery Theatre). He had an exhibition and performance in Hungary at the Kiscell Museum of the Municipal Gallery.

caused such a profound scandal that Zsolt Semjén[12] himself spoke out on the matter, saying that such a thing just could not be done. The same politicians who spoke out then did not speak out now, presumably because this performance was realised in a theatrical space that qualifies as proprietary in their political coordinate system. So here we have to see that there are fundamentally the kind of theatrical expectations that Réka referred to. And there is that layer of audience, and presumably there are also actors, who did not feel comfortable in this performance. They didn't feel that Fabre's project was their own, though it has its own audience, by the way. Let me give you an example. Here's the Pál Frenák Dance Company[13]: I have been following Frenák's work for about thirty years, and there probably isn't a single production by him that I have not seen. How is it that he received the Kossuth Prize from this conservative government in 2021? He also shows what Réka was referring to, the human body, human vulnerability, our multi-layered and in some ways contradictory relationship with the body, which is also explored by Abramović and others. I can also mention István Kovács (1964), who is little known, but he's the Hungarian performer who goes to the most extreme applications of the human body. However, the audience that is receptive to this does not go to the National Theatre. Not only does it avoid the institution led by Vidnyánszky[14],

Hermann Nitsch: *Six-Day Play,* Prinzendorf, installation, 1999 (source: btmfk.iif.hu)

Marina Abramović and Jan Fabre, *Virgin/Warrior,* 2004, performance (photo: A. Maranzano, source: ugni.si)

[12] Zsolt Semjén is a politician, currently Deputy Prime Minister; in 1999 he was the Deputy State Secretary of the Ministry of National Cultural Heritage in charge of church affairs.

[13] Pál Frenák (1957) is a Hungarian choreographer and dance teacher. FrenÁk Company was originally founded in 1989 in Paris.

[14] Attila Vidnyánszky (1964) has been managing the National Theatre since 2013.

it [15] has not attended Alföldi's or Jordán's National Theatre[16] either, nor will it in future. And the other part of the audience that watches this performance on the main stage by Fabre, who has a very important place in the history of European theatre and art, can't find what to do with it. It just doesn't fit their worldview, they can't place it. Mr. Szkári, whom Zsolt quoted, used to say, and the editor of Magyar Műhely, Tibor Papp, had said the same thing: that the avant-garde engaging in the performance genre is doomed to write its own reception. As was the case with the classical avant-garde: from Kassák onwards, everyone wrote theoretical texts to explain what they were doing. By the way, this is also true of the universal avant-garde, Fabre himself. Nonetheless, again, that is a real problem, the expectations of the National Theatre's audience are not in line with the aesthetics and message of this performance, while elsewhere in the capital it could have been implemented without attracting much attention, without raising eyebrows in politics. Budapest has productions of this type on a daily basis.

RÓBERT SMID: So far, we have talked about public discourse, i.e. non-aesthetic reflections, and those who have seen the play and then read the debate or the Facebook post that started the degenerate pogrom can clearly establish that the author of the post did not see the play. But criticism came even from groups of recipients whose members are well acquainted with Fabre's work. A prominent figure of one workshop told Laci L. Simon that this was not Fabre's most significant work. You couldn't find arguments in his comments, but Noémi Herczog[17] also published a 6000-character review in ÉS. Unfortunately, half of it deals with Fabre's court cases, but she also seems to suggest that this is not his most successful project. It should be noted that this is a revival of the 2001 production, premiered in Avignon. With a larger audience, I guess. I find it a bit strange that this one was staged for a rather small audience. For me, the performance worked from the very first moment, when the dancers appear in knight's armour, the music is punctuated by the rattle of the armour, the dancers themselves create it through their choreographed body movements, it's as if their bodies gave birth to the rhythm, and we begin to perceive it as if it were the other way around, as if the bodies were manipulated from the outside, in the way puppeteers move the puppet. This may remind us of Kleist's 1810 essay on marionette theatre[18] or Robert Wilson's scene [19] in Oedipus at MITEM VII, where the father's murder

[15] Róbert Alföldi (1967) managed the National Theatre between 2008 and 2013.
[16] Tamás Jordán (1943) managed the National Theatre from 2003 to 2008.
[17] Noémi Herczog (1986) is a theatre critic and editor
[18] Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811) was a German playwright, poet and publicist
[19] Robert Wilson (1941) is an American experimental theatre director and playwright

is depicted by actors dancing on huge metal plates, as though the sky came crashing down.

RÉKA SZABÓ: Wilson and Fabre are friends and have a close working relationship. Wilson regularly holds workshops at the Troubleyn Company.

RÓBERT SMID: In terms of the ritualization toolbox, Wilson's theatre is close to Fabre's. But if you are familiar with Attila Vidnyánszky's theatrical language, if you've seen something by him, you won't find it strange that Fabre's direction is present in his theatre. After all, in fact, he also represents a kind of ritual theatre, which we might even call post-dramatic.

ZSOLT SZÁSZ: Essentially, we are dealing with a dance-based production, just as dance is also a key element in Attila Vidnyánszky's productions. To this day, *The Passion of Csíksomlyó*[20] and *Merry-Go-Round*[21] – both created in collaboration with the Hungarian National Dance Ensemble – remain integral parts of our repertoire. But it's not just folk dance that's present: the contemporary dancer Yvette Bozsik[22], who collaborates with Fabre in *I Am Blood* together with her ensemble, has directed several productions with us already. A key term mentioned by Robi was "ritual theatre," which inherently involves the duality of the sacred and the profane. So we cannot claim this world is foreign to us. For we were, and still are, part of the undivided cultural space of medieval Europe. Last time we discussed *Salome*, directed by the Bulgarian artist Diana Dobreva with actors of the National Theatre. There, the Bible was the shared spiritual foundation acting as a catalyst between the actors and the director, between the actors and the audience.

Michel de Ghelderode: *Images de la vie de saint François d'Assise [Az úr komédiásai],* National Theatre, Budapest, 2017, dir. Yvette Bozsik (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhaz.hu)

RÉKA SZABÓ: After watching the performance, we were talking in the cafeteria and I mentioned how good the rehearsal process of this performance was, Laci (László L. Simon) ironically remarked that I measured everything by this… Yet I wanted to say that the end result was wonderful because these actors of different ages and educational backgrounds, the Yvette Bozsik Company, the musicians who got involved in the rehearsal process through casting, these twenty-

[20] *The Passion of Csíksomlyó* was premiered on 10 March 2017

[21] *Carousel*'s premiere: 10 February 2015

[22] Yvette Bozsik (1968) is a choreographer and director, founder of Yvette Bozsik Company (1993)

plus people, of whom only five or six knew each other, were very much a team by the time of the premiere, which is extremely rare. In the meantime, however, there were a lot of difficulties during the rehearsals, as the play's multilingual text itself was no small challenge. The actors needed help when they faced this "blood problem", for example in the menstrual scene, which was also pinpointed by the media. It didn't make things any easier that Fabre took everything for granted, as he has been doing the same thing for 40 years. I kept nudging him to explain to the actors, who were at first keeping their distance, what he was asking them to do. It was a great joy for us all when they finally became a close-knit team. From a professional point of view, this is very important.

LÁSZLÓ L. SIMON: Can I say something about that? Just because I think you've highlighted very different aspects. So let's say that at one end of an imaginary scale is Fabre, who is the creator and who has been doing something for decades; you are somewhere in the middle, participating in the rehearsal process all along, we could even say you were a catalyst for him, because in some way you helped the director instruct the actors so they knew what was happening. And there I am at the other end, someone not completely uninformed or uneducated, as I've seen various art performances across Europe for 30 years, but let's say I sit in the theatre unbiased and I have no idea what might be on the director mind. So I can make my own judgment, form an opinion or develop an interpretation based only on the work I have seen. Although it doesn't bother me that it was on the main stage, I could have imagined a much more intimate space, without a stage or auditorium, like in a mystery play in the Middle Ages, we practically stand in a circle so we can see everything from everywhere. What I'm getting at is I obviously didn't see clearly what the director's intentions were. Quite a few things seemed to be ad hoc to me, though they may have been specifically designed, crafted and rehearsed by the director. I had a feeling at the end of the performance that it wasn't quite finished yet, my little ironic remark was also about that.

KINGA ERŐS: I would like to draw a parallel with the so-called "textual literature" that occurred to me after seeing the performance: the kind of postmodern, intellectual prose whose peculiarity is that the greater the cult, the more it alienates readers from the literary text itself. Because the writer demands such a broad educational background of the reader that the reader certainly doesn't have. But a similar dilemma arises also in connection with how the imagery can be read. Because if spectators don't know what the pelican has stood for from the Middle Ages onwards, they simply can't make sense of it. And this points to a much more general problem, it raises the question of what we assume about the audience sitting at the theatre to see a Fabre performance.

LÁSZLÓ L. SIMON: But a lack of education won't stop spectators enjoying themselves. I mean that. I don't think you should approach the issue from this angle, because you walk into a gallery, start looking at the pictures, and you can't wrap your head around most of them, because you don't have the

knowledge, you can't decode the whole thing. It's not worth dwelling on this so much, because it can well be a problem with every single art performance. In addition, a significant part of the Hungarian audience sees theatre as a source of entertainment. Some people's expectations are very close to the world of variety shows.

RÓBERT SMID: We're not even doing poorly by international comparison, relative to the Brits, for instance.

LÁSZLÓ L. SIMON: That's just like you suggest, the last time I was in London, I tried to find something to see at the theatre, and I couldn't find a performance to excite me, twenty-seven shows out of thirty were some kind of popular musicals. On the other hand, in Berlin I found the performance of Kurtág at the Opera in about five minutes, so it was not a problem what to see. Now that [23]I am selecting for the National Theatre Meeting (OSZT), my fundamental experience is that seven out of ten Hungarian theatres present something completely different than what fits with Vidnyánszky's own theatre world…

ZSOLT SZÁSZ: As for the textual world of the performance, its foundation lies in the writings of Saint Hildegard of Bingen. She lived from 1098 to 1179 – roughly from the death of King Saint Ladislaus of Hungary to the beginning of the reign of King Béla III. We honour her as a versatile mystic: a healer, composer, and theologian, who was only canonized in 2012. We also owe the first European mystery play, *The Play of Adam*, to her. Her texts are presented in the first person, in the form in which liturgical drama was performed in cathedrals. This kind of cultural knowledge was, for the most part, lost under the communist dictatorship, and it seems that even over the past 30–35 years, we have not succeeded in reclaiming it. Europe has largely lost its sense of identity for the same reason, and when Fabre calls himself a "servant of beauty", he is presumably deliberately going against this trend. Now, when the European Union preaches about morality while hundreds of thousands perish on the Ukrainian front, Fabre's production can also be understood as a form of protest. So it would be completely wrong to call this an inhumane production. I also appreciated how Robi referenced Kleist and the mechanism of puppetry, pointing to the problematic nature of what it is that actually drives us. As for the dramaturgy of the performance, it recalls the sacred representations typical of the late Middle Ages, where the elements are not connected according to the rulebook of psychological realism. There is no linear plot, no system of cause and effect – stage tableaux follow one another unexpectedly, favouring symbolic visual language and free association. All this also evokes the aesthetics of traditional Eastern theatre. At the same time, it is close to carnival forms and to the former folk culture of laughter, even if the humour of this 2025 production is much more subdued than boisterous.

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[23] National Theatre Meeting: Hungary's annual professional theatre showcase.

RÓBERT SMID: Very interestingly, the performance consciously relies on olfactory stimuli. This is my standard hobbyhorse, and relatively few people in contemporary Hungarian theatre studies have dealt with it, Péter P. Müller[24], professor at the University of Pécs, comes to mind now. There is an aromatherapy scene, of course, but I really liked the fact that the audience always has a sensory connection opportunity. So if you don't understand something, let's say you can't identify a motive or something that happens, you're never out of touch, because some sensual stimulus is coming at you all the time from the stage. Not all spectators may be aware of the cultural history of aromatherapy, but fragrances are used boldly, and at the end there is that smell of talcum powder as the wall is being built. In this respect, the performance accomplished something that reminded me of the best of German theatre, and I could relate to it. At the same time, what surprised me a little, but in a good way, is that Fabre is very erudite. And he shows it. Unlike Terzopulos, who is also extremely well-read, but does not always stage this cultural background.

RÉKA SZABÓ: Terzopoulos leads rehearsals so that we leave his sessions with a hundred pages of notes, while Fabre only analyses if you ask him specifically about something. At times he suddenly realised, oops, he had to sit down and give a little lecture on Flemish painting so the actors could somehow get started. And then he said: go home, look at a table scene by Brueghel or watch Bosch, find a moment and show that! By the way, the performance was also criticised for how similar it was to Avignon. But no-one denied that it was a revival of that. Of course, it matters who you do it with, because here the performance was developed along improvisations. Fabre built the scenes in a way that kept amazing us: look at that, the scene has come together, again and again. But he didn't explain what was happening, or very rarely so, when we asked him to. The reason may be that he has been working with the same team for 40 years, he does not direct any other company, so he is used to his people understanding what he is doing. Terzopoulos, who works more with other companies, has learned to explain in detail what he wants. For example, he held a wonderful course on Brecht for us when he staged *Mother Courage*.

RÓBERT SMID: Well, I want delve into this: the scenes that, as you said, Zsolt, are placed next to each other, are thus no longer just scenes. The grande dame of postmodernism, Donna Haraway,[25] came up with some pretty good theorems; one of them is "matterphor", which includes the English word "matter". In Fabre's performance, blood functioned as a kind of matterphor, it was a material and served as a metaphor at the same time: think of the blood of Christ, for example. What you said about the liturgy at the end also struck me, that the wall is being built, we can't see what's behind it, it can be a castle

[24] Péter P. Müller (1956) is a literary and theatre historian, university professor

[25] Donna Haraway (1944) Professor of Feminism in the History of Consciousness

wall or a body, while we hear the response in chorus, which is still there in Catholic liturgy, for example, during mass: "Please hear our prayer." This works very nicely in the performance. Blood is the medium of professing something, of being convinced of something. The menstruation scene, therefore, reminded me of a bride whose virginity is ascertained. But expressions such as "someone giving their blood for something" or "blood obliges" have also popped into my mind, blood as a guarantee of inheritance, etc. The performance is in four languages, and this comes across in all those languages.

RÉKA SZABÓ: It was not uncommon for medieval painters to paint with their own blood, for example, various shades of brown. I hope that Fabre's 2000-page *Nachtbuch* will be available in Hungarian version as soon as possible, a great part of which I had the pleasure of reading in manuscript form. It's a wonderful thing that he tested everything on his own body before bringing it to the stage. I was reading his diary, the next day I went to a rehearsal and asked him: is that the scene you tried on the street in '78? I'm talking about armoured Peti Juhász throwing roses. Fabre did the same thing at the age of 23 or 24 in the city centre, he went out with a bouquet of roses and yelled at people: I love you, I'll sacrifice myself for you. The police took him in, even tested him for drugs to find out what was wrong with him… He tried everything on his own body, he used his own blood and sweat to paint with just like his predecessors. He has experienced everything we see on stage through his own body, which is why it's all so accurate and conscious.

RÓBERT SMID: What you say plays into my hands now, as older performances get rearranged these days. For example, the topos of bad blood is an interesting one, it leads to a meta-history of theatre, reminding us of the famous monologue in *The Merchant of Venice*. I am also very happy about the rose, as János Géczi's [26] major monograph also discusses the connection between rose and blood. Then there is this key phrase that's like a mantra that "we are still living in the Middle Ages", which is perhaps not even a criticism, but rather a call for distinction: what is the same today (liturgy, for example) and what is different? By now, a lot of things have become taboo, we don't relate to bodily fluids the same way as before. Cannibalism is a latter-day concept in cultural history: from

Jan Fabre: *I Am Blood,* National Theatre and Yvette Bozsik Company, 2024, dir. Jan Fabre (photo: Csilla Zelkó, source: bdpst24.hu)

[26] János Géczi (1954) writer, artist, art historian

modernity, especially from Montaigne onwards, there is the kind of cannibal so familiar to us – eating blood had a completely different meaning earlier on. I would add that you really don't have to understand everything, and that's why I was very enthusiastic after the performance. There is a dynamic in this production that I really like, that if I don't understand something, I can at least enjoy it sensorially, which also evokes a kind of intellectual pleasure.

RÉKA SZABÓ: What you say is interesting, because it was also very conscious on Fabre's part. I was confronted with the fact that this was a reconstruction, when the plan was approved. It was also clear to me that it would be similar to *Mytikas Peak,* that we would experience the events on stage up close. Not only did I smell what was going on, but I suddenly became part of this repetitive process. When it was over, I wasn't quite sure how to deal with it, but in the following days it all started to take place and shape in me. Somehow, this may be the real purpose of Fabre's performances, seeing those images, hearing those concepts and utterances for 8 or 24 hours that we have only encountered in passing until then suddenly sets off a kind of inner purification process. This kind of theatre really works you through psychologically, it's just about equivalent to a whole therapy.

KINGA ERŐS: Zsolt mentioned St. Hildegard of Bingen, who had a highly interesting relationship with the body. Her literary legacy includes four books specifically about professional healing and the body, the anatomical knowledge handed down by the ancient Greeks via Arab mediation. And as already mentioned, we can also talk about the Eucharist in this context. In liturgical practice, Catholics specifically receive body and blood. It's a little different for Calvinists, but for Catholics, the body and blood of Christ appear not only as symbols, but as a real transformation that takes place during the ceremony. Can this transformation also scandalise? How many in the audience experience this mystery every Sunday? This cult practice is certainly very deeply rooted in the European tradition. What touched me the most about the performance was its demonstration of our relationship with the body. This relationship has remained controversial to this very day. We don't like the body. We talk about the fact that physicality rules all over the place, yet we don't really like our body. On this stage, the dancers were really beautiful, they were nice to watch. But at the same time, figuratively speaking, blood was flowing incessantly. Beauty was there, but its opposite as well, desecrated physicality was also present. In today's culture, we try to keep this duality away from ourselves. Many are shocked by this production because it confronts us with this duality. Ultimately, it brings us face to face with our transience, a topic we hate to have to deal with. The dramatic stake in this production is actually to realise our transient nature.

Translated by Nóra Durkó and László Vértes

"My Performances Are Like Symphonies on Stage"

An Interview with Diana Dobreva, Director of *Salome*, by András Kozma

Diana Dobreva holds an MA degree in Acting for Theatre and Cinema as well as Theatre Directing from the National Academy of Theatre and Film Arts (NATFA), where she specialised under Prof. Plamen Markov. Prior to that, she graduated from the Lyuben Grois College of Theatre under Prof. Elena Baeva. She began her career as an actress at Theatre-Laboratory Sfumato, where she performed for nearly a decade. During this time, she also starred in both Bulgarian and international films, including *Monkeys in Winter* and *Warden of the Dead*. Her performance in these films earned her the *Golden Rose* Award for Best Leading Actress at the 27th Bulgarian Feature Film Festival (Varna, Bulgaria), as well as the Award of the Bulgarian National Film Center & Filmmakers' Union (Sofia, Bulgaria) for Best Leading Actress. In 2006, she made her directorial debut with *Medea*. The production won her the ASKEER Award for Best Debut Performance (2007), the Award of the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture for outstanding creative achievement and contributions to Bulgarian culture, as well as the prestigious *Coup de Cœur* – the Critics' and Press Award for Best Performance at the International Festival in Avignon, France. Since then, she has directed numerous productions both in Bulgaria and internationally, with performances staged at major festivals and theatres worldwide. Her latest production, *Salome* – based on Oscar Wilde's play and enriched with biblical passages as well as writings by Aleksander Sekulov – is one of the most acclaimed productions of the 2024/25 season at the National Theatre in Budapest (premiere: 3 December 2024). In an interview conducted before the premiere, dramaturge András Kozma spoke with Diana Dobreva not only about her direction of *Salome* but also about her artistic philosophy as a whole. This is not Dobreva's first appearance at the National Theatre

in Budapest. At the 2023 International Theatre Olympics, she captivated audiences with *Silk*, a stage adaptation of Alessandro Baricco's novel, and at the most recent MITEM, she once again made an impression with her production of *Odysseus*. Hungarian audiences will have the opportunity to see two of her productions at MITEM 2025: *Moby Dick*, based on Aleksander Sekulov's play and staged at the Ivan Vazov National Theatre in Sofia, and *Without Blood*, adapted from Baricco's novel and presented by the Plovdiv Drama Theatre.

– In Hungarian theatres, the first read-through usually takes place with the ensemble reading the play aloud, followed by the director analysing the text. However, you immediately began experimenting with the actors' voices, having them sing. Is this a general method you use during a read-through, or was it something you applied specifically for Salome*?*

I also tend to have a longer period of analytical table work, but not as long as some directors who begin the rehearsal process with an extremely detailed analysis of the play. I prefer to build the plot and the characters through action. At the same time, sound plays a crucial role in my work. By *sound*, I certainly do not just mean music or the noises and effects that define the actors' performance externally, but also the voice that emerges from within the actor embodying the role. For me, the voice which is born within a person is often more important than what the character thinks of themselves. Through the vibration of the voice, the spirit of both the actor and the role is often revealed more clearly, and the audience can connect more deeply with the character – understanding their goals, desires, and intentions better. So I think that the vibration of the voice is crucial both in life and on stage. We can see similar examples in life, too – such as with dictators, who do not merely convey an ideology to the world but exert a powerful influence on people through the vibration of their voice. I believe that theatre and the stage are particularly well-suited to creating the full essence of a character more quickly through the voice which emerges from a person's inner world. It is an important part of my method, and I usually begin rehearsals this way. Sometimes I may not be able to fully articulate a character's nature at first, but through their voice, I can delve deeper into their mystery – the voice can open the door to understanding the secrets of the role. After all, every role is a great mystery, which can be uncovered through voice. This is the inner voice of the role.

– And in this way, can not only the voice of the role be brought to life, but also the actor's inner voice itself?

Yes, exactly. That is precisely what I meant to say: I always strive to shape the character of a role not by imposing it externally on the actor but by creating it through the actor themselves. Since every person is a unique individual, character formation will also become tailored to them, distinctive, conveyed

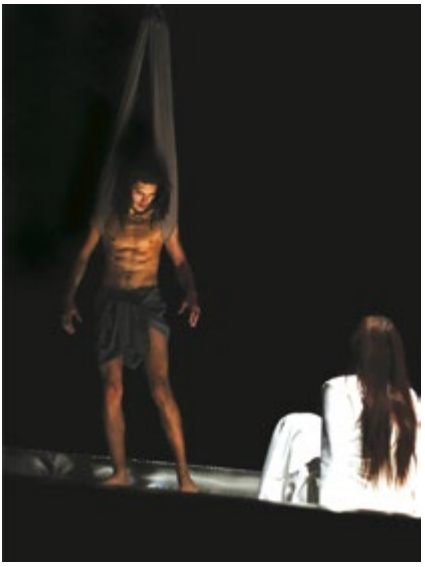
through the actor and their voice or even their breathing. This often defines the very essence of the role. For me, the role and the actor's individuality form an organic unity.

– We are well acquainted with the story of Salome *from the* Bible*, but as a stage work in Hungary, Richard Strauss's opera is more widely known, while Oscar Wilde's play is rarely performed. Is it more popular in Bulgaria? Is it staged more frequently? Why did you choose this play to direct at the National Theatre?*

Oscar Wilde's *Salome* is not particularly well-known in Bulgaria either, nor is it frequently staged. However, it resonates deeply with me – I am especially impressed by the poetic quality of Wilde's language: this is a remarkably lyrical text. I might even say that, for me, this play is like a theatrical poem, a kind of superior manifestation of poetry, and not only in terms of its words but also through the atmosphere it creates.

– The theme of the play as well as its story have biblical origins, which carries not only poetic but also sacred connotations. Did this also play a role in your choice?

Poetry, the word *poesis* can, of course, be interpreted in many ways, but for me, this form of art is closest to God. I believe that, like music, poetry is closest to divine reality. It is superior poetry which is most capable of creating the vertical connection that links man to God. This is what poetry means to me – an aspiration which is vertical in direction, moves upward, whereas movement along the horizontal plane keeps us grounded down here. In the aspiration to move upward lies the possibility of drawing closer to divine reality, just as with music. That is why poetic texts in many languages sound like music. And I am not speaking merely about melody, but also about thought itself, because good poetry elevates – it seizes a person, lifting them out of their horizontal existence, raising them upward spirally and vertically, all the way to the heights. That is why I called this play a theatrical poem, a poetic work which brings us closer to God.



Scene of John the Baptist and Salome in D. Dobreva's 2017 production (photo: Ivan Donchev, source: dianadobreva.com)

– Could we say that this is a mystery-like performance or a kind of endeavour toward a metaphysical theatre?

I would perhaps rather use the term *metaphysical theatre*, as it more precisely captures the formal language of this production.

– One of the main characters of the play, Herod Antipas, repeatedly mentions hearing the beating of wings and feeling a cold gust of wind, as if he were seized by

"…the beating of wings … a cold gust of wind". Foreground: Herod, Miriam, John and Salome, scene from the 2024 production (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhaz.hu)

a sense of ominous foreboding. Did the fact that we have a similar foreboding about our own time play a role in your choice of this play? As if a new era, a new world, were approaching?

Yes, we can certainly speak of such a parallel. The era we live in strongly resembles the time in which the play is set. Then, as now we have reached a turning point in history, a moment when one has the feeling that this world is gradually falling apart, and a sense of fundamental change is taking hold of us. I see humanity as having reached a point where it feels that it can no longer continue to exist this way. It feels as if we were speeding on a train with no tracks beneath it, unaware of where we are heading. Perhaps we should get off this train or rebuild the tracks – but not horizontally, rather upward. Just as it was then, materialism has come to dominate the world, pushing the spiritual out. Yet, in the pursuit of physical pleasures, we tend to forget what is most important. We have everything, we live in abundance and comfort, able to attain almost anything without real human effort. Consumption and the chase for pleasure have grown rampant, and if we look at the overwhelming flood of advertisements, the most frequent message they convey is that we need not give up anything, everything can be ours. There is no need for physical exertion or sweating through workouts – just sit on the couch, stare at the TV, and place a vibrating miracle gadget on your body to lose weight. In other words, there is no need to actually *do* anything – it is as if people were being led to believe that they do not have to use their own strength. Whereas I believe the most important thing is precisely the ability to act through our own efforts, to have the opportunity to struggle. Because if a person is stripped of their physical resilience, it becomes much easier to subjugate their soul and spirit as well – once they lose the ability to fight and resist. I see this phenomenon more and more around me, and I have even noticed it in myself.

– During the analysis of Salome*, it was mentioned that in the biblical era in which the plot is set, people seemed not yet ready to embrace the "word of God." In your opinion, are people today ready for this?*

The fundamental difference between that era and today is that in biblical times people were not ready to receive the message of redemption, in other words, they did not believe that salvation was possible for humanity. They either would not or could not grasp the message that the possibility of redemption was open to them as well, although only through love. That salvation could come

solely through complete, absolute divine love. Now, however, the era in which people had already accepted the possibility of redemption and salvation should be restored. In my view, for modern humanity, this idea, this hope has simply faded into oblivion, as if it no longer existed. People need to be reminded once again that it is possible. I believe in this – I believe that, in one way or another, human beings are divine creations, and the time will come, the moment will arrive, when they once again find their true place, which is much closer to God.

– So, for you, is staging and creating this production a kind of ars poetica, a manifesto of your worldview expressed through art?

Yes, you could put it that way. This play, for me… I do not know… it is like an inner scream. But not a terrified, panicked plea for help, nor a thundering condemnation of anyone. Quite the contrary – I think that what we need most right now is to be more understanding, more merciful toward one another. This cry for help is, in fact, a plea for mercy – not with the aim of condemning anyone or even of seeking to see God… no, it is simply about being more merciful to each other, about our ability to forgive, to trust one another more, to look each other in the eye, and to pay closer attention to one another. What we need now are not prophets, but the ability to hear what the person standing next to us is saying. Of course, in this play, there is a prophet who speaks. Yet, no matter how important his words were, many did not hear or understand him at the time. Today, we do not need prophets, because we already know everything… Deep down, perhaps we even know what we truly need, yet in recent times, we have drifted away from God. But this is not only about God – it is about man as well, because we are living in an era that has forgotten about human beings, too. Today, we tend to see a person merely as one of a vast, faceless mass; we no longer recognize their unique destinies, nor do we regard them as independent individuals who are standing beside, who are turning to us with their cries for help yet no one seems to hear them.

– In Oscar Wilde's play, the character of Salome differs in some ways from her biblical counterpart. There is an intensified eroticism about her, she possesses a powerful sensual aura. Because of this, many interpret Salome as a femme fatale, a "woman of fate." What is your perspective on this interpretation?

I do not favour this kind of approach. The idea of Salome as a *femme fatale* feels distant to me – it simply does not strike me as the most interesting aspect of her character. I have never been particularly interested in interpretations that portray Salome as a woman of fate who achieves her goals purely through erotic seduction. Of course, it is true that eroticism plays a role in the story, but I feel that there is something even more significant beyond that. It is obvious that sexuality and erotic attraction are present in the dynamic between Herod and Salome, however, from Salome's perspective, what seems more important to me in this play is that the moment she sees Jokanaan, she instantly falls in love with him. Rarely does such a thing happen in life – falling for someone so suddenly, like

Salome's entrance on a moonlit night
(photo: Csilla Zelkó,
source: facebook.com/nemzetiszinhaz)

a bolt from the blue. I think that, in this case, Salome immediately sensed something of the divine presence in Jokanaan or the radiance of divine love emanating from him. It is a fact that Salome is still a young, inexperienced girl in whom religious devotion is mixed with erotic attraction, ultimately leading to tragedy. Moreover, she is a princess who is accustomed to getting everything she wants at court. But this "divine love" overwhelms her so suddenly that she becomes completely confused – she cannot understand why she cannot have what she so deeply desires as a result of her awakening erotic attraction. I believe that there is another major issue in our modern lives: we often make the mistake of confusing love with something else. Many times, we ourselves cannot distinguish between our emotions – we mix the feeling of higher love or deep affection with sexuality and sensuality, ultimately plunging ourselves into emotional chaos, in which we can no longer determine what love truly is and what it is not, whether we love the other person or not, and whether they love us in return or not… I think this emotional chaos stems from the lack of clarity surrounding our fleeting feelings. At the same time, true love never ends.

– So love is eternal?

Absolutely, I am convinced of this. If it is true love (or genuine affection), then it lasts forever, even if the word "eternal" may sound a bit overused… In any case, it never truly ends; it is impossible for real love to simply cease. Nowadays, we are so quick to label anything as love, to say we have fallen for someone, when in reality, it might just be attraction.

– In this production, we are not dealing with a love triangle but rather a quadrangle. Herodias, the wife of Herod Antipas and the mother of Salome, plays a crucial role in the unfolding tragedy. She appears as an intriguer, yet she, too, harbours a longing for love – or is her love for power and desire to dominate others even stronger? How do you see the character of Herodias?

When analysing a character, I do not consider traits such as a thirst for power or the ability to manipulate as fundamental, nor do they particularly interest me. I do not see this aspect of Herodias' personality as essential at all. I think that she has far more intriguing qualities. Herodias, as known from history, also exhibits feelings of love and affection, specifically for Herod. I see this as her defining trait, and from it stems her greatest personal drama, which ultimately leads to

tragedy. After all, she had to commit a sin in order to be with the man she loved. She left her previous husband, who happened to be Herod Antipas' elder brother, thereby breaking all laws and, by the standards of the time, committing an enormous transgression. Oscar Wilde's play somewhat portrays Herodias as a monstrous, selfish woman, a sexually charged, wanton creature, yet I also see another interpretation of her character. To me, she is a woman madly in love, willing to commit even the gravest sin for the sake of her love. In this sense, it is an incredibly dramatic situation – how far is a person willing to go to see their love fulfilled? That, to me, is the truly fascinating question. And, also, can a sin committed for love ever be forgiven? And once the sin has been committed, can Herodias stop on this path, or will one transgression inevitably lead to more?

– We already saw your productions at the Theatre Olympics and the most recent MITEM, and both Silk, *based on Barricco's novel, as well as* Odysseus *captivated audiences with their striking, almost hypnotic visuality. Is this an important expressive element in the stage production of* Salome, *too?*

Yes, I consider expressive visuality to be fundamentally important in all of my productions, although I find this concept somewhat difficult to interpret, just as I find it hard to imagine a theatrical performance that is "not visual." After all, visuality encompasses everything that a person sees. But if the idea is that my productions are somehow "more beautiful" than the average theatrical production, that would only mean they might be aesthetically "more beautiful", but certainly not more visual.

– Then let me clarify the question: Some directors strive for simplicity and minimalism in their stage productions, placing less emphasis on "visual expressivity" and spectacle. For example, two actors might sit in an empty space, with simple lighting and no set, dressed in everyday clothes. Throughout the performance, visual elements are kept to a minimum, and the impact on the audience is primarily determined by the actors' presence.

Yes, I understand. Regarding the visual aspects of my productions, I find it important to emphasize that I do not intend to illustrate the plot or events with the visual elements – whether set design, costumes, props, or lighting. In my work, visuals are never just a tool for illustration; rather, I deliberately strive for them to serve a dramaturgical function, which may set my solutions apart from those of other stage performances. I consider the image created on stage – the visual

Scene between Herod and Salome before the dance (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhaz.hu)

composition – as if it were text, meaning that the image itself also "speaks." Moreover, certain visual elements can even appear as "characters" in their own right – something that can be found in *Salome* as well. At certain moments, the set behaves like an independent character. After all, space, light, and colours also have their own message and relationship to the events unfolding on stage. Both the visual composition and the music have the power to transform the atmosphere of a scene, as if they were engaging in a dialogue with the characters and actors. I know that actors often find it challenging when I ask them to integrate gestures, music, lighting, set design, and costumes into an organic whole, ensuring that everything works together in a specific, unified rhythm on stage.

– Can this be regarded as a kind of complex score?

Exactly, we can absolutely interpret it as a symphonic piece. It is a kind of symphony with precisely defined rhythms and pauses, just like a musical composition. My performances are like symphonies on stage.

– Perhaps this is what Wagner had in mind when he proclaimed the idea of the Gesamtkunstwerk, the concept of a total work of art. And in this case, how do you see it – does theatre primarily affect a person's thoughts, emotions, or soul?

I will try to articulate this precisely. Why is there a need for visuals, music, and everything else? Because my desire is for the audience, upon entering the theatrical space, to be transported into a completely different world. Into one that no one has ever seen before. That is why I am far less interested in productions that target solely a person's logical thinking and the rational side of their existence. The reason my stage design and every element of my productions are so intricate is that they provide an opportunity to create a world which the audience steps into for the first time in their lives. And when a person encounters something entirely new, something unknown, it affects their entire being. Through hearing, sight, and emotions – this is somehow the way I create theatre.

– So, do you believe that theatre can change the world?

I do not know what it means to change the world, but I do believe that people can be changed. Those sitting in the audience. And if even one person experiences a positive change, then perhaps, in doing so, the world has already changed as well.

Translated by Nóra Durkó

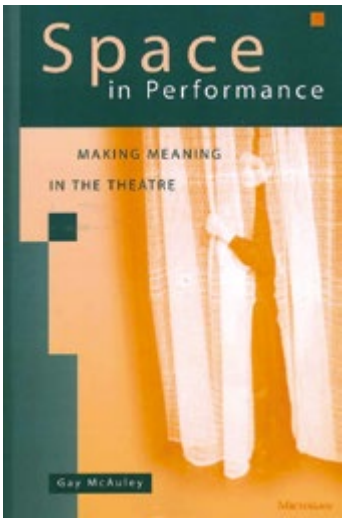
Salome with the head of John the Baptist at the end of the performance
(photo: Zsoltán Kocsis, source: origo.hu)

ALIN GÎRBU

The Problem of Space in Silviu Purcărete's Recent Shows: *Death and the Ploughman* and *Gertrude*

Silviu Purcărete was born in Bucharest, in 1950. He graduated from the Institute of Theatre and Cinematography of Bucharest. He worked at Piatra Neamţ, Constanţa, Bucharest, and since 1988, at the National Theatre of Craiova. In 1996, he became the director of the Limoges National Dramatic Center, where he produced several performances and where he created a school for young actors. In 2007, he directed J. W. Goethe's *Faust* at the Radu Stanca National Theatre of Sibiu, a performance that was remarkably successful at the 2009 edition of the Edinburgh Festival. He has worked in theatres located in England, Austria, France, Norway, Portugal, Hungary, as well as at the Bonn, Cardiff, Vienna, Essen Opera Houses. Purcărete's work has been recognized with numerous awards in Romania and across Europe. His productions in Hungary: *The Cherry Orchard* (2019), *As You Like It* (2014), *Scapin the Schemer* (2013). His productions at previous MITEM Festivals: *Gulliver's Travels; The Tragedy of Man; Lulu; Faust; The Scarlet Princess*. In addition to *An Italian Straw Hat*, which he presented with the National Theatre in the Spring of 2025, he is also participating in this year's MITEM with two productions: *Jonas, Gertrude*. This paper reviews two of the most important recent productions directed by Silviu Purcărete {*Death and the Ploughman*, staged in Iasi in 2021, and *Gertrude*, staged in Bucharest in 2023), focusing on how the components of these two productions influence the audience's perception of the spaces in which they take place. The author will prove that the main objective of a theatre performance is to occupy this space through various means (scenographic and interpretative). Thus, through the presence of these elements, a theatre performance offers the audience a new understanding of the significance of space. (Journal Artelor Spectacolului, 2024/2, pp. 71–83.)

Nowadays, theatre is no longer perceived as a physical performance of a written text; according to Marvin Carlson, theatre today is seen as a socio-cultural event, whose meanings and interpretations are not to be sought exclusively in the source text or in the events on stage, but in the experience of the audience that takes part in the creation of the event in its totality[1]. The position is quite appropriate, given that this new way of looking at the theatrical performance automatically leads to a change regarding in how the space in which the latter takes place can be viewed. Some notable examples for what we intend to investigate in this article can be found in two academic works by Gay McAuley and Marvin Carlson. As for the work of the latter, *Places of Performance. The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture, we* have chosen to discuss it in this introduction since it opened the field of spatial analysis by theorising performance spaces not as fixed places or given realities, but as spaces produced by society and therefore *transformable.* This premise is an inviting starting point if we relate it to the other work, *Space in Performance: making meaning in the theatre,* where Gay McAuley argues that a theatrical performance is an event that fills a certain space and a certain duration[2]. In other words, a theatrical performance creates and presents a fictional world, implicitly a series of events that form this universe, through two very important elements: the scenography and the actors' performance.This naturally leads us to the next question that needs to be answered: How, exactly, do these elements come to shape the audience's perception of the entire space in which the performance takes place? Starting from these examples, with the performances *Death and The Ploughman* (staged in 2021 atthe Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre in Iasi) and *Gertrude* (staged in 2023 at the I. L. Caragiale National Theatre in Bucharest) as analysis materials, we will test the applicability of these assumptions. In other words, we will analyse the way in which the component parts of Silviu Purcărete's two performances influence the audience's perception of the spaces in which they take place.



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1 See Marvin A. Carlson, *Places of Performance. The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture,* Cornell University Press, 1989, p. 2.

2 See Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance, making meaning in the theatre,* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 126, apud. Alison Oddey and Christine White, "Introduction. The potential of spaces", in Alison Oddey and Christine White (eds.), *The Potentials of Spaces. The Theory and Practice of Scenography and Performance,* Intellect Ltd, Bristol, 2006, pp. 14–15.

A first step is to try to set a theoretical framework. This leads to the following question: What exactly do we mean when we talk about theatrical space? According to Paul Allain and Jen Harvie[3], the theorists who have discussed the problem of space in theatrical environment have come to divide it into three distinct categories: *stage space, theatre space, and theatrical environment. We* call *the stage space* the area in which the actors perform (more specifically, the scenic space). By *theatrical space we* mean the architecture that includes the perimeter of the stage and the audience spaces. Considering this type of space will help us analyse the relationship between the actors on stage and the audience in the auditorium (or between stage and auditorium). As for *the theatre environment,* this refers to the place of the theatre in its wider geography. Put simply, where, exactly, it is geographically located and what meanings that location offers. The space that we will analyze in this paper is the theatrical space, the kind of space that can be understood as a common entity to the two worlds, that of the actors and that of the audience. This is because theatre is the meeting of human microcosms that are (for a moment) in the same space[4].

In the following, we need to sketch some general characteristics concerning the issue of space in Silviu Purcărete's performances. His preoccupation with space is already well-known among exegetes.

Besides, it is important to note that the director's perception of space is visual, plastic, and photographic. He likes "unorthodox spaces, dynamics, transformation"[5].Throughout his directorial activity, in addition to the traditional performance hall, Purcărete has also staged in non-theatrical spaces, such as the Cultural Factory in Sibiu, a location where he has customized four spaces, namely: the *Lulu, Faust, Metamorphosis* halls, where the performances of the same name were played, to which we can add the *Eugenio Barba* hall, where the shows *Games, words, crickets…* and *The Scarlet Princess were performed* (for this performance the director formulated a space similar to the Japanese one, intended for kabuki theatre). As can be seen, Purcărete has created performances in spaces that have a close thematic relationship with the text he has chosen to stage. Each of these spaces came to determine the spectators'experience, given that they promised new possibilities for negotiating the relationships between actors and audience.

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[3] See Paul Allain, Jen Harvie, *Ghidul Routledge de teatrușiperformance [The Routledge Guide to Theatre and Performance],* Translated by Cristina Modreanu and 11 i n ca Tamara Todorut, Nemira Publishing House, 2012, p. 433.

[4] See Octavian Saiu, *In cautarea spatiului pierdut [In Search of Lost Space]* Nemira Publishing House, 2008, p. 202.

[5] Oltita Cintec, Silviu Purcărete sau privirea care infatiseaza *[Silviu Purcărete or the glance that depicts],* Camil Petrescu Cultural Foundation through Cheiron Publishing House, Bucharest, 2020, p. 62.

In addition to these aspects, it is important to note that in his performances, with small exceptions *(Decameron 645* and *Faust),* he keeps intact the equation of frontality in the theatrical communication between stage and auditorium, the performance space and the theatrical space being two distinct notions. We also believe that it is essential to emphasise the type of relationship that the performer establishes with the two types of spaces. Why exactly? We can look at the performer in Purcărete's performances as the element that connects the two spaces, given that he has to fill the whole stage space with a certain kind of energy that contaminates the spectator's space. In other words, Purcărete's construction of space is centered on this vocation of transmitting energy from the stage space to the auditorium[6]. We keep these aspects in mind, hence they are important for the discourse that we will develop from now on.

As I said in the beginnig of this article, Gay McAuley, in *Space in Performance: making meaning in the theatre,* states that a theatrical performance, regardless of its genre, is an event that occupies a certain space and a certain duration. According to Alison Oddey[7], from a cultural point of view, we can read the messages of theatrical spaces, locations and sets as we do with any architectural and urban code, and through this reading we structure our entire environment. Starting from the idea that the way a theatrical performance functions in a space can influence the way spectators come to perceive it, we can come to see the place in which a theatrical performance takes place, as Nicholas Wood[8] says, as a cube combining two spaces (the stage and the audience). But what exactly is the effect of a director's work on this cube waiting to be filled? As we shall see, the main objective of a theatrical performance is to occupy this space by various means (scenographic and interpretative). In this way, through the *presence* of these elements, a theatrical performance comes to give the audience a new understanding of the meaning of space.

Before moving on to our case studies, let's talk a bit about what presence means in theatre. Given its central place in the theatrical phenomenon, according to Phillip Zarrilli[9], the concept of presence has come to be a debated and hotly contested term among a very wide range of scholars. To demonstrate that presence in theatre is an extremely complex phenomenon, Cormac Power distinguishes three main types of presence: *the makingpresent* (theatre's ability to create presence, to make 'fictional entities' present on stage in front of an

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6 See Octavian Saiu, *op. cit,* pp. 336–337.

7 See Alison Oddey and Christine White (ed.), *op. cit.,* p. 17.

8 See Nicholas Wood, 'Flatness and Depth: Reflections', in Alison Oddey and Christine White (eds.), *op. cit.,* p. 65.

9 See Phillip Zarrilli, "… presence …'as a question and emergent possibility: a case study from the performer's perspective', in Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks (eds.), *Archaeologies of Presence,* Routledge.Taylor & Francis Group, New York, 2012, p. 121.

audience, creating the sense that the whole drama is unfolding as if it were taking place in that moment), *the having-present* (the ability of the theatre or actors to have presence, to convey a certain energy or *aura* to the audience) and *the beingpresent* (the ability of the spectator to be present, to be in the same place and time as the performance/ performer)[10]. In her book *The Transformative Power of Performance: a new aesthetics,* Erika Fischer- Lichte emphasises that today's theatrical discourse sees presence as an aesthetic quality specific not only to the performer's body, but also to the objects and elements that are found and construct the stage space[11]. Interestingly, she uses the term *presence* only when talking about the importance of performers' bodies in the economy of a performance. On the other hand, she prefers to use the concept *of atmosphere* in order to emphasise the major role played by the stage space, and implicitly by the objects that make it up, on the audience's perception. This is because, according to her, through the atmosphere that these elements create, the spectator experiences the scenic space and the elements that make it up as being present. More specifically, the scenographic elements immerse the spectator in the general atmosphere of the performance[12].

Death and The Ploughman (2021)
A hybrid space

Technology and art have become twin concepts that cannot be discussed separately. This is because the evolution of new technologies has had a major impact on the cultural-artistic field: firstly, technology has inspired artists to create completely new art forms, and secondly, it has also influenced the way traditional art forms (theatre, opera ballet, etc.) have adapted[13]. There are various examples of how modern technologies have influenced and inspired the arts, leading to the following questions: How can artists incorporate new technologies into their own artistic creations? How should we (as viewers) relate to technology-based artworks in the context of this century? The art world has gone through a variety of changes over the past decades, with the development of technology representing a major event in the way art has come to be thought about, made, and viewed. As we said, the intersection of contemporary art and technology can be found in different artistic fields, with technology transforming

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[10] See Cormac Power, *Presence in Play. A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre,* Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam – New York, NY 2008, p. 11.

[11] See Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: a new aesthetics,* Routledge. Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, 2008, p. 93.

[12] *Ibidemem,* p. 116.

[13] See Ma ria Tajta kova, *Theatre in the Digital Age: When Technology Meets the Arts,* available at URL: http://www.cutn.sk/Library/proceedings/km_2014/PDF%20FILES/Tajtakova.pdf, accessed on 07.02.2024., p. 1.

activities such as painting, sculpture, theatre or music[14]. Strictly speaking about theatre, digital technology has immensely influenced the staging elements of this art form, with new features ranging from simple video projections to sophisticated virtual reality theatre simulations, including interactive features[15]. According to the researchers[16], the use of digital tools in contemporary theatre is a practice rooted in the particularities of this art form, as theatre artists use these tools because they allow directors to construct a new figurative and spatial vocabulary when working on a theatrical production. Thus, we see that it is impossible to talk about contemporary theatre without referring to it as a cultural phenomenon influenced by today's digital world. The innovative technological solutions that are used in making the performance space not only provide the audience with spectacular images, but also contribute to the process of creating and maintaining a certain environment and atmospheres that support the whole performance[17]. As we will see in the following, the use of digital tools in theatrical performances offers the possibility for artists to solve new scenic tasks and create a unique atmosphere, which is difficult to achieve through traditional scenography methods. Many academic studies discuss the importance of using digital tools in contemporary theatre practice[18]. What is very clear is that these tools have greatly expanded the range of means to create theatre. In order to strengthen these claims, we will prove the validity of what has been said by drawing on different case studies.

First, however, let's take a look at the concept proposed by H.T. Lehman of*postdramatic theatre.* The term was used by Lehman in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* to describe the new theatre. According to Lehmann[19], the adjective postdramatic defines a theatre that operates beyond drama, in a time situated "after" the validity of the paradigm of drama in theatre has expired. More specifically, this type of theatre is one that abandons many conventions that have been valid up to this point. An essential feature of this type of theatre is that the directors of postdramatic theatre reject realistic (mimetic) settings and adopt a more abstract approach. Within this paradigm, the audio and lighting tools play a key role in creating and suggesting the atmosphere of the performance. In addition to all this, in his study H.T. Lehmann also talks about the importance

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14 *Ibidemem,* p. 2.

15 *Ibidemem,* p. 3.

16 See Tetiana Boiko, Maryna Tatarenko, Kateryna ludova-Romanova, Yuliya Tsyvata, and Yaroslav Lanchak, Yaroslav, "Digital Tools in Contemporary Theatre Practice", in Franco Niccolucci (ed.), *Journal on Computing and Cultural Heritage Vol. 16,* 2023, available at URL: https://doi.Org/10.1145/3582265, accessed on 07.02.2024., p. 2.

17 *Ibidemem.,* p. 5.

18 *Ibidemem.,* p. 7.

19 See Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Teatrulpostdramatic [Postdramatic Theatre],* Translated by Victor Scoradet, Editura UNITEXT, Bucharest, 2009, p. 21.

of the use of multimedia technology in theatre art. He argues that the traditional theatre form is no longer in tune with our experience of being and living in the contemporary world. Therefore, the emergence of this new paradigm, postdramatic theatre is an organic response to the modern technologized world, the world in which both our relationship and our perception of it is changed. Given these changes, one might ask what are the implications of technology and how does the latter element affect the form of theatre as we know it today? We know from Lehmann that contemporary theatre adopts multimedia technologies to enhance the stage language[20], to complement and transform the stage space in an innovative way. In order to support this hypothesis, we will try to analyse the main performances signed by the director Silviu Purcărete in which the technological component plays a key role in their materiality.

W. Shakespeare: *Titus Andronicus,* Marin Sorescu National Theatre, Craiova, 1993, dir. Silviu Purcărete (source: uniter.ro)

We will start by emphasising that Purcărete's performances are no strangers to this concept. According to specialists[21], Purcărete's 1990s show *Titus Andronicus* was the first to bring video projection to the Romanian theatre: at the beginning of the show, the image ofTitus is projected onto the stage, and two televisions show the two sons of Caesar engaged in a public debate. However, we cannot say that technology played an important role in the economy of this performance, given that these projections did not help to create a certain scenic atmosphere that served the thematic of the performance. Instead, we can see this example as an early phase of this approach. In our opinion, the most important productions in which technology has played a key role are *Faust, Metamorphoses, Richard III,* and *Death and The Ploughman.*

For now, we will briefly discuss the first three examples, given that in all these performances Purcărete uses technology to pursue the same goal: in *Faust, Metamorphoses* and *Richard III,* the two components (the theatrical and the digital) were used to complement and illustrate each other, in these productions alternating video projections and events on stage. In *Faust* (2007), *a* performance based on Goethe's play, the space and everything that is brought

[20] *Ibidemem,* p. 265.

[21] See Horatiu Mihaiu, *Scenografi romani contemporani [Contemporary Romanian Set Designers],* Cheiron Publishing House, Bucharest, 2022, p. 139.

Based on J. W. Goethe: *Faust*, Radu Stanca National Theatre, Sibiu, 2007, dir. Silviu Purcărete (photo: Paul Băilă, source: thetheatretimes.com)

on stage to transform it into the chamber of Goethe's famous hero, gives off a metaphysics of its own that serves the entire mise en scene. In this performance, video projections play two main roles in the economy of the stage action:

• They have a descriptive role (in the background of the scene, namely the window of Dr. Faustus' study room, the world outside is projected: in the first scene of the performance we have a full moon projected, and in the scene where the bells are ringing for the resurrection service, a church is projected in the distance);

• They suggest the subtextual atmosphere of certain scenes (the weather is constantly changing and the clouds are moving at a rapid pace in the sky when Mephisto first appears in the landscape; a fire suggesting the flames of hell burns in the background when Faust makes his pact with the devil).

In the case of *Metamorphoses,* in the background we have a big screen on which are played the actors' passport images that are in a process of degradation, but also different video sequences filmed in different locations in Sibiu, which are meant to intensify, at a suggestive level, the episode of the plague presented in the stage space.

In *Richard III* (2017), staged at the Metropolitan Theatre in Tokyo, a key scene in which the video component played an important role in the economy of the performance takes place, chronologically speaking, after all the atrocities committed by Richard have happened: in an empty space, where the only set element is the throne on which Richard is sitting, he recites a monologue. This scene is important because in the background is a close-up video of Richard delivering this entire speech live. We note that, through its video component, this scene reveals Purcărete's use of set design to emphasise the cinematic nature of this sequence.

But perhaps the most telling example (and also the one that deserves a more detailed analysis) is provided by the performance staged by Purcărete in 2021, namely *Death and The Ploughman,* since in this show there are various interactions between the actors who play live on stage and the figures of those projected on the same stage. Written in the Middle Ages by Johannes von Tepl, *Death and The Ploughman,* is about life and death, as the whole piece is centred on the philosophical dialogue between a ploughman (whose wife has died) and Death itself. As far as Purcărete's performance is concerned, what we are more interested in emphasising in this analysis is not the philosophical dimension of the fable, but the multimedia

dimension of the whole performance (which we can regard as its central element). We can say that the space of the performance gives the audience a feeling of hybridity, given the way in which it is used: the set designed by Dragos Buhagiar creates an intimate space, where the few pieces of furniture delimit the rooms of the ploughman's house (the kitchen, the living room, and the bedroom). As for the walls that make up the space for acting on stage, they behave as a gateway to the other world, given that these walls are the screens on which the video projections will be shown throughout the performance, projections that are intended to bring Death into the landscape. Thus, the alternating planes between the real world and the world beyond are supported and materialised with the help of this digital component of the performance, the video-design conceived by Andrei Cozlac.

Johannes von Tepl: *The Ploughman and Death*, Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre, Iaşi, 2021, dir. Silviu Purcărete (source: tncms.ro)

Another important element to bring up in this performance is the fact that the main actor appears both physically in space and projected on the screen: both the ploughman and Death are played by the same actor

(Calin Chirila). Thus, we observe that this multimedia component of the performance offers the possibility of duplicating the presence of the protagonist, who embodies both the role of the live ploughman and that of Death in its filmed and projected version on stage.

Gertrude (2023)
The aesthetics of fragmented space

Staged in 2023, *Gertrude* is based on the play of the same name written by Radu F. Alexandru. Appreciated among critics and performing arts scholars as a theatre director attached to classical works, Purcărete surprises by his choice to stage this play, a creation that recontextualises the figure of Hamlet and manages to bring him into the present. This rewriting of the myth portrays Hamlet as the prince who refuses to follow the former king, his father, to the throne. The reason Hamlet gives for his decision not to take the crown and go back to Wittenberg is laid out at the very beginning: "None and never shall be like him". However, once the king has been buried, the throne will remain vacant if it is not taken by a rightful heir. Salvation seems to come in Hamlet's proposal: the only option left is for the country to be ruled by his uncle and

Radu F. Alexandru: *Gertrude*, National Theatre, Bucharest, 2023, dir. Silviu Purcărete (photo: Dragoş Ivan, source: fnt.ro)

mother. Initially, the two give us the impression that they are being forced to marry and take the throne. However, Hamlet realises he's watching a poor comedy. He tries to explain it to his good friend Horatio, but Horatio does not believe him. The appearance of the former king's spirit further clouds the enigmatic answer to the central question that Hamlet has been trying to unravel since the beginning: How did his father die? The path to the answer raises several questions that need to be unraveled: Who killed the former king? Was it murder or suicide? As the plot of the play progresses we see how Hamlet's path to solving the case becomes labyrinthine.

It is interesting how exactly this feeling of permanent mystery given off by the text is amplified in Purcărete's performance. He manages to do this through the scenography by Dragos Buhagiar. In this stage production we find some of his main obsessions/recurring elements (we have scenic views that give the impression of a plastic painting, characters whose face or gender cannot be determined, but also scenes where a banquet takes place) that he mixes in a unique scenographic framework: with a few exceptions, the space in which the characters evolve is not fully presented to the audience, but is hidden by a screen that isolates the entire stage space. Along the way, this screen opens and closes different cutouts, creating a visual play of the frames. More precisely, the story is presented to us in the form of a succession of frames that show us a fragment of the entire scenic device. By means of this artifice, the director manages to control and direct the audience's attention to certain moments and fragments of the scene, oscillating between the presence and absence of the characters evolving in the space: despite the fact that the characters in the performance wish to be seen (or not) by the others, in the next moment they are brought to the audience's attention in one way or another (whether their entire body is revealed to us or just a pair of legs orbiting in space). Once the screens are out of the way, the characters in the story are framed and presented to the audience at the moment they (seem to) least expect.

This way of using screens in a theatrical performance is very similar to what Robert Wilson has proposed in various of his productions, using screens to structure the stage space, but also to control elements such as light or time and rhythm of the action[22] (the best example of this is *Shakespeare's Sonnets'*).

Returning to Purcărete's performance, this show combines text, music, and visual effects (among the most important of such effects we find the use of screens, the latter having the role, as we have seen, of structuring the stage space by dividing it into frames and of amplifying, at a visual level, the enigmatic and dark atmosphere of the story). More precisely, these frames, through their movement, create a mysterious space that is in constant transformation. As I was saying, in this performance the screens are used to divide the stage space into frames, revealing the actors and different set elements, in order to highlight the atmosphere of the text. In addition to this, the screens also serve to mask the monumental structure of the set, as well as to control elements such as light and rhythm. In this space, the performance imposes a certain relationship between actors and spectators, opening up possibilities of perception and thus generating a type of space that Erika Fischer-Lichte defines as *atmospheric*[22]. As Gernot Boehme says, the atmosphere is not tied to a place or architectural space, but rather belongs to the stage space. It does, however, end up spilling over and shaping it[23]. Simply put, the atmosphere arises from the interaction between the specific elements of the stage space and the audience space. It homogenizes and transforms the theatrical space, immersing the spectators in the fictional universe. Since the 1960s, the theatre has revealed the atmospheric potential of the stage space and how the latter manages to influence the theatrical one. In terms of the main elements involved in creating this atmosphere, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte, body movements, lighting, rhythm, sound, and music play a key role[24]. Through its presence or absence, lighting highlights or hides a visual picture. A very good example of this is the scene where Hamlet's father is exhumed on the orders of Claudius and autopsied, a scene which refers to Rembrandt's painting, *Anatomy Lesson.*

Sounds and music surround and enmesh the perceiver, the spectator. It is through this auditory component that the atmosphere of the performance makes its presence felt. ("Emerging from the silence of the space, sound fills the space only to die and vanish in the next moment. Fleeting though it may be, sound still has immediate – and often lasting – effects on those who hear it. First of all, sounds impart a sense of space. […] Theatre is constituted not just through sight «theatron» but always also through sound «auditorium»"[25]). On top of that, this production has a rather slow pace (the movements of the actors unwind slowly, the changing/ closing and opening of the screens also happens slowly). We can say that the performance lures the spectator under its influence, given the atmosphere. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte,

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22 *Ibidemem,* p. 114.
23 *Ibidem,* p. 115.
24 *Ibidem,* pp. 118–119.
25 *Ibidem.,* p. 120.

rhythm can be described as an organizing principle[27]. When it becomes the primary organising principle of a theatrical performance (as is the case in this staging), it can establish either a connection or a disconnection between the theatrical elements (body movements, stagecraft, sound, and music). In Purcărete's performance, each system of theatrical elements follows a similar, slow rhythm. As we have already seen, the slow rhythm in which all the sequences of the performance follow one another is supported and emphasised by the sound universe of the performance (signed by Vasile Sirli), but also by the actors' body movements and the lighting. Thus, all these elements create a tension that, with the final scene, will flood the entire theatrical space.

Conclusions

As we have seen, Purcărete's creations are at the confluence of important theories of scenic and theatrical space. More precisely, this director's creations can be viewed and questioned through these theoretical lenses proposed by the scholars we have brought up here. After analyzing the performance of *Death and The Ploughman, we* noticed that the innovative technological solutions that were used in the creation of the performance space did not only offer the audience spectacular and monumental images. Moreover, they contributed to the process of creating and maintaining a certain environment and atmospheres to support the whole performance. More specifically, in this performance, technology played an important role in the economy of this performance, as these projections helped to create a certain scenic atmosphere that served the theme of the performance: the mystical connection between the real world and the world beyond. With the help of this digital component of the performance, Silviu Purcărete conceives a space that is a hybrid. One in which the two worlds are presented to us in the same frame by means of technology that monopolizes the foreground and offers the possibility of duplicating the presence of the main protagonist. As for *Gertrude,* the space in which the characters evolve is not fully presented to the audience, but is hidden by a screen that isolates it entirely. Along the way, this screen opens and closes different cut-outs, thus creating a visual play of frames. As we have seen, this process has the function of structuring the scenic space by dividing it into frames and visually amplifying the enigmatic atmosphere of the text. More precisely, in this space, the performance imposes a certain relationship between the actors and the spectators, opening up possibilities of perception and thus generating a type of *atmospheric* space. Here, the atmosphere arises from the interaction between the specific elements of the stage space (lighting, rhythm, sound, and music) and the audience space, thus immersing the spectators in the fictional universe.

In conclusion to all that I have said, in order to understand Purcărete's creations we must focus our attention both on the performance and on the container in which it is cast. Both the stage space and the theatrical space. The essence of theatre, after all, lies in the impression that all the elements that contribute to the creation of the final scenic product make on the audience. This is because theatre is essentially a reactive art.

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Siteography

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GEORGE BANU (1943–2023)

Peter Brook and the Former East[1]

George Banu was one of the world's most prominent theatre scholars, Professor Emeritus of Theatre Studies at the Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris, former President and later Honorary President of the International Association of Theatre Critics, and an honorary doctorate holder at several European universities. His work was recognised with numerous prestigious awards, including the National Order of Merit of the French Republic. In 2014, the Académie Française awarded him the Grand Prix de la Francophonie. He published numerous significant works on major European directors – including Peter Brook, Giorgio Strehler, Antoine Vitez, and Ariane Mnouchkine – and served as editor-in-chief of influential theatre journals, thematic conferences, and anthologies. His oeuvre vividly and inspiringly presents the theatrical processes of the 20th century, offering unique insight into the workshops of great masters, drawn from his personal, friendly, and professional encounters with them. In this essay George Banu presents to the Hungarian public his perception of Brook as a director and describes his personal experiences with him. Banu's monograph *Peter Brook and the Theatre of Simple Forms* was published in 2010 in Cluj-Napoca.

In Honour of Him by Edit Ágota Kulcsár: "I owe him a debt"

I first met George Banu during a book presentation held at the University of Theatre and Film (UNATC) at the National Theatre Meeting in Bucharest in 2011. It was a special book: his doctoral dissertation, *Theatrical Reforms in a Century of Renewal*, written in 1973 at the age of thirty, which he believed had been lost for more than three decades after his emigration to France. At the

[1] This article was published in French in *Alternatives théâtrales* July 2022 and an extended version was published in Romanian in Teatrul azi 2022/7–8. Hungarian version: *Szcenárium*, volume X, issue 6, translated from Romanian by Edit Ágota Kulcsár

relaxed and friendly event, Banu remarked that, rereading his first book after forty years (a book never published in Romania at the time because the available paper was reserved for Ceaușescu's publications), he now felt he had already formulated all his essential thoughts about theatre back then. "I have not developed, only broadened my perspective," he writes somewhat resignedly in the book's foreword. But he was pleased to note that his way of thinking about theatre and his creative approach were already discernible in that thesis: "As a committed academic, I have always positioned myself between the book and the stage, convinced of the fruitful nature of their dialogue. I loved both, even separately." Perhaps few know that George Banu and Andrei Șerban were admitted to the same acting class, and after their first year, they were advised to pursue training in criticism and directing, respectively. Banu never wrote about theatre as an outsider – he approached every piece with affection and curiosity, and his analyses reflect the thoughts of an exceptionally cultured, experienced person filled with emotion, passion, and a zest for life. He visited the National Theatre in Budapest several times; in 2015, he gave a lecture on contemporary scenography at MITEM, and in 2017, he held a discussion about *Faust* with Silviu Purcărete and his collaborators. Wherever we met, he was always affable and attentive, and almost instantly welcomed me into his confidence. On one occasion, he brought me an engraving of the Parisian neighbourhood visible from his window. On my sixtieth birthday, he called me from Paris to wish me well. At the time, he told me he was caring for his wife, worrying about her – and just a few weeks later, he himself passed away. I must confess, I owe him a debt. When I read his first book – believed to be lost – about a century of director's theatre and shifting forms of theatrical expression, I promised I would translate it into Hungarian. It could become an essential textbook even for the young theatre reformers of the 21st century.

Translated by Nóra Durkó

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Peter Brook passed away like a candle fading slowly over a long time, whose gentle end brings reconciliation with the world and its order. During our last encounters, I saw he had changed; he'd lost his former dynamism, he was filled with love more than ever. His eyes shone brightly, his smile was infinitely gentle. He was ready to embrace the prospect of the end, and that acceptance and nostalgia for everything he had ever stood for consoled the friends gathered around him.

Eastward, Lear and Hamlet

By the age of forty, Brook had already devoted his heart and soul to the stage and cinema as a director. His memorable productions had set the direction for European theatre life; *King Lear,* as he himself put it, had a particularly great

W. Shakespeare: *King Lear*, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1962, dir. Peter Brook. In the photo: Alec McCowen, Paul Scofield (source: rsc.org.uk)

impact on the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, where this play, whose tragedy is driven by the authoritarian regime, was an overwhelming success. For a long time, the East and its artists had admired this Lear boundlessly, which, as Brook himself admitted, was born out of his encounter with Jan Kot and his *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. They both confessed this to me, and I can't separate this *Lear* from their friendship. It's the *Lear* of my life. Let's not forget that in the early 1950s, even before directing *Lear*, Brook was invited to Moscow to stage Hamlet with Paul Scofield. It was then that he reconnected with his Russian roots, which he'd never hidden or forgotten. He told me how he'd found a cousin whose existence he had ignored up to that point, because his mother and sister had not exchanged a single word with him for thirty years, they'd never even written a letter to each other: wise tactics during Stalin's terror. This cousin was Meyerhold's assistant, and Brook said, "had I lived in Russia, I think I would have been a director like Meyerhold." While in Moscow, he met one of Gordon Craig's colleagues, with whom he talked for hours outside the Art Theatre. These dialogues were recorded, but Brook said regretfully, "by chance… no doubt in a premeditated fashion… these confessions disappeared as if by magic…"

The vigilance of a dictatorship knows no bounds.

Peter Weiss: *Marat/Sade*, Royal Shakespeare Company, 1964, dir. Peter Brook (source: letemps.ch)

Stages of the Journey

He staged various texts, refusing to meet "expectations" or to comply with anything that was generally accepted at the start of his career. He said, "nothing can be alien to me that is theatre". That's how he went from plays for entertainment to Arthur Miller's serious texts and Jean Genet's parables. Without exclusive choices or strict rules. With boundless freedom. As a result, he created two opposing

but interconnected and equally committed performances. On the one hand, he brilliantly staged Peter Weiss's text *Marat-Sade*, combining the themes of madness and imprisonment in a disturbingly powerful way, and on the other hand, he also directed *US*, to oppose the war in Vietnam, the title simultaneously referring to the *United States* and… US in first person plural.

Grotowski's Poland

Brook was a man of continuous metamorphoses; in the early 60s, he embarked on the path of theatrical experimentation championed by Antonin Artaud. He was sensitive to the echoes coming from Poland at the time, and recognized in Grotowski both a follower of Artaud and the embodiment of perseverance that he was dreaming of but could not achieve himself, so he invited him to work with his actors in London. A lifelong friendship developed between them. A mutual one. At Jerzy's invitation, Brook travelled to Poland in the 60s. Later, he and I would recall Grotowski in Wrocław, amid emotions that reflected the spirit of this person we loved immensely.

Peter had organised a ceremony for him at the Bouffes du Nord, in honour of his becoming a member of the Collège de France. Soon after, he learned of Jerzy's deteriorating health and hurried to Santarcangelo to pay him a visit. This snap decision was for me the clearest proof of their attachment to each other. Once, when I asked him about his relationship with Barba and Brook, Grotowski replied, "Eugénio and I only talk about theatre, Peter and I only talk about life." Peter was close to him until the last moment, and maybe even beyond. He integrated Ryszard Cieślak, Grotowski's emblematic actor and immortal Prince, into his Paris company and made him the Blind King of *Mahabharata*.

Jean-Claude Carrière: *The Mahabharata*, C.I.R.T., 1985, dir. Peter Brook. In the photo: Ryszard Cieślak as Dhritarashtra, the blind king (source: lap.szinhaz.hu)

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* and its Eastern Avatars

Peter ended his *"English cycle"* by staging the masterpiece *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which he set in broad daylight, leaving the night behind and using feats reminiscent of the acrobatic performances he had seen in Peking Opera.

W. Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* Royal Shakespeare Company, dir. Peter Brook (source: pinterest.com)

In the midst of the tragedy of Russian tanks rolling into Prague in 1968, this production – which, lo and behold, was once again performed in the East – was a remedy to our wounds. The production was banned in Prague because Brook had stood up for the great Czech director Otomar Krejca and opposed the closure of his theatre, Divadlo za branou. Although the performance was received in Bucharest, pressure was exerted through official channels to condemn it publicly. Radu Popescu complied with the request and wrote an embarrassing review in which he praised the quality of the songs alone, saying it was "due to the beautiful lyrics for which they were composed." Nicolae Carandino, just released from a communist prison, followed suit. All the critics lined up behind the ordered rejection. Only Dan Hăulică was brave enough to publish an issue of *Secolul 20* a few months later, dedicating an entire chapter to the *Dream* and paying tribute to this exemplary performance. It was then that I wrote perhaps the most expressive confession of my love for Brook's theatre. How can we forget Puck as he walks down the room at the end of the performance, shakes our hands and murmurs an unforgettable "Good by".

The Rift in '68

At forty, Brook paraphrased Dante, "life has given us what it could give, and from now on we must pay our debt." Peter then changed *from director to theatre person*. A new era began. He settled in Paris, established the Centre de Recherches Théâtrales Internationales and launched expeditions to unusual places. He dedicated himself to the most radical experiments. With *Orghast* in Shiraz, he revived the tragedy of Prometheus based on research into ancient languages and by creating another, imaginary tongue, with the aim of going as far as possible in discovering the primordial power of voice. He wouldn't get any further than that. But his colleague at the time, Andrei Șerban, continued this quest and reached the ultimate outcome in *Antique Trilogy*. Brook noticed his talent and involved him in his research. But Șerban, like Brâncuși, realising that "nothing grows in the shade of great trees"; left Brook, without forgetting or denying him. He remained his ally, "with love".

The extreme experiences around voice and sound were followed by a "journey to Africa ", traces of which can be discerned in his later themes. "For me, Africa is the land of truth," Brook would later say. He chose Africa, the continent's characters and stories, and made them his own.

Return to Theatre

In 1974, he opened the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord. Unlike Grotowski, who had little interest for the public, he admitted he "needed an audience." An audience he wanted to enthuse with the vibrant energy of the stage. I was at the opening night of *Timon of Athens* at the new place even whose "warts" he loved, the theatre that reminded me of the Elizabethan stage, where I discovered another, a more open-minded Brook less concerned with the mastery of form than with curiosity about actors from different worlds. He initiated the founding a multinational company, which he considered necessary to reflect the diversity of modern cities. These two things resonated with each other like echoes, mutually reinforcing each other. The ingenious connection between them inspired great theatre directors like Patrice Chéreau, Ariane Mnouchkine or Antoine Vitez.

Peter Brook, aged 95, on stage at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord in February 2020, speaking about Shakespeare and *The Tempest* (picture from an article by G. Banu, source: blog.alternativestheatrales.be)

Brook would alternate between options. In 1977, he staged *The Cherry Orchard* at an unconventional venue, accelerating and freeing it from the slowness that characterised Stanislavsky. With Romanian-born composer Marius Constant and librettist Jean-Claude Carrière, he wrote the masterpiece *The Tragedy of Carmen*, wherein the opera regained the dramatic virtues of the play and achieved what I have called "the theatre of essence", a phrase Jan Kott fell in love with so much that he made it the title of his last book.

Return to the East

Shortly thereafter, Peter – unusually for him – hosted a workshop for young directors in Vienna. He chose two young directors from the East: Felix Alexa from Romania and Krzysztof Warlikowski from Poland, whom he invited to Paris to attend rehearsals and accompany the tour of *Pelléas and Mélisande*. Peter's choice would have a great impact on these two debuting artists, on their way to become today's leading directors. A production by Krzysztof Warlikowski would then be invited to the Bouffes. The relevance of the relationship between

Brook's theatre and this production was as surprising as when, years earlier, the great Tadeusz Kantor had presented his production *Wielopole, Wielopole*. Eternally dissatisfied, he'd admit to me with a smile: "I have never been really happy, except at the Bouffes du Nord". Brook, for his part, spoke of this performance as a masterpiece of a brilliant craftsman who miraculously exuded "brightness" to the world around him. It was an unexpected encounter of two seemingly diametrically opposed artists. Once, again, Brook had reconnected with the East.

Brook, to whom we owe so much, honoured the East. I accompanied him to Prague right after the regime change, where the Czech theatre community gathered to greet, listen to and pay tribute to him, remembering his gesture of solidarity with the Prague Spring and the Divadlo za branou in 1968. A few years later, we would meet again in Bucharest, where he came to the festival Printemps de la liberté to present a performance titled *Albert Wozza*, which confused some Romanian artists. And he was also invited to a conference at the National Theatre, where he asked Andrei Şerban and me to conduct an improvisation exercise, whose failure amused all our friends. He loved… to smile! To stay in the East, I remember accompanying him to Poznań to receive an honorary doctorate. We spent hours together… I just can't forget the drawing Grotowski's famous set designer Jerzy Gurawski gave him at the end: sneakers flashing from underneath the doctoral gown Peter wore. He was very happy and had a good time in the company of Polish friends. We all belonged to a community devoid of fault lines or suspicion. The next day, on our way to Wrocław, we had to deal with the harshness of Polish winter: a blizzard gave our trip a mythical character. "We won't forget that," said Peter as he got out of the car. Not long afterwards, at the

Wielopole, Wielopole, Teatr Cricot 2, 1980, dir. Tadeusz Kantor (source: culture.pl)

Molière: *Don Juan*, Tumanishvili Film Actors' Theatre, Tbilisi, 1981, dir. M. Tumanishvili (source: tumanishvilitheatre.ge)

invitation of Jarosław Fret, we'd meet again in Wrocław, where we gathered for the launching of Peter's book and to reminisce about Grotowski.

Let us not forget his relationship with Georgia and Georgian theatre: Mikhail Tumanishvili staged *Don Juan* in the spirit of questions, reflections and political scepticism. Peter Brook wrote about this performance: "Should Molière be discovered in Tbilisi? Why not! That's what theatre is all about! Tumanishvili's Don Juan is the best I've ever seen!" And one day he advised me to go to the Théâtre des Abbesses, where a production by the great puppeteer Gabriadze, *The Battle of Stalingrad*, was performed. He had met him in Tbilisi and admired him for courageously addressing great events of history. He was there at the opening night, and had his Georgian friend take a snapshot of him. He was close to the artists oppressed by Moscow's dictatorship.

Speaking of the East… how could I forget a small personal experience? One night I was late for a performance at the Bouffes. I explained to Brook that I'd lost my way. "You made the mistake of not realising that we in the West are unlike the Eastern countries, where sometimes you go left and sometimes the other way. Here we have to go straight ahead…". I'd never been able to go straight ahead, but it was Peter who diagnosed my inability to do so. He was well acquainted with the East and its influence on our lives.

He loved the East, and the East loved him back. It is worth remembering this reciprocity now, in the last hour.

Glory and Silence

The oeuvre of Brook, a "theatre man", is completed by two masterpieces that, with the wonderful richness of theatrical motifs, will live forever in the memory of those who had the opportunity to see them: *Conference of the Birds* and *Mahabharata*, both based on great epic texts. Peter steered clear of Western mythology, be it Greek or Latin, preferring instead to explore Eastern epics. He was confronted with stories from distant worlds, with their broad interpretations of humans and their fate.

Two great foreign actors, Yoshi Oida, his long-time partner, and Sotigui Kouyate, the unparalleled actor, must be mentioned here, both of whom were his partners in the performances they participated in. The former gave extraordinary performances in the role of Drona in *Mahabharata and in The Man Who,* reflecting on the human mind; the latter also excelled *in Mahabharata,* as the unforgettable Prospero in *The Tempest, and as* an ordinary man in *The Suit*.

One day, Peter told me that "staying at the same level was declining." This became his operating principle. Therefore, after the "cycle of the heart", which ended with *The Tempest* and *Hamlet*, he started the "cycle of the mind", i.e. focusing on neurological issues and the disorders they caused. It was then

Peter Brook and Marie-Hélène Estienne: *The Prisoner*, C.I.R.T., Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, 2018, dir. Peter Brook (photo: Ryan Buchanan, source: nationaltheatre.org.uk)

Peter Brook and George Banu, February 2021 (source: blog.alternativestheatrales.be)

that he created two memorable performances: *The Man Who* and *I Am a Phenomenon.* Peter would always surprise me. He kept changing registers and approaches, he'd avoid the risk of immobility, trusting in the totality of each moment and sharing it generously with the audience.

In his last work period, he preferred African theatre forms, which are parabolic and direct at the same time. We cannot ignore his productions *The Suit* or *The Prisoner*, based on texts he had matured in his mind for decades. He also got a taste of what I like to call "primary theatre", the theatre of ancient "naïve", archaic wisdom. No pomp, no prestige, no nimbus.

Peter thought in theatre terms, initiating the highly successful concept of "empty space"; he was a fan of the "impure" Shakespeare, the Shakespeare combining "the gross and the sacred"; he worshipped the human voice as the "truth of existence" and invoked "silence". "What does silence consist of?" were his last words that will stay with me.

I quietly watch him lie on the cold bier. The film of my life unfolded in his company organically, just as he always wanted his theatre to be "organic". And I say to myself: that's how "my life, the second one…" ends.

"Thanks to Life, which has given me so much," he liked this refrain of Violeta Parra's song.

Translated by László Vértes

TADEUSZ KANTOR (1915–1990)

"The Actor Exists Only if Their Model Is the Dead"[1]

Tadeusz Kantor was born 110 years ago, in 1915, and passed away 35 years ago, in 1990. He began his career as a painter, but his versatile talent destined him to create along with his troupe of independent artists stage productions for which he served simultaneously as writer, director, and set designer. His emblematic production, *The Dead Class* premiered in 1975 and had a profound impact on the greatest theatrical innovators of the 20th century, and many significant artists still regard him as a master in the 21st century. Kantor also made a lasting contribution as a theorist of art. This is documented by his collection of poetic essays, published in Hungarian in 1994 under the title *Theatre of Death [Halálszínház]*, which is mainly the result of the dedication and perseverance of theatre historian Nina Király (1940–2018). On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth, she also organized an exhibition of Kantor's oeuvre at the National Theatre in Budapest, accompanied by a publication titled *Milan Lessons*. Tadeusz Kantor stated on several occasions how much he would have liked to come to Hungary with his company, yet, due to the weakness of the domestic theatre scene, this could not happen. In November 1986, when the master was passing through Budapest, he held a smaller-scale seminar at the R Club of the Szkéné Theatre. Its text, which originally appeared in issue 1/1987 of the journal *Kultúra és Közösség [Culture and Community*[2]*]*, is being hereby republished.

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1 The event took place at the R Club of the Budapest University of Technology in November 1986.

2 Tadeusz Kantor: Ankét (Translated into Hungarian by Nina Király, Gyöngyi Heltai and Ágnes Pálfi)

In Honour of His Memory by Zsolt Szász: From Beyond the Iron Curtain

It is 1988. We have been sitting for over two hours in the larger theatre hall of the Pompidou Centre in Paris, where the Master is answering Denis Bable's questions. He explains the motifs of *I Shall Never Return* in meticulous detail. The world premiere of this, his last completed production, is scheduled for 7 p.m. But leaping up from his chair time and again, Kantor continues to speak about how each character carried by the actor corresponds to a fixed, imprint-like, layered memory image. They have come for one final encounter; the space around them must be sealed in order for the past to return. "We are standing at the door," says Kantor, "taking a long farewell from our childhood, standing helpless at the threshold of eternity and death… the fragile walls of our everyday linear time will not save us… there are important events taking place behind the door…"

We are from Hungary, and between the two of us we do not have a hundred francs for a ticket. The stainless steel door of the theatre opens and closes automatically as the strictly controlled tickets are collected by the ushers. Waiting seems hopeless. In my mind, I replay the film excerpts shown that afternoon, and the photographs I studied at home of *The Return of Odysseus*, *The Water Hen*, the teacher in a dressing gown from *The Dead Class*, Marshal Piłsudski passing through on his skeletal horse, and the soldiers from *Wielopole, Wielopole!* constantly returning. One of the ushers, a black woman who has been watching us closely the entire time, now approaches. Only the three of us remain. "Where are you from?" she asks. "From where they are," we reply, pointing at the door. "From beyond the Iron Curtain." She smiles and gestures for us to go in.

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Cricot 2 is neither an institution nor an official theatre. This group is made up mostly of visual artists. Of our two periods, the first one was extremely dangerous, although we were completely unaware of this at the time because we were young: it was the era of *Conspiracy Theatre* during the war. The second one was the actual Cricot 2, which was founded in 1955 – during the so-called period of thaw, when it became possible to create something in Poland.

This is how we created the theatre of artists, naming it after a pre-war theatre. Cricot 1 was an avant-garde troupe in the 1920s and 1930s, founded by painters, poets, and actors – artists who had studied in Paris under Bonnard, Soutine, and Chagall. From that theatre, the Polish visual artist Maria Jarema joined us. It was actually because of her that we named our theatre, or cabaret, or club – I'm not even sure what to call it – Cricot 2.

This is in fact an anagram; such surrealist and Dadaist anagrams, such montage-like combinations of various words were quite fashionable before the war. Once, someone said about Cricot 1 that it wasn't a theatre, but rather a circus (*to cyrk*). And since they had had a fair bit to drink, the atmosphere in that café must have been lively – not as depressing as it is nowadays – someone twisted this name, and so *to cyrk* became *cricot*. And since it also sounded a bit Parisian, it appealed to these artists with a French-influenced education. Then, when French culture faded a bit after the war, upon encountering this name, people more often associated it with *tricot* – based on the idea that actors perform in *tricot* (undershirts). This anecdote was true.

Józef Jarema: *The Tree of Consciousness* at Cricot Theatre, Kraków, in the 1930s (source: audiovis.nac.gov.pl)

So, the actual history of Cricot 2 begins in '55. As, in the eight years leading up to that, we were all fed up with socialist-realist theatre, actors and audience alike, and the boredom was almost reminiscent of the torments of Dante's hell, and so our theatre was embraced with open arms even by the critics. During this time, we received a lot of encouraging press feedback. These were the years of enthusiasm anyway. We opened the huge windows of the space where we performed, and the audience, with ecstatic abandon, climbed in through them to join us. Back then, art and life merged together. But then, gradually, things changed. Our press coverage became quieter, and only our smaller audience remained loyal to us. The audience started to dwindle. Everything seemed to shrink around us, and Cricot 2 also shrank. Maria Jerema passed away, some left us – though the core of the company has essentially remained the same to this day, while a few younger artists have even joined us.

Thirty years have passed, and our fate has shifted in various ways. There has never been enough concrete reason to close our theatre down. We were given a space in the Krzysztofory basement, in the gallery where the most important post-war painters' group, the Grupa Krakowska, operated. Among its members were some who had also been part of the Conspiracy Theatre, and who later became increasingly famous. They were appointed to the chairs at the Academy of Dramatic Arts or to high-ranking positions in the ministry. This gallery became a kind of stronghold for our theatre. Because when I say that the artists who originated started from the gallery – Brzozowski, Mikulski, Novosielski, Skarzynski – had brilliant careers, I don't mean this in a pejorative

Rehearsal of the Konspiracyjny Theatre's production of *Balladyna* in 1943 (photo: W. Witaliński, source: krakowculture.pl)

Production photo of *The Dead Class*, 1983 (photo: Wojciech Kryński, source: culture.pl)

sense. As avant-garde artists, they all earned such serious official recognition that their authority became a trump card for us at all times; and the fact that our theatre didn't get shut down even once was also thanks to them. The noise would have been too great. We felt more and more at home there in the basement. It could have been about three times the size of the room we're in now, and it could fit around two hundred people. We lived through many artistic phases of our theatre there: the Informel production of Witkiewicz's *In a Little Manor House* (1961), then Zero Theatre with another Witkiewicz play, *The Madman and the Nun* (1963), followed by Happening Theatre (*The Waterhen*, 1967), and finally, the Impossible Theatre (1972). The last play we did there in the gallery was *The Dead Class*. In 1972, everything seemed to be falling apart: there was no money, no funding, everyone worked for free. Then, *The Dead Class* brought the breakthrough.

The premiere took place in a strange manner: we had been working for over a year, and it still wasn't coming together. We were only halfway through, and I was already thinking we should give up on the whole thing, especially since the city council announced that they would cut off our funding. At that time, the International Cultural Congress was taking place – with many American, French, Japanese, and obviously Hungarian guests – and they simply demanded that we present the play. I told them that we had only finished half of it. (Their request was obviously due to our foreign successes: we first achieved great success in Nancy with *The Waterhen* in 1967; and since 1969, we had been travelling regularly.)

There is one more detail I need to mention here. When our foreign tours began, the Ministry of Culture greeted them with considerable reservation; however, the Ministry of Finance saw a foreign exchange source in us. So much so that it declared Cricot 2 a self-sustaining theatre, thus these trips were always paid for by the hosting party, but our revenue flowed into the ministry's coffers – while the official theatres travelled at a massive state expense, not always with overwhelming success. In the 1970s, I fought a lot against the status of a self-sustaining theatre, while our tours grew more frequent. We had six hundred performances of *The Dead Class* alone, and more than three hundred of *Wielopole, Wielopole*.

Production photo of *Wielopole, Wielopole,* 1980 (photo: Maurizio Buscarino, source: sztuka.agraart.pl)

We have become something of a real travelling theatre. From time to time, we also go on tours in Poland. At this moment, I am convinced that we are the most representative theatre in this country. For the first time, we will travel to Israel with *The Dead Class*, but not as an official Polish theatre, because simultaneously the Warsaw Opera will also be touring with its performance *Mannequins*, which has obviously been copied off *The Dead Class* – after all, the theatrical phenomenon of the mannequins was born fromin our play, even according to the critics. (Of course, I myself also refer to Craig, to whom we owe the concept of the 'supermarionette', in the *Theatre of Death* manifesto.) So in Israel we will only be seen as a 'fairground stall' theatre, 'la baraque foraine', just as Louis Barrault's theatre was. Anyway, we are untouchable, at least for now. I don't know how our future will unfold; perhaps one day we will be touched by them as well (as we saw in Gombrowicz's *Wedding*).

After the huge success of *The Dead Class* – on about which the entire Polish press reported, meaning the whole country's public must had to have heard about it – no one asked me what I was going to do next in Kraków. The gallery had completely deteriorated, and it was no longer possible to put on a performance there; the city council wouldn't give any money, – and all this happened after what even the international press called "the greatest success of Polish theatre".

Everyone hoped that with *The Dead Class,* I might have finished my work. However, I started thinking about *Wielopole*. Around the same time, two gentlemen from Florence came to visit us, whom I called 'the two noblemen from Verona', and they offered to invite the company to Florence for a year. Our

contract was somewhat paradoxical: we didn't agree to create a production, but only to work in Florence for a year. Two weeks later, we were already there, and for eight months we rehearsed in a defunct non-functioning church of Santa Maria, which became the true workshop for Cricot. Eight months later, we held the *Wielopole* premiere there. Then we went to Paris with it, and after that, we returned to Krakow.

The *Wielopole* period took place between 1979 and 1982. In 1983, the era of *Let the Artists Die!* began. Generally, four or five years pass between two of our productions. In 1983 I thought it was time to make my last production, so we started working on it in Krakow. By then, we already had Cricoteka – our theatre's archive, a small institution funded by the city council (because, after all, it's easier to fund a scientific institution than a theatre; theatre is much more dangerous).

For six or seven months, we rehearsed here at the Cricoteka – the room wasn't much bigger than this one here. Since the space proved too small, we moved to the old synagogue, and then again to another place, until finally our patron emerged in the person of a West German banker, K. G. Smid, who was incidentally also a renowned art collector. He invited us to Nuremberg for a month to finish working on the production there. Then our newfound patron was joined by the Milan CRT as a co-producer. Our premiere took place in Nuremberg, followed by ones in Milan, Avignon, then we went to the Paris Autumn Festival, and finally to New York, La MaMa Theatre.

At the moment, we are just passing through – the ensemble is travelling from New York to Thessaloniki, Greece, tomorrow. I was supposed to appear here at the Cultural Forum, but since that didn't happen, and since changing the travel route would have cost me $700, and beyond that, I hoped to meet you: well, here I am.

So this was our story until we reached the production *Let the Artists Die!* In the programme booklet, I described in detail how it all began. Why is this important to me? Because, for me, a performance always comes into being in an almost demiurgic way, which means that in the beginning, there was the nothing, and after that, there was the we don't know what; because even according to the Bible, in the beginning, there was the Word – but whether there was an image there, or whether there was a gesture, we do not know. And generally speaking,: how is a performance created with us? I'll try to illustrate it. I believe that every human mind has pits or holes, some kind of reservoirs into which everything happening around us flows: impressions, reflections, opinions, judgments. At least, this is the theory I have about my own creative method, – as I consider myself to lack the ability of imagination. I don't have the kind of creative fantasy that would evoke a vision and then realize it.

I wrote long ago that my imagination is a black hole, a small room; my life likewise began in a very tiny room, perhaps one-tenth the size of this space, with

its window overlooking – who knows what where? It was a kind of surrealist window, one that might bring to mind Breton's words: everything is art beyond the window. Well, beyond my window, there was a red brick wall. And into this small room, various objects, things, and strange people would occasionally tumble into, uninvited. Ulysses also appeared unexpectedly in 1944. He stopped at the door and said, "I won't come any further. I will not step into your imagination". What followed might may have truly been a kind of poetry: Ulysses followed me everywhere, shadowing me in the staircase, in taverns, and on the streets. And in one of these taverns, I once noticed a few drunkards leaning over their companion lying on the floor. I was utterly convinced that it was the shepherd murdered by Ulysses lying there and that, after this journey, Ulysses would return to his war-torn room.

So, various figures stepped into the room of my imagination from time to time, figures whom who I refer to in this final performance of mine as "lost and found property". Yet somehow, this isn't poetry, but rather *truth* itself. As an explanation, let me offer another example. In this new performance of mine, there is a figure who, in my opinion, is the greatest in Polish history – the man who, after World War I, established Polish statehood: Marshal Piłsudski, the father of the legion whose anthem ("We Are the First Brigade") nearly became our national anthem. But how did Marshal Piłsudski end up in this performance? I had no intention of making the play an apotheosis of a great man, nor did I want to shape him into a legendary historical figure – that would have been uninteresting in itself. What fascinated me, however, was the concept and nature of glory.

I once greatly shocked my French friends with my opinion that soldiers of all times have always attained the greatest glory, for no one – not even a Picasso, Cézanne, Rimbaud, or Mallarmé – has brought greater glory to their homeland than Napoleon. I am by no means a militarist; I am merely interested in the concept of glory within a man-created order. I am intrigued by how someone who commands a war attains glory. Piłsudski always wore a gray military coat, a shining eagle emblem adorned his cap, and he had a drooping mustache. This is how everyone knew him, and this is how he appeared in the room of my imagination as well. Yet he was not surrounded by any halo of glory. And here is where chance comes into play. After all, how did he appear to me? One day, I I'd bought a record. The record, featuring that particular anthem, had been lying around for a long time. At some point, someone – I don't know whether it was me or someone else – sat on it, and it cracked in two. Later, unaware of this, I placed it on the record player. And suddenly, I became a witness to how this triumphant anthem, radiating the brightest national glory, was transformed into a dirge of death and mourning. Later it made its way into the performance in this distorted form. I became deeply captivated by this melody – in it, I found the musical equivalent of my thoughts and meditations. Music is the highest

form of inspiration. It was to the accompaniment of this melody that I had Marshal Piłsudski step onto the stage.

Then one day, someone brought me a pre-war publication titled *"When the Leader Departs into Eternity."* On the cover there was an unusual image: generals in full dress uniform, their chests covered with medals, adorned with braiding, epaulettes, and with a moustache. These generals were carrying something on their shoulders: the corpse of their leader, which they were bearing to Wawel, where Marshal Piłsudski had to be laid to final rest alongside the kings. What made this image so striking was that you rarely see so many generals together. Typically, there is only one person seen at the head of an army. Therefore this image indicated precisely that something of extraordinary significance was happening – not in a historical sense, but in a theatrical one. And so, after the Marshal, ten generals soon entered the room of my imagination. In full ceremonial uniform – just as they later appeared in the performance. These costumes are historically accurate, but they seem like children's toys, made of a lead-like material – like tin soldiers.

Let the Artists Die! performed at La MaMa Theatre, New York, 1985 (source: cultura.pl)

After the generals, a six-year-old boy appeared to me, dressed in the same outfit as the marshal. I recognized him immediately – it was me at six years old, and I knew then that everything was true and already there, on the stage; and that I, at six, in my grey coat, with an eagle emblem on my cap, would not simply walk onto the stage, but would ride in on the little cart my grandfather had once bought me. And there I stopped – I didn't know how to move forward. Even back in Florence, during the time of *Wielopole*, I had wanted to make that cart. That performance was about memory, and so I aimed to reconstruct this cart in trying to represent the workings of my own memory, and not to build a mere theatrical prop. I drew a series of sketches, and in the process the wheels, steering, and axle of the former vehicle came back to me, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't recall what was under the seat.

This cart was for me something like an old man trying to reclaim his childhood. Clearly, the motifs from *The Dead Class* were still at work within me: the elderly returning to their school desks, attempting to relive the lessons they had once been part of. Yet this hole beneath the seat brought me to a halt. The craftsmen told me that building such a cart was impossible, but I had my sketches with that hole in them, and on the stage there I was at six years old,

too, travelling on my little cart. It's true, that particular hole was eventually filled by a famous Kraków craftsman. He convinced me that it couldn't be any different from what he had made it to be.

Now you can see that this performance was not born in an ordinary way either. Perhaps it's worth recalling *The Story of the Title* from the programme guide at this point:

The title of the performance is unsettling: "*Let the Artists Die!*" It took place in Paris on the evening of 5 March 1982.

A lively conversation among friends.

The director of a renowned gallery had just finished telling an amusing story.

It was about how they had to ask permission from a neighbour of the gallery for certain architectural works that affected both parties. The neighbours objected, of course.

In response to the argument that the gallery, where famous artists exhibit, brings glory to the entire neighbourhood, one of the women next-door shouted: "Let the artists die!"

At the same time, I was in discussions with a well-known patron in Nuremberg about what could be done over there.

Suddenly, I said to him: "You know what? There's something I could only create in Nuremberg and nowhere else – a story about that nail, the one they pierced through Veit Stoss's face as punishment for some financial offence. This happened when the Master, already old and driven by homesickness, left Kraków, to which he had given his greatest masterpiece, the *ALTAR OF ST. MARY'S CHURCH*. After a long journey, he finally knocked on the door of his childhood home.

"LET THE ARTISTS DIE!" I exclaimed, captivated by the similarity of the two stories. That became the title of my performance.

A friend from Milan reminded me that the Italian Futurists referred to
a poetic-graphic method
as "a knight's move in chess" –
a technique based on the principle of being inverted and reversed,
where halfway through, the direction of movement is altered.
Even this belongs to that unsettling title.

Yet, we can indeed speak of a unique method; after all, since we do not rely on a pre-written text by a dramaturg, the performance will become a real creative process. Earlier, I said it was born from nothing, but it still gets conceived in some way. Of course, we never use ready-made material – that's precisely what makes our rehearsals so unconventional. Every actor feels that something is being created, but even I don't know where we'll end up eventually. This current play has also been an enormous artistic risk, one that could have ended

in catastrophe. But for me, only this kind of artistic risk constitutes real creation. For a long time, I didn't even know which scene would be the first and which would be the last. Throughout the rehearsals, countless variations emerged. The scenes shifted like constellations of stars; it was impossible to tell which would remain and which would disappear. Only in Nuremberg did the whole finally come together.

I am not particularly devoted to Artaud, but I do agree with him on one point: creation can only be compared to the state before the world's genesis, to the very beginning. Likewise, everything is pure chaos here, and forces contrary to human reason are in operation. After all, human reason comes into being only at the end of creation, when everything, the entire world, is already complete. Every positive value and even the concept itself are tied to reason. In the state before reason, good and evil, virtue and sin, piety and prostitution are still inseparably intertwined. In our performance, there is a combative general and one who retreats. Every value is present on stage, from the lowest strata of society to the highest surrounded by a halo of glory. Thus, everything Artaud called demiurgic chaos is present – lacking any religious, moral, or rational value system.

Perhaps I would mention one more point. It was precisely in this chaos that the concept of *prison* appeared to me – not in a social sense, but in an artistic one. I committed a kind of sacrilege when I juxtaposed and compared the artistic creative process, the state of the artist, with imprisonment and the death penalty. Veit Stoss's Kraków altarpiece is a triptych that is closed every evening, and thus the carved figures spend most of their time imprisoned. The altar depicts the swooning Virgin Mary, kneeling and surrounded by the apostles. I have always been intrigued by what these figures might do when they are locked away. This also inspired my *Prison* (1985) essay:

Prison.
It is both a concept
and a perfect,
meticulously and thoughtfully
structured model of man's history. It
is undeniably a "product" of man and
civilization.
The fact that "prison" is set up
against man; that it is a brutal
mechanism established to crush
man's free thoughts happens to be
one of the grimmest absurdities.
However, similar absurdities can be
found in abundance in history
and in the illustrious *"magister vitae."*
Let us leave it then for history
to determine innocence or
guilt.
Let us consider
the ontological aspect of prison and
its…
eschatology.
Prison…
A word which sticks in the throat…
There is something final about
it; a feeling that something has
happened that cannot be undone or
revoked…. The gates of prison close

behind a man, as the gates of an open grave close over the dead who "walk" through them. In a moment the grave-diggers will be through with their work. The living are standing yet for a long while… as if they could not accept the idea that he is to be left
"there"
alone!
Painfully alone….
They are standing
helpless and powerless
at the verge of
something that
they can neither touch nor name….
The man who is already "on the other side" is setting off on his journey. He is going to travel alone, left to himself,
destitute
with nobody but himself to rely on.
He walks aimlessly and hopelessly along a deserted and eerie path….
Nothing but marching on…
from the height of,
I daresay,
imagination's wild wanderings and madness
I saw this apparition
in front of my eyes
in a ghostly landscape of horror.
[This apparition] was like an idea,
which against all reason and all logic,
hovers at the doorway of my new THEATRE.
Once again I see
this apparition,
outlawed and
tainted with madness;
which is able to
convey
by means of violence and change
the most dramatic manifestation of ART and FREEDOM!
… Prison…
is an idea
separated from life by an ALIEN, impenetrable
barrier.
It is so separate [from the world of the living] that
if this blasphemous likeness is permitted – it will be able to shape THE WORK OF ART.
… The metaphoric use of this obscure image
for the creative process may be revolting or immoral.
So much the better!
This would surely mean
that we are on the right track!

Translated by Michal Kobialka[3]

When I was working on *The Dead Class*, I was preoccupied with the actor's model. In that performance, the dead became this model. I'll explain why.

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[3] Tadeusz Kantor's "Prison" (1985) was originally published in *A Journey Through Other Spaces: Essays and Manifestos, 1944–1990*, trans. and with the critical commentary by Michal Kobialka (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 150–152; and reprinted in Michal Kobialka, *Further on, Nothing: Tadeusz Kantor's Theatre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 384–385.

In early ritual ceremonies, community members formed a closed circle, physically almost bonded together, – with all the participants being equal, no distinction between actor and audience. It was a kind of religious commune. It stood on the boundary between religion and something from which theatre would later emerge. Then at a certain moment, one of the participants in this ritual suddenly grew tired of sitting so closely together and resolved to separate from the circle. But this separation was very difficult. Because it not only meant a physical breaking away, a rupture with the community, but also the ability to embrace being different. This person must undoubtedly have been a brilliant actor. And by doing this, they did something that later led to them facing a wide range of accusations: lack of social sensitivity, profanation of the ritual community, extreme individualism, heresy, destruction of values, revolutionary spirit, and intellectualism.

At that time, the concept of the artist did not yet exist, and this individual had to differ from the others. By stepping out, they initiated theatre, defying a risk of punishment for their "sin". They realized that, for the sake of this difference, they had to exist as if they were dead – that is, they had to simultaneously meet two conditions: on one hand, to remain externally identical to those sitting opposite them, while on the other hand, to become entirely absolutely different. To be identical and to differ: these are two opposing states that can exist simultaneously only in art and in death. This realization came to me through my own experience during the war. When I first saw a dead body in the street. As the corpse is lying there before us, we perceive it as a human being just like ourselves, while at the same time, we have the feeling that we see a human being for the very first time. Because in our contact with the living, we don't notice the human being in the other, we simply talk to them. However, if I know that this person will never speak again, can no longer make contact with me, and I can no longer speak to them, although we are completely similar – we belong to the same species-although – belonging to the same species, – we are completely similar, then I wake up to the realization that I see a human being. And these are the two conditions that the actor must meet. That is: they must belong to the same species as the audience, and at the same time, they must differ from them in an absolute way.

The actor exists only if their model is the dead. This is metaphysics. The actor who is approaching me, the spectator, from the void, from the darkness on the stage, is exactly like me; this is why I renounce costumes and historical scenery. The actor must be wearing the same attire as I am, having the same face as me, and be just as real as I am, who will never step onto the stage, never stand beside them.

Indeed, I reserve this right for myself, – in such a way that I am illegally present on stage. In *The Dead Class*, I based the entire acting on this. Later, when the play was finished, I began to wonder what other actor-model could meet these two conditions. And I found it: the soldier, the warrior fits perfectly.

In the *Wielopole* programme guide I wrote: When I see an army marching in the street – 'left-right-left-right' – I cannot march with them, because they would think I am mad. This means there is an insurmountable boundary separating me from the army. And it also means that these soldiers are all dead. The army consists of people practicing the procedure of death – the soldier must die on command. Therefore, he is an entirely *different* person.

When directing my performances, I always start from the actor-model. After *Wielopole*, I began to think again about what else this actor-model could be. And I found it: the imprisoned person. The prison gates close behind them, we remain on this side, and they are on the other – almost like the dead.

With this, I will conclude. In this time, I could only show you the quintessence of my thinking. If you have more specific questions, I am happy to answer them.

– How did you find actors who met your expectations? What criteria did you use to select them?

– Unlike Craig, I do not accept the puppet. The actor is a living person. We meet by chance, just as people usually do. It's like love.

– Is it just as difficult?

– Yes, exactly the same. Incredibly difficult.

– How do the rehearsals take place with you?

– This is the hardest to explain. I have no fixed system. In other words, I don't have a method like Stanislavsky's empathy, or Meyerhold's biomechanics, or others' body corporeal exercises (physical training). I don't impose any method on my actors. I accept them in their entirety as they are; the actor, for me, doesn't play a role, but lives as a figure identical to themselves, as a person. They create this theatre. And we create it together. The actor brings the role to life. Somehow like in commedia dell'arte. The twin siblings don't play at being twins, but they actually are. And then I create the twin roles from them: the two disruptive students in *The Dead Class*, the two uncles in *Wielopole*, and the two characters in *Let the Artists Die!*; one is the author himself, who is telling the story of his own death, illness, and life story history, while the other is playing the role of the model. At first, the twins were look-alikes, but now they are more complex beings. I wrote my most important essay, *Reflections* for them.

So, in my work, each figure retains their own character. My talent lies in having a sharp nose, as the saying goes. I know my actors' weaknesses, even those they carefully try to hide from me; it's precisely their weaknesses that interest me and not their virtues, because those are irrelevant to me. I know their fears, their passions, and little sins. And I discreetly make them aware of their character. This is very difficult work. The greatest resistance from the actor will be triggered when something is revealed about them; then they tend to shut themselves off. It's like surgery, or like reopening wounds. For me, the important thing is that the actor doesn't perform something external to them.

Something already written in a play. I create situations that somehow emerge from the actor's character (some are capable of certain situations, others of different ones), but, at the same time, are always unexpected, surprising, and not realistic. And in these situations, the actors find their own way. I call this being thrown in at the deep end. I force them to rescue themselves. In the meantime, we conscientiously document their reactions to these impossible situations through writing, video, and photography. And then they must repeat these reactions. Usually, it works brilliantly because they have been, and continue to be, themselves.

– The ensemble has performed each of its productions many times. What do you aim for: to preserve the performance in its original form, or do you constantly innovate and change it? And this ties into my other question: if there are any changes, are they prompted by the audience? And since you perform in many countries and diverse settings, how does the changing audience influence the performance?

– This question actually refers to the life cycles of a production and the ensemble. In conventional theatre, where a certain harmony must be established between the intention of the play and the play itself, and where the stage performance must always align with the original play, this stage life process comes to a halt after about a dozen performances, because everything in it is merely repeated mechanically (I know this well, as I was a professional set designer). In conventional theatre, it's very difficult to keep a performance alive, and the longer it is played, the worse and more lifeless it will become. With us, it's a bit different. Since the actor plays themselves, remains themselves, even if they become rigid, this doesn't mean the performance itself becomes rigid – it simply means that, through repetition, the actor has exhausted the internal reserves of their character. This makes keeping the production alive both easier and, on the other hand, more difficult. At this point, the actor becomes indifferent, and forces me to resort to drastic measures to shake them up. There have been a few occasions when I had to find another actor. But in such cases, it was always a new, a different role, and not a new person playing the same role. I do have one method for this, though: I order my actors not to talk about the performance in the café or the club, but rather about painting or poetry in general, because this activates their intellect more intensely. I've been convinced that after such gatherings – over wine or coffee – they are once again capable of such fresh reactions as at the beginning of the work. The worst thing in the ensemble is that everyone lives a separate life, preoccupied with their own problems. It's certain that after about the twentieth production, the performance inevitably stiffens; this is unavoidable. But sometimes, an unexpected argument before it, or a scandal, is enough – it always works, and the actor comes to life again. But this isn't about bringing the form to life. The actor needs to be agitated; there are actors who possess the rare ability to maintain the same level of intensity throughout repeated performances once a situation or a sequence of gestures

has been encoded into them. This is an extraordinary talent. It's not about perfection, but about a certain temperature: a specific tension, an internal heat is needed for the actor to understand what triggers their actions and movements. However, if they were to repeat these movements without being conscious of their purpose and motivation, they would become lifeless. Rigidity usually stems from this: the repetition of tone, word, or gesture without an emotional impulse and without awareness of the goal.

– And are you there on stage throughout the entire performance to agitate the actors?

– No, although to some extent, it does make them agitated. But it's a very valid observation. My stage presence doesn't help them, although it usually doesn't agitate them either; since they are already quite tense, they're not afraid of me, they just know that someone is watching them besides the audience. This somewhat irritates them…

– Do you ever come up with unexpected things that surprise the actors?

– I don't intend to throw them off balance. They need to maintain their balance in order to be able to perform. But sometimes I do it anyway; once I even fired a shot from my pistol, of course not at the actor, it was just a warning shot.

– And what do the actors think of this? Do they like it?

– I never asked them, I don't know.

– But one can feel it.

– Sometimes they grumble at me. Especially abroad. But this is not just my whim. All of this serves to eliminate illusion, imitation, so that we create the true reality of the stage.

– Should we understand all of this to mean that the performances maintain their original form and intensity, and that no new scenes or episodes are added?

– There are evenings that I don't like. This is a human thing in a system where we want what happens on stage to be true reality, not an imitation of something happening outside of it. It's like life – sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't.

For me, the *process* of artistic creation is the most important, since I am not a professional director. I don't direct to create productions, one after another. The productions serve for me as a framework for my endless reflections, doubts, and unresolved problems. When I'm searching for an answer to something, even if I intellectually think I have found it, the true answer will be provided only by the materialized artwork. In my last performance, I came to the conclusion that there can't be a clearly positive or negative answer anyway, and that the uniqueness of art is precisely that it can encompass both positive and negative answers at the same time. It's what makes it truly exciting. Because in life, we always have to say a clear yes or no, while art works with entirely different concepts – as long as it's real art, that is.

– Is the intellectual and cultural atmosphere of Kraków – a city that even gave the world a pope – reflected in your theatre's work?

– Yes. Although it's hard to say whether it could have influenced me during the wartime period when I created Conspiracy Theatre, because the theatre in which the pope performed stood in sharp contrast to ours. It was a fierce battle back then. However, when the pope visited Kraków, he wondered what true theatre might be like. It's hard to imagine a single person attracting three million people – so many that they couldn't even fit into Kraków. He stood there in the middle, surrounded by a city, an entire country – and none of this required propaganda. For days, people from every part of Poland made pilgrimages en masse to reach the place where this one man would appear. This is almost the pinnacle of an artistic experience. At that moment, I thought: how wonderful it would be if Cricot Theatre were was the point to which people flocked from everywhere.

– Is the audience important to you at all?

– They are not It isn't really attracted to by other theatres. And if they are it is, it's specially organized. Back then, the Polish press was incredibly excited about what drew such large crowds to Cricot; they even suspected some kind of political motivation behind the fact that people came who otherwise rarely attended traditional theatres. So yes, we have an audience, we perform for the audience, and the audience is important to us.

– Does the audience participate in the performance?

– No. Only back when I was doing happening theatre did the audience participate, and this participation was quite varied. For example, once we were invited to Iran, to the Shiraz Festival. Farah Diba – who at that time was the Shah's wife and the Minister of Culture – commissioned a special performance from us. There was no general audience, just them and the court. But we were performing a play in which audience participation was necessary. Forty Jewish characters appeared in it, forty identical Mandelbaums with beards, wearing black coats. The main Mandelbaum had to select the others from the audience, lead them backstage where they would change into costumes, and then reappear on stage as Mandelbaums. This was one of Witkiewicz's plays, in which a forty-headed erotic body appears. The main Mandelbaum had to teach the others their roles in front of the audience. The

Scene from the happening *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*, 1973 (photo: Jacek Szmuk, source: tadeuszkantor.com.pl)

audience was highly entertained by how they learned the lines and gestures. But in this case, the chamberlain informed us that we couldn't choose anyone from the court. I then told him that without the forty Jews, there would be no performance. At that point, they provided me with forty policemen, who arrived on motorcycles. They were quite overweight, armed with pistols, and bearded – in other words, real Jews. Everything went fine; I rehearsed with them for about two hours, and then they went on stage. There was just one thing I couldn't get them to do: the play featured a drunk White Russian general who shot himself in the head every five minutes. And every time he pulled the trigger, they automatically reached for their own pistols, and the chamberlain informed me that I wouldn't be able to train them out of this instinctive reflex. Well, this was probably the funniest form of audience participation I can remember. Farah Diba, who sat across from the forty Mandelbaums, was shedding tears from laughter, and her makeup was running. But let's stop here. "Let the Artists Die!"

– And when can we see you again, along with your theatre?

– When I'm invited.

– Katona József Theatre will send an official invitation. A few years ago, the director of the theatre in Kaposvár already invited the theatre, and you were supposed to come; but then the management moved to Budapest, and in the end, the meeting did not take place.

– The situation is similar in Poland. For example, one evening I am talking to the director of the theatre; then the next morning I go again, and at the other end of the table sits a new director. "Oh, it's you?" I say to him. He replies, "No, it's not me."

Translated by Nóra Durkó

I Shall Never Return, Cricot 2 Theatre, 1988, dir. Tadeusz Kantor
(photo: Jacek Maria Stokłosa, source: tadeuszkantor.com.pl)

NINA KIRÁLY (1940–2018)

Exegi Monumentum

Nina Király (Nina Petrovna Dubrovskaya) was born in Moscow on 17th October 1940. She graduated from Moscow Lomonosov University, the Department of Russian Philology (Linguistics and Anthropology) in 1962. That same year, she conducted research at the Slavic Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences (Department of Cultural History). These years laid the foundation for her studies in the field of the Theory of Culture and Communications at the Department of Cultural Semiotics (under the guidance of Y. Lotman, V. Ivanov, and B. Uspensky). In 1964, she moved to Budapest, Hungary, with her husband, Gyula Király, who was a professor at the Russian Department of Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE). Between 1966 and 1968, she pursued postgraduate studies in art history in Warsaw. In 1973, she was awarded a PhD by the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for her research on 'Polish National Theatre in the 18th Century'. Between 1973 and 1994, she was an associate professor at the Slavic Department in Budapest and worked as a visiting professor at the Theatrology Department of Jagiellonian University in Kraków (1984–1990). From 1993 to 1999, she served as the director of OSZMI, the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute. During this period, she became Tadeusz Kantor's official collaborator at his Cricot 2 Theatre. She also established connections with other renowned Polish directors, including J. Jarocki, W. Staniewski, and A. Wajda, and worked at Anatoly Vasiliev's theatre as well as Új Színház (New Theatre) in Budapest, under the leadership of István Márta. Between 2006 and 2013, she was the artistic consultant for international projects at Csokonai Színház (Csokonai Theatre) in Debrecen, Hungary. From 2013 to 2018, she was a cultural relations coordinator organising MITEM, the international theatre festival, at the National Theatre in Budapest, under the direction of Attila Vidnyánszky. Nina Király lived for 77 years. A memorial was held in her honour by friends, colleagues, and students at the National Theatre, Budapest, on 24th August 2018. In her essay published here, she

pays tribute to Tadeusz Kantor, one of the greatest theatrical innovators and theorists of the 20th century, who passed away in 1990. Nina Király was instrumental in introducing Kantor to Hungarian theatre audiences by editing the 1994 volume *Halálszínház* (*The Theatre of Death*), which contains his poetic essays. To mark the 100th anniversary of Kantor's birth, she organised a retrospective exhibition of his oeuvre at the National Theatre. As part of the National Theatre's *Small Library* series, a volume titled *Milánói leckék* (*Milan Lessons*) was published in 2018 in connection with the exhibition. Nina Király's contributions to theatre studies and cultural organisation were recognised with awards, including the *Order of Merit for Polish Culture* (1975), the *Witkacy Prize* of the International Theatre Institute in Poland (2005), and the *Jászai Mari Award* (2012).

In Honour of Her Memory

Anatoly Vasiliev

And so, Nina Király has departed from this earthly world of ours. Throughout her life, for as long as she drew breath, she devoted herself tirelessly to both Hungarian and Russian theatre, accomplishing so many gratifying and wholly praiseworthy things that her legacy is bound to live on in the history of both cultures for a long time – and I can only wish it could live on forever. As for me, I owe Nina nothing but beauty and good things – from her friendship and affection to the books and performances. I deeply regret that we were not able to spend the last few years together, exchanging only letters between Budapest and Moscow. I remember Gyula, Nina and Gyula's children, their house in the hills and their apartment – the generous table laden with food and drink, as well as the endless conversations. Surely this friendship between us has not truly come to an end? Surely my connection to Budapest has not been severed? And not only mine – but that of all those who are in love with this city and its culture! Why should it matter that these ties go back to the socialist era? What does that have to do with politics? We are special people, people of culture; and the boundaries of mutual love are much broader for us. Thank you, Nina, for your work, your love. We will carry your memory with us for as long as we live and pass it on to others. Step peacefully into that other world – all is well, in fact, it is even perfect.

András Kozma

Nina Király was a true theatrical phenomenon, a one-person institution that connected creative individuals, theatres, and cultures from all over the world. At the same time, she was a cheerful and lovely person, with whom one could converse just as naturally outside the theatre about Russian philosophy, Polish

Romanticism, the Georgian mountains, Azerbaijani cuisine, Tállya wines, and her heavenly homemade jams. She was a universal person, interested in everything and treating everyone with the utmost love and understanding. This is how I, too, became her student indirectly and then directly, as her husband, Gyula Király, was my university supervisor in Russian literature, and I came to know her through him. I am grateful to Nina for having set me on the path of my theatrical career. She is the one to whom I owe much of my human and intellectual connections with Anatoly Vasiliev, Mari Törőcsik, and Viktor Rizhakov, as well as a significant part of my professional advancement. As a former student, I promise that, to the best of my ability, I will continue the work she carried out with such exceptional dedication, which will remain an eternal example for all of us.

Zsófia Rideg

Today, I am absolutely certain that Nina Király was my mentor for 25 years. The master-student relationship also exists in Western culture, but it operates in a much more subtle way than in Eastern traditions. Of course, one can only be a master if they are a devoted student to someone. Nina primarily learned from Tadeusz Kantor, and later from Anatoly Vasiliev. She measured everything against them: there are no compromises, one way or another, it is them you must grow up to – she suggested to all of us. When she was the head of OSZMI and I was a young beginner searching for my path, her devotion to her mentors sometimes felt overwhelming. One could feel that there was no theatre beyond Kantor and Vasiliev, as if you could not even open your mouth. I had to fight my own struggle for independence, stand up straight, and say: "Alright, surely I will never measure up to them, but let me at least light a small candle, let me contribute a spoonful to the ocean." And Nina began to take me seriously when I finally dared to say this – that perhaps not as much as they did, as she did, but still, I can contribute something. She accompanied me as far as she could. Cheerfully, broadly, invisibly paving the way for me. And now, she has let go of my hand. "Thank you" seems insufficient here... I must keep going.

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Even on that Friday, when in the afternoon he rushed to the hospital of his own accord – perhaps for the first time in his life – due to severe chest pains, Kantor still held a rehearsal for his final play in progress, *Today Is My Birthday*. Those of us who had the privilege of witnessing the birth of this piece are convinced that it can only be compared to *The Dead Class*, undeniably one of the greatest theatrical events of the century, or perhaps it is even more profoundly shocking. In it, we can follow the fulfilled fate of the 20th-century Artist, from the childhood birthday table to the closing scene evoking his own funeral.

Yet another world-famous theatre which never truly reached the Hungarian audience – yet another great artist who, in his lifetime, could not inspire the Hungarian theatrical model. An irreplaceable loss. Just like the missed introductions of Grotowski, the Living Theatre, or Stein in their time. Nevertheless, CRICOT had become more of a world theatre than a Kraków-based one in the past decade: *The Dead Class* was performed 1,300 times in 122 countries. Many in Hungary were eager to see it; the most determined made pilgrimages to the performances in Kraków, while others caught up with it in Paris or other world cities. In 1986, as Tadeusz Kantor was travelling from New York to Thessaloniki for a performance of *Wielopole*, he accepted our invitation and stopped in Budapest for three days. He met key figures from the Hungarian theatre and visual arts scene, as well as students, at the R Club of SZKÉNÉ Theatre[1]. During that conversation, the idea arose that Katona József Theatre would gladly invite the troupe for a guest performance, to which Kantor readily agreed pleasure. However, due to the well-known financial and cultural-political circumstances at the time, this invitation could not be realized. Another opportunity presented itself in May or autumn of 1990 for the theatre to introduce itself in Hungary, but, instead, only an exhibition materialized at the Budapest Gallery, where we could see Kantor's drawings, stage objects, as well as video recordings of his performances for a month. [2]

"On 8 December 1990, with the death of Tadeusz Kantor, the twentieth century came to an end… He did what he could; what those who come after him will do, we cannot know, because with Kantor, something has definitively closed," – thus bid farewell Jerzy Nowosielski, the trailblazing painter and Kantor's friend, at his grave. Indeed, those who knew him can attest: among theatre directors, he was perhaps one of the last true "A R T I S T S" par excellence. He began as a painter, learning from the Constructivists, but his epoch-making discovery – the idea of the "lowest-grade reality" – brought a radical shift in the aesthetic perception of the relationship between art and life. In his eyes, artists who pursued goals outside of art's existence – be it for redemption or patriotism – lacked credibility. For him, the essence of the Artist lay elsewhere: "As a human being, I am entangled in various situations, and when something seems utterly unsolvable, an enormous force is unleashed within me – this is when some truly great work can be created… In man, this wretched rag, something demonic awakens at such moments. First, one must nurture that miserable rag-like state and then this demonic force". – He expressed this in his final performance, *I Shall Never Return Here Again*, where he played the lead role. For Kantor, the Artist is a Demiurge – a god. It is not

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1 See the conversation in the 1987/1 issue of *Kultúra és Közösség*. At the same time, Kantor also gave a brief interview to the television programme *Stúdió*.

2 For this occasion, the BELVEDERE publishing house was to publish Kantor's art and theatre writings translated into Hungarian. However, only the journal *Színház [Theatre]* presented Kantor as a pioneering theatre maker in May and published several significant pieces from the upcoming book as well.

I Shall Never Return, Cricot 2 Theatre, 1988, dir. Tadeusz Kantor (photo: Jacek Maria Stokłosa, source: tadeuszkantor.com.pl)

art that merges with life, as the avant-garde apostles of the 1920s and 1930s proclaimed; rather, art itself creates reality from the artist's very existence.

Tireless, aggressive and gentle, uncompromising yet forgiving, a scandal-maker and an introverted poet, a megalomaniac and a self-sacrificing director – all these qualities were true of Kantor, and, miraculously, each one of them was present in all his works. It was the tension vibrating between them which always led to new discoveries and gave birth to the cathartic FORM.

Kantor always passionately protested whenever terms like "experiment" or "laboratory" were used in connection with art – even when it concerned Grotowski. A characteristic incident: In April 1990, the French Ministry of Culture and the Jagiellonian University organized a conference in Kantor's honour, which also served as the inaugural session of the International Academy of Experimental Theatre. During the event, the programme of this new institution was read aloud, declaring the support of artistic experimentation as its primary goal. Kantor, not sparing the celebratory occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, once again vehemently rejected the notion of combining art and experimentation, as was his scandalous style. In his view, no matter how a discovery might seem to arise "by chance" – as with the surrealists or the dadaists for instance –, its prerequisite and result is always the Perfect Form. Therefore, the notion of experimentation is out of the question; with each step, the Artist is always on the path towards the Perfect Form.

During rehearsals, Kantor would often burst out vehemently: "I may die tonight, but I will still finish this,"– and with this determination, he would inevitably push his actors to make the utmost effort. It was no different this time. Perhaps he sensed death, because he had never continued earlier when he was not fully satisfied with a scene. However, this time, he didn't stop; he was pushing himself and his actors – he had to hurry. The company was preparing to go to France, and in just a few days, the final rehearsals would have taken place at the Garonne Theatre in Toulouse before the Paris premiere set for January. And on that final evening, although not in its most refined form, the performance was indeed completed, which performance can never be played on stage without him – as his actors also feel. There is nothing at stake: from now on, he will no longer be there watching from the side of the stage – he, who gave life to the play, and who, every time staked his own life on the act of playing. Yes,

Kantor made a will for everything: the Cricot archive, his personal belongings, the fate of his writings – but when it came to his theatre, he remained silent. Without him, this theatre will no longer be what it once was.

In this final performance, true to the spirit of the avant-garde, Kantor presented on stage all that art, embraced as a form of existence and fate, meant for him: autobiography, history, and an ars poetica.

After the opening scene evoking a childhood birthday, enormous grey picture frames emerge on the black background of the stage. Behind them is a bier, which also serves as a box, with a small table in the foreground, holding an old family photo, a Stoc manuscript, and an oil lamp. This is now Kantor's place. From one of the picture frames a performer steps forward – Andrzej Welminski – whose attire is identical to Kantor's. In the opposite frame stands a young lady, reminiscent of Velázquez's classic masterpiece, the portrait of the infanta. The story of how Jonasz Stern, Kantor's painter-friend, survived the bloody massacre at Iwov is heard from a tape recorder. The text coming from the tape recorder is simultaneously repeated by the actor playing Stern, and as he is telling the story, he is slowly climbing out of the coffin-box. A notably elegant lady steps onto the stage, embodying Maria Jarema, the avant-garde painter and Kantor's former collaborator. Maria Jarema parodies the so-called realist depiction of the infanta using quotes from avant-garde manifestos, which causes the infanta to feel ashamed, step out of the frame, and disappear. When Maria reappears, she is already in an NKVD uniform, holding a pistol, and she sweeps away the world on stage – the people and objects, the remnants of the "old regime". The family – sitting around the table like in the old photograph – is surrounded by people dressed in long military coats, wearing pointed red-starred earflap hats. Accompanied by a familiar Russian melody from the Alexandrov Ensemble, extermination and destruction begin. Battle vehicles, which Kantor had designed, appear – the small, almost toy-like tank, reminiscent of the First World War, followed by an armoured vehicle. The soldiers pull the particular man wearing the black scarf from the first frame and stretch him out on a wooden plank. From the speakers, we hear Meyerhold's final letter, written before his execution to Molotov, in Russian:

Today Is My Birthday, Cricot 2 Theatre, 1990, dir. Tadeusz Kantor (source: cricoteka.pl)

"The investigators began to use force on me, a sick 65-year-old man. I was made to lie face down and beaten on the soles of my feet and my spine with a rubber strap. They sat me on a chair and beat my feet from above, with

considerable force… For the next few days, when those parts of my legs were covered with extensive internal hemorrhaging, they again beat the red-blue-and-yellow bruises with the strap and the pain was so intense that it felt as if boiling water was being poured on these sensitive areas. I howled and wept from the pain. They beat my back with the same rubber strap and punched my face, swinging their fists from a great height… The intolerable physical and emotional pain caused my eyes to weep unending streams of tears. Lying face down on the floor, I discovered that I could wriggle, twist and squeal like a dog when its master whips it… When I lay down on the cot and fell asleep, after 18 hours of interrogation, in order to go back in an hour's time for more, I was woken up by my own groaning and because I was jerking about like a patient in the last stages of typhoid fever…"[3]

Kantor was also delicately fragile, almost like a child, and humanly fallible, but what he created, what he left behind, has largely become an integral part of European culture. The final place and significance of his work in modern theatre and visual arts will be determined by Time, this Great Director.

Translated by Nóra Durkó

Tadeusz Kantor: *One Night the Infanta of Velázquez Entered My Room*, from the *Further on, Nothing* series, 1988, acrylic on canvas, 136 × 180 cm (source: onebid.pl)

[3] Translation by John Crowfoot. Shentalinsky, Vitaly (1995). The KGB's Literary Archive. Harvill: John Crowfoot. pp. 25–26. ISBN 1-86046-072-0.

VALDAS VASILIAUSKAS

The Drama of Independence

Eimuntas Nekrošius and Lithuania's Youth Theatre[1]

Eimuntas Nekrošius (1952–2018) is one of the most significant contemporary Lithuanian directors and also the founder and artistic director of the *Meno Fortas* theatre company. His first position as a director was with the Kaunas Drama Theatre, and he later worked at the Vilnius State Youth Theatre. Gradually, he developed a distinctive and highly metaphorical approach to the language of the theatre, which was later to become the hallmark of some of his most important productions based on the works of Chekhov and Shakespeare. One year after his 1997 production of *Hamlet*, which was arguably epoch-making, he founded the *Meno Fortas* (Fortress of Art) company, which became a member of the Union of the Theatres of Europe. Nekrošius has been won numerous awards for his work. Beginning in 2002, he directed several operas in cities such Florence, Milan (in La Scala), Moscow (in the Bolshoi Theatre), and the Lithuanian National Opera House. At previous MITEM festivals, the Hungarian audience could see these productions by Nekrosius: A. Chekhov: *Ivanov*; *A Hunger Artist* by Franz Kafka; S. Šaltenis: *Sons of a Bith*.

In Honour of His Memory by András Kozma: Hamlet and the Ice Chandelier

When I entered the doors of Vígszínház on a November evening twenty-five years ago, I had no idea that three hours later I would emerge as if pierced straight through by a dagger. The poster read *Hamlet*, and of course I had already read a great deal about Shakespeare's iconic play; I had seen several productions – some

[1] Published 23 May 2018, original in Lithuanian. Translated by Kristina Aurylaitė First published by Kultūros barai 3/2018. Contributed by Kultūros barai © Valdas Vasiliauskas / Kultūros barai / Eurozine

better, some worse – and I, too, carried within me a vague image of the decadent, self-destructive rebel who cannot bring his soul into harmony with the world, yet in whom perhaps still flickers a childlike purity, a dwindling desire for hope… Nekrosius had founded his company, *Meno Fortas*, barely two years earlier – what a peculiar name: "The Fortress of Art" – nevertheless, his reputation was already the stuff of legend. He was said to be working like a man possessed, rehearsing his productions for months on end; this *Hamlet*, too, had taken nine months to create and was sweeping festival stages everywhere. I am a little sceptical – although I had only seen it on a recording, could anyone truly surpass Vysotsky's elemental passion, erupting like a volcano, in Lyubimov's *Hamlet*? *"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, when we have shuffled off this mortal coil, must give us pause"* – an old echo flickers in my memory. But from the very beginning, this production transports us into an entirely different dimension – on the dark, nearly empty stage, space, light, and silence themselves become the oppressive interior of Hamlet's world, as if I were witnessing the agony of the Danish prince's lonely soul, turned inside out, with a strange, amorphous, crystal-like chandelier floating above his head. This image is seared into my eyes: Andrius Mamontovas, who played the lead and seemed to vibrate on an entirely different frequency from the rest of the cast, lifts his head and gazes at the glittering chandelier, from which droplets of water fall onto his face. With a scream, he grabs a stick and smashes the floating ice-chandelier with terrifying force, shards of ice scatter in every direction – the tiny splinters of his existence continue to melt on the ground, leaving behind small, fleeting marks on the black floor…Fear cuts through me: *"Who would these fardels bear, / To grunt and sweat under a weary life, / But that the dread of something after death / The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn / No traveller returns, puzzles the will, / And makes us rather bear those ills we have / Than fly to others that we know not of*?" I watch the stage, hypnotised… Is Hamlet destroying the last trace of cold celestial brightness, the world's final light? Is there perhaps no one left to set right the time out of joint? Or is there perhaps not even time left to set right? There are memorable moments in one's life, but this was more – unforgettable. A fragment of that ice-chandelier is still melting inside me… somewhere near my heart.

Translated by Nóra Durkó

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Beginnings

During the romantic 19th century, even at the beginning of the 20th, art legends were born in the attics and garrets, preferably Parisian. During the more practical decades of the late 20th century, artists relocated to much more prosaic places, such as the smoke-filled cellars of Liverpool (The Beatles) or the garages and student dormitories of the American West Coast, populated by computer magicians and IT wizards. The great legend of the Lithuanian theatre was born in a warehouse

in Vilnius, more specifically, in the section of the Youth Theatre used both as a workshop and a warehouse in which stage decorations were stored. Nowadays, the building – a newly redecorated palace, originally built during the 15th and 17th centuries by the Radziwiłł family – is difficult to recognize and hosts the Museum of Lithuanian Theatre, Music and Cinema. In the 1970s, it was a dilapidated structure, despite the fancy name – Experimental Stage of the Youth Theatre – given to one of its decrepit halls. It was this stage, the most modest among the Lithuanian theatres of the time, that was chosen by Eimuntas Nekrošius for his debut as a theatre director in 1977. Then a student of GITIS, the Lunacharsky State Institute for Theatre Arts in Moscow (renamed the Russian Institute of Theatre Arts in 1991), Nekrošius directed his diploma performance *A Taste of Honey* (Medaus skonis) with the troupe of the Youth Theatre.

The debut production was modest, too, but also incredibly meticulous, starting with the choice of playwright. It may have seemed that Shelagh Delaney, of England's 'angry young men' generation, wrote this 'kitchen sink' drama specifically for the Experimental Stage of the Youth Theatre, whose poverty Nekrošius did not even attempt to conceal, as if with a nod of acknowledgement to the great innovator of 20th-century theatre Jerzy Grotowski and his Poor Theatre. Delaney's characters became the predecessors of the figures Nekrošius would later persistently put on centre stage – subjugated outsiders, hurt and humiliated, whose social status overshadows their humanity and the beauty of their soul.

In Nekrošius's rendition, the irony of the title of *A Taste of Honey* was further underscored by a very mundane detail: during the second part of the performance, the room would be filled with a pervasive smell – not of honey, but of cigarette smoke, whose clouds would waft in from the foyer, in which the audience smoked during the interval (back then, all of us, young and old, men and women, smoked like crazy). The performance would begin in complete darkness with only a few cigarettes flickering on stage, but their light was too weak to pierce the darkness or warm up the relationships between the characters. Still, it was a flash of hope, a candle in the dark.

The young director was right to have selected the actors of the Youth Theatre, although he could hardly have chosen anyone else. His was a return of one of their own. Eimis (Eimuntas Nekrošius's pet name, given to him during his student years by his friends and theatre people) had been eagerly awaited by his first teacher of stage art, Dalia Tamulevičiūtė, who taught at the Department of Acting at the Conservatoire (now the Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre), and his former course-mates, the ten actors whom Tamulevičiūtė had trained and brought to the Youth Theatre, then managed by her.

'The Ten' of the Youth Theatre – the actors trained by Tamulevičiūtė – could have just as easily been 'The Eleven' (by the way, the young men loved, and were extremely good at, football), but Tamulevičiūtė soon noticed that one student in her group kept creating intricate *mise en scènes*, very different from

what she was instructing her students to do. I do not know how long it took her to persuade him, but after he finished his first two years at the Conservatoire, Eimis left for GITIS to become a theatre director.

Therefore, upon his return to Lithuania, Nekrošius did not have to navigate the tricky waters of the Youth Theatre in order to avoid the reef which had sunk many a director – distrust on the part of the troupe. The latter was a group of distinct and very self-confident young individuals, with their own understanding of the theatre and rehearsal methods, even the criteria of acting excellence. What made Nekrošius's debut as a director so distinctive was the perfect harmony he achieved between directing and acting. It is the happiest moment in the theatre when the director's and the actors' hearts beat in sync. *A Taste of Honey* was a first step towards the greatest roles of their lives for the actors Dalia Overaitė, Algirdas Latėnas and Vidas Petkevičius.

After he completed his studies in Moscow, Nekrošius was appointed to Kaunas Drama Theatre, where he directed *The Ballads of Duokiškis* (Duokiškio baladės) by Sauliaus Šaltenis and *Ivanov* by Anton Chekhov (both 1978). His second return to the Youth Theatre in 1980, the performance *A Cat Behind the Door* (Katė už durų), based on Grigory Kanovich's text, was not as triumphant as had been expected. Nonetheless, triumph was around the corner.

In 1975, the Youth Theatre had undergone a renewal, marked by the employment of Tamulevičiūtė's 'The Ten' and of Saulius Šaltenis, who went on to become not only the theatre's major playwright, but also its guru, something of a spiritual leader for the entire troupe. For five subsequent years, particularly after its first very successful tour in Moscow in 1978, the theatre was constantly in the limelight. It could continue exploiting the gold mine of texts created by Šaltenis; however, both the theatre and its gifted actors soon began to long for new ideas. The troupe was characterized by free thinking and irony, introduced by Šaltenis, whose targets were the persistent lies, empty extravagant phrases, pathos and artificially heroic poses so beloved by Soviet culture, aiming to cover up the reality, which was far from heroic. The actors of the Youth Theatre needed directors who would offer new, more complicated tasks and greater challenges. Their well-trained imagination, their improvisational nature, the flexibility of their bodies and minds, even the entire atmosphere of the Youth Theatre urged them to constantly seek new things. Nekrošius, on the other hand, badly needed actors who would share his ideas. In 1980, these circumstances begat a *chef-d'oeuvre*, the performance of *The Square* (Kvadratas) directed by Nekrošius.

The great explosion

During the six years between 1980 and 1986 at the Youth Theatre, Nekrošius directed five masterpieces: *The Square* (1980), *Pirosmani, Pirosmani…* (1981), *Love and Death in Verona* (Meilė ir mirtis Veronoje) (1982), *The Day Lasts More*

Than a Hundred Years (Ilga kaip šimtmečiai diena) (1983), and *Uncle Vanya* (Dėdė Vania) (1986). His last production at the Youth Theatre, *The Nose* (Nosis) by Nikolai Gogol (1992) was suddenly very different; it was somewhat of a postscript by Nekrošius, a painfully ironic commentary on himself and the entire period which had just come to an end.

The Square was not just another brilliant performance. It was an absolutely new theatre, never seen before. The new theatrical language allowed Nekrošius to create an epic theatrical phenomenon out of a sentimental didactic novella by Valentina Eliseeva, titled 'This Is How It Was…' and depicting a criminal who is reformed by a young teacher and active member of the Komsomol. Next in the line was a mediocre play by Vadim Korostylyov, *Pirosmani, Pirosmani…* Both texts were fundamentally rewritten by Šaltenis, who sat next to Nekrošius during the rehearsals; Šaltenis is the real author of the monologues and occasional asides in these performances. For Nekrošius, a literary text typically served to provide a topic, which he then developed on stage using non-verbal means, sound and movement. In Nekrošius's performances, the actors often say much more by using physical actions and body language, rather than dialogues.

Several instances of this wordless but eloquent acting are impossible to forget. I am thinking, for example, of the dumb Guard played by Vidas Petkevičius in *Pirosmani, Pirosmani…*, whose only tool of communication was an empty bottle, which made mysterious sounds when the Guard blew into it. The Clown by Remigijus Vilkaitis (*Love and Death in Verona*), a true ode to the actor's profession, framed the Shakespearean plot by employing the 'theatre within the theatre' principle and commented on the action without any words, using only facial expressions; this characteristically Italian comedian, a vagabond with a suitcase, a Maestro loyal to the theatre, may have predicted Nekrošius's successful career in Italy in the early years of the 21st century. The role of a mankurt by Saulius Bareikis (*The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*) managed to convey, exclusively through pantomime, what happens when a human being's and a nation's memory is destroyed. The *lazzo* (*Uncle Vanya*), those brazen, passionate beings who polished the parquet of professor Serebryakov's estate – to the loud applause of the most diverse audiences in different countries – deserve a special mention. These servants, imagined and put on stage by Nekrošius, were a remarkable episode in the long career of experienced actors Rimgaudas Karvelis, Jūratė Aniulytė and Vytautas Taukinaitis, who did not utter a single word during the entire performance.

By the early 1980s, the word had been totally compromised by socialist realism, Soviet campaigning and propaganda. In Nekrošius's hands, however, the humbug of Soviet parading became the building blocks for *The Square*. Energetic marches, Mayakovsky's poems, the over-the-top enthusiasm of the Komsomol youth, slogans transmitted through megaphones, all of this would be transformed into mere noise – whistles from a train and the rattle of the wheels on

a railway, punctuated by shrill commands, emitted from the megaphones at the labour camps of the Gulag. For a live human voice, undistorted by megaphones and microphones, to resound again, deadly silence had to prevail, the silence of the universe, as if the old world had ended to give way to a new one.

The central character in *The Square*, a nameless He played by Kostas Smoriginas, was a remarkable accomplishment on the actor's part. With a haphazardly donned *ushanka* hat, its ear-flaps pulled down, and a square loaf of bread in his hands, He was a generalized picture of the *zek*, an inmate of the infinite Soviet Gulag: it was as if the famous sculpture by a Gulag martyr Leonid Nedov had come to life and stepped onto the stage. Everything in *The Square*, even the breathing of He, was controlled by the Leader, played by Remigijus Vilkaitis, who stood for the numerous guards, supervisors, jailers, convoyeurs, politruks, functionaries, and other officials of the repressive state and the largest 'prison industry' in the world, developed by the Soviets.

Remigijus Vilkaitis as Guard (left) and Kostas Smorginas as He (Man) in *The Square*, dir. Eimuntas Nekrošius (photo: eurozine.com, courtesy of *Kultūros barai*)

In front of our eyes, Smoriginas's He (zeks did not have names and were referred to by numbers) was reduced to a *tabula rasa* – a clean slate, the soul of a child, who had to relearn how to live and to re-establish his severed ties with the world; hence a child's bed, placed on the stage of *The Square*. Overcome by childish belief and hope, He would attempt to communicate with a post-box or a can as if they were living beings and would then turn the can into a radio receiver (nowadays, He would probably conjure up a mobile phone).

At the same time, a brutal conflict was unfolding between Him and a prison guard, one which would culminate in the victory of the prisoner. With the help of the radio and a post-box, He overcame the walls of his prison cell as well as the endless vastness of Siberia, which had kept him isolated, and received a response from another human being, Her (Janina Matekonytė and Dalia Overaitė). In exchange, instead of sugar, the most precious possession of the prisoner (in Soviet prisons and labour camps, pieces of sugar were used as a kind of currency), He gave Her his heart. The *mis-en-scène* was extremely poetic, but also very unsettling, setting the love scene, which was covered in a rain of sugar cubes, in the most unfitting of places, the brutal environment of the prison.

Pirosmani (Vladas Bagdonas), a self-taught Georgian painter full of dreams to amaze Paris, also found himself in a hostile world, in which he could converse only with the dumb Guard (Vidas Petkevičius). The performance would begin in

complete darkness, with a reading of an excerpt from the Georgian poem 'The Knight in the Panther's Skin' by Shota Rustaveli. Then, from behind Pirosmani's dark shop window, human figures would begin to emerge, of people whom he had met and dreamed about, had remembered and painted.

Pirosmani, Pirosmani…; Vladas Bagdonas as Pirosmani and Irena Kriauzitė as Iya-Maria (photo: eurozine.com, courtesy of *Kultūros barai*)

The stunningly beautiful window of Pirosmani's shop – and of his dream world – created by scenographer Adomas Jacovskis was reminiscent of the doors and gates as described by the 20th century British thinker Clive Staples Lewis: they allow humans to look beyond nature. As Lewis puts it, 'But all our confidence that Nature has no doors, and no reality outside herself for doors to open on, would have disappeared.'[2] In the performance *Pirosmani, Pirosmani…*, the door to the otherworld (eternity) did indeed open, and, very fittingly, the audience would see a miniature Georgian church in the finale.

Nekrošius constructed the fragile poetic space of the performance in his usual manner, using very simple objects. Bagdonas's Pirosmani brought his best and only friend a gift of an Easter egg, wrapped in gilded paper. In another scene, he carried an intricate pyramid of simple chairs, a celebration of his loneliness. Before his death, Iya-Maria (Irena Kriauzaitė) smeared Pirosmani's soles with black shoe polish. The Guard transported Pirosmani from this vale of tears to a heavenly homeland, having lugged his body onto scales and dusted him with white flour, suggestive of resurrection.

After these productions, set on the small stage at the Youth Theatre, Nekrošius moved on to monumental forms. The rock opera *Love and Death in Verona*, based on William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, for which Kęstutis Antanėlis composed the music and Sigitas Geda wrote the libretto, began as a medieval mystery play about the secrets of love and death, which elevated Juliet (played by Violeta Podolskaitė, Kristina Kazlauskaitė and Janina Matekonytė) to the status of the Madonna. However, the mystery soon turned into a carnival, even a burlesque. The omnipotent Prince of Verona (Antanas Šurna and Arūnas Storpirštis) turned into a midget, and Romeo (Kostas Smoriginas),

[2] C. S. Lewis. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. London: Harper Collins, 2009. p. 16.

accompanied by his rascal friends burst into a crowd of Veronesi, wearing stilts. Audacious Romeo then bravely stepped on a precarious keyboard-bridge to meet Juliet, his fate, while the chorus on stage – and the audience in the theatre – looked on, breathless.

The polyphony of the high (medieval mystery, tragedy, drama) and the low (burlesque, farce, comedy) enriched Nekrošius's other performances as well, for instance, *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* and *Uncle Vanya*, both marked by tragic existential undertones. A grand sacral funeral procession to the ancient Ana Beiit Cemetery in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* was accompanied by two jesters, the deceased Kazangap's son (Arūnas Storpirštis) and son-in-law (Juozas Jaruševičius), who could not stop quarrelling. The most intense and candid confession scenes in *Uncle Vanya* were repeatedly unsettled by clumsy, fat Vaflya (Juozas Pocius), who would keep appearing on stage seemingly without a reason.

The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years, a powerful story, adapted for stage from the Kyrgyz writer Chinghiz Aitmatov's novel of the same title and enhanced by visual and acoustic means, to this day remains, arguably, the best Lithuanian theatre production. On stage, a simple rope was woven to form the grand, elegant shape of the camel Karanar, given as a gift to Kazangap's friend, railwayman Yedegei (Algirdas Latėnas). An entire world was created, using very basic elements, such as sooty utensils and objects typical of a small isolated railway station, as well as the noise of trains flashing by, dismal sounds of everyday life, punctuated by the ting-a-ling of the funeral bell and the 'cosmic' chanting of Tibetan monks, suggestive of the hum of eternity. Suddenly, the melody of 'Suliko,' a song much loved by Stalin, would be heard, which composer Faustas Latėnas transformed into a *danse macabre*, a harbinger of calamity and death.

The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years; Algirdas Latėnas as Edigej (photo: eurozine.com, courtesy of *Kultūros barai*)

The time and space constructed in the performance acquired epic dimensions: one day of the funeral rites indeed seemed to last a hundred years. Yedegei's tiny world expanded into a macrocosm, in which, for instance, the surface of the water in a barrel would reflect a spaceship taking off.

During the introduction to the performance, conducted in complete silence, it would take the audience some time to discern Yedegei and Ukubala (Irena Tamošiūnaitė) as they seemed to have merged with the grey dullness of their daily life. Aitmatov had made Burannyi

Yedegei the centre of the contemporary world, and Nekrošius entrusted the centre of the epic created on stage to the actor Algirdas Latėnas, who had to control the stream of consciousness of Aitmatov's narrative and prevent the performance from turning into merely a spectacular spectacle. It seems to be an impossible task, but Latėnas handled it masterfully. Even though Yedegei's role in Aitmatov's novel consists mainly of monologues, Latėnas turned them into conversations. There were awkward appeals to the railway station master, who had ruthlessly refused to let Yedegei attend his friend Kazangap's funeral. There were heartrending tête-à-têtes between Yedegei and his beloved Zaripa (Kristina Kazlauskaitė) as well as his teacher Abutalip (Ferdinandas Jakšys), both lost during the years of Stalinist terror and repressions, and only alive in Yedegei's memory. There were discussions about history and mythology with mankurts, characters from Kyrgyz legend who were prisoners of war whose heads would be wrapped in camel skin, which would dry and harden under the sun, enslaving them forever and depriving them of the ability to think. Yedegei talked even with his surroundings, including the camel Karanar, a fox, and birds. As the performance progressed, several of Yedegei's neighbours joined the funeral procession and gave him a white handkerchief so that he, bent under the coffin and in pain, could wipe away his tears. Strange as it may seem, the brightest episode in this sombre performance was Yedegei's own death. In preparation for it, Yedegei gave away pieces of his last shirt, wrapped in which were handfuls of the sand from the bottom of the drying Aral Sea, considered sacred by the Kyrgyz people. Thereby he reconciled himself with the world and regained peace and harmony.

At the time, many quarrelled over Nekrošius's take on playwrighting and the text. Some argued that he disrespected the word and literature by over-relying on wordless 'dramaturgy,' totally dependent on the director's choices, thereby usurping the role of the playwright. Defying such criticism, Nekrošius later adapted for the stage an entire library of literary classics: Alexander Pushkin's little tragedies and *Boris Godunov*, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*, Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust*, Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, *The Seagull*, and (for the second time) *Ivanov*, Lithuanian Kristijonas Donelaitis' long poem *The Seasons* (Metai), Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, Dante Alighieri's entire *The Divine Comedy*, Franz Kafka's *A Hunger Artist*, even the masterpieces of *The Old Testament*, *The Song of Songs* and *The Book of Job*. Nonetheless, even while still at the Youth Theatre, Nekrošius proved his respect for literature and literary classics as well as demonstrating a unique talent in interpreting them.

Uncle Vanya directed by Nekrošius was a modern take on the brutal realism of the late 20th century, perhaps even its radical manifestation. Without denouncing his dramaturgical experiments, this time Nekrošius did not omit a single (!) word from the play and even added some phrases from Chekhov's

other texts, creating a very special harmony between verbal and non-verbal forms of expression.

The plot of the performance was punctuated with directorial pauses. The introduction was meant to foreground the creation of the performance space with actors establishing contact with the stage space and the objects which would become an essential part of the stage design. What I want to call Nekrošius's 'liturgy,' his strategy of turning material objects into suggestive leitmotifs (not unlike bread and wine are turned into flesh and blood), allowed Chekhov's words to become flesh and make their dwelling among the audience. And I use the term 'liturgy' not only as a metaphor: Nekrošius's *Uncle Vanya* would begin with a Jewish song, reminiscent of a lament or a prayer, adapted to stage by the director's 'brother in arms,' composer Faustas Latėnas. Who or what was lamented? Who or what was prayed for?

The introductory directorial pause spoke, albeit without words, about sickness and resignation afflicting a tormented soul and an entire world, which had exhausted its possibilities. In the *mis-en-scène*, doctor Astrov (Kostas Smoriginas) was treating the Nurse (Irena Tamošiūnaitė) by applying suction cups to her back and then, suddenly and surreptitiously, pulled out a bottle of morphine, his only way to endure the debilitating dreariness of the provincial life. As is typical for Nekrošius's dramaturgy of physical details, the bottle of morphine found its way back on stage in Act Four of the play (the scene between Astrov and Voynitsky), while the suction cups reappeared during the finale: in the final scene, the cups were applied to Uncle Vanya's (Vidas Petkevičius) back, as it was now his soul that had been overcome with sickness. Life, in the manner typical to Chekhov, had come full circle.

Only the retired professor Serebryakov (Vladas Bagdonas) and his admirer, old Voynitskaya (Elvyra Žebertavičiūtė), did not feel tormented in any way. In Nekrošius's performance, this grotesque couple was characterised by highly mechanical movements, foregrounding their unwillingness or inability to change their habits: a new life had not yet begun, and the old one continued out of sheer inertia. Serebryakov's only concern during the performance was not the people living on his estate, nor their destiny, but a heavy metal weight placed on the *avant-scène*, another image from Nekrošius's dramaturgy of physical details. When on stage, Serebryakov watched with envy with what ease his friends and rivals, uncle Vanya and doctor Astrov, would lift the weight.

Sonya (Dalia Overaitė) and Yelena Andreyevna (Dalia Storyk) made another pair of friends-rivals. In aging Serebryakov's provincial estate, his young and beautiful wife Yelena Andreyevna looked like a palm tree among the snow. She was also the centre of the action, even though seemingly against her own will as at one point she acknowledged that she was performing a merely 'episodic role.' Everyone on the estate leaned towards Yelena Andreyevna, as if enchanted by her beauty, of which they wanted to steal at least a small part, just like

they kept stealing her perfume bottles – another instance of Nekrošius turning words into flesh. Not only the men were guilty of that, but also Sonya, whose long and heavy black braids reached to the floor, as if a pair of mourning sashes. As far as I know, in the history of Chekhov's theatrical production, no Sonya has been played with so much talent, elevating the character to the status of a tragic figure, on a par with Uncle Vanya.

Final scene from *Uncle Vanya* (photo: eurozine.com, courtesy of *Kultūros barai*)

Differently from the conventional interpretations of the play, Dalia Storyk's Yelena Andreyevna was not an attractive beast, not a slick beautiful weasel, but a selfish coquette, who rejected and destroyed a wonderful man. In Nekrošius's performance, everyone got rejected and destroyed, even Yelena Andreyevna herself, repeatedly treated like an object: in one scene, Astrov met her equipped with a pair of pincers; in another one, Serebryakov prodded her with a walking stick.

This world, doomed to disappear, could not be saved by Yelena Andreyevna's ephemeral beauty, which, just like her exotic perfume, would soon vanish without a trace, and she would remain empty handed and helpless. After the estate went on sale, the residents lined up for the last photograph and sang *Va, pensiero*, the chorus of the Hebrew slaves from the Giuseppe Verdi's opera *Nabucco*. This, arguably, is the most beautiful crowd scene in the entire history of the Lithuanian theatre. And the photograph turned out to be a last record of the dying epoch as the old Soviet system collapsed less than five years later. At the same time, it was a farewell photograph of the troupe of *Uncle Vanya*, the dream team of the Youth Theatre. The legendary troupe soon fell apart; the actors began their solo careers, each going their own way, seeking the new lands of their dreams, their promised lands.

The prophecies of Doctor Astrov

Even after the demise of the communist dictatorship, Nekrošius's phenomenon in the Youth Theatre remained without adequate explanation. *The Square*, a performance about the Soviet man's 'freedom without rights,' was performed in Vilnius, completely, unimpeded, during the very peak of the Soviet stagnation: when attempts were made to rehabilitate Stalinism and the Gulag, because

communism could not sustain itself without labour camps; when Stalin's crimes had become a forbidden topic; when one could not even breath without permission. The censors obviously did not attempt to decipher the title of the performance, even though it was an obvious euphemism for both the prison and the camp surrounded by barbed wire.

The idea of *The Square* can be most accurately described, drawing on the words of Varlam Shalamov, whose writing was strictly prohibited at the time: 'The camp is a replica of our life; the camp even resembles the world. There is nothing in it that wouldn't exist outside, in freedom, in its social and spiritual structures.'[3] In other words, Nekrošius's *The Square* showed that the entire Soviet Union was a gigantic prison, in which even a free person was hardly different from a prisoner.

'Was it not here, in these prison cells, that the great truth dawned? The cell was constricted, but wasn't *freedom* even more constricted?' These were the questions Alexandr Solzhenitsyn asked in *The Gulag Archipelago*.[4] Much later, when Solzhenitsyn's study of the Soviet Gulag became freely available, we suddenly realized that, except of course for the numerous evidence and facts he presented, Solzhenitsyn did not condemn Stalin's terror more openly than did Zaripa (Kristina Kazlauskaitė) in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years*, when she slapped the gigantic portrait of the moustached Senior Murderer, Stalin, in revenge for the death of Abutalip and billions other innocent victims. Maybe, during the Soviet times, we were braver than Solzhenitsyn himself? No, we were not. Maybe the censors were not attentive enough? Maybe they could be deceived? Or negotiated with?

There were, of course, no deceptions or deals. The censors were not inattentive, either. Their requirement was that the Gulag, if referred to, be talked about without words, which is precisely what was done at the Youth Theatre. However, even during Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika years, the censorship made it impossible to show *The Square* and *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* outside Lithuania. In 1987, when American theatre professionals were selecting the repertoire for the Youth Theatre's tour in the USA, Moscow recommended to the Ministry of Culture of the Lithuanian SSR that Smoriginas 'fall ill,' so that the American visitors would not be able to see *The Square*. Nonetheless, the minister of culture, Jonas Bielinis, took personal responsibility and Smoriginas miraculously recovered: *The Square* was performed for the Americans in secret, in an otherwise empty theatre. Such a cat-and-mouse game can be partly explained with reference to Herbert

[3] Varlam Shalamov. *Vishera: An Anti-Novel*. See: https://shalamov.ru/library/16/ (in Russian)

[4] Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn. *The Gulag Archipelago 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation.* Transl. Thomas P. Whitney. Vols. 1–2. New York: Harper and Row, 1974. p. 614; original emphasis.

Marcuse's discussion of the universal relationship between society (not only totalitarian) and art (high culture): 'To be sure, the higher culture was always in contradiction with social reality, and only a privileged minority enjoyed its blessing and represented its ideals. These two antagonistic spheres of society have always coexisted; the higher culture has always been accommodating, while the reality was rarely disturbed by its ideals and its truth.' Marcuse continues, 'In its advanced positions, it [art] is the Great refusal – the protest against that which is. The modes in which man and things are made to appear, to sing and sound and speak, are modes of refuting, breaking, and recreating their factual existence. But these modes of negation pay tribute to the antagonistic society to which they are linked.'[5] It is probably because of such 'tribute' that attempts were made to tolerate Nekrošius's modes of brazen refuting.

Moreover, the high art created at the Youth Theatre was never meant to be enjoyed solely by the privileged minority, the élite. Queuing for the tickets overnight became part of the legend of the theatre, and not only a local one. During the theatre's triumphant second Moscow tour in 1987, crowds stormed the Sovremennik Theatre; mounted police were called to restore order, while those eager to see the Lithuanians perform a play by a Russian cultural icon, Anton Chekhov, were begging for a spare ticket in the nearest subway station.

Nekrošius's dream (remember the aforementioned chorus of slaves) eventually overcame the borders erected by the censorship: his performances crossed the Iron Curtain and reached the free world despite the restrictions of the Soviet regime. Those born in independent Lithuania can hardly fathom that during the fifty years of the Soviet occupation, Lithuanians, if they were permitted to go abroad at all, had to fly via Moscow. Foreigners, too, could come to Vilnius only via Moscow.

The first international pilgrim to the Youth Theatre was the director of the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF) Mira Trailovič, a glamorous lady, who, when she stood next to Eimis, in his regular sweater knitted by his mother (most of us, including me, wore handmade sweaters at the time), looked, as Germans would put it, like air from a different planet (*Luft von anderem Planeten*). Yugoslavia then, indeed, was a different planet to us, and Mira Trailovič took the Youth Theatre there in 1984. BITEF became for the Lithuanians the first window to have opened to the world. In 1988, the Youth Theatre performed at BITEF for the second time. Among the audience there sat Franco Quadri, one of Italy's most famous theatre critics, who subsequently became Nekrošius's good friend and patron in Italy.

Nonetheless, the strongest impetus for the Youth Theatre's international career was given by famous American playwright Arthur Miller. In 1985, he

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[5] Herbert Marcuse. *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. London and New York: *Routledge Classics*, 2002. p.p. 60, 66.

was attending a meeting between Soviet and American writers in Moscow and had an opportunity to visit Vilnius, where he saw several performances directed by Nekrošius. Upon his return to the USA, Miller told his colleagues about the peculiar Lithuanian theatre genius. Soon after, the Youth Theatre was visited by Edith Markson, an influential figure in the US theatre world. She came accompanied by a group of American theatre directors and producers. A little later, Bernard Sahlins, the director of the Chicago International Theatre Festival, and several directors from the Alley Theatre in Houston arrived. The Chicago festival and the Houston theatre selected *Pirosmani, Pirosmani…* and *Uncle Vanya*, and agreed to cover the expenses of the Youth Theatre's watershed tour in the USA in May 1988.

The Berlin Wall was still standing, and Sąjūdis, the Reform Movement of Lithuania, which led the struggle for Lithuania's independence, had not yet been created. Therefore, the first tour of the Youth Theatre in the United States (the second one took place in 1990) was more than a cultural event: it was Lithuania's first escape from a cage, the Soviet 'square'. It was a hopeful message to the nation that the Iron Curtain was not forever, that it might soon be withdrawn and trips to the West could become a regular thing. Thus the thirty five people from the Youth Theatre set off to the USA as if carried by the wings of *Lituanica,* the aeroplane flown from New York across the Atlantic Ocean by Lithuanian pilots Steponas Darius and Stasys Girėnas's in 1933. It is quite symbolic that Eimuntas Nekrošius had starred as Stasys Girėnas in Raimondas Vabalas's film *A Flight Over the Atlantic* (Skrydis per Atlantą) (1983), which narrates the story of Darius and Girėnas's endeavour.

The theatres were full. The English-speaking audiences watched with rapt attention and applauded enthusiastically for the actors, performing in Lithuanian – in fact, only in the theatre did many in the audience find out that Lithuanians are not Russians. Extremely positive reviews were published in the American press. All in all, it was a stupendous success. Lithuanian-American Arūnas Čiuberkis did a fabulous job as a translator. He and another compatriot, the wonderful Audra Misiūnienė, who volunteered to manage the tour, became true members of the troupe. It was an international triumph not only for the Youth Theatre but for the entire country, then still under the Soviet regime.

The tour was also important as a historical and purely political event as it united, for the first time, two parts of the nation, violently split by the Soviets: that which remained in the occupied Lithuania and that which had found refuge in the free world. The majority of the organisations created by the Lithuanian diaspora in the USA strictly complied with the policy of withdrawal and did not foster any connections with the Lithuanian SSR. They would boycott or even picket the sparse representatives of culture and arts from the homeland, because these visits, aimed exclusively at Lithuanian audiences in the US, were correctly seen as propaganda campaigns or even spying, conducted by the

association *Tėviškė* (Homeland), essentially a KGB institution. By contrast, the tour of the Youth Theatre was arranged through the Ministry of Culture of the Soviet Union and its commercial institution Mosconcert, thereby bypassing the involvement of *Tėviškė* as well as avoiding the danger of being seen as yet another propaganda campaign celebrating the 'achievements' of Soviet Lithuania.

This allowed the Youth Theatre to be received with warm welcomes by various political organisations of Lithuanian Americans, even those who usually abstained from any official contacts with the Lithuanian SSR, because these threatened the anti-communist resistance movement and the politics of non-recognition of the occupation as well as eroded the unity of the diaspora in exile. The power of the art of the Youth Theatre helped demolish the wall of distrust which loomed large between the two artificially antagonised parts of the nation.

Sooner or later, any legend comes to an end, even if art is as ephemeral as theatre is. However, thirty years later, I can remember one of the scenes from *Uncle Vanya* in the tiniest details: Doctor Astrov (Kostas Smoriginas) shows Yelena Andreyevna (Dalia Storyk) a cartogram of his own making, detailing how the district looked 50 and 25 years ago, and how it looks now, and delivers a harsh diagnosis: 'Overall, this picture shows a gradual and certain degeneration, which, some 10 or 15 years later, will most probably become universal.'

More than 10 or 15 years have passed since *Uncle Vanya* premiered at the Youth Theatre. Has Astrov's prophecy come true? We need (I do!) to look at Eimuntas Nekrošius's magic screen once again, that gigantic magnifying glass which would show us the real picture of our contemporary existence.

W. Shakespeare: *Hamlet,* Teatras Meno Fortas, 1997, dir: Eimuntas Nekrošius
(source: ddoppiozero.com)

The Theatre of Gentle Strength

Rimas Tuminas and Mayia Pramatarova in Conversation

Rimas Tuminas (20 January 1952 – 6 March 2024) was one of the most significant Lithuanian theatre directors. From 1970 to 1974, he studied at the Conservatory of Lithuania. In 1978 he finished GITIS in Moscow (Joseph Tumanov's directing course). From 1979 he was the director of Lithuanian national drama theatre. In 1990 he founded the Little Theatre of Vilnius. He was awarded the State Prize of Russia in 1999. From 2007 to 2022, he was the artistic director of the theatre named after E. Vakhtangova in Moscow. With Tuminas, the Vakhtangov Theatre occupied a leading position among the Russian theatres. In 2011, the theatre was recognized as the most visited theatre in Moscow. He combined this work with the post of artistic director of the Little Theatre of Vilnius. "What I hate, like everything, is death, the senseless death that is happening these days, I don't accept it as a human being and I don't justify what's happening," wrote Tuminas on the next day after the start of the war between Russia and Ukraine. "I'm sorry for the people who became hostages of this tragedy. We realize very quickly that this is a tragedy. And I can sympathize and regret that a beautiful and talented people fell into such a tragedy," the director wrote. Commenting on his resignation in May 2022, the Moscow theatre reported that Tuminas did it "for his health". Soon after the dismissal, the theatre filmed and showed several of its productions. In addition, the Prime Minister of Russia, Mikhail Mishustin, cancelled the awarding of the director's prize for significant contribution to the development of Russian culture.

In the run-up to the 8th MITEM in 2022, we were hopeful that after Lermontov's *Masquerade Ball* (2014), Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (2017), Sophocles' *Oedipus* (2018), and Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (2019), the Lev Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* (premiered in Moscow in November 2021) would also be presented to the festival audience in 2022. Yet, due to the

outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian war, that could not take place, just as the plan to have Tuminas direct at the National Theatre in Budapest fell through. We were aware that the Master had been battling terminal illness for a decade, but we hoped to welcome him in person to the 11th MITEM in 2024, along with the performance of *Anna Karenina* he had staged in Israel. The news of his death, which came from Italy on 6 March, shocked us all. However, fans of his art will find comfort in knowing that he was actively creating and directing almost until the end of his life. At MITEM 12 this year, audiences will once again have the opportunity to see a production directed by Tuminas. Cyrano (*A Comedy of Love*) will also arrive from Israel. In this issue, following Attila Vidnyánszky's tribute, we present an interview with Tuminas about his epoch-making production of *Uncle Vanya*. His interlocutress, Maya Pramatarova is a screenwriter, theatre specialist, interpreter and director. In response to her skilled questions, the stage director reveals his artist's creed in an intimate and informal tone.

In Honour of His Memory by Attila Vidnyánszky: Whom Have I Lost?[1]

In the person of Rimas Tuminas, we have lost a friend and a true comrade-in-arms in the world of theatre. He was a man who dedicated his entire life to the cause of theatre, and whose artistic voice I have always felt to be kindred to our own. The theatrical language he developed resonates deeply with me. I first encountered Tuminas's productions during my undergraduate years at the Academy of Theatre and Film Arts in Kyiv, and these experiences have remained formative for me ever since that period in my life. For this reason, I was particularly pleased that we were able to present several of his productions at MITEM, the Madách International Theatre Meetings hosted by the National Theatre.

As an institutional leader, Tuminas also fought exemplary battles – he succeeded in building a truly great theatre. The sense of loss and absence in relation to him is also personal, and it impacts my own work as well. In 2021, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Vakhtangov Theatre, he invited me to direct a production in Moscow. At the time, we were in the midst of selecting a play and navigating the restructuring process at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest, so I was unable to leave Hungary for an extended period. He took this to heart and expressed his deep regret. Back then, we

[1] Attila Vidnyánszky, director and General Manager of the National Theatre, spoke in remembrance of Rimas Tuminas during a roundtable discussion held in March 2024. The text below is an edited version of his words. (The participants of the roundtable included András Kozma, dramaturge, and Ágnes Pálfi, editor of the journal *Szcenárium*. The discussion was moderated by György Lukácsy.)

thought we had all the time in the world. I promised him that my next directing production in Russia would be with him. Sadly, that did not come to pass. But what is even more painful is that since 2013, I had continuously invited him to direct here with us. While he immediately agreed, he repeatedly told me he was overwhelmed with commitments. There were so many people lined up to work with him that he could not possibly fulfill this promise any time soon. He eventually agreed to the 2023/24 season: he chose a text by Racine, and we already arranged a rehearsal space and put together a cast, which he approved. In the meantime, I kept wondering how he would feel with us, since we all knew he was seriously ill.

I learned about his condition through an intermediary – Avtandil Varsimashvili, who was directing with us and was not only a close friend of Rimas but also a creative collaborator: he worked closely alongside him during the final two weeks of rehearsals for *War and Peace*, staged at the Vakhtangov Theatre in 2021. From Avtandil, I learned that even then, Rimas was already deeply exhausted. He had endured immense pain and was struggling physically. During the final week of rehearsals, Avtandil became his extended hand and amplified voice. He managed the technical rehearsals, oversaw the lighting runs – he did everything. He brought me countless updates and also acted as a go-between for us. It was then that Rimas finally agreed – he would come. However, due to his deteriorating health, we had to skip that season and planned for him to join us in the following one.

When Rimas Tuminas was appointed artistic director of the Vakhtangov Theatre, he inherited an institution grounded in the finest traditions of Russian realism, supported by a company of exceptionally skilled actors. Yet he brought with him poetic theatre – one that embraced pathos, grand emotions, strong visuality, and musicality. He offered the ensemble a different theatrical language, and he had to fight for it. There was some uncertainty about whether, as a Lithuanian, he could truly find his place and, as something of an outsider, implement a bold stylistic transformation within such a venerable institution. Many of us who were rooting for him watched closely to see whether he would be able to express himself in his own artistic language. Ultimately, *Uncle Vanya* marked the breakthrough. Before that, we were afraid he would not be able to get the ensemble to accept his distinctive theatrical language. *Uncle Vanya* was a cathartic breakthrough: at the time, the entire Russian theatre world was talking about the emergence of a major production – and the birth of a new kind of theatre.

In Moscow, Rimas was always regarded, to some extent, as an outsider – despite the fact that he had studied there. It also became clear very quickly that by taking on an institutional leadership position in Russia, he turned into a stranger in his own homeland. It escalated to the point where he was eventually declared persona non grata: intellectual circles wrote various

documents against him, and even the window of his house was broken in Lithuania. Then, during the war, hackers – exploiting his trust – manipulated him over the phone into making a statement about the conflict. Naturally, his view was the same as that of any reasonable person regarding destruction and killing. Yet almost instantly, he found himself in a position where he had to flee Russia as well. His fate was dramatic in this sense, too, and at that point, he was already on the verge of departing from life itself. He spent his last two years in Israel.

When he first came to us at MITEM, he was already ill. He fought the deadly disease for a decade. Alongside the playfulness, there was also a constant sense of death in his performances. In such a death-close, end-of-life period, one often turns back to the past, with childhood memories and emotions becoming more intense. Alongside the childlike playfulness, he was also characterized by a certain sentimentality. This, too, stemmed from his life situation. In his productions, one can observe – especially from a professional perspective – how he systematically sought and built those situations and moments when he could release the energy, let the actor go, allow them to fly, and, in doing so, let the audience soar along with them. By the time I came to know Rimas, he had already been somewhat beyond life, looking back from a distance. Perhaps that is why he saw so clearly and precisely – because he already had a different vantage point.

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RIMAS TUMINAS: We must know how to be happy, in the belief that happiness exists. Although none of us are granted this happiness, it still exists – just like God Himself. Our stormy struggles and miseries all stem from our desire to be happy. Yet Chekhov laughs at us. As it is said in *Three Sisters*, happiness does not exist, nor does it need to.[2]

MAYIA PRAMATAROVA: In Uncle Vanya*, Sonya says that she and Uncle Vanya are so unhappy. Where does this idea that one needs to be happy actually come from?*

R. T.: In my opinion, Tolstoy is very similar to Chekhov on this matter – or rather, the other way round, Chekhov to Tolstoy. We often talk about the various troubles in life, but the greatest problem is life itself, which seems utterly meaningless. From this perspective, we cannot help but smile when we look at the struggling, rushing human being, longing for love, wanting to love, seeking happiness – yet ultimately failing in all these pursuits. The mistake lies in the

[2] Vershinin's words to Masha in Act Two of the drama, in a literal translation: "Somehow I would like to prove to you that happiness does not exist, does not need to exist, and will not exist for us…"

idea that we are destined for happiness, or that we have been told that we are created to be happy. We *must* be happy. And if we are not, we transform into something else – anarchists for instance. This is where the distortion arises from. From the assumption that happiness exists but I just have not found it yet. In reality, it cannot be found at all. Just as Astrov creates a beautifully cultivated, exemplary estate, bringing beauty to the manor house he inhabits. His mistake lies in having some ten to fifteen years ago believed that people would marvel at his garden and that others would also want to live as he does. He would set an example through his work, and the Earth would become a paradise, transformed into beauty. I deeply understand the futility of this struggle myself when, year after year, I battle with my own resolve to mow the grass in the village where I own a few hectares of land. Then of course the grass just keeps growing and growing. Still, I fight to maintain a small natural clearing there. All sorts of weeds are sprouting endlessly, and I keep struggling and struggling. In time, one comes to realize that if others around them were doing the same within a radius of some kilometers, their efforts would not feel so futile. In other words, one cannot cultivate a small corner in isolation. The same holds true for human life. As Chekhov says, a person cannot be happy if those around them are suffering.[3] General happiness is the state in which we all become happy. But what are we going to do with this general happiness? Most likely, we are going to destroy it and return to the state we are in now.

Chekhov and Tolstoy at the playwright's dacha in Yalta, 1901
(source: gittegylet.com)

M. P.: But this is not granted to us. Still, despite everything, to live through our daily lives, to get up every morning, to take responsibility for our actions, to attend rehearsals, to raise children, to plant trees – all with the awareness that in a certain amount of time, we will leave this world behind, and perhaps some kind of energetic trace will remain of us… All of this requires an immense effort on a person's part over the course of thirty, fifty, or seventy years. […]

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[3] In Chekhov's short story *The Gooseberry Bush*, Ivan Ivanovitch says this in connection with his brother's self-enclosed life: "… evidently the happy man only feels at ease because the unhappy bear their burdens in silence, and without that silence happiness would be impossible. It's a case of general hypnotism. There ought to be behind the door of every happy, contented man some one standing with a hammer continually reminding him with a tap that there are unhappy people;…" [p6 at: https://collegelit2014.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/gooseberries-anton-chekhov.pdfG

R. T.: And yet, we must get up, summon our strength, and come up with something – an idea, some kind of mystification…

M. P.: Right now, we can hear shouting from the street. Young people are marching along the Arbat, blowing soap bubbles.[4] *This, too, is a kind of mystification.*

R. T.: Yes, the mystification of happiness, luck, the moment of enlightenment, and faith. In this way, we strengthen our belief in tomorrow. In other words, it is necessary for bubbles to be blown. This is the carnivalization of our times. Similarly, in theatre, on stage, one must also attempt the carnivalization of the plot, regardless of the genre in which the plot is presented. Carnivalization creates playfulness, a light form that is very understandable, yet profound. There is no need to torture the audience with riddles; rather, as Lessing put it, the eyes must be caressed and the ears delighted at the same time. Art has an effect in its own way, and the spectator's unconscious is awakened, unless spectators are attacked or scolded. This used to be the case, and sometimes today we still shout at someone – not those who do not go to the theatre, but our very spectators. We shout at them, accuse them, we speak the truth to their faces, everyone is guilty, the spectator is guilty, living wrongly, so we administer a blow to them. And it is very strange that after such a performance, when a spectator is asked if they liked the show, they answer, "Yes, I liked it. Because I have been jolted." The theatre, however, is a gentle, tender strength within which there is forgiveness. The house of forgiveness. The place where everything is forgiven. Everything, except for murder. We are ready for forgiveness. If three years pass, or even just half a year passes after a performance, when something begins to unsettle you, when you want to go somewhere, you will return to that theatre where you were forgiven, and not to the one where you were simply administered a blow.

G. E. Lessing (1729–1781)

M. P.: In your career, why do you return to certain texts which you have already touched on before? Why did you need Uncle Vanya *in the early 1990s, and why do you need this play now, ten years later? Does returning to a text reveal something about your relationship with it? Does it suggest that you now wish to convey something different with it, or that you had not fully explored it before? In general, why does a director return to certain texts from time to time, as you do with Chekhov.*

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[4] The interview was being recorded at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow on 11 April 2011, while the sounds of the *Dreamflash* event were filtering in from beyond the theatre walls. As part of this springtime event, hundreds of young people gathered on the Old Arbat (where the Vakhtangov Theatre is also located) to embrace one another and blow colourful bubbles in celebration of spring and happiness.

R. T.: My take on this would be that the text is revealed through certain themes. This is the principle of the tale. Just as Shakespeare's plays follow the principle of the tale, too. Of course, our starting point is that Shakespeare is a genius, and we use his texts, yet we do not fully grasp that we ourselves have been written into those texts over the past few centuries. It is as if we were talking about a shared repository, in which each generation somehow situates itself, placing something – through its culture and social status – into this tale, which in turn absorbs them all. Then we take Shakespeare's text and play ourselves through it. Several generations are condensed within it. This is the form of the tale. The same can be said of Chekhov: once upon a time, there was an Uncle Vanya; there lived three sisters…

A. P. Chekhov: *Three Sisters,* Little Theatre, Vilnius, 2005, dir. Rimas Tuminas (photo: V. Lupovskij, source: ptj.spb.ru)

M. P.: Unfortunately, I did not get to see your production of Three Sisters. *What was your tale about?*

R. T.: I usually begin directing a play from the end. To be able to tell a story, one must understand everything – the ending included. Only then can the story be told – told in a way that makes it truly powerful, a story capable of shaping the actor's thinking. In this *Three Sisters* the ending is constantly reinforced, according to which we are brought close to hatred. This is how the three sisters also feel at the end of the play – not standing like birch trees, weeping, but violently tearing at their hair, realizing that they were not needed, that they had no rights. They had hatred as their only weapon left, sweeping them away; they do not want it, they resist it, but still, they begin to hate – or even, they may be preparing for revenge.

M. P.: You began your career with the play January,[5] *which is essentially a winter's tale, with a third party present…*

R. T.: Just as with Efros[6] there was always something supernatural in the air. For me, the most interesting part is when we engage in dialogue or struggle not with politics or power, but with Fate or Destiny. This is when space opens up for art. The play was a kind of mystical, mysterious parable, a celebration of disappearance. Full of anxiety, yet still a celebration. And they went boldly[7]…

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5 Rimas Tuminas's first production was *January*, a play by Bulgarian writer Jordan Radichkov, staged at the Lithuanian SSR Drama Theatre in 1978.

6 Anatoly Vasilievich Efros (1925–1987) was a Soviet director, an influential artist of his time, associated with the Central Children's Theatre, the Theatre on Malaya Bronnaya, and the Taganka Theatre.

7 The play is set in a small Bulgarian village, where a close-knit community discusses the harsh winter cold. Meanwhile, we learn that a man named Pyotr Motorov has

Lermontov: *Masquerade*, Little Theatre, Vilnius, 1997, dir. Rimas Tuminas, poster of the 2010 Moscow restaging (source: vestnik.ca)

M. P.: One disappears, another moves on, he too disappears, and the third one follows…

R. T.: Something like this also occurs with the Romantics, in *Masquerade*[8]. In the 19th century, girls went to balls with deep décolletages, dancing in light dresses in castles where it was unbearably cold. But they were filled with anticipation, with the anticipation of Beauty, of Youth. Yet many died of pneumonia. But it was as if nothing had happened, new ones always came. Some died, some danced, but the ball, in the end, was a celebration of Beauty. And all of this was not tragic, but beautiful. It is understandable why. Because of human aspiration, which will undoubtedly last forever.

M. P.: I am surprised by how many new, modern texts you have worked with throughout your creative career. Directors raised in the Russian tradition primarily stage classics and focus less on interpretive theatre. You – though, of course, you have staged Lermontov and Chekhov multiple times – have also turned to Lithuanian authors. I clearly remember your direction of Madagascar[9]*, which I saw in Poland. It is a metaphorical performance, which I personally am not sure if I fully deciphered. But the very fact that it is as if we were looking at a casket, where we can open certain drawers, others we think we have opened, and then there are some to which we cannot find the key, creates a peculiar tension. In me, a purely visual, humour-laced experience lingers. I was surprised to read in one of your articles that when you staged*

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set off for the city, undeterred by wolves and snowdrifts. However, before long, the sleigh he departed on comes back carrying a dead wolf and a rifle, but without Pyotr. A search party is sent after him, yet each time the sleigh returns without its passenger, once again bearing a weapon and a lifeless wolf.

8 Mikhail Lermontov's *Masquerade*, directed by Tuminas, was presented to the audience of the National Theatre as part of MITEM 2014. For a detailed analysis of the performance, see: Ildikó Regéczi: "A World Covered in Snow, Frozen into Ice and Stiff as a Statue. Lermontov's drama *Masquerade*" at MITEM, *Szcenárium*, Vol. II, Issue 4 (April 2014), pp 43–53.

9 The play *Madagascar* was written specifically for Tuminas by the then 31-year-old Lithuanian playwright Marius Ivaškevičius.

The Hill of Crosses, 12 km north of the city of Šiauliai – Lithuania's most sacred pilgrimage site since the 14th century (source: youtube.com)

the work of the Lithuanian playwright, the Lithuanian audience was more reserved. I would be interested to know why. What is the reason that we[10]*, small nations, seem to be reluctant to see our own reflection on stage?*

R. T.: Although I had been an opponent of the European Union, I certainly voted for it so that our local politicians would not make mistakes, would not become gods, because we had already lost the ability to exercise power and govern. It might be happening because we were the last to adopt Christianity in Europe, and small nations always have to hide something that is too early to share with others, something for future centuries. Centuries from now, the time of our independence will seem like a brief period. And why was I an opponent of the European Union? Because we had not yet discovered who we were. We should have remained independent and neutral for another five to seven years to figure out who we really were. We should have confronted the painful points of our history, to uncover who killed whom, to understand our character. After all, every people is hardworking, beautiful, kind-hearted and …

M. P.: Hospitable.

R. T.: Yes, hospitable. But every people says that about itself. Of course, we have the right to claim this, but in reality, we are not such a good people. We should have dug brutally into the depths. Only then would it have been possible to understand our history. Without self-awareness, we cannot understand it. But it seems as if this was not the right time for it. It is just a matter of years, which is a very short period in the course of centuries. Meanwhile, the pagan element is very much alive, too. The mentality has remained unchanged.

M. P.: Although the Bulgarians adopted Christianity in the 9th century, paganism and Christianity still coexist.

R. T.: Yes, yes, they coexist. I do not know what is happening to man, but today it seems as if everything was drawn to nature, to stone, to wood. This attraction is obvious. As the Lithuanians say, give us a piece of wood, give us a stone, a little water or fire, and we will make a performance out of it. All of this is earthly element. But alongside this, there exists the eternal Cosmos, whose existence we acknowledge, and the stone or the wood serves as a kind of intermediary. During rehearsals, I do not use and do not allow others to use expressions like *character*, *character search*, or *conflict*. The understanding

[10] The interviewer is a Bulgarian-born critic and art historian.

of conflict must be set aside. Neither the actor nor I are the creators of the conflict, not even the playwright. The conflict has been handed down to us through centuries. It is something like…

M. P.: The postscript of our parents.

R. T.: Yes. It has an effect on us, we are simply subordinated to it, we are forced to be subordinated. To uncover the conflict of the play seems to be a contradiction. The foundation of dramatic theatre, of course, is conflict and character, but we should not base it on these; we need to place the human being at the centre. We get nowhere with *character*. Why did Russian theatre – Efros being the exception, of course – focus on *character*? If we look at it, the actors perform well, excellently, the characters are clear, distinct, but you forget them by the next day. You forget them, and what have you gained? Momentary feelings. You watch and you yourself respond, as if looking into a mirror. But the mirror tells you nothing, it only reflects, nothing more. And we continuously want it to tell us something. But it is not a tale, it tells us nothing. […] What interests me primarily is the human being. But the actor asks the question: what can be played if the conflict is removed? I answer that I do not know, we need to think, rehearse, walk, and remain outside the conflict. But despite not wanting to be part of it, we inevitably find ourselves in this eternal conflict zone of the Earth, even though we are not its owners, only the transmitters of the conflict. This is where a third eye, a third party, an unknown originates and appears. As we read in the Gospel, where two or three of you are gathered together, there am I invisibly in your midst. The third one must be performed for, the third one. This is also something we have forgotten in theatre. Actors perform for each other; there is no third presence. The spectator is not the third one either but *ours*, as if our friend had just come to the theatre. We have forgotten what it is that is above us. We have learned how to build the wall, how to create horizons, we have learned everything that is on Earth. But as for what is up there – there is only the set, nothing else.

M. P.: So, we must still look upward.

R. T.: Certainly. Only then is our verticality revealed – the verticality of performance. And in play – as in every game – there are those who lose and those

Announcement marking Rimas Tuminas's 60th birthday,
from the Vakhtangov Theatre website, 2012 (source: vakhtangov.ru)

Rimas Tuminas in the kitchen of his farmhouse, 2022 (source: lyritas.it)

who win. Just as with Shakespeare. Once, Anatoly Vasiliev and I were practicing: we took a play and analysed it – not with the intention of staging it, but simply for our own enjoyment. We worked, for instance, on *King Lear*. If we say that Lear is old, then by about page 10 we come to realize that he is not. If we interpret Lear's actions as some kind of experiment, as a political manoeuvre in the play, it soon becomes clear that this is not the case either, and the theory becomes untenable. We come up with all sorts of explanations, many of which ultimately do not hold up, because this is a game. We know how to play each part – so step into the game, where you will encounter passions, grand human emotions, deep feelings. And as we begin to play, what will it become? A tragedy. No matter how we play it, it will become a tragedy. Just as Pushkin also came to the conclusion that comedy is not meant to entertain the audience, nor to provoke laughter, nor to invite merriment, since comedy ends in tragedy even more often than tragedy itself. In fact, I believe that there is no such thing as comedy. I have seen performances that were comedies…

M. P.: For their own sake…

R. T.: … that had some kind of happy ending. You might think, sure, sure, there must be such things, too, but then you get slapped in the face or trip on the stairs, and you do not understand – because you were told that life is wonderful…

M. P.: That happiness is real.

R. T.: In other words, you were hoodwinked – which is not good.

M. P.: So then, is it possible, or at least can we attempt to speak of truth in theatre?

R. T.: We can only attempt.

M. P.: Yet truth is multifaceted, colourful, and layered, and that is why it is difficult to decipher.

R. T.: It is just that we must not forget the play. Then diversity will reveal itself – we will see the colours. The play. Nature is at play; we are diverse – some feel this play, while others are playing their own game..

M. P.: I was surprised by how little time you have had to mould your audience, though they strive to grasp the play.

R. T.: Yes, they do. They must strive to understand. They are committed to play, to the principle of play, so they must understand it. The grandmother, the grandfather, the young man – all must grasp the principle of play. Then everything can be condensed into shared play – the tragic, the lyrical, the comic, the dramatic – all of it seeps through the play and lands with great strength.

Translated by Nóra Durkó

„Megvan hát e rideg világnak is költészete!”

Madách Imre: Az ember tragédiája

“So even this cold world has its poetry!”

Imre Madách: The Tragedy of Man

MITEM12

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NEMZETI SZÍNHÁZ, BUDAPEST • 2025. ÁPRILIS 25 – MÁJUS 25.

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"…creation can only be compared to the state before the world's genesis, to the very beginning. Likewise, everything is pure chaos here, and forces contrary to human reason are in operation. After all, human reason comes into being only at the end of creation, when everything, the entire world, is already complete. Every positive value and even the concept itself are tied to reason. In the state before reason, good and evil, virtue and sin, piety and prostitution are still inseparably intertwined. In our performance (…) every value is present on stage, from the lowest strata of society to the highest, surrounded by a halo of glory." *(Tadeusz Kantor)*

"As we read in the Gospel, where two or three of you are gathered together, there am I invisibly in your midst. The third one must be performed for, the third one. This is also something we have forgotten in theatre. Actors perform for each other; there is no third presence. The spectator is not the third one either but *ours*, as if our friend had just come to the theatre. We have forgotten what it is that is above us. We have learned how to build the wall, how to create horizons, we have learned everything that is on Earth. But as for what is up there – there is only the set, nothing else." *(Rimas Tuminas)*

"Nekrošius's 'liturgy,' his strategy of turning material objects into suggestive leitmotifs (not unlike bread and wine are turned into flesh and blood), allowed Chekhov's words to become flesh and make their dwelling among the audience. And I use the term 'liturgy' not only as a metaphor: Nekrošius's *Uncle Vanya* would begin with a Jewish song, reminiscent of a lament or a prayer, adapted to stage by the director's 'brother in arms,' composer Faustas Latėnas. Who or what was lamented? Who or what was prayed for?" *(Valdas Vasiliauskas)*

"I believe that theatre and the stage are particularly well-suited to creating the full essence of a character more quickly through the voice which emerges from a person's inner world. It is an important part of my method, and I usually begin rehearsals this way. Sometimes I may not be able to fully articulate a character's nature at first, but through their voice, I can delve deeper into their mystery – the voice can open the door to understanding the secrets of the role. After all, every role is a great mystery, which can be uncovered through voice. This is the inner voice of the role." *(Diana Dobreva)*

"In liturgy, (…) the body of Christ can be shared among the faithful, as can his blood, in fact. The very same transubstantiation happens in a performance on a Fabrian stage: the performer is looking for a form that can be shared and communicated. But not via the appropriate channels of gaze, understanding, meaning and reason. No, this is about a shared process from body to body, from matter to matter. The bread unifies via the tongue and palate. In a similar way, the birth of a new guise into which the performer has transformed looks for openings in the audience, where he can gain access, where he is welcome…" *(Jan Fabre / Luk Van den Dries)*

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