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Támogatók



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OLYMPICS



THEATRE OLYMPICS

CROSSING MILLENNIA

Theatre Olympics Logo. 1994. Designed by Robert Wilson



inaugural



Theatre and Freedom

Attila Vidnyánszky, Artistic Director of the 2023 International Theatre Olympics in Hungary Was Interviewed by István Kornya*

– *The announcement was made last year: Hungary will host the 10th International Theatre Olympics. In December 2021, it became official: the government will fund the event. So planning and organisation could start. Along what principles?*

– Most importantly, I have approached all the stakeholders of the Hungarian theatre profession.

– *You have said this in the first person singular.*

– There is an established process and tradition for organising the Olympics. A committee consisting of the founders and artistic directors of previous Olympics, as well as of eminent playwrights and directors, invites someone to be the artistic director of each Olympics. This time, the committee bestowed this honour and responsibility on me.

– *So what's your concept?*

– The Theatre Olympics have never been produced in such a decentralised way yet, based on the free decisions of individual professional communities. We often talk about openness and the importance of freedom, but I often have the feeling that is just rhetoric. My approach is to create a structure that has these values in its DNA.

– *How should we visualise this?*

– By default, the brick-and-mortar theatres have the possibility, with us providing the funding, to invite a foreign company and a company from across our borders. It would be nice to have not just one-off invitations but lasting relationships, with performance exchanges and joint productions. We also welcome larger programme plans from theatres.

– *How about alternative theatres?*

* An edited version of an interview published in the January 2022 issue of National Magazine.

– We have approached three key players in this context. Jurányi House, the most important incubator of alternative companies, Trafo, a prestigious institution with an extensive international network, and Szeged's Thealter Festival with a track record of three decades. All three are offered the same opportunity: stage your own Olympics. Only the Jurányi House gave a positive answer.

– *Won't Attila Vidnyánszky have a say in who they invite?*

– No. They are completely free, that's up to them. The point is to provide an opportunity, a framework for the representatives of the Hungarian theatre profession to make headway in the world as they see fit, according to their own theatre preferences, so they can build long-term relationships and open up to the world. It is up to them to make the best use of this freedom.

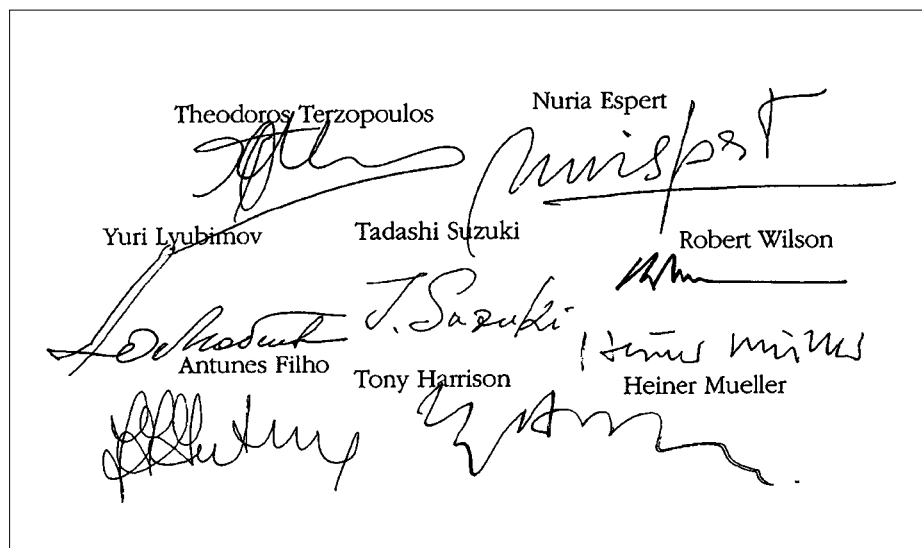
As MITEM's organisers, we share the principles that led to the founding of Theatre Olympics in 1994 by the world's great directing talents. Namely, that culture and theatre are opportunities for expressing our respect for each other, indulging our curiosity, accepting each other, and jointly celebrating our diversity. MITEM's track record over the past eight years is clear evidence of that.

– *Does every stone theatre have a positive stance regarding the "Olympic bid"?*

– Some theatres in the capital have said no, but I trust they will change their minds. I hope they, too, will see the Olympics as an opportunity.

– *Are there any specifics yet?*

– We are at the stage of preparations and proposals. It is important to involve rural centres. For example, the National Theatre of Miskolc will celebrate its bicentenary in 2023 and they want a major programme in relation to the Olympics. Since the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen has been organising the



DESZKA Festival, a prestigious showcase for Hungarian contemporary drama, for fifteen years, it is an obvious choice for them to present a showcase of key Hungarian productions to foreign critics and festival organisers. Veszprém is next year's European Capital of Culture – it is self-evident that we should be linked to that. In 2016, Wrocław in Poland not only hosted the Theatre Olympics, but was also an ECOC (European Capital of Culture). Their experience of artistic direction is important not only because of that, but also because compared to previous metropolitan venues such as St Petersburg, Beijing or Seoul, a city of 600,000 in Silesia is on a scale comparable to ours. The Olympics are also a great opportunity for the “little ones”. A case in point is the monodrama festival of the Mari Jászai Theatre in Tatabánya, which has been inviting productions from the regions and from across the borders since 2015. This is an opportunity for them to select fantastic solo performances by great foreign artists, which they have not been able to afford with their budgets. The Olympics is a chance to go to the next level. Then, there are the open-air theatres. I could also mention the amateurs, who have serious organisations and festivals in many countries. Think of the boost Hungary's amateur companies would get from taking their contacts to the next level. The same goes for children's theatres, youth theatres, puppet and dance theatres, too. The Hungarian representatives of these genres have already come up with ready-made, inspiring, meaningful plans, and we are happy to support them.

– *Will MITEM 2023 be integrated into the Olympics?*

– We will be hosting the longest and largest MITEM ever in the context of the Olympics. It will present productions by the founding masters along with, as every year, important productions by the younger generation. A central theme will be Imre Madách, whose name is borne by the Meeting. Next year, we'll celebrate the 200th birthday of the author of the *Tragedy*. My big dream is to have a production of the *Tragedy* in which each scene is performed by students from another nation. This will require a lot of organisation and involve the University of Theatre and Film Arts (SZFE) as well. And while we're at it, we'll also organise the festival of theatre universities and colleges – giving space to actors' studios at home and abroad.

– *When organizing this year's MITEM, we had to face unexpected difficulties as the Russian-Ukrainian war broke out on 24 February 2022.*

– Yes, the cancellation of the productions from Russia has been a great loss. However, we hope that a ceasefire and a negotiated settlement will take place soon. Re-establishing international cultural relations and direct dialogue among artists may play a huge role in this process. We trust that we will be able to welcome at the 2023 Theatre Olympics also the companies forced to stay away this time.

Translated by László Vértés



theatre olympics



GYÖRGY LUKÁCSY

Participation Is Important

Artistic Freedom and the Meeting of Cultures

Hosted by Budapest in 2023, the International Theatre Olympics is the youngest of the global theatre festivals, but it has found its own distinct profile by returning to the original ideal of modern Olympics, putting cultural encounters before competition. Could there be a more modern idea in an age of ideological separation and relentless culture wars?

If we take the ideal alone, the International Theatre Olympics is more Olympic than the Olympic Games themselves. For even in ancient times, the Games were not about participation, but clearly about competition. Rivalry prevailed not only in sports, but also in the intellectual arena. Ancient athletes – the best in the Hellenic world – matched their skills in Olympia, and playwrights competed during the festival of Dionysus in Athens; we even know the names of the ‘champions’ of the Golden Era, i.e. the 5th century BC: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Following the 1948 London Olympics, artistic – literary, architectural, sculptural, painting and musical – contests were discontinued. They are no longer recognised by the International Olympic Committee. Held in 1995 for the first time, the International Theatre Olympics, unlike the Games, actually implemented the oft-mentioned but mostly rhetorical modern Olympic ideal. The motto attributed to Baron Pierre de Coubertin – “The most important thing is not winning but taking part.” – could not be taken at face value even when it was first uttered.

The Olympic ideal

In fact, it was the consolation speech at the 1908 London Olympics that launched the adage. De Coubertin, the French founder of the International Olympic Committee, said in an attempt to soothe tempers, “Last Sunday, the

Archbishop of Pennsylvania made the cheery observation that the importance of the Olympics is not winning but taking part. The essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well. The important thing is not that we were beaten, but that we fought well.”

A noble goal that never came true. Still, the idea is worth pondering.

Jae Kyoung Kim from South Korea analyses how modern and legitimate this idea is in his 2016 book *International Theatre Olympics: the Artistic and Intercultural Power of Olympism*. A PhD student at the University of Georgia and a lecturer at Chung-ang University in Seoul, he emphasises the importance of diversity in participation. As a result of globalisation, Western audiences employ and host countless ‘international artists’ and companies. The phenomenon of ‘McTheatre’ (after the fast food chain), has overshadowed national specificities and major personalities. Which is why Jae Kyoung Kim defines the International Theatre Olympics as a festival of authors, directors and avant-garde, and why he believes the great theatre festivals of Avignon, Edinburgh or Bogotá, once of supreme authority, have lost much of their significance. This is one of the reasons for the emergence of off-festivals, such as the Edinburgh Fringe, which provide space for artistic initiatives that are not accommodated by the official programme of the major events. This openness, according to the South Korean academic, stems from the personalities of the founders of the International Theatre Olympics. When they founded the Olympics in 1994, the world’s leading theatre directors were mindful of the fact that traditional competition was crowding out free artistic initiative.

From avant-garde to carnival

Greece’s Theodoros Therzopoulos, the American Robert Wilson, Englishman Tony Harrison, Spain’s Nuria Ester and the Japanese Tadashi Suzuki, as well as the late Russian Yuri Lyubimov, Germany’s Heiner Müller and the Brazilian Antunes Filho were all outstanding avant-garde directors and theatre-makers at the peak of their careers or already beyond the peak in the early 1990s and despite their aesthetic and ideological differences, they found common ground in the Olympic ideal. Jae Kyoung Kim’s study even devotes a chapter to the hope that this ideal might also impact on the Olympic Games. While there is little hope for that, it is encouraging that the evils of the sports industry – doping scandals, violence, terrorism, political boycotts – are absent from the International Theatre Olympics. In fact, Theodoros Therzopoulos, founder of Attis Theatre in Athens, points to the positive impact on the host countries: “Despite the fact that the Theatre Olympics have been hosted by China, Russia and Turkey – countries where freedom of artistic expression is relatively limited – there was no censorship, apart from a ban on nudity in China.”

The question, of course, is whether the Theatre Olympics remains a safe haven in an age of stormy culture wars: will respect for the Olympic ideal prevail over ideological differences?

In any case, the International Theatre Olympics preserves the original intentions of its founders to this day and seeks to present both “In” and “Off” theatre culture, i.e. avant-garde, directorial and popular theatre, as well as street theatre, puppet theatre and carnival productions.

This democratic principle encompasses organisation as well. Unlike major theatre festivals, the International Theatre Olympics has no permanent organising committee or headquarters; each host country offers a number of partner institutions the opportunity to accommodate foreign companies. Perhaps, it is precisely this unconventional approach to organisation, rather than the involvement of the traditional strongholds of Western culture, that the International Theatre Olympics, despite its scale and importance, is not yet on a par with other festivals in the Anglo-Saxon media coverage. The New York Times, for example, expressed amazement at this after the most recent event co-hosted by St. Petersburg, Russia, and Toga, Japan. “More than twenty countries sent over one hundred productions, including the great ones by the most popular directors. Then why have so few people heard of the event? (...) With one hundred and four productions from twenty-two countries (including seventy-eight from Russia alone), this year’s festival is the longest and most extensive since its inception. Great productions are presented by Katie Mitchell, Milo Rau, Heiner Goebbels and Tadashi Suzuki, who also directed the Toga part of the festival. (...) The scale of this year’s festival is remarkable, but despite the fact that the organisation’s international committee includes American director Robert Wilson, French theatre-maker Georges Lavaudant and British playwright Tony Harrison, conspicuously few people in the Western theatre world have heard of the Theatre Olympics.”

According to Roslyn Sulcas, writing for the US paper, “this is, perhaps, because the festival has so far been held in countries like China, Greece, Japan, South Korea and Turkey that are not considered international theatre hubs. Unlike major festivals such as Avignon or Edinburgh, the Theatre Olympics is not an annual event and has no permanent Director or PR staff to give it a clear identity. Instead, every time, there is a new artistic director defining the event.”

One such artistic director was Yuri Lyubimov, Director of the legendary Taganka, who also used to direct in Hungary to great acclaim. Of the founders, Therzopoulos and Suzuki have also been at the helm of the event. The artistic director is approved by a committee comprising the founders and the directors of previous Olympics. The artistic director of the 2023 event in Hungary will be Attila Vidnyánszky, Director of the National Theatre.

The two Olympics held in Russia are good examples of the scale – albeit attracting subdued international attention.

“The programme in St Petersburg included hundreds of performances and events,” said National Theatre dramaturge András Kozma, one of the organisers of the 2001 Moscow Olympics working alongside legendary Russian director Anatoly Vasiliev. “The St Petersburg programme also included several internationally renowned Russian festivals, such as Baltic House, the Chekhov Festival, NET (New European Theatre) and Russia’s Golden Mask National Theatre Festival. While during the 2001 Moscow Olympics, the capital city hosted hundreds of performances, workshops, exhibitions and professional events”, adds András Kozma, “the 2019 Olympics encompassed all of Russia, with foreign productions touring major cities in the Far East and the national theatres of the Federation making guest appearances in St Petersburg”.

Five rings, no scandals

The Olympic Games have repeatedly been criticised not only because of the use of banned performance-enhancing drugs, but also because of the financial implications of the quadrennial events. The International Theatre Olympics, of course, does not compare to the Games, however, the latter aspect is not negligible.

The budgets of the Theatre Olympics to date have varied a great deal, due to the diverse scales. The first festival, held in Delphi, featured only nine performances from seven countries in about two weeks. The 1999 Theatre Olympics in Japan lasted two months and attracted forty-two productions from twenty countries, while the 2001 festival in Moscow, a large-scale event, presented ninety-seven productions from thirty-two countries over two and a half months. The 2018 Olympics in India went even further, with some 465 performances from thirty-five countries. We cannot compete with big countries like China, Russia or India, but Hungary can afford more than Seoul in 2010 or Wrocław in 2016, for example. The HUF 6.8 bln budget is mid-range compared to previous festivals. Importantly, these funds will not result in empty and unutilised infrastructure after the event, since visitors will be accommodated by lots of theatre centres, as opposed to a single city, so there will be no gloomy and upsetting photos after the International Theatre Olympics depicting vacant stadiums or an Olympic village-turned-rust belt. Infrastructure development consists mostly of renovating the country’s theatres. The Olympics do not require new investment, but can provide an opportunity for long-overdue improvements.

The International Theatre Olympics is not a tour de force for the cultural industry and politics, but an opportunity to get to know each other. The Olympics can put a company or a lesser-known theatre culture on the map. All they have to do is take part.

Translated by László Vértés



„Óh, e zűr között
hová lesz énem zárt
egyénsége.”

/Madách Imre/

MITEM

MADÁCH NEMZETKÖZI SZÍNHÁZI TALÁLKOZÓ
MADÁCH INTERNATIONAL THEATRE MEETING

NATIONAL THEATRE • BUDAPEST, 17 SEPTEMBER – 9 OCTOBER, 2021.

NEMZETI SZÍNHÁZ • BUDAPEST, 2021. SZEPTEMBER 17. – OKTÓBER 9.



“Ah, in this tumult wild,
What shall become of
that self locked in me.”

/Imre Madách/

foto: © Lucie Jansch

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ÁGNES PÁLFI – ZSOLT SZÁSZ

Scenes of Imminent Existence¹

Flash Report on MITEM 2021

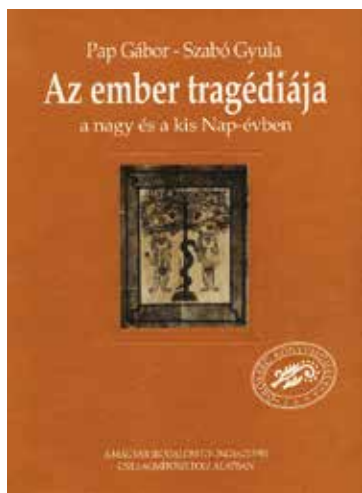
Now, that it is April 2022 already², the directors and dramaturges at our theatre are becoming increasingly interested in the focus of the Theatre Olympics to be held in Hungary in 2023. What is the motto that best suggests the present state of our globalized world? What are the universal concepts by which the mission of today's theatre can be redefined? The *Tragedy* staged by Silviu Purcărete at MITEM VII, which took place between September 14 and October 9 last year, may even be considered as the harbinger of the Theatre Olympics because the year 2023 will also see the bicentenary of the birth of Imre Madách.³ So let us start our regular flash report with this production.

ZSOLT SZÁSZ: New directorial concepts as realised on the stage time and again have always played a primary role in the reinterpretation of the classics of drama literature. What makes Purcărete's production exceptional is that he had come up with a radically new reading before the rehearsal process: he wanted to stage Madách's work as a theatre for the parousia, or resurrection. His dramaturge, András Visky has the following to say about the director's *ars poetica* in his work diary involving the rehearsal process: "[Purcărete] regards the theater as the stage of universal events: a space where Revelation is achieved and we participate in the administration of justice. Not a theater of illusion, opposed to

¹ In Hungarian, see the January, February and March 2022 issues of *Szcenárium*.

² This dialogue began in January 2022, but was completed only in April (– authors)

³ As a closing event of the Theatre Olympics, a grandiose open-air *Tragedy* performance is scheduled in Alsó-Sztregova, today Slovenia, with an international staff, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, who has staged Madách's work several times during his career.



Cover of the book by Gábor Pap, Örökség Könyvműhely, 1999



A frame from Marcell Jankovics' film "With the Eye of God" and the figure of Adam (source: mma.hu)

reality, but on the contrary, the theater of the sole reality, opposed to the world as optical illusion."⁴

ÁGNES PÁLFI: This salvation history perspective was by no means always characteristic of *Tragedy* interpretations. If we now re-read György Lukács's 1955 review in *Szabad Nép*, which rejects the work on account of Madách's pessimistic view of history, what we really get shocked at is that the Christian eschatology of the framing first and last scenes is totally out of the question, so it does not even become the subject of criticism. The change of attitude in this field came with the 1999 study⁵ by Gábor Pap, who interpreted Madách's "world drama" focusing right on the first and last scenes within "an astral mythical framework". However, this astral mythical reading of the vast cycle of time beyond history, which, thanks to Gábor Pap's lectures, had been well known for quite a long time among receptive young intellectuals, did not attract the attention of contemporary directors. I remember Marcell Jankovics saying at a screening in the late '90s, when he presented the already completed historical scenes of his animated film, that "as the eclectic child of our eclectic age" he did not find the key to the visualisation of the framing first and last scenes. Not much later, János Szikora came up with a notable concept that was congenial to me: in his staging for the festive opening of

⁴ See this work diary here: Visky, András: *Mire való a színház? Útban a theatrum theologicum felé*, Károli Gáspár Református Egyetem – L'Harmattan Kiadó, Bp., 2020. Excerpts from it were published in the September 2021 issue of *Szcenáríum* pp 26–39, titled *Az ember tragédiája mint theatrum theologicum*. See the complete work diary here: András Visky: *The Tragedy of Man as Theatrum Theologicum (A Dramaturg's Diary)*. In: *Poetic Rituality in Theatre and Literature*, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary – L'Harmattan Publishing, Budapest – Paris, 2020, p 225

⁵ Pap, Gábor: *A Tragédia csillagmítoszi értelmezése a nagy és a kis Nap-évben*. In: Pap Gábor – Szabó Gyula: *Az ember tragédiája a nagy és a kis Nap-évben*, Örökség Könyvműhely, Érd, 1999, pp 89–106

the new National Theatre on March 15, 2002, he took a kind of generational perspective when he started and finished the story, the drama of expulsion from the Garden of Eden, with the first couple of people, József Szarvas in Adam's role and Vera Pap in Eva's, like two aging adolescents, as if referring to his own "great generation".

Zs. Sz.: Also, the problem of beginning and end was in the focus of the 1984 film version by András Jeles, when he started and had this story played through with preadolescent children, drawing attention to humanity's inherent sinlessness, which is given again and again as a chance for successive generations. This kind of primacy may have puzzled Purcărete as well, since we know from András Visky's diary that he returned to Jeles's film several times during the interpretation. Yet, in the end, he found the way of staging in terms of genre: "»We're not playing a parody of Madách – or rather the *Tragedy* – but a *guignol*: we seek the amateurism and immediacy of folk theatrics« – he told the actors. If it is the Bible, then let it be the peasant bible, or *biblia pauperum*; if theology, then a *theologia pauperum*", as Visky's diary has it (p 234). With this in mind, I asked him at the talkback after the performance whether medieval genres like mystery and morality plays could be considered as forerunners of this production⁶ – to which Purcărete gave an affirmative answer, but could not elaborate in the absence of time.

Á. P.: This consistent genre perspective gives a unity to the theatrical language of the production, as opposed to the stylistic eclecticism which characterizes the historical scenes in Jankovics and Szikora's interpretation. Purcărete radically ignores the tools of psychological realism, but enforces the surreal pictorial logic of the avant-garde, which, with its absurd, irrational shifts, reinforces dreamlikeness and liberates the passage between the individual historical scenes. However, it is most understandable that the two Prague scenes – centred on the existential drama of modern European man, including



Eve-Lucia, Adam-Miltiades and the Child Kimón,
directed by Silviu Purcărete (source: hetuijszo.ro)

⁶ In his 1939 production, Antal Németh already made an attempt to direct the chamber theatre version of the *Tragedy* as a mystery play. György Lengyel praises this performance as a religious ceremony in an intimate atmosphere. See note 9 on page 14 on this in András Visky's quoted diary: Lengyel, György *La tragédie de l'Homme, poème dramatique d'Imre Madách*. L'Annuaire théâtral, Numero 47, Printeps 2010, pp 157–171



The final scene of the Timisoara Tragedy with the white lily (photo: Petru Cojocaru, source: jatekter.ro)

which suggests from the outset that these beings are already inhabitants of the phalanstery. But beyond that, throughout the historical scenes, Adam and Eve are even wearing masks to cover their entire heads, which emphasizes their puppetlike quality once and for all. In every moment we perceive that they exist not only in the borderland of dream and wakefulness, but – as is natural in the case of puppet figures – at the edge of life and death.

Á. P.: The nature and significance of this ambiguity is revealed in the last scene, when following the key sentence of the dramatic climax (“Ah, Adam, I’m in the family way”⁷) the inhabitants of the phalanstery begin to dance slowly in pairs, like the multiplied offsprings and replicas of the first couple. The white lily symbolizing the virginity of Mary in the hands of the expectant Eves



The final scene of *Misericordia* after the boy says “mama” (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

Madách’s personal karma and the painful chapter of his life, the crisis of his marriage – would not work in this unified formal language combining the tradition of 20th century avant-garde and medieval farce.

Zs. Sz.: We do not see people in this performance. Almost naked whitewashed bodies move on the autopsy table of the Theatre surrounded by the oval auditorium as well as along the two axes of the cross-shaped playing area, which suggests from the outset that these beings are already inhabitants of the phalanstery. But beyond that, throughout the historical scenes, Adam and Eve are even wearing masks to cover their entire heads, which emphasizes their puppetlike quality once and for all. In every moment we perceive that they exist not only in the borderland of dream and wakefulness, but – as is natural in the case of puppet figures – at the edge of life and death.

Á. P.: The nature and significance of this ambiguity is revealed in the last scene, when following the key sentence of the dramatic climax (“Ah, Adam, I’m in the family way”⁷) the inhabitants of the phalanstery begin to dance slowly in pairs, like the multiplied offsprings and replicas of the first couple. The white lily symbolizing the virginity of Mary in the hands of the expectant Eves suggests that they are all bearing Jesus, the new Adam. Yet, unlike the couple in the Madách drama, they apparently have not awakened to self-awareness from the dream spell that was cast on them.

Zs. Sz.: It is a great challenge for any director to have the Lord’s concluding words rendered at the very end of the work: “I told you, man: fight, trust and be full of hope!” In the production from Timisoara, Enikő Éder and the choir echo this celestial phrase in unison. As mentioned in the

⁷ <https://mek.oszk.hu/00800/00876/00876.htm>

interview with the company⁸, Purcărete originally meant to have the Lord speak in a child's voice. Finally, he entrusted the task to Enikő Éder, who, with her atonal speech-voice, conveyed this non-worldly voice of the Lord, always present in the background, as if we were hallucinating the fading voice of a child. However, on the stage of *Misericordia*, written and directed by Emma Dante, there is only one word left for the "child" at the end of the performance: "mama" – which also has a powerful effect. I wonder why?

Á. P.: It can also be interpreted as when the deaf-mute boy says this first word, which is, at the same time, the final word of the performance, the three foster-mothers, who have previously been caring for him as a backward infant, can now release him into the adult world "in the hope of a better life" – as one of the foster-mothers (Italia Carroccio) put it at the talkback. Still, when we come to think about it, it is not a happy ending, but a cathartic moment that, like in the case of classical tragedies, in fact mobilizes our sense of loss. For the three aging prostitutes are now losing the only meaning of their lives, the common adopted child, just as the boy is being expelled from the paradisiacal state which has been the freedom of dance for him up to now in the world of verbal communication. Katalin Kemény, when she spoke of the original meaning of *katastrophe*, the ability to turn to reality⁹, was probably drawing attention to something that Emma Dante apparently also came to think through when staging this story.

Zs. Sz.: Nonetheless, it is a post-dramatic author's theatre, but it goes far beyond the sociological criteria that many are trying to embrace here, too: they try to capture the drama of our age in its



Arturo (Simone Zambelli) is dancing in front of the stepmothers (source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

⁸ MAGYARADÁS / Pódium / *The Tragedy of Man* at the Gergely Csiky State Hungarian Theatre in Timisoara. Released on Youtube: 7 April 2020

⁹ Katalin Kemény warns that *katastrophe* in the Greek language originally meant 'reversal', "more precisely the turning point in the drama where the threads of complexity begin to unfold (...)." However, this meaning has been deleted from modern European languages, and it is to be feared that so has the alternative of the conscious dramatic act of 'reversal' or active presence with it. Thus, there is a constant danger that "[where] the disturbances and connections of life would be clear, *where we could turn to the real and become real, there we crash*". Cp Kemény, Katalin: *Az ember, aki ismerte a saját neveit* (Szélszegyetek Hamvas Béla Karneváljához). Akadémiai, Bp. 1990, p 41

own brutality, demonstrating that today it is worthwhile to focus only on the stories of marginalized existences or people with disabilities, and that artists must act as protagonists, demanding to directly shape social discourse. In my opinion, the main merit of this production lies in its ability to override this kind of civilization-critical attitude. Without any didactic overtones, the members of the company go through their own life drama to ontological questions about what is the ultimate mover of man as a gendered being. It is no coincidence that Simone Zambelli's both elementary and virtuoso dance language is discovered and incorporated into the play, which, combined with the emotional surplus of the foster-mothers sassing in their regional dialects, creates the sensual evidence of a fuller reality for the viewer. At this point, it is worth mentioning the influence on Emma Dante of Tadeusz Kantor, who also devoted theoretical writings on how a "poor" ordinary object can become a sign of even Man on stage. The artistic revolution of the 1960s and 1970s had similar issues at the heart and they do not seem to have lost relevance to this day. The two great masters, Robert Wilson and Teodoros Terzopoulos, representing octogenarians at this MITEM, have raised the fundamental questions of theatre again and again for decades. It is a shame that their results could not be incorporated into Hungarian theatre theory and practice in their own time.

Á. P.: Robert Wilson's theatre was brought closer to me by János Pilinszky's 1977 book. The poet saw Wilson's production of *Deafman Glance* in Paris in 1971 and subsequently made friends with Sheryl Sutton, who had an elemental influence on him as a black, silent and still presence in this piece – the dialogue between the two of them gave birth to this particular Pilinszky volume, one of the most important spiritual foods and cult objects of my generation yearning for a "new sensitivity". However, it was not until 1994 that the Hungarian audience first saw a Wilson production live at the Madách Theatre. I mention this because being late has turned out to be critical to me several times in my life. I was over forty years old when seeing *László Vitéz* by Henrik Kemény in Nyírbátor I sighed "had I had this elementary experience at the age of three, I would have become a different adult..." And now watching Wilson's *Oedipus*, I felt a similar shock: what could have gone in a different direction if I had encountered this theatrical language as a poet when I was twenty...

Zs. Sz.: The *Oedipus* performance, which premiered in 2018 and was on at MITEM twice, also reflects how much has changed in Wilson's art since the '70s. The production titled *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, which opened in '94, is memorable already on account of being the first one the Hungarian audience could see. Yet it is no coincidence that Wilson returned to this subject several times as a director of the great narratives of early modern times. The exceptional format of *Oedipus* stems from the fact that he has now turned to the mythical subsoil of European drama, which, through the masterpiece of Sophocles, makes all the genre issues of Greek tragedy discussable again.

Á. P.: I had the impression during the performance that in this rendition of his *Wilson* came quite close to the spirit that we perceive as the ultimate mover of ancient tragedy when reading concrete pieces of Greek drama: all through, *Wilson* focuses on the relationship to fate, and returns again and again to the very scene which immediately precedes, or follows Oedipus' murderous act of killing Laios. This text, repeated unchanged in the narration, represents the “bonkers” state we all know when we are recalling the decisive moments of “why it could not have happened otherwise” over and over again in our lives. One further question might be why fate, and the relationship to fate have become so important to Europeans today, 2500 years later.

Zs. Sz.: You have used the Latin word *fatum*, which means fate and prophecy at the same time. *Wilson* radically breaks up the Sophoclesian drama structure; so to say deletes the choir, which was meant to maintain the ceremonial nature of the performance on the Greek stage, but he does not even have the prophet Tiresias act as a talking character – his figure is portrayed, otherwise brilliantly, by a woman, an elderly German dancer. He has the story evoked by a Greek actress though, who simultaneously plays – in ancient Greek – the dramatic role of the fortune teller and the chorus, with the overwhelming power of past rhapsodists. Although she speaks in prose, she is able to connect the celestial and earthly spheres with the intensity of dithyramb that appeals to the inhabitants of the upper world. And at the same time as the repetition you mentioned, we see five dancers, Oedipus included, on stage, stepping on large steel plates that make a storm-like, thundering sound at every step, as if releasing the energy inside the material. From time to time in the performance, such elements add up to create the mechanism of action, which, in my opinion, cannot be described in full by saying that it is a technically perfectly executed total work of art production.

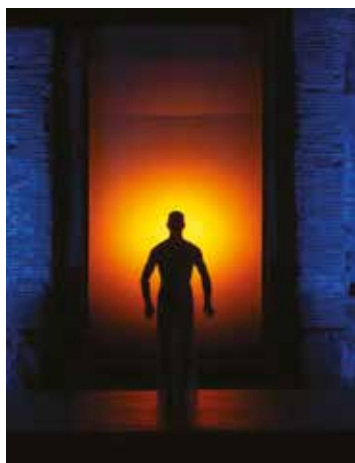


Oedipus and the four dancers on the steel plates, Epidauros, 22 July 2019
(photo: Elvi Fylaktou, source: aefestival.gr)

Á. P.: At this point, again, it is worth mentioning the concept of *techné* (τέχνη), which is the foundation of the ancient Greek conception of art, and by no means identical with what in the West is mostly identified today with the perfect technical skills of the artist. Following the line of thought of Olga



Scene from Gertrude Stein's play *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, directed by Robert Wilson, 1992 (photo: Achile Kent, source: robertwilson.com)



Final scene of the *Oedipus* performance (photo: Lucie Jansch, source: robertwilson.com)

Freidenberg, who deals with the issue in depth¹⁰, we can say that techné comes into play when the artist is already able to function and create as the medium of the Creator. If the notion of poetic theatre makes any sense¹¹, the question is worth rethinking by taking the beyond-literary-genres complexity of this production as a starting point. For there is no doubt that the narrator and the dramatic epic, as well as the prophetic lyrical voice of the dithyramb mutually

enforce one another on this stage, forming a symbiosis that goes beyond itself.

Zs. Sz.: I must admit that I am just getting to know Wilson's art, too. Although I was sitting there in the Madách Theatre auditorium in 1994, there is only one image that I can recall from that performance: with infinite slowness, a white cube was descending diagonally in the middle of the stage, in sync with a man in a woman's role, wearing a white dress, with a sickle in his hand, crossing the stage. Then I learned it for a lifetime that slowness can produce focussed attention, which is the most important thing for any theatre practitioner.

In the case of *Oedipus*, it is as if the whole thing was about this focussed attention. The first image already engages the viewer in the meditative space of the performance: when in the middle of the stage a silhouette of a human figure emerges in the pulsating backlight in front of a light source behind the canvas, it is undecided whether it is a man or a woman, approaching aslant or moving away, but we feel that we ourselves are

¹⁰ Examining the nature of the adjective *antique*, Olga Freidenberg states: we speak of techné when "mythological semantics creates the image of 'creation' in the sense of cosmic rebirth and the birth of the cosmos". Cp.: Olga Freidenberg: *Metafora* (ford.: Horváth Márta) = Kultúra, szöveg, narráció. Orosz elméletírók tanulmányai (szerk. Kovács Árpád, V. Gilbert Edit), Pécs, Janus Pannonius Egyetemi Kiadó, 1994, p 244

¹¹ See: Pálfi Ágnes – Szász Zsolt: *Költői és/vagy epikus színház?* – Magyar Művészet, 2016/3, pp 61–70

standing there facing the Light in the sustained moment of sunrise or sunset.

Á. P.: Unlike Wilson, Theodoros Terzopoulos is one of those directors who explain their *ars poetica* in their theoretical writings as well. *Szcenárium* also published an excerpt from his book, which will soon appear in Hungarian.¹² As with a Greek director, it is almost natural that his performances are related to the ancient dramatic heritage. His production titled *Ajax, the Madness* is based on Sophocles' little-known tragedy, but, like Wilson, he does not stage a linear dramatic plot. Based on his writing titled *The Return of Dionysus* I think this blood-soaked story can be read as in fact a demonstration of the creed and working method of Attis Theatre on the pretext of Sophocles' play: "We were trying to provoke the uprising of deeper forces, to tear down the walls which were keeping us immersed in ourselves, to bring forth images from the space of the unconscious, to fly out of our known limits. We realized that our duty is to make the people our accomplices and let them be our partners in the long journey to the country of Memory, the country which hides the primary body and the primary language".¹³

Zs. Sz.: The study you quoted was published by Terzopoulos in Greek in 2015, and the production itself has been on the repertoire of Attis Theatre since 2004. At the talkback after the premiere, the director himself spoke about the fact that it was meant to be a kind of workshop study rather than a full-length production in its own right. Yet I would turn your question around: What is it that has been



Theodoros Terzopoulos: *The Return of Dionysus*, first Greek edition of the book, Attis, 2015



From the 2004 premiere of *Ajax the Madness*, Savvas Stroumpos, Meletis Ilias, Tasos Dimas (photo: Johanna Weber, source: attistheatre.com)

¹² Teodórosz Terzopolosz: *Dionüszosz visszatérése*. A test (fordította: Regős János), *Szcenárium*, October 2019, pp 19–27

¹³ Theodoros Terzopoulos: *The Return of Dionysus* (with Preface by Erika Fischer-Lichte), Theater der Zeit, 2020



Meletis Ilias with the knives
in the first scene of *Ajax the Madness*
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó,
source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



Savvas Stroumpos with
the coffin covers and the red shoes
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó,
source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

keeping this barely one-hour production alive for 17 years now? After all, the world has changed a lot since then, and, let us face it, passing time has not been kind to the actors in the physical sense, either. If we click on the photos taken during the performance, we will see young male bodies brimming with power, which prove without words that in this theatre workshop the energy liberation mentioned in the text you have quoted above has indeed taken place.

Á. P.: With this former performance, which we unfortunately did not see, it is easier to associate the Brechtian attitude inherent also in the new handbill to the production: "...the performance is a study upon war's paranoia, violence and blood. The actors describe the criminal acts of Ajax, they are identifying with them, embody them and finally are transformed victims-victimizers, behaving with the same lethal mania that possesses Ajax."¹⁴ Referring back to my previous suggestion, I think the director expresses here that it is far from hazardous to "provoke a rebellion of deeply dormant forces". As far as Brechtian aesthetics is concerned, I have been preoccupied for decades with the beginning of Illyés' Bartók poem dated 1955: "»Hangzavart?« – Azt! Ha nekik az, / ami nekünk vigasz!" ("»Discordance?« – Yes! If it is that for them / which is solace to us"), then came the expeditious answer to this poetic question: "Ím, a példa, hogy ki szépen kimondja a rettenetet, azzal föl is oldja." ("Here

is the parable: / As you articulate the terrible, you dissolve it.") I believe I am discovering the same ambivalence or even paradox in this one-time cult poem, as Terzopoulos describes the "ecstatic god" of theatre, Dionysus, who "...represents mutually exclusive and intertwined identities at the confines of god and animal, insanity and rationality, order and chaos." How can we comment, recalling our experience of *Ajax, the Madness*, on this paradox today, in 2022?

Zs. Sz.: One thing is for sure though: we see actors on stage, no matter how old they are. First we see them standing on black coffin lids laid in a cross shape

¹⁴ See the bilingual programme guide to MITEM 2020 (ed. Rideg, Zsófia)

on the floor of the playing area. Meanwhile, we can hear Sophocles' text with the messenger reporting how Ajax killed the flock of sheep and the shepherds after the unjust decision, believing them, in his madness, to be his opponents. The play begins while the text is being repeated three times, almost without change, by all three actors respectively. The actor who is just speaking is holding a knife with both hands, imitating a frantic run in his standing position. His whole body is trembling. In the meantime, the other two companions are relocating the coffin lids, then explore their interior – each one is blood red: these are the contracted symbols of killing and life, death and the cradle. The beginning and the end are simultaneous – like in Wilson's *Oedipus* or in the poem titled *Semmi himnus* (*Nothing Hymn*) by the contemporary Hungarian poet Noémi László, published in 2004: "...Mintha az előbb volna az után. / Mintha túl volnék a haláltusán / s innen azon, amibe belehaltam. / Mintha keresztül suhanhatnék rajtam / és mindenem, ami feléled. / Mintha belélegezhetném a mindenséget." ("It's as if before was after. / As if I was beyond the agony / and inside of what I died of. / It's as if I could glide through myself / and everything that is waking. / It's as if I could breathe in the universe.") So we are probably in a watershed moment when our perception of time and space is undergoing a fundamental change. On this stage everything is utterly laid bare, root extracted. Symbols may change, knives may be substituted with bards and red patent-leather heels, which serve as the same killer weapon or handgrip as knives used to. The viewer's subconscious is influenced by killing and erotic desire, the two great movers, simultaneously. Seeing the aging actors, we feel that they, as sentry spirits, still represent everything that constitutes the foundation and essence of European cult- and cultural history. Which, in the end, can be simplified to what Terzopoulos said in the film representative of his oeuvre, *The Ritual Theatre*: martial dance on the male side, and mourning on the female one constitute the two upholding dramatic rituals in folk tradition.

Á. P.: In contrast, the other Terzopoulos production, *Alarme*, which opened in 2010 and unfortunately few of us have seen, examined the nature of female hysteria, revealing in almost microscopic detail the threatening state of existence when two women face each other, and their struggle becomes unstoppable. Same-sex competition in adolescence is absolutely appropriate, as the battle for dominance then serves self-



The set of *Alarme* with Aglaia Pappa, Sophia Hill, Tasos Dimas (photo: Johanna Weber, source: attistheatre.com)

knowledge as well as socialization for both boys and girls. Here, however, we see the murderous rivalry between two adult women, which, when viewed from a specific historical situation, takes place between the two queens, Elizabeth and Mary Stuart, for power. Yet, beyond gaining earthly power, this unstoppable hysteria apparently has its roots deeper. The pictorial language of the production makes concrete reference to certain mythologemes, too.

Zs. Sz.: There is no need to decipher symbols to notice that there are two snakes fighting each other on this stage: we can concurrently feel their fierce struggle, as well as their urge to intertwine. The set of two large space elements also guides our glance by starting from the top, from the right rear half of the stage, to the front and to the centre each time, and then the same way backwards, following a continuous snake movement. In the tilted cavity of the sloping wall plane at the back, Elizabeth is descending facedown from the right, while opposite her, Mary Stuart (the defeated queen) is crawling upwards from the left, from below. While a man (who, according to the playbill, is an impoverished nobleman) is also moving on his stomach along the piste which stretches into the middle from the left. If we just stick with the snake, which has countless mythical connotations, one of the most archaic stories came to my mind at



Scene: the two queens and the golden disc
(photo by Johanna Weber, source: attistheatre.com)

the climax of the performance. It is the myth of the ancient snake that swallows and regenerates the Sun as the world – showing that in the midst of their never-ending battle of words, these two “snakes” are unable to either swallow or spit out the golden disk that symbolizes the universe. They only keep serving it into each other’s mouths to silence the other one by it for a while.

Á. P.: The filthy comments of the “snake man” target precisely this barren verbalism, apparently referring to the general state of the world, which, at the same time, may be interpreted as a kind of critique of feminism. The performance as a whole envisions the hopeless situation in which both woman and man find themselves outside the cosmic medium of creation and cannot find their way back to the instinctive and ecstatic state of fertility which has given birth to and operated European culture until very recently.

Zs. Sz.: The next performance we want to talk about is the production by the György Harag Company of the Szatmárnémeti Északi Színház (Northern Theatre of Satu Mare), *Rasputin*, which deservedly had one of the greatest successes at this festival. But before that, it is worth referring back shortly to the

historical background of the basic situation of *Alarme* staged by Terzopoulos. Why did the director's choice fall on these two female monarchs, Mary Stuart and Elizabeth I to portray the communication crisis of our time? Probably because their correspondence, in which they both constantly refer to Christian love, was in fact also a kind of religious polemics between the prominents of the contemporary Catholic as well as the brand new Anglican Church. Which, from a European perspective, began with Luther's appearance in 1517 and culminated 100 years later in the bloodbath of the Thirty Years' War, which can even be considered World War Zero. This is worth putting forward here because Géza Szőcs, the author of *Raszputyin küldetése* (*The Mission of Rasputin*), raises the "ahistorical" question of how Europe could have avoided World War I, which had already projected the second one.

Á. P.: This play can now be regarded as Géza Szőcs's last will and testament, through which he is sending a message to the future; that may be the reason why he urged its translation into as many world languages as possible.¹⁵ Director Sardar Tagirovsky related the dramatic material even more to the current state of the world. It is not for nothing that – in an interview with him – he refers to the new global system of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, Metaverse, which he says is threatening with the horrors of a "historical-scale digital regime changer"¹⁶. He also mentions Madách's *Tragedy* in this regard, saying that perhaps we are already beyond the "phalanstery reality" envisaged therein¹⁷. The parallel between the two pieces does not indeed seem exaggerated after we saw the performance. Expressly or tacitly, it implies that a contemporary Hungarian playwright or director may also take the world stage by raising their own questions concerning philosophy of history. This self-awareness can also be perceived in what could be understood as Sardar Tagirovsky's *ars poetica*: "I, as a director, have been interested in how we can flip this historical situation, which rhymes with our current condition, so that we can present our fall in Europe as a kind of survivor stunt, a theatrical event amounting to victory"¹⁸.

Zs. Sz.: The final images of the production are indeed worth mentioning in concrete terms. Think of the bombastic operatic scene with Rasputin's death and the several attempts to kill him in the Yusupov House as its themes. The full spectrum of the theatrical language of the performance unfolds in connection with it. Still wearing a black cassock, Rasputin, the only one whose face is not masked in white, is recalling cheerfully yet resignedly, as if at his own funeral reception, his unsuccessful attempts with European rulers to prevent

¹⁵ Géza Szőcs lived to see the premiere of the play in Szatmárnémeti on October 4 2019. But he died a year later, on November 5 2020, before the premiere in Budapest.

¹⁶ Cf. "Szőcs Gézának valóban volt látnoki képessége" – Sardar Tagirovskyt a Szcenárium szerkesztői kérdezték. *Szcenárium*, 19 October 2021

¹⁷ Ibid 20

¹⁸ Ibid



Guseva (Evelyn Budizsa) with the knife and Rasputin (Gábor Rappert-Vencz) with the Bible
(source: harag.eu)

the outbreak of war. Parisian courtesan Loulou, who is meant to symbolise the inherent purity of art with her indispensable symbol, the violin, is making a reappearance. Another young woman, Guseva also emerges, presumably from Rasputin's past in Russia, who, as an angel of death, is held captive here by the hysterical desire to kill and embrace at the same time. This duality is symbolised by the oversized knife that she nails alternately to her own loins or Rasputin's throat during their "intimate" duet. Such an exaggeration and overemphasis of objects unequivocally points to a puppeteer's approach¹⁹: its role is to show Rasputin as invincible and immortal, parodying the absurdity of stage death. A phenomenon who, unlike the puppets complying with the so-called "historical compulsion", is inspired by an archangel conveying the command of Heaven, and who may be said, despite his fall, to have tried to fulfill its mission to save humanity at the cost of its life. Nevertheless, Rasputin is not a tragic hero in the literal sense of the word – inviting him onstage is to the aim that we do not lose our historical memory. This is served by the more than three hundred texts inserted, which – apart from enriching this great narrative with philosophical treatises and Rasputin's internal meditations – provide a wealth of additional information about the historical events and characters invoked on the stage.

Á. P.: Well, after the drama by Géza Szócs, I think we had better continue this conversation with Beckett's absurd play, *Waiting for Godot*, which, as we know,

¹⁹ Sardar Tagirovsky also qualified as a puppet actor in the studio of the Budapest Puppet Theatre.

was written in French in 1948/49²⁰. If one reads the text carefully, they will find a number of clues that make up the picture, namely that it is with full intent that the characters in this drama choose to retreat and to escape the trauma caused by World War II. We may as well put it like historical amnesia in their case amounts to a kind of rebellion. However, the larger-scale dimension of salvation history opens up to them exactly by virtue of the cosmic exposure stemming from this exodus, which is actually made clear in the beginning by the dramatic situation in *Waiting for Godot*. And if we recall the famous verse of the Gospel of Mark: “Therefore stay awake – for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning”, there is no doubt about a concrete parallel here with the anticipation of the second coming of Christ²¹. Putting this Biblical situation into the centre can only be the result of a deeply thoughtful and conscious decision on the part of Beckett. Just like that his figures undergo this situation without being aware of it, and they keep looking upon Godot as the mysterious object of their longing all through. This unconscious dreamlike existence reminds me of the final image in Purcărete’s direction of the *Tragedy*, in which the multiplied figures of the first couple have apparently not yet awakened from the dream Lucifer cast on them.

Zs. Sz.: The kind of parousia interpretation that Purcărete represents in this staging of his could be extremely fruitful for theatre practitioners in the future. It also anticipates rethinking the very nature of acting, too, if you like. The most

²⁰ *Waiting for Godot* (in French: *En attendant Godot*) was first published by Les Éditions de Minuit in Paris in 1952. Two years later it was published in English by the Grove Press in New York, with significant modifications by the author. The play opened in Paris in 1953 and its English premiere took place in London in 1955. The drama was first published in Hungary in 1965, translated from the French language by Emil Grandpierre Kolozsvári. The translation from the English version by István Pinczés was published in 2010. The play was first staged in Hungary in 1965 and has premiered more than 15 times since.

²¹ The prophecies of the Gospels attributed to Jesus, the seemingly contradictory statements, actually stem from the same root: they suggest that we can no longer count with time in the old way. In each case, Jesus speaks of the same paradox of time that characterizes the Age of Aquarius which set in at his birth, approaching it from a different perspective each time. When, quoting from the Psalms of David, he claims that *what has already happened is yet to come*, he discloses the cyclical operation of world time (the solar year). On the other hand, in the Last Supper scene (Mark 14: 17-32), he makes his disciples aware of personal responsibility, claiming that *what is happening in the present is part of the end of times*, a prelude to the passion narrative, of which the disciples themselves are thus active participants already; and that his fate is sealed by their betrayal and denial “today, this night”. And his last teaching is that the “day and hour” of the historical geology-scale cosmic drama, the end-time apocalypse is a mystery known only to the Father (Mark 13): *But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father*. See: Pálfi, Ágnes: *A színoptikusok három világtükre. Márk, az Oroszlán. Szcenárium*, September 2015, pp 47–54

recent trends in aesthetics are now treating actors as mere moving bodies (see the term “biological setting”). It is probably also the reason why contemporary theatre wants to get it over with the Beckett phenomenon itself, because if the underlying contents of the dialogue between the two figures is comprehended to a lesser and lesser degree, it is easy to arrive at a reading where this all boils down to a pointless and meaningless quibble.

Á. P.: This aspect also has its own *raison d'être*, if by it we do not mean the ordinary reading of the average viewer but, instead, think of the crisis of communication that the world-famous semiotician, Lotman called attention to more than three decades ago: “We are interested in communicating with the very situation that makes communication difficult and ultimately impossible.”²²

Zs. Sz.: When sitting in the auditorium, I could palpably feel the visceral resistance of the audience, “Oh dear, a new Godot yet again”. And I must admit that I was also running Szilárd Podmaniczky’s paraphrase parallel with



Samuel Beckett: *Waiting for Godot*, 2021, São João National Theatre, Porto, directed by Gábor Tompa, Maria Leite as Lucky (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemetiszinhaz.hu)

this performance, which was on at the RS9 Theatre from 2008, with a super cast and the telling title *Waiting for Becket*, and which asked straightforward questions about the actor’s existence. But then contact between the auditorium and the stage became more and more lively during act two. I think it was because these excellent actors know exactly what it means to embrace a stage self and to create the drama of intermediate existence internally, the gateway between their civil selves and their role selves, which will then inescapably captivate the viewers as well.

Á. P.: Gábor Tompa asserts in an interview that this very game for survival has been at stake in this umpteenth Godot rendition of his, thanks to which it is, after all, not a gloomy performance he says. He even goes so far as to say that “despair is the highest degree of hope”.

Zs. Sz.: Well, I would argue with this conclusion of hope, because I can vividly remember Kantor’s lesson in which Death is the ultimate point of reference. For me, the most shocking part in this performance is Lucky’s

²² Cf. *Kultúra, Szöveg, narráció*. Orosz elméletírók tanulmányai. In honorem Jurij Lotman (ed. Kovács Árpád, V. Gilbert Edit) Janus Pannonius Egyetemi Kiadó, Pécs, 1994, p 2

Dance of Death, which overrides the moral philosophy-based dichotomy of hope versus hopelessness. It was at least as powerful as the dance in *Misericordia* of Arturio, who is also referred to by the foster-mothers as Pinocchio.

Á. P.: Yet beyond that, the couple Lucky and Pozzo is also a metaphor for the agony of European civilization. It is a similarly brutal formulation of the madness in the exercise of power as well as the pathological relationship between the prisoner and the prison guard to what we see in the great narratives of the Enlightenment, that is *Candide* by Voltaire or *Gulliver* by Swift. Also, it is no less important that without this couple being around, the dialogue between Estragon and Vladimir would turn pointless and the drama lose its dynamics. Through them, the “real world” breaks into the world of the two “stage selves”, demonstrating that retreat or escape is ultimately impossible.

Zs. Sz.: Ivan Franko National Academic Drama Theatre, Kiev, featured at last year’s MITEM for the third time. The first piece of the trilogy by the Ukrainian national classic Panas Mirny, *Limerivna*, was staged by Ivan Urivsky, one of the most prominent representatives of the new generation of Ukrainian directors. Calling to mind the production which we saw in 2019 (*Morituri te salutant*), directed by Bogomazov, what I find as the most striking thing is that this performance also seems to be worded in the same stage language. The background to it may be that the creative intelligentsia of this young nation state has, for generations, been trying to create a unique stage language which feeds on its own folk traditions before all else. The symbolic sign of the final image, the straw puppet made to dance, which evokes Wyspiański’s *The Wedding*, indicates the importance to the director of the common mythical conception and cultural code of this Central European region, which intermingle the cult of ancestral spirits with archaic rites promoting fertility.



Based on short stories by Vasil Stefanik: *Morituri de salutant*, Ivan Franko National Drama Theatre, Kiev, 2019, directed by Dmitro Bogomazov (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

Á. P.: I think that this final image of the performance was, at the same time, the turning point which placed this karmic story with a melodramatic tinge or modern ballad involving a test of fidelity, into another dimension. Without that, the story would be little more than the individual tragedy of two young lovers who proved weak against the force of circumstance. However, this frozen moment concluding the story, the rupture of the female protagonist’s heart, did not in its style evoke either the sentimental topos or the well-known formula of folk



Panas Myrnyi: Limerivna, Ivan Franko
National Drama Theatre, Kyiv, 2021, directed by
Ivan Urivsky, in the picture Marina Koskina
as the dying Natalia (source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)



Scene with the straw man (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó,
source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

poetry, but presented the almost passionate and romantic gesture of a heroic life sacrifice. I venture to say that this scene, shocking even in its austerity, may actually be associated with a vision of the death of a nation. Yet, without the appearance of the straw puppet, this change of altitude could hardly have taken place.

Zs. Sz.: The appearance of this animated straw puppet as an independent actor can only be interpreted and justified together with the materials and tools used in the performance. The story takes place in a traditional peasant world, where everything revolves around the production and accumulation of grain, wheat and material goods. In the empty and neutral stage space the scenery is also a bundle of straw, and the villagers' choir and the talking heads turn into cabbage heads from time to time. The solemn end is the counterpoint to this consciously constructed grotesque and surreal use of signs. The

dramaturgy of the performance is permeated by the puppeteer's approach. Namely by that the living and the dead status – living and dead objects – are convertible at any time. This, in turn, evokes a more comic effect, rather than reinforcing the sympathy and emotion characteristic of melodrama. However, the performance as a whole, and the vitality of the company had a cathartic effect on me. This vitality is broken by the death of the best, the most beautiful and innocent girl.

Á. P.: This staging reminded me of Plato's dialogue, *Symposium*, in which one of the speakers, Phaedrus, claims that civic virtues – courage, fighting spirit and morality – are also attributable to Eros: "And if there were only some way of contriving that a state or an army should be made up of lovers and their beloved, they would be the very best governors of their own city, abstaining from all dishonour, and emulating one another in honour; and when fighting at

each other's side, although a mere handful, they would overcome the world.”²³ The typical storyline of Hungarian folk tales is also founded on the idea that the weakened kingdom can only be restored by the lovers who are meant for each other. Wyspiański's *The Wedding* is also grounded on this “archaic” conception. “Marry a peasant girl!” – this nation-building programme of the young generation at that time was nourished by the belief that at the beginning of the twentieth century Poland would be born and



The big scene of Natalia's lover Vasil (Pavlo Spegun) (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

from her dust shall she arise as a result of the wedlock of the intelligentsia and the peasantry. However, the play accommodates a warning as well: on the night of the wedding, the straw puppets – the spirits of the long-dead ancestors, the spirits of noble Poland – also pay their respects! Many people today believe that love, the last myth of humanity, is a thing of the past. Yet the unbroken popularity of the type of drama typical of the bourgeois era, and of Chekhov's plays in the first place, are proving just the opposite.

Zs. Sz.: The view that Chekhovian dramaturgy is a model of bourgeois drama has indeed been widespread in the Hungarian reception. Still, if we take a closer look, Chekhov's heroes are not urban citizens, but impoverished rural landowners or marginalised intellectuals. Therefore they can represent neither traditional folk values nor modern bourgeois values, although they, as heirs of Pushkin's heroes, are receptive to both, and are even bearers of the literary language which yielded, like in Hungary, the basis of nation formation in the 19th century. However, at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, this way of speaking already proved anachronistic – it does sound funny out of the mouth of Chekhov's characters, too, just as if they were reading from a book. Nonetheless, this kind of humour was hard to come by on Hungarian stages. Chekhov was played in a kind of sentimental and nostalgic tone until very recently, which greatly hindered the discovery of the novelty value in this dramatic oeuvre.

Á. P.: Honestly, I was very surprised to see that Gorky's piece which is reckoned to be reminiscent of Chekhov, *Children of the Sun*, has recently been staged in several Hungarian theatres. I would also be interested in how. In my

²³ Cf. *Platón válogatott művei* (Selected Works by Plato), Madách Könyvkiadó, Bratislava, 1983, p 158. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/7302467-and-if-there-were-only-some-way-of-contriving-that>

view, the greatest virtue of Roschin's interpretation is that he makes absolutely the most of the Chekhovian comedy you have been talking about. I remember well when he said at the talkback after his previous brilliant production, *The Raven* at MITEM 2016, that as a young director he devoted twenty years to mastering the theoretical work of the two pathbreaking early-20th-century Russian masters, Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, in order to synthesize the two kinds of methods they had developed. This performance is, in my view, a style parody of these two methods, while it also depicts the drama of the inherent duality of human mentality. I had the impression that these characters on stage, above all the female ones, are in fact infantile adults who have not yet managed to find the object of their love, but are so eager to do so that they begin to hysterically produce the symptoms of passionate love; then the very same persons suddenly change their style and start to organize and instruct themselves cool-headedly, regarding mating as a kind of erotic and purposeful role play. And the actors present it all so smoothly and effortlessly that I think some of the viewers inevitably recognise themselves. I must admit that I was also reminded of my adolescent torments, when I stayed quiet most of the time, unable to find my own language and manner of speaking.

Zs. Sz.: It was also mentioned at the talkback you referred to that in the second decade of the 21st century the suggestions that were made during the Silver Age of Russian poetry in the early 20th century are still valid. That period of Russian history is, at the same time, the period of the collapse of the Tsarist Empire. This piece by Gorky was created in the year of the 1905 revolution, but it was also the year when the Russian-Japanese war ended in a Russian defeat. Contrary to the rural locations of Chekhov's dramas, the characters here are members of the urban lumpenproletariat and idealistic intellectuals living in city blocks. Roschin's open-plan stage is at once like the deck of a capsized ship or a nursing home, but – because of the row of lamps hanging from above, turning on and off – one might as well think of a shelter where all sorts of existences have been forced together. The

only “comfort” device in this stark space is a bathtub, which is the refuge for the wife estranged from the amateur chemist Protasov, who experiments with the synthetisation of homunculus. Several of the intellectuals are making an attempt to take a dip in this lukewarm water, while the audience is listening to fragments of their world-saving ideas and trying to follow their tangled



M. Gorky: *The Sons of the Sun*, Alexandrinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, 2021, directed by: Mikhail Roschin (source: afisha.ru)

emotional relationships – only to soon realize how hopeless it is, and, instead, start focusing more on the burlesque choreography. At the end of the play, Gorky even unleashes a cholera epidemic on these figures to demonstrate the elemental destructive forces from the outside world. On Roshchin's stage it is not the epidemic that puts an end to this collective squirm, which can be interpreted as a game that has lost its purpose. The director employs a radical change of image: there is an orchestra emerging from the trap in front of the curtain coming down, and the protagonist, Protasov in his new role is conducting the opera tutti of the last judgement. We see three projections in a row: the ship of life on the way to the new world, and then the shipwreck; next the destruction of the passengers and happy couples in love, with Death playing chess over them in the red setting sun; and finally a huge hammer striking the anvil – an unequivocal symbol of the coming dictatorships.

Á. P.: It is in fact the current situation of the world that is qualified as apocalyptic by this ending of the production which premiered in 2021. Attention is drawn to the vulnerability of the bubble which makes one feel safe for a little while, thanks to the benefits of civilization. And to how frail artists themselves are, too, in deciding whether they are supposed to burst this bubble, which is in fact sustained by themselves, if the situation demands it. In the light of the current war conflict, this direction by Roschin may at least give rise to some hope for the future: it proves that the sense of danger and responsibility within the best of the Russian creative intelligentsia has remained unbroken.

Zs. Sz.: In Hungary, labouring the point of social responsibility has been the loudest voice in connection with the renewal of the theatrical language on the part of left-wing liberal theatre makers for at least a quarter of a century. The middle generation now in their fifties is trying to reinterpret the classics in terms of this programmaticity. Yet how far can one go in this kind of “language renewal”? Are classical authors still adequate for staging today's



The final scene of the performance with the image of the shipwrecked (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)



Ivan Volkov as Protasov with the hammer (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)



H. Ibsen: *A Doll's House*, Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, 2021, directed by Botond Nagy, Anikó Pethő in the title role (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)



The lying dead Nora in the glass coffin (source: huntheater.ro)

glass coffin, Nora like a disciplined schoolgirl, in the hush that suddenly fell, repeats as a foreign text the famous monologue of Ibsen's heroine, which is the creed of the new person, the woman seeking emancipation, formulated in the late 19th century.

Zs. Sz.: In their manifesto published in the programme of events, the creators themselves report that the new creative generation is experiencing this crisis in a kind of hypnotized state, a coma which is at least as difficult to escape from as to break out of the compulsive yet comfortable framework of the former bourgeois way of life.

Á. P.: That said, I still consider it an important question whether, and to what extent this production may still be considered an Ibsen play. Or is the author's name really just a trademark in this case? Nevertheless, as regards Bogomolov's direction of *Crime and Punishment* (Priut Komedianta, Saint Petersburg), it is

drama, by or with reference to them? – On leaving the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj-Napoca after *A Doll's House* performance, I asked myself the question: are Ibsen and the dramaturgy of bourgeois drama still valid?

Á. P.: With this production, director Botond Nagy and dramaturge Ágnes Kali do not address this question, but try to demonstrate that female emancipation is still the most pressing issue today. And there really is no denying that technical civilization is pushing more and more violently into people's private lives as well, so much so that the aural overkill of technomusic and the unstoppable flood of images doom relationships to failure from the outset, making intimate dialogue impossible. At the same time, it is a completely new situation, which has little to do with the state of the world depicted in the original drama. It is no coincidence that at the end of the performance, rising from her

a matter of staging a Dostoevsky novel which has lost nothing of its relevance since its birth. Does man have the right to destroy even a malicious being to take the first step on the path to becoming a great man? Or are only former and present gods, religious founders and warlords predestined and able to do so without a psychological collapse? – This staging professedly reckons with the key questions of Raskolnikov in the novel, as well as with the one whether, after committing the murder he intended to be a “probe”, in possession of what existential experience he is trying to redefine his own *beyond morality* creed.

Zs. Sz.: However, in the case of Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, this *beyond morality* creed does not mean that he is “out of the zone of ethical and moral grind,” as the director put it in the official MITEM programme guide last year. In this performance, cold rationalism reigns programmatically indeed, with the protagonist staying psychologically passive throughout, and this characterizes the acting style of the other actors as well.

Á. P.: The director’s concept is unmistakable from the first scene, as we are listening to Raskolnikov’s mother’s passionately presented voluminous letter, while its contents – a detailed description of the family’s existential constraints – is able, even so, to convey the dramatic ammunition which can throw Raskolnikov off balance and move him from his coffin-like lair.

Zs. Sz.: A memorable episode of this guest appearance was, however, the scene in which the head of the Investigation Department, Porfiry was acting as a simple police constable, unfettered and jovial, with Raskolnikov, smuggling humour and colour into this depressingly monotonous performance. Much to our surprise, this actor, Merited Artist of the Russian Federation Alexander Novikov revealed at the talkback that he had made a heat of the moment decision that evening, for the sake of the Hungarian audience, to go against the director’s instructions which dictate a hibernated style of acting.

Á. P.: So it is far from certain that this production concept, cultivated by many directors today, will be long-lived on contemporary stages. After all, there are more promising alternatives as well, like Slava Polunin’s smash at MITEM 2019, *Snow Show*, presented in cooperation with Fővárosi Nagycirkusz (Municipal Circus, Budapest). It also showed that co-arts may play an ever-increasing role in the renewal of theatrical language. And just as in the last



F. M. Dostoyevsky: *Crime and Punishment*, Priyut Komedianta Theatre, St. Petersburg, 2021, directed by Konstantin Bogomolov, on the right: Alexander Novikov (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhez.hu)

third of the 20th century physical theatres had a fertile effect on the toolbox of dramatic acting, now the so-called popular entertainment genres, long exiled from the high arts, are claiming their place among the programmes of prestigious international festivals. A good example of the interaction between these genres is the production *Bells & Spells* by Victoria Thierrée Chaplin and Aurelia Thierrée, of whom I think that the *ars poetica* they represent is not only an alternative to a new kind of theatricality, but a conscious and powerful rebellion in defense of the freedom of the artist and art.

Zs. Sz.: This kind of theatre can be traced back to the genre of the once flourishing variety show, which is characterized by a loose garland of subsequent magic tricks, dance inserts, couplets and chansons, as well as scenes of ventriloquists and puppeteers. The separate parts, like in the cabaret, are connected here by the compere, and it is also his role to reflect on the rapidly



Bells & Spells, *Bells & Spells* production, Paris, 2021 directed by Victoria Thierrée Chaplin, in the picture: Aurélia Thierrée with the puppets she moves (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

changing world: he is making fun of the current anomalies of public life, the excesses of politics, the “benefits” of technical civilization, the disintegration of the traditional frameworks of life, and the absurdities of the new lifestyle. At the same time, the variety show of the previous century was also a kind of “bubble” that served as a temporary refuge for an audience recruited from urban middle-class citizens. Still, considering the chances of the renewal of theatrical language, it is also worth mentioning the European theatrical avant-garde, which grew

out of the same mixed-genre subsoil in the early 20th century – in the spirit of shocking the public.

Á. P.: However, the style of *Bells & Spells* is not characterized by rebellious avant-garde loudness. This performance unfolds the richness and poetry of the artist’s inner world, making our imagination soar all the way to cosmic spaciousness. The dramaturgy of this poetic picaro becomes coherent without the creators trying to fabulise a traditional storyline out of the separate parts.

Zs. Sz.: I would like to highlight the craftsmanship-like nature of the performance. Behind the brilliant illusionist Aurelia Thierrée and dancer Jaime Martinez acting downstage, like in a puppet theatre, four artists keep the myriad objects, spatial elements and requisites animated in constant motion in the acting area of the great stage, minimizing the use of electronic modern stage

technology. This leads to our perception of the imaginary world in its objectified quality as a transformable reality on the one hand, and to our impression of the material world as humanized and transcendental on the other. This kind of animation appeals to the child within us who still walks freely between the worlds of dream and wakefulness, imagination and reality. As you have just put it, it is indeed a rebellion against the increasing aggression of virtuality – it is, as you please, the freedom struggle of the *homo ludens* in a world where today's Noras are helplessly trapped in the captivity of their delirium which keeps suggesting the supremacy of the outside world incessantly.

Á. P.: At the beginning of our conversation, in connection with Robert Wilson's production we already mentioned János Pilinszky, the hundredth anniversary of whose birth was commemorated in 2021. At the heart of this lyrical oeuvre is the trauma of the Holocaust, and the same theme dominates the poet's theatrical experiments, too. In addition to drawing from Pilinszky's emblematic poetic texts, the director of *Éjido* (*Nighttime*), Kinga Mezei also tries to rethink the poet's efforts to create a new dramatic language. Relating to this production, it would be worthwhile to reconsider above all the issues concerning the nature of the so-called "poetic theatre" and the *raison d'être* of the theatrical representation of poetry – but this is not possible now.²⁴

Zs. Sz.: On another note, I think it is important to accentuate that this production from Magyarkanizsa, Serbia, was made at the Regionális Kreatív Műhely (Regional Creative Atelier), which was founded by the world-famous Josef Nadj / József Nagy and has been spearheading experimental theatre endeavours for decades. In terms of its professional quality, this production is also worthy of the eminent Hungarian theatre workshop in Vojvodina. And as a puppeteer I can say that, similarly to the *Bells & Spells* production, the creators have brought into being a perfectly animated stage world here. The craftsmanship-like quality is an absolute virtue of the performance, too. But whereas in the case of *Bells & Spells* we perceive an ever-expanding and



Based on the works of János Pilinszky: *Nighttime*, Regional Creative Atelier, Kanjiža, 2021, directed by Kinga Mezei, sleeping/dead ancestors in the performance (photo: Róbert Révész, source: szmsz.press)

²⁴ We have made an attempt to rethink this issue in a different context previously. See: Pálfi, Ágnes – Szász, Zsolt: *Költői és/vagy epikus színház?* Magyar Művészet, 2016/3, pp 61–70



Closing scene of the performance
(source: pannontv.com)

subconscious realms which make the past of this cross-border area inhabited by Hungarians existent. Particularly memorable are the dreamlike depiction of the dead ancestors as well as the closing puppet scene of the performance, the village wedding, which symbolizes the vitality of a self-renewing community as the counterpoint to the notion of a sinking world.

Á. P.: While sitting in the auditorium during the “one man show,” a performance written and directed by Omar Fatmouche from Algeria, I found myself as embarrassed as at the first MITEM in 2014, watching the production titled *Where To?* by the Ankara State Theatre. For the stage language in which they spoke seemed not only different, foreign, but naive and rudimentary as well. On looking back over eight years now, however, I must admit that the Turkish ensemble left a lasting impression on me, and it is not just so because a year later we got first-hand experience of modern-day migration, which had been the topic of the performance. Actors in the role of illegal immigrants on their way from Turkey to Germany represented a wide variety of people: Kurds, nomadic pastors, including a holy old man, a barber and a mother with



Where to? State Theatre, Ankara, 2014, directed by Volkan Özgömeç (source: nemzetiszhaz.hu)

cosmic-scale medium, everything in the cube-shaped stage space of *Éjido* (*Nighttime*) acts inwardly, condensing the unspeakable traumas of minority existence and the two South Slavic wars, while digging deeper and deeper into the pits of memory. The greatest benefit of this enterprise does not really lie in the attempt to theatricalize János Pilinszky’s poetry, but in bringing to the surface the collective

small children. Locked together in the cargo hold of a truck, they brought close to us at the level of elementary gestures such norms, values, surplus energy, spontaneous conflicts, and unwritten rules of coexistence within a culture as we had no idea of. It is a good thing that we got intimately close again to a little-known culture and mentality through this “one man show” at the last meeting.

Zs. Sz.: Productions of institutional theatre culture which

follow European patterns and reach festivals such as MITEM also model the negotiation process we read about in Eugenio Barba and Savarese's new book on the concept pair of *acculturation* and *inculturation*. According to Barba, the "two complementary dimensions of knowledge" are equally important preconditions for becoming an actor.²⁵ In the case of Algeria, a young nation-state liberated from colonization in 1962, even the definition of the very place and role of an actor's existence



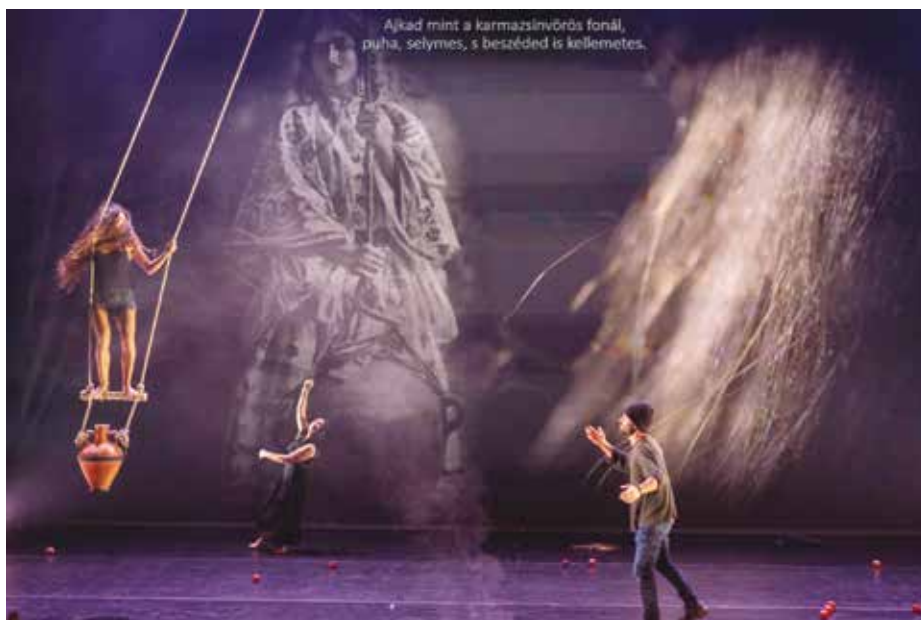
Omar Fetmouche: *Bravo to the Artist*, Théâtre SINDJAB de Bordj-Ménaiel, Algeria, 2021, directed by Omar Fetmouche (source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

in the European sense within their society proves necessary. After all, it is an archaic culture rooted in oral traditions, which, at least in terms of the Berber ethnicity living here permanently, may be traced back to the fifth millennium BC. The symbolic hallmark of the performance is a three stringed camel skin-covered bass – this instrument brings such a great success to the musician (played by Azezni Ahchè) who relocated from Algeria to Paris that he will get attention even in his homeland. It is also symbolic that he has to smuggle this double bass home in a coffin, as a result of which he is arrested for blasphemy in violation of Islamic funeral customs after his successful concert. Despite the somewhat complicated storytelling, this production, titled *Bravo to the Artist*, clearly articulates the fragmented and surreal state of existence which artists attempting to reconcile cultural and civilizational codes must suffer these days.

Á. P.: The talkback after this production also had a surprising account in store: we learnt from playwright Omar Fetmouche how Berber storytellers, who embody a separate social stratum like a caste in the Sahara, in the region of the Tassili Plateau, are telling their stories even today. It is an ancient custom still alive that the audience turn their backs on the storyteller to listen to the stories recited in extremely colourful ways. To them, as we found out, this is the real theatre, because in such a manner the freedom of the audience's imagination is not limited even by the sight of the performer.

Zs. Sz.: We are finishing our report with *El cantar de cantares* (*Song of Songs*), a production by director Ignacio García and the University Museum of Navarre,

²⁵ In Hungarian cf. Eugenio Barba: *Hogyan válik valaki színésszé?* (Part 1, translated by Regős, János), *Szcenárium*, May 2019, p 42. In English: Eugenio Barba – Nicola Savarese: *The Five Continents of Theatre. Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor*. Brill Sece, Leiden – Boston, 2019, pp 160–161



Song of Songs, transcribed by Fray Luis de León, with photographs by José Ortiz Echagüe, University Museum of Navarre, Pamplona, 2021, directed by Ignacio García (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetisinhaz.hu)

which, as mentioned also at the talkback, was intended by the creators to be an improvisational and attractive performance adjusted to changing circumstances. The Mediterranean, and Spain within that, has always been a melting pot of cultures distant in space and time. It is natural for the man of today's globalized world, the consumer of cultural goods, that theatre may also function as a kind of jamsession, an informal meeting of genres. There is room for projected ethno-photos, with live and moving characters – who all of a sudden leave the acting area and return, while sending us smart phone video messages on the screen – getting copied onto the frames on and off; or for a singer appearing several times with a solo that conveys the emotions of a couple in love. Yet, beyond this overt eclecticism, there is also an unspoken and disturbing question posed by the production, which has come up in this conversation for the second time now: Is it really true that love, the last myth of mankind, stands no chance at all? – Because this couple in the performance apparently surrender to an external force greater than them, when the boy and the girl break apart again and again. – It is worth noting that the director of this production is the apostle of the return to the golden age of 16th century Spanish theatre, and that in this performance the lines of *Song of Songs* appear in a transcript by Fray Luis de León, a Renaissance theologian-poet. This Old Testament masterpiece of love poetry is remarkable for the fact that love used to be considered part of the mystical experience of God...

Translated by Nóra Durkó



in honour of the masters



VALÈRE NOVARINA

The Spoken Word Writes in the Air

The dramatic pieces by playwright and director, also known as graphic artist and painter, Valère Novarina (b. 1942) have been included in the programmes of theatres and international festivals all over the world. The Comédie Française added his play, also directed by him, titled *L'Espace furieux* (*The Furious Space*) to its repertoire in 2006. His production titled *Le vrai sang* (*True Blood*) at the Odéon Theatre won the Performance of the Year award in France in 2011. In 2009 he presented his play *The Imaginary Operetta* (*L'Opérette imaginaire*) with the company of the Csokonai Theatre in Debrecen, Hungary, which then had five nights in Paris on the stage of the Odéon, too. He first appeared at MITEM in 2016: his piece titled *Le Vivier des noms* (*In the Forest of Names*) was presented by his French company, and his monologue titled *Pour Louis de Funes* (*So Spake Louis de Funès*) by Tibor Mészáros. For the Hungarian audience to see, this year's MITEM will feature his drama titled *A Game of Shadows* (*Le Jeu des Ombres*) directed by Jean Bellorini and performed by the Théâtre National de Marseille. On this occasion, in an essay written at the request of our journal, the Master looks back on his creative career and explains his artistic creed which is based on a poetic and philosophical approach to the creative power of the word on stage.

At the beginning, the very beginning of *L'Animal imaginaire* (*The Imaginary Animal*), are two paragraphs by a writer that I have a lot of admiration for, Jeanne Guyon. I discovered her thanks to my friend Jean-Noël Vuarnet, who lent me her correspondence with Fénélon one summer. I later found out she had spent a long time in Thonon and started writing in Draillant, where my alpine chalet is. I had never heard of her before. Here is the passage from her autobiography where she describes perfectly what I call "blind writing":

"It is not that I had nothing in particular to write. I had nothing in the world, not a single idea about anything. It was a simple instinct, of a fullness I could



Elisabeth Sophie Cheron: *Jeanne Guyon*, oil on canvas, circa 1700, Pushkin Museum, Moscow (source: pinterest.com)

not bear. I was as those mothers too full of milk who suffer greatly [...] ‘But what do you want to write?’, I was asked. I have no idea, I replied, I want nothing and I have not a single idea, and I believe it were a great infidelity to myself to give myself one, or to think for one moment about what I may write. I began writing without knowing how and found it came to me with a strange impetuosity. What surprised me the most was that it flowed as if from the core and passed not through my head. I knew before writing what I was going to write, and once written, I thought of it no longer.”

I don’t like the word *author*. I prefer the word *writer*. What does *author* mean? Author of the crime? It’s a word I never use. Texts, which *happen*, almost write themselves and are not *signed* as firmly as that.

If one says *writer* and not *author*, one sees the hand, the pencil, the paper, the physical act of writing the spoken word in space. In all of my work, I am searching for a verb-like action, a concrete knowledge. Everything that our hands have to teach us.

I immediately recognised myself in this way of working *without intention*, far from the forced labour of *overcommunicative* writing to which the world seems set on condemning us.

The actors too must be deeply passive. Passive actors, passive action, acted passion: theatre’s deepest paradox in two words.

There is in my practice – in my *exercising* of writing – something like a theory of the *intentionless*. I am a practicing writer, practicing director, practicing painter etc. Through exercise. A labourer. Also practicing Christianity in its philosophy – sometimes spending months turning strange figures over in my head such as the speculative Good Friday.

I saw more than thirty performances of André Marcon’s *Discours aux animaux* (Speech to the animals) each night more powerful, more beautiful than the last. But one night, André gave an extraordinary performance. At the end of the show I rush to his dressing room, keen to know how this miracle has occurred, I ask him what he’s eaten, what he’s drunk, what music he’s listened to, whether he saw his girlfriend. How to explain this great leap forward, this extraordinary metamorphosis? André replies “Oh, was it alright? I actually spent the whole show thinking that I’d forgotten to leave tickets at the box office for a

friend from St Etienne.” I laughed, then remembered a phrase from Herrigel’s little book on Zen archery, which says that one must reach a point where “something is shooting”. Reach, through exercises, a place of *non-will*.

Intention, premeditation, is the source of all ills. There is an *operative*, a *labouring* passivity – in the archer, the writer, the actor... and many others: they are at work in a forcefield... This is a somewhat magnetic conception of work, I admit.

Always begin with *blind* writing. I contest all mechanical visions of language. Works are not made but *engendered*. In theology, there is a clear distinction between *engendering* and *creating*. The Son was engendered – and not created by the Father. The Son – Actor – through which all things were created. Poet, Acting, Actor, Worker, Operator, Labourer, opener of the Universe.

When asked to talk about my work, I compare it to a gestation, a ripening in the darkness of the womb, the flesh, somewhere hidden etc. The images that come to me are to do with childbirth, the umbilical cord and not at all with some mechanical operation of which I would be the *author*. The author is merely the place where things have taken place, taken shape. Extraordinary things come from chance, from the outside, from a force that suddenly helps us. In our last show, the violinist Mathias Levy plays after a great wordless void. Then some workers, stagehands, come and mop up the blood that had splashed out of a fountain. In the beginning the stagehands didn’t dare take mops and brooms while Mathias was playing the violin. One night, suddenly, to my great surprise, Mathias Levy comes on with his bow and the rest with brooms and mops at exactly the same time. It’s an extraordinary moment in the show, this interplay between the bow, the brooms and the blood being cleaned up. These powerful moments are not calculated. They come from elsewhere. Make room for non-intentionality. Theatre, the very



André Marcon in *Speech to the Animals* in 1986
(photo: Tristan Jeanne-Vales,
source: festival-automne.com)



Mathias Levy plays the violin in *Imaginary Animal*,
2019 (photo: Pascal Victor, source: journalventilo.fr)

place of paradox, of no cause, no calculation, where there is room left for the unexpected, the call of the unexpected – as Laure Née wrote.

A non-intentionality which also implies a relationship with emptiness. Emptiness, meaning air, breath etc. The union of the three beats of breath (including a dead beat!) is the live spring of all dialectic.

The text will often find another one, vary it, decline it, rework it through all sorts of *touchups*. I got into this habit through painting. Three or four years ago I planned to call an exhibition “Repentance” (in the pictorial sense of the word). I started painting over old canvases which were five, ten, fifteen years old. Either to continue them, to make new figures appear, or to cover them with black paint and make other paintings instead, or simply to turn them upside down and make them pivot in a gesture of re-painting, re-viewing, re-writing. Continuing the same canvases but upside down. New view. Renewal. Move onto the next apparition. I don’t make much of a difference between painting and writing, nor between acting and writing because I think actors write language in the air, just as painters trace hieroglyphics on the canvas. If I may, I’d happily say *writerist* rather than *writer*.

I sometimes wonder if what attracted me to the theatre wasn’t the presence of writing in space, an interplay with emptiness.

I remember that one day, I said to André Marcon as he left the stage: “Now I understand. Actually it’s me who plays and you who writes”. Actors have no business interpreting. They shouldn’t have ideas on anything. They *don’t know* humanity: they simply carry its language before our eyes. They don’t interpret, they suffer the text, they have no opinion on “the character”, they are condemned to say the words. They have no choice. Life is entirely in the hands of words. Law, society, our feelings; everything rests on language.

In Avignon, everything started in 1984, when Joëlle Goutal, who organised literary readings at the festival, invited André Marcon and I to read two of my texts in a little chapel in the rue des Teinturiers. Bernard Faivre d’Arcier was in the audience. Struck by André’s work, he suggested we perform, the very next day (the last day of the festival) the *Adramélech* monologue in a magnificent setting, the courtyard of the Old Palace, in the Palace of the Popes. A spectacular turn of events! The following year, Alain Crombecque, following in the footsteps of Bernard Faivre d’Arcier, gave me free rein for a two-year project – which was obviously joyous news! During the festival in 1985, in the context of their “carte blanche for actors”, Lucien and Micheline Attoun invited André to read the text of his choice; that is how *For Louis de Funès* was written.

Alain Crombecque had seen the performance of drawings in La Rochelle, where I drew 2587 characters. He came to see me in September and offered to put on *Le Drame de la vie* (The Drama of Life) at the Avignon Festival. But we needed a director. We spent a long time looking for one...

During one of the last meetings, which was quite painful, André Marcon, Laurence Mayor et Evelyne Didi were reading *Le Drame de la vie* at Evelyne Didi's, in front of the director André Engel. The atmosphere was getting more and more glacial. At the end Engel says, "it's like Canada Dry, it's theatre and it's not theatre!" Upon which Andrew Wilms announces he is pulling his hat out of the ring. Another follows him. It was a total fiasco. I went and met Laurence Mayor in a café who suggested I direct it myself. Initially I refused: I was scared of actors, I had spent little time around them. Laurence insisted, "We'll help you. And because you paint, you can paint the set!"



Recorded at the Avignon premiere of *The Drama of Life*, 1986 (source: artinterview.com)

In July 1986, at the Avignon municipal theatre, we therefore performed *Le Drame De la Vie* – secretly subtitled: "an episode in the fall of the current reproduction system". The opening night was a pitched battle! Actors were booed and applauded simultaneously. At the very end of the curtain call – and the battle between boos, hisses and applause, a spectator called out from the balcony, "it's not this neurotic scatology that will get French theatre out of the mire!". Somebody in the front row responded "Go back to your caravan!". All the while I was running to the dressing rooms to announce to the actors, to their astonishment, "atheism has retreated!"

Then, year after year, everything built itself around the Avignon festival, which became in a way my natural setting: my home port. Without Avignon, without the great open book of its different stages, most of my *dramatic writings* would have, without a doubt, stayed alone on the page, as *dead letters*. Instead, on the stages of the Cloître des Carmes, the Pénitents blancs, the Cour d'Honneur, the cloître de la Chartreuse, written signs became living letters. Through the magic – the mysterious action – of actors, their embodying-disembodying, their return to the breath of tongues, to the very birth of thought... materialisation of language at the source of air... dialectical spiritualism?

When working with actors, I am always particularly careful not to talk to them about the play... And prefer to talk endlessly about the *drama of space*. In the heart of *Parsifal*, Wagner places this phrase: "Here time becomes space".

I think the opposite: it is space that becomes morsels of time. Time (which was unseen) finally visible. Other, *second* visibility of language.

Work starts in two dimensions, in a frontal relationship, facing the audience... Then we look for depth, we dig down into space and under the hood of language. A kind of turning upside down takes place: a spatial paradox... To dig until one believes in a pluralisation – until one reaches the fourth, the fifth, the sixth dimension. To open, to dig into language. Never-ending digging.

I think the actor has to be left at a distance, free to find his way alone, his revelatory passing through the role. The soul of the theatre is the actor. All *emotion*, the profound setting-in-motion of all our senses, comes from the embodiment of language, from the offering of language that the actors deliver, from their gift. In its naked truth, at its poorest, theatre is simply the offering of language. Everything rests between the hands – and at the tip of the tongue – of logophoric actors: under their tongues, which are carried, presented, offered to us as true blood... Through them, we see language delivered to space and delivered by it, our tongues unchained, seen suddenly as *other*. The actors do not enter the stage, the actors hold the entire theatre between their teeth.

Follow the actor in his voyage of truth (theatre as a place of truth, not lies!) Each body, each actor will reveal something new, another shadow of the text. Another silhouette. Through the cycle of scenes, the succession of acts, the dialectic, the photographic thought, the text will *appear differently*, as if revealed by the production of a negative – until very recently an unavoidable process in photography. Valérie Vinci will give it to us one way, Julie Kpéré will give it differently, Agnès Sourdillon differently, Michel Baudinat, differently and so on. Each produces *their own* text... The mystery of incarnation: the text is revealed by the flesh of each individual. And revealed in the end, at the core, at the very core, by the *body of the spectator*. To every actor, a different story. Different delivery. Different offering.

When at the beginning of their reign, Vincent Baudriller and Hortense Archambault suggested that I work in a space that I had not yet explored, I visited twelve and told them: “There are two places where I am dying to work: the *Carrière Boulbon* (nature in its raw state, rockface, rocks, a wild mineral landscape); and the Palais des Papes. What interests me there are not the stones of the palace, but the human wall erected before us, the magnetic power of assembled spectators. I remember the Wailing wall in Jerusalem, where one slides written messages between the stones. In the theatre there are no written messages, but a volley of lines, like arrows, that come and hit the spectator individually. *Singularly*.

For *L'Acte Inconnu* (The Unknown Act), I therefore chose the Palais des Papes, where I never would have ventured without Philippe Marioge, the eminent set designer I have worked with for years: a philosopher, an engineer of emptiness, an architect of space. Thanks to Philippe, we succeeded in taming

this immense, intimidating space, by building trapdoors from which to reappear or disappear suddenly, as in a small puppet theatre. The soul of the space decides everything.

I gave the play this strange title: *L'Acte Inconnu* (The Unknown Act). I had chosen it so I wouldn't be asked questions about the content of the play. But also because the unknown act is the resurrection of the dead. They rise again and joy overtakes them.

We are the only animal that knows how to deny death.

During one of the initial rehearsals for *L'Origine rouge* (The Red Origin), Jean-Quentin Châtelain grumbled, "I don't understand a single word I'm saying!" I immediately made it a line which I gave him in the following show, *La Scène* (The Stage).

What is attractive about Avignon is the air, the fresh air, the wind, especially the *mistral* ... In the open air, the voice works differently: it must be in tune, sonorous, simple, supple, irrigated, fiery, precise in order to be heard.

The spoken word weaves itself, stands up straight, erect, like a living statue, a fragile structure plaited between the speaker and the hearer. In the theatre we rediscover the materiality of the spoken word, its *drama*, its *unfolding*, its course.

Back in the day, one said of an actress (for example of Julia Barthes) that she had *given* her Phaedra or Berenice. This idea that the actor gives is very beautiful. What is given is spiritual, open, offered.

I always have in my head this fundamental image: the actors carrying language in front of them. Language as an offering. A carrying of the verb.

Words know more than we do. And sometimes they act alone, change everything without saying anything. Language is our flesh, our floor, everything rests upon it.



A scene from *The Unknown Act/Unknown Act* in the Courtyard of the Papal Palace in Avignon in 2007 (photo: Olivier Marchetti, source: novarina.com)



Scene from the performance of *The Red Beginning*, Avignon, 9 July 2000 (source: novarina.com)

Antoine Vitez used to say that we go to the theatre to *re-hear* our language: imaginative, rhythmical, fertile and entirely open.

Thought *accomplishes* animal breath: the dramatic path, the gesture of breathing.

Thought also passes through death, pulls us out of asphyxia, of suffocation.

Thought must also *trespass*: through meanderings, through crossings: life found again.

One does not direct actors.

It's not "direction", it's *assistance*, witnessing, a *loving gaze* on the actors. To me, the director has always seemed to be an *actor's doctor*. Just like a doctor, he must not believe too much in medicine. Nor in staging, or in directing actors. Good doctors try homeopathy. If that doesn't work, they try antibiotics.

For a while now I have spoken to actors in increasingly enigmatic ways, mysterious ways, to avoid giving them clear orders. Light suggestions...

When you tell an actor something, the consequences are terrible: it erases all the work that came before. And it's wrong. And it can stay wrong for four days. So beware! I think the text, the orders of the text, are already very constraining, there is no need to add more.

The true director, the true *director of actors*, for the actor, is the text... It's the text that must be followed, that must be heard...

I only say two things to actors. *One*: "All is true." *Two*: "Always go back to the sheet music; there are still many things you haven't seen. Go back to the book, go back to the text! Every day."

Jean-Pierre Sarrazac directed my first (and perhaps my only?) play, *L'Atelier Volant* (The Flying Workshop). Quite justifiably, he excluded me, chased me out of rehearsals because I had an unfortunate passion for contradiction and would constantly throw spanners in the works. Actors don't like having

to deal with several people. The general practitioner, the director practitioner – that's enough.

Barred from rehearsals, I wrote the text *Lettres aux acteurs* (Letters to actors). I distributed it on two consecutive Mondays, as the cast left rehearsals. They were very surprised. At no point did I think this text would be published: it was only for them. I saw myself as the *Spartacus of actors*, their liberator. The breaker of the bonds of slavery who liberated them from the tyranny of the director...



Shot at the 2012 Paris show of *The Flying Atelier*
(photo: Agathe Poupeney,
source: divergence-image.com)

Actors are not exhibitionists at all, actors are rather looking to disappear. A theatrical vocation is not at all the passion to show oneself, it's the passion to disappear. To come back as *another*.

Daniel Jeanneteau invited me to speak at a conference in Strasbourg. At the end, a Vietnamese man asked me if I realised that everything I said was Taoist. I had no idea what to reply.

In *Le Repas* (The Meal – 1995), there was a song by French singer Damia (“The Garden”) for which I wanted an accordionist, because, as a man of the Alps, I love the accordion in every shape and form. We were then lucky enough to meet Christian Paccoud, and we haven’t left each other’s side since. What is extraordinary, is that Christian never presses music onto the text: he takes pages, he presses them, affectionately compresses them and extracts, expresses, makes music spring from them – as from a lemon! I compare him to Debussy, so clear, so elegant and natural is his music.

He is extraordinary because he resembles Alexander, Marceau, Vincent Scoto, but also John Cage. Paccoud can also make experimental anti-music.

Stranger still... In *L'Origine rouge*, I asked Christian to organise the brief and boisterous intervention of a brass octet ... Paccoud assembled the musicians and the actors, set up their sudden apparition – and asked them not to play anything at all. This powerful musical moment was only optical.

If something isn’t right, isn’t going well on my writing worksite, rather than take away the deficient pages, I move them to the centre of the action.

Take nothing out; make everything proliferate. Picture the work as a *dig*. An excavation rather than a construction. Perhaps this tendency comes from my ancestors who all worked in construction: builders, plasterers, painters, architects. Start by digging, excavating. Maybe excavate the self: enter by going through *the lowest point* – under the door? The word digger is very beautiful. The dig. Profession: digger! In Greek theatre, the space for the audience was called *kileon*, the hollow. Untying, unravelling. Language digs a hole in us, finds things buried, excavates us. Does language deliver us from words? Could language go as far as *delivering* us from words?



Christian Paccoud, Novarina’s fellow musician, 2010 (photo: Barbara Heide, source: flickr.com)



NICOLA SAVARESE

The Five Continents of Theatre

Introduction¹

“Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? To answer these questions, we have to re-examine from a different perspective the innumerable forms, experiences, findings, and mysteries that the story of our profession hands down to us. It is the only way for us to construct a personal compass for crossing the five continents of our craft: when, where, how, for whom and why we do theatre” – as the recommendation by one of the authors, Eugenio Barba, goes on the cover of the bulky volume published in 2019 titled *The Five Continents of Theatre*. The introduction by the co-author, Nicola Savarese is about the purpose of this large-scale enterprise and the circumstances of its creation. The publication of this chapter is made relevant to us by the fact that this representative publication will soon be available in Hungarian, translated by János Regős.

To the reader

Dear Reader, I'd like to tell you here how the idea of this book was born, because an origin, as you know, is simultaneously a beginning and a foundation.

At the end of the last century, in one of my many meetings with Eugenio Barba, we were discussing the research we'd done and which remained to do, and our surprise that our book, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology. The Secret Art of the Performer*, first published in Italian in 1983, continued to enjoy new printings and translations into various languages. Clearly its simple format with text and illustrations having equal importance, each referencing the other, had

¹ Vö. Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese: *The five Continents of Theatre*. Facts and Legends about the Material Culture of the Actor, brill / Sense, Leiden / Boston, 6–11.

proven effective. The illustrations played the role of protagonists in a new field of study, theatre anthropology, which Eugenio had invented.

I had a playful impulse: why not do it again, another book by the award-winning firm of Barba-Savarese? Since I had collaborated as a theatre historian in his project on theatre anthropology, now it would be Eugenio's turn to participate in a history project, on a book I imagined as a complement to the first. In the grand firmament of ideas it's always good to have the pole star of a title. I proposed *The Golden Age of Theatre*, because I'd read that art exhibitions with the word "gold" in them always attract big audiences (in Italy we'd recently had *The Gold of Taranto*, *Venetian Gold*, *The Gold of the Horsemen of the Steppe*). It's okay to kid around with Eugenio, but you're always walking on a razor's edge. Although we had no idea what the book might consist of, Eugenio said it was a good idea and suggested we focus on actor techniques that had never been sufficiently studied.

To work – In 1996, a group of Italian scholars – Eugenia Casini Ropa, Marco De Marinis, Clelia Falletti, Bruna Filippi, Piero Giacché, Laura Mariani, Claudio Meldolesi, Franco Ruffini, Mirella Schino and Ferdinando Taviani – took part in an early discussion about our future book during a session of the University of Eurasian Theatre held in Scilla, in Southern Italy, organised by Claudio La Camera's theatre group Proskenion. These sessions, planned by Barba, were similar to his ISTA (International School of Theatre Anthropology): a "school of the gaze", but with fewer participants – no more than fifty – coming from different theatrical cultures. It was a temporary village of actors, artists and scholars who wished to deepen their awareness of their own techniques and become acquainted with those of others, sharing questions, comparative research and technical demonstrations.

The scholars declared their interest in the undertaking, suggesting ideas and filling out forms. The idea emerged of a history of theatre that would start from the present and proceed upriver into the past, centring on actors and their techniques. We would also include the research by the scholars around the journal *Teatro e Storia*. The title of the future book underwent extensive metamorphosis: *The Golden Age of Theatre*, *An Atlas of Actor Technique*, *A History of the Craft of Acting*. There's nothing wrong with thinking big, but the project had grown out of proportion. I was worried about how to subdivide under coherent headings the database of ten thousand images I had collected.

As time went by, the scholars became absorbed by other commitments. Expressing his trust in the project, Marco De Marinis went so far as to write *Theatre After the Golden Age*. At the end, only Eugenio and I were left: Bouvard and Pécuchet, two gardeners dedicated to cultivating this book-garden. It has taken exactly twenty years to complete, stealing time from other activities. We are responsible for the final title, and for extending theatre anthropology to the material culture of the actor. Old and new friends left us texts which they had composed, and we requested others. We were still, however, a bit lost. We leafed



Joan Miró, sketch for the set design of the ballet *Jeux d'enfants* (1932, Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona). Ballet in one act, with choreography by Leonide Massine, libretto by Boris Kochno, music by Georges Bizet, debuted in 1932 in Monte Carlo. A girl plays with her toys and falls in love with one of them, the Voyager, who turns into a living being.

through books on theatre history, but mostly set them aside as examples not to imitate. We kept on looking at pictures, commenting on them and making notes. Time passed between one meeting and another because we both have professional duties to carry on: Eugenio at Odin Teatret in Holstebro, Denmark, and me at Rome University. Every time we met, we began all over again.

One day Eugenio said, “Nicò, we have to start from something concrete. Let’s start with the English Five W’s – Who? What? When? Where? and Why? – and see what happens.” Considered by some the golden rule of Anglo-Saxon journalism, by others used as a simple mnemonic to remember the basic questions to apply to any subject of inquiry, these five interrogatives, with their illustrious precedents in Cicero, Quintilian and Thomas Aquinas, had the merit of brevity and directness. Best of all, they have the impertinence of children. Rudyard Kipling immortalised them in a nursery rhyme:

I keep six honest serving men
 (They taught me all I knew);
 Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who.
(Just So Stories for Little Children, 1902)

We adopted these questions as a trail that we might follow or not, but that we would adapt to the subject of theatre: When, Where, How, For Whom, and Why do people do theatre? And they have stayed with us till the end.

Thanks to them, a way of composing the book emerged that Eugenio said resembled the preparation of a performance. We conducted improvisations on a technical term, an aspect of actors' daily routine, a particular stage object. These improvisations provoked ideas and suggested combinations we fixed in pages of images or texts. As we refined them, some were discarded, while others grew in a sequence of evolving montages. Some examples of these improvisations can be found in Chapter 6.

For some years we devoted ourselves to composing a book on the history of theatre by seeking the way of telling it through the techniques of actors. It was clear, however, that we needed to take up the discourse where it had begun, with theatre anthropology.

Body-mind techniques and auxiliary techniques – The *techniques of the body-mind of the actor* are the foundation of the actor's relation with the spectator. The principles are listed by Barba in *The Paper Canoe* and in our *Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology. The Secret Art of the Performer*. soon realised that the relation with the spectator presupposed another element, of equal efficacy, constituted by *auxiliary techniques*. The immediacy and efficacy of the actor-spectator relation depends on a complementary relation of *body-mind techniques* and *auxiliary techniques*. In their variety and materiality, the auxiliary techniques concern:

- the diverse circumstances and times that generate theatre performances (the festive or civil occasions, celebrations of power, popular feasts such as carnival, calendar recurrences such as New Year, spring and summer festivals);
- the economic and organisational aspects (costs, contracts, salaries, impresarios, tickets, subscriptions, tours);
- the information to be provided to the public (announcements, parades, posters, advertising);
- the space for the performance and that for the spectators (theatre spaces in every possible sense of the term);
- lighting, sound, sets, makeup, costumes, props;
- the relation established between actor and spectator;
- the means of transport adopted by actors and even by spectators.

All these elements are managed through a practical knowledge stratified in time and experience, founded on techniques that facilitate the work of the actors and favour the realisation of their profession. *This is the material culture of the actor, organised within the double spiral of bodymind and auxiliary techniques.*

The field of exploration of material culture involves the actors' pragmatic relations and technical functionality, their behaviour, the norms and

conventions that interact with those of the audience and the society in which actors and spectators equally take part.

The perspective of the material culture of the actor does not take into consideration any meta-theatrical discourse (dramatic genres, social problems, gender etc.) or the aspect of the dramatic text which, together with buildings, are the only concrete residue remaining of the past. The goal is to concentrate on auxiliary techniques, on solutions, means and pragmatic procedures, ways of thinking and superstitions that actors of all cultures apply in the realisation, consumption and results of their craft.

Auxiliary techniques are not only recurrent across the various historical eras but also – according to diverse modalities – in every theatrical tradition. Interacting dialectically in the different layers of practice, they respond to fundamental needs that are analogous in every tradition when it comes to preparing/enacting a performance. A comparative view of auxiliary techniques shows that the material culture of the actor, in diverse processes, forms and styles, finds its roots in the ways actors respond to the same practical demands.

Within the framework of material culture focused on efficiency, promptness, and ductility, a collection of myths, anecdotes and superstitions impregnate the craft of theatre. The emotional aspect of values such as friendship, gratitude, rebellion, patriotism, spirit of sacrifice, inner search, refusal of discrimination and social revolt are motivations that have manifested themselves in the subterranean history of theatre, its myths and legends.

Where do I come from? Who am I? Where am I going? To answer these questions, we have to re-examine from a different perspective the innumerable forms, experiences, findings and mysteries that the story of our profession hands down to us. It is the only way for us to construct a personal compass for crossing the five continents of our craft: when, where, how, for whom and why we do theatre.



Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). *Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?* (1897, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). "I think this painting canvas is not only superior to all that came before, but also that I will never be able to make a better or even similar one. Before dying, I have put all my energy into it, and such painful passion under such terrible circumstances, a vision so pure, without corrections, that everything that is hasty in it disappears and life arises from it. [...] My dream will not be captured, there is no allegory; it is a musical poem that does without any libretto. The essential in a work of art is in what is not expressed" (Authors' translation).

With these words, Eugenio one day presented me with the “lateral perspective”. It seemed like reinventing the wheel. From the darkness of my still-disorganised database two images of the sun blazed out. They show the nuclear and magnetic phenomena produced on the sun’s surface that disturb radio and satellite communication, often causing serious damage to electronic devices. It isn’t easy to know when these phenomena are coming in our direction, and so NASA launched an observation programme with two twin satellites that move together. The two images, taken on 14th October 2012, display the same phenomenon from two different perspectives. The image taken by satellite A shows a simple filament that looks like a small dark stripe on the solar surface. From the perspective of satellite B the same filament turns out to be a gigantic protuberance exploding from the solar atmosphere. The filament and the protuberance are the same thing, but the two perspectives offer different information. This image seemed a favourable sign. We put it at the beginning of our book and there it has remained. (See picture on the next page.)

The two friends Bouvard and Pécuchet discuss the history of theatre and of actors

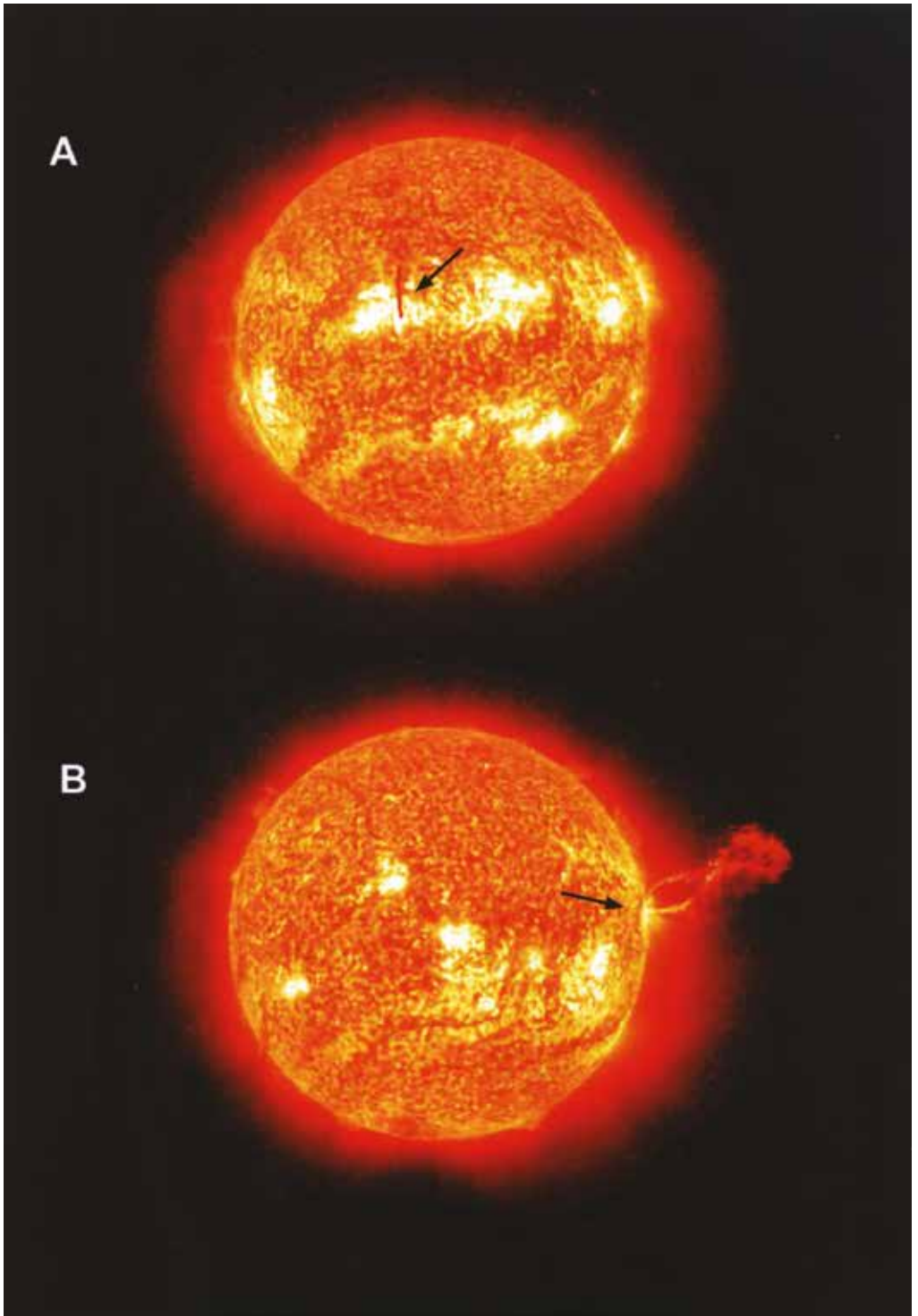
BOUVARD – We could say that the history of theatre means plotting out a sequence of facts and circumstances proven by documentary evidence. We then end up with a history of dramatic texts, another one about buildings, yet another about all the different plays, and also a history of styles and aesthetics. But shouldn’t the fundamental sequence be the history of the people who actually do theatre, meaning actors and their techniques?

PÉCUCHET – Blessed words! But not all actors are worthy of being enshrined in history. A book on the history of actors would have to face some extremely problematic issues. For example, how to describe that element essential to the craft of acting: the hidden, intimate relationship between an actor and one or more spectators? This relation is different and unique for each spectator. So how can its memory be handed down?

BOUVARD – You could hand down not only stories of actors, but also their stories in History.

PÉCUCHET – I’m reminded of Buster Keaton in his film, *The General*. Totally concentrated on getting back to his girlfriend, he tosses logs into the boiler of the steam locomotive, without noticing that a decisive battle in the Civil War is taking place all around him; that is, History with a capital H.

BOUVARD – I’m thinking about Trotsky, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Whites and the Reds, and the actors’ train that crossed the front from one side to the other, performing plays for enemy troops trying to kill one another.



Images of the sun taken on 14th October 2012 by the two NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration) satellites named STEREO (Solar Terrestrial Relations Observatory).

PÉCUCHET – In Theo Angelopoulos's film *O Thiasos* (The Travelling Players, 1975), a film camera is aimed at a street. The buildings on both sides function as stage wings for groups of soldiers who cross first in one direction, then in another, first with one flag, then another, advancing and retreating repeatedly across the camera's plane of vision. Then we see seven actors fleeing. Do their lives depend on the audience? On the critics? On the quality of their technique? Or on the senselessness of History?

BOUVARD – The tiny story of individual actors compared to History with a capital H: an abyss! When you read a book on theatre history, it's all so clear, quantifiable: this guy was the pioneer, then came his followers; this guy was influenced by So-and-So; this is the Cause and that is the Effect. But a whole other human adventure flows under this comforting evidence, a subterranean history that can't be trapped by the linearity of a *posteriori* explanation.

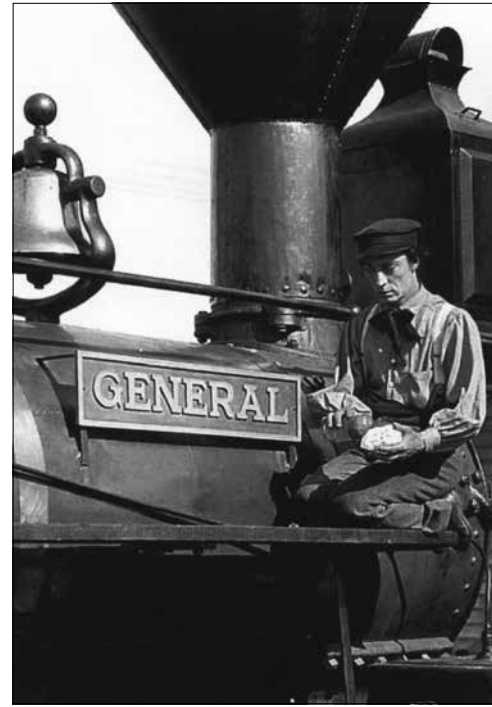
PÉCUCHET – That's right. It's undeniable that behind the perspicacity of artistic choice and the greatness of some results, there are forces that no rationality can break down: political belief, loneliness, affinity, patriotism, spirit of sacrifice, and the inability to reconcile oneself to the spirit of the times. And above all, passion and love. How can all that be written down?

BOUVARD – With the same poetry emanated by performances, that which touches the senses and memory of spectators.

PÉCUCHET – But spectators come to the theatre with their eyes and minds already stuffed with dramatic images. They are conditioned by situations of tragedy, pathos, and surreal absurdity offered up freely by the reality of daily life. The true school of spectators – what fills their eyes and brains – is History.

BOUVARD – So why do people go to the theatre, then? To escape from life, to encounter poetry springing from the play? And what does this poetry consist of? The evening news we watch over dinner repeats awful news with horrifying images of violence and death inflicted on helpless people. When the news is over, they broadcast films also full of bloody scenes, or gorgeous landscapes with happy young people, and VIPs preparing exquisite meals. How can stage actors, in their little boxes, motivate spectators to come and visit them?

PÉCUCHET – Are you asking what special extra thing a theatre performance has to have to compete with images from daily life, from television, media, and



Buster Keaton in *The General* (1926). The title is the name of his locomotive.



Engraving from the fifth edition of *A Tale of a Tub* by Jonathan Swift (London, 1710), a satire that mocked the prejudices, pedantry and arrogance of his time. The image shows "the three stages of humanity": the pulpit, the gallows and the theatre. Sermons, executions and theatre performances were the era's only occasions for public spectacle at the time. Judging from the boredom of those listening to the sermon, the most interesting spectacles seem those going on outside the window.

the internet?... I think actors have to be bears and hummingbirds. As sly as snakes and as spotless as doves. They have to be able to entertain, amuse, debate, tell an interesting story, make a banal one fascinating, reawaken civic responsibility, reveal the conditions of minority groups, be didactic, provocative, transform themselves into vehicles of spirituality, affirm ethnic, religious, or gender identity, confront a community's problems, and seek beauty, aesthetic experience and individual originality... And, naturally, they have to transgress.

BOUVARD – Is that all?... take it easy! Whatever objective they pose themselves, actors must, above all, master the famous extra-daily techniques that empower their performance and stimulate the attention of spectators.

PÉCUCHET – Agreed, but to achieve this glorious relationship with spectators, they also need other kinds of knowledge. A play has to be organised. You need to find the space, set it up in a certain way, create costumes and props, choose the music, and use the right lighting. You have to know how to locate a hall to perform in, how to get permits from authorities and the fire department, how to arrange ticket sales, invite critics and other influential people, how to pay copyrights...

BOUVARD – Just hearing the list makes me tremble. What makes a young person decide to become an actor, then? Why should a man or woman want to pretend to be a man or woman different from the one they are? Is it a natural instinct? Is it to achieve social prestige, for exhibitionism, artistic calling, spiritual need? To compensate for a sense of inferiority? Because they want to escape their own destiny?

PÉCUCHET – When an actor went to Alfred Hitchcock to discuss his character in the film, the director answered, "It's in the script." When the actor asked, "But what's my motivation?" Hitchcock explained, "To get paid."

BOUVARD – Many actors do theatre without getting paid, though; they must have a strong motivation too. Perhaps it would be more exact to ask, “*For whom*” has an actor chosen to become an actor?

PÉCUCHET – The first answer that comes to me is: they do it for *the one who paid for the ticket*. We could also give other answers: for their patrons and those who commissioned the work; for people they don’t know, who bought the ticket online; for those who want to spend a nice evening with their boyfriend or girlfriend; for believers in a certain dogma; to cheer up the elderly; to incite derelicts to revolt...

BOUVARD – You always go off on a tangent! For me, theatre finds its reason for existing in *where* the actors perform. Then I ask myself, “Does the place where the performance occurs determine the actors’ function and purposes?”

PÉCUCHET – I have to grant you that there is a certain difference whether you do theatre in a handsome building with cosy velvet seats or in a gym on the city’s squalid outskirts, sitting on plastic chairs. Whether you do it in the street or in a prison. There’s no denying that the *where* reveals the motivations for doing it.

BOUVARD – The actors can choose the place. Can they also choose the *when*? At what time of day or night, in what periods of normality or festivity can they stand before spectators to act, speak, demonstrate, or criticise something?

PÉCUCHET – Theatre is a trade with rules and conditions that actors must accept. Sometimes doing theatre is prohibited, while other times you can be paid richly to go on stage. It is only rarely up to actors to decide the moment for the encounter with spectators. When this encounter takes place is usually determined by other factors, especially by civil, religious or military authorities. Further, there are customs, the factor of when you can attract the largest audience, the likelihood of making a profit. You don’t offer theatre at three in the morning, when your spectators are in bed.

BOUVARD – Sometimes, however, performances take place at the strangest hours of day or night. And they get an audience! There must be something that drives spectators to overcome obstacles or an exhausting trip. As though this effort had some value for them...

PÉCUCHET – Value: such a big word! But you’re right: there’s something true in it. Perhaps the spectator is the true depositary of the meaning of theatre, and this meaning is found in the connection with the actor. *How*, then, are actors able to surprise the expectations of those who need them? With lightning-fast movements or by standing still, by whispering, singing, dancing, sitting in a chair or climbing onto a bench to entertain them, move them, or provoke them?

BOUVARD – If spectators are the depositaries of theatre, then actors are travellers who come to knock on their door, asking to be admitted to their intimate space. When they succeed, the sky falls on the spectators’ heads. That has happened to me on rare occasions, and I hope it can still happen to me. What was it that Anais Nin said? “We don’t see things as they are; we see things as we are.”

APPENDIX

Performances by Odin Teatret at the National Theatre, Budapest (2015–2019)

- 2015: *The Chronic Life* (d: Eugenio Barba, actors: Kay Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Jan Ferslev, Elena Floris, Donald Kitt, Tage Larsen, Sofia Monsalve, Fausto Pro, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Julia Varley)
- 2016: *The Tree* – co-produced with the National Theatre (d: Eugenio Barba, actors: Luis Alonso, Parvathy Baul, I Wayan Bawa, Kai Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Donald Kitt, Elena Floris, Carolina Pizarro, Fausto Pro, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Julia Varley)
- 2017: *Salt* (d: Eugenio Barba, actors: Roberta Carreri, Jan Ferslev)
Ave Maria (d: Eugenio Barba, actor: Julia Varley)
- 2019: *Big Cities Under the Moon* (d: Eugenio Barba, actors: Luis Alonso, Kai Bredholt, Roberta Carreri, Jan Ferslev, Elena Floris, Donald Kitt, Tage Larsen, Carolina Pizarro, Iben Nagel Rasmussen, Julia Varley)

Professional programmes at MITEM (2014–2019)

- 2014: *Identity – Sacrality – Theatricality*. Roundtable discussion on the reception of Eugenio Barba's work in Hungary, Central and Eastern Europe. Odin Teatret: *The Gospel According to Oxyrhincus*. Screening of the film version of the performance. Moderator: Zsolt Szász, Editor-in-Chief of *Szcenarium* (for a detailed programme and actors, see *Identity – Sacrality – Theatricality*, *Szcenarium*, 2014/3, 73–77)
- 2015: MITEM overture
- Eugenio Barba: *The Land of Ashes and Diamonds* – presentation of his book. Participants in the roundtable discussion: Eugenio Barba, János Regős and András Pályi (translators of the book); simultaneous interpreter: Nóra Durkóné Varga; moderator: Zsolt Szász, the editor-in-chief of the volume
 - Presentation of Julia Varley's work with comments from Eugenio Barba
 - Screening of a documentary on the 50th anniversary of Odin Teatret (d: Exe Christofferen; simultaneous interpreter: János Regős)
 - Casual conversation with Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley
- 2017: Masterclass with Eugenio Barba and Julia Varley. Simultaneous interpreter: János Regős; organizer: Zsolt Szász
- Traces in the Snow* – Roberta Carreri Workshop Presentation. Organizer: playwright Zsófia Rideg
- 2018: “The Way of Foolish Wisdom” – Zsófia Rideg's conversation with singer Parvathy Baul and Julia Varley
- 2019: Odin Teatret is 55 years old
- *The Art of the Impossible* (r: Elsa Kvamme, 2017) – film screening
 - Eugenio Barba – Nicola Savarese: *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology The Secret Art of the Performer*. Dr. Enikő Sepsi, a literary and theatre historian, talked to the translators of the Hungarian edition, Zsófia Rideg and János Regős.



NÁNDOR BERETTYÁN

“The Actor Educates Himself on the Stage, and in Turn the Audience Is Also Educated”

Notes on Anatoly Vasiliev’s Masterclass

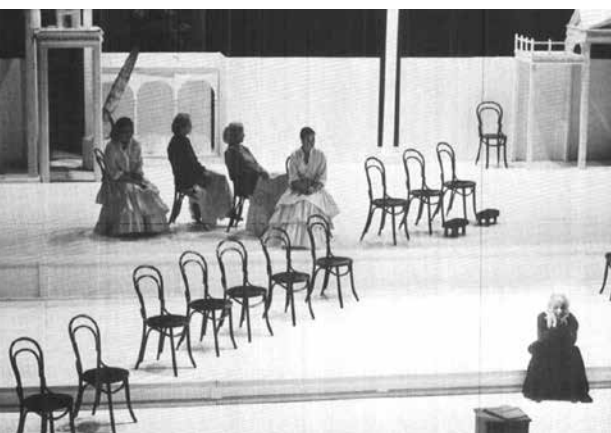
Anatoly Vasiliev, a leading figure in contemporary Russian theatre, is a regular guest at the Madách International Theatre Meeting (MITEM). In 2014, a portrait film and a compilation of his performances in Hungary were presented. Mari Törőcsik, who was invited to the master’s theatre workshop in Moscow in 1994 after her memorable performance in the production of *Uncle’s Dream* directed by Vasiliev (Művész Színház, Budapest) – this productive period between the two artists was showcased in Gyula Maar’s documentary –, also took part in the professional day dedicated to her. At MITEM 2015, participants of the actor masterclass led by Vasiliev explored the possibilities of action and composition in relation to Chekhov’s *The Seagull*. At MITEM 2021, Vasiliev’s masterclass “Theatre is a living art in motion”, co-organised with the University of Theatre and Film, was attended by students of directing, dramaturgy and acting. Nándor Berettyán, the young actor-director of the National Theatre and the newly appointed general director of Karinthy Theatre, gives a personal account of the course, including Vasiliev’s films presented at Uránia National Film Theatre. This is followed by an interview with the Master (also from MITEM 2021) by István Kornya, editor-in-chief of *Nemzeti Magazin*.

Vasiliev had already given a short one-day masterclass at a previous MITEM, at which I also took notes. I was still a student at the time. Now, during the first discussion of the course, Vasiliev expressed his delight at meeting actors with some experience, because he often feels somewhat confused among students, not knowing what to say to them, or if they will understand anything he is

talking about. So, I pulled out my notes from my student days. It was about two pages long, much of which I didn't remember at all. This time we essentially covered everything that featured in my earlier notes, but the experience was truly revelatory. The reason why I probably didn't remember anything from my old notes, was because I didn't understand anything at the time. Now, I feel I have managed to get a little closer to Vasiliev's thinking.

First encounter

The day before the course began, a documentary about Vasiliev and Mari Törőcsik's collaboration in Moscow and their production of Dostoevsky's *Uncle's Dream* was screened at Uránia. Vasiliev expressed his regret that in the film he is portrayed as a sombre, constantly struggling, austere figure, although he considers himself to be much more casual and jovial. (Note: Very rarely did



F. Dostoyevsky: *Uncle's Dream*, Art Theatre, Budapest, 1994, directed by A. Vasiliev (photo: Péter Korniss, source: szinhaz.net)



Maria Knebel (1898–1985)

I see him smile.)

Vasiliev described his own theatrical career as an evolution from psychological theatre to metaphysical theatre. His teacher and master was Maria Knebel, who as a student of Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavsky and Mikhail Chekhov was directly related to the legendary Moscow Art Theatre. Stanislavsky is seen as the father of realistic-psychological theatre, however, his work is more than that, and is much broader. He already realised that, although

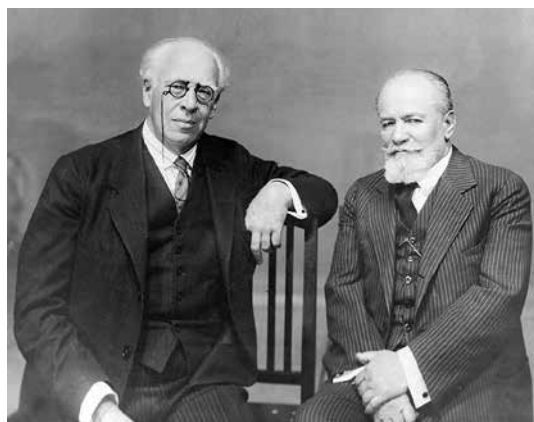
realistic theatre is fundamental and indispensable (especially in actor training), there are certain materials that defy realistic aesthetic (see opera and non-sensationalist musical theatre in general). For this reason, in the 1930s Stanislavsky, abandoned his analytical-psychological approach, and began to experiment with the etude method. It was during this period that he worked with Maria Knebel, who then developed, refined, and elaborated the method.

Of course, just as a painter has to learn to draw accurately and a musician has to learn classical harmony, actors and directors must also learn

the basics of theatre culture. This is what realistic acting is, for which Vassiliev uses the term situational theatre.

(This distinction may seem irrelevant in some ways, but I believe it is very important. The concept of realistic theatre refers to the end result. It refers to the created aesthetics of the finished performance itself. If we decide to do realistic theatre, we approach it from the point of view of the end result, that is, we are moving towards a clear goal. On the other hand, the term psychological theatre also refers to something fundamentally different, because in this case we label the style based on a method, that is, our approach to the material, our working process, our key to understanding, which is psychology and its very diverse, analytical practice. Therefore, it can be said that realistic theatre, in the case of a successful production, is necessarily psychological, but the psychological method does not necessarily lead to realism in the aesthetic sense, although this is usually the case. Situational theatre is also something different. The reference to the stage situation means that the situation is the soul, the essence of the given material and the performance. In this case everything stems from the situation, and everything follows from it. On the whole, we can say that we are dealing with ever larger sets. All realistic theatre is psychological, but not all psychological theatre is realistic, however, all psychological theatre is situational, but not all situational theatre is psychological. Despite the fact that in the vast majority of cases these three concepts can be placed side by side, I think it is important to stress that they are not necessarily synonymous.)

In any case, returning to Vasiliev's terminology, situational theatre is something to be learned. The actor must be able to fully immerse himself in the situation, which requires empathy. However, according to Vasiliev, this method of acting does not always work, or rather it is not always possible to understand the material, the play or a given part of the play. One such example is the scene of Konstantin and Nina in the fourth act of Chekhov's *The Seagull*. While in situational theatre the 'personage' (Vasiliev's terminology,



K. Stanislavsky and V. Nemirovich-Danchenko in 1925 (source: artivistus.ru)



Stanislavsky at a demonstration of the Opera and Theatre Studio with his students, 1938 (source: elektroteatra.ru)



Three actors in *The Seagull*, in the middle, as Trepljov: V. Mejerhold, 1898
(source: meisterdrucke.uk)

perhaps more understandable in English as 'figure') is placed within the situation, there are cases in which the personage must be placed outside the situation. In such cases, the situation itself becomes a personage in its own right, and serves as a kind of mediator between the personages of the piece. Thus, Konstantin and Nina do not become part of the situation, but treat it as a separate personage, establishing their relationship with the situation as a

personage from the outside. In order for the situation to become a personage in such a way, it has to be filled with facts, similarly to the characters of the play (in my interpretation what Vasiliev is talking about is something very similar to Stanislavsky's emphasis on the importance of circumstances). These can be material or intellectual facts, which of course influence and shape the situation-personage to varying degrees.

In a similar vein, actors can be divided into two groups. One is that of personage actors. This can be exemplified with 19th century realistic acting: as mentioned above, the actor tries to analyse and dissect the personage, trying to take on the role as fully as possible by placing himself in the situation. The other group is that of protagonist actors. In this case, the actor abandons the personage and appears not as a role-player, but as a transmitter of thoughts and feelings, outside the situation and the character. Vasiliev referred to ancient plays as relevant examples. This kind of presence is difficult for the actor because, by leaving the character and the situation, the *sujet* (topic) is also lost, so the actor is unsure of what to tie his gestures to, what to use to generate his lines, etc. It is a long process for the actor to find the truths of this kind of existence, which is why Vasiliev would often work for years on a single performance. (I think it's worth adding that these two approaches are not mutually exclusive; on the one hand, it depends on the play which approach to choose, and on the other hand, they can even vary within the play, see Vasiliev's own example from *The Seagull*.)

Taking the actor's work into consideration from a different perspective, he can act on three levels: physical, verbal and psychological. All of them function, no single level of communication can be eliminated, but one of them always dominates. Additionally, however, there must be a constant effort to achieve something called the playful theatre. The actor must be immersed in acting similarly to a child playing; fully engrossed as if the situation was unique and never to repeat itself again. The question arose whether the actor is a creative

artist. According to Vasiliev it depends. If an actor chooses to execute, he will not create, but if he chooses the more arduous, difficult path to act as an autonomous, independent artist, he will naturally and unquestionably become a creator.

With regard to the director's job, Vasiliev says he has a double role. He must be a teacher who guides the actors in a fair and supportive way, giving them the freedom to create, and at the same time fashion the performance, give it a coherent, unified style, build up the *mise-en-scène*, in short, set the framework for the performance. That is why actors are often not good directors, because an actor has to see the small picture (seen from the inside), while the director is responsible for the big picture (seen from the outside). Also, many actors, when they find themselves in the director's position, either fail to see and construct the outside picture, or overcompensate and set an overly rigid framework.

The question of the theatre's social responsibility was also raised, to which Vasiliev gave an unusual answer. In his opinion, it is not the theatre that is responsible for the spectator, but the spectator for the theatre, and it is not the theatre that is responsible for society, but society for the theatre.

Second encounter

The subject of painting is colour and form. For music it is sound. For dramatic theatre it is action. This action has two levels. The first level is when the action, the centre, the situation is within us (the actor), when the facts exist in and stem from the past. For example, the facts of a couple's relationship after their break-up are in the past, so the past organises the action. At the second level, when the centre is moved outside, the situation "surrounds us like an eggshell" (as Vasiliev put it), and the facts are found in the future. This is what happens in the case of metaphysical theatre, which must constantly be in relation with the future, since it organises the action. For example, your lover is far away, and you are travelling to meet him/her. In this case, the object of your desire is in the future. Another example is *Crime and Punishment*. Raskolnikov is waiting for redemption, and this redemption is in the future. The question is whether it is worth killing for it in the present. The source of action is not the past, but the future.

The existence of metaphysical theatre is important, and the reason why it is necessary to strive for it is because theatre has always had a metaphysical origin. Denying its mystical nature is like a child denying his/her parents. During the course of its development, theatre has branched out in many different directions, with a wide range of forms and genres, and even *commedia dell'arte* has its origins in the sacral past of the theatre. This is clearly seen in Shakespeare, where the sublime alternates with scenes typical of fairground attractions.

In terms of content and perspective, vertically speaking, theatre can be divided into three levels: the first level is the ethical level where theatre deals

with social issues, the second is the moral level, and the third is the intellectual level, which can sometimes be substituted with the aesthetic level. The higher levels must always be reflected in the lower levels, otherwise the performance will have no “atmosphere”. There must be a window, a perspective through which the spectator can look out and which opens up the piece.

Back to acting: the actor’s job is to go the distance (the play, the role) in the presence of the audience, but not *for* the audience. The actor educates himself on the stage, and in turn the audience is also educated. The paradox of acting is that if the actor tries to show too much, he loses the audience. The spectator always sees more than what the actor does and shows. However, this paradox also applies to the performance itself: the more intelligible and lucid the play tries to be, the

less the audience understands. You have to leave room for the spectator’s associations, imagination, thoughts and emotional reactions. Show little, but show it precisely.

The difference between Dostoevsky and Chekhov was raised in relation to *Crime and Punishment* staged at MITEM. According to Vasiliev, Chekhov’s characters are essentially in the situation, interpreting their fate, desires, life and past; their reflections are born of the situation. This also means that the Chekhovian character always remains human. However, Dostoevsky’s characters fanatically

follow an idea, which outgrows them, therefore, it is not personal motivation that counts, action is initiated and determined by the idea itself.

Vasiliev then had some strong words about contemporary theatre. In his opinion, contemporary theatre is interested in neither knowledge nor tradition. Theatre today is only interested in the director, and the director is only interested in himself. Unfortunately, due to lack of thought and narrow-mindedness, theatre today is an institution that only functions and is only valid in the present. There is no perspective in contemporary theatre.

Third encounter

(As you may have noticed, Vasiliev has repeatedly expressed broadly similar ideas. I hope that my account does not make it seem repetitive, because in person one felt that he was analysing different aspects of the same thought, unravelling deeper and deeper layers. This was also the case at the third encounter.)



F. M. Dostoevsky: *Crime and Punishment*, Priyut Komedianta Theatre, 2021, directed by K. Bogomolov (photo by Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

In situational, dramatic theatre (e.g. Chekhov), the psyche is nourished by the situation on the stage, and the words accompany the actions. The story moves in a straight line from the beginning to the end. Thus, the centre is the situation, the situation is determined by the past, and so is the action.

In metaphysical theatre, you have to start your analysis at the end point and always know where the story is headed. The story does not simply run from the beginning to the end, but begins with the end, which is why the situations, characters (who are the embodiment of ideas) and actions are determined by the future. We move from one node to another, where the node is the meeting point of two compositional elements, which must always reflect the end. The metaphysical theatre can only unfold and become complete, if we free words

from their previous meanings and implications, so that they can be filled with new content and carry new symbols. Once again, this is all exemplified by *The Seagull*. (Interestingly, despite Vasiliev's distinction between situational and metaphysical theatre, he nonetheless cites Chekhov as an example of both. This is why I think that what he is talking about is not a case of art historical or theoretical reasoning, nor scientific categorization, but rather a manifestation of a coherent approach. Just as metaphysics stands above physics, not against it, and is rather based on it, so is metaphysical theatre based on situational theatre; it does not want to reject the *here* and *now*, since this is the soul of theatre, but it wants to expand it to *everywhere* and *always*.) In Vasiliev's interpretation, the idea of love is embodied by Konstantin, while Nina is the embodiment of faith. Their every moment reflects the struggle between these ideas, so the ultimate question the play raises is which one creates art: love or faith? The actor's task is not only to work on a particular detail (scene, episode) of the performance, but to always be concerned with the entire role.

Of course, metaphysical theatre often turns to sacred texts, but it is important that these texts should not be intoned in an ordinary way, precisely in order to free the words from their common meaning, as Vasiliev has already mentioned. This is not formalism for its own sake, but an attempt to give the ideas that the characters represent through their words and what they are trying to assert through their words a living validity that is verified every single night.

In comparison, it might seem surprising that Vasiliev says that in every performance there should be interludes, when the actor can turn to the



A. Vasiliev at the masterclass in the rehearsal room of the National Theatre (photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszinhas.hu)

audience and then turn away from them again. (A parallel can be drawn with Vasiliev's analysis of Shakespeare, namely that in his plays sacral scenes are often interrupted by scenes that resemble fairground comedy.)

I will end my diary entry with one of Vasiliev's most critical, insightful and, although I have not yet fully deciphered what he meant by it, perhaps the truest comment: the problem with theatre today is that theatre is an adjective, not a noun.

Footnote to the film screening

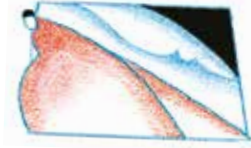
The last public event of Vasiliev's stay was not held at the National Theatre, as part of the course, but at Uránia National Film Theatre, where a film was screened that included excerpts from Vasiliev's performances from different periods.

I think it would have been very interesting even without the course beforehand and the conversations with Vasiliev that had taken place, but in the light of these encounters it was particularly revelatory to see how the ideas we heard from Vasiliev were reflected in practice. I'll be honest: I was impressed by the uniqueness, depth and formal diversity of what I saw, and I could go on naming further aspects. Yet, after seeing the theory become reality, I smiled to myself that Vasiliev, like true great masters, had not revealed the real, ultimate secret. Perhaps it should never be told.

Translated by Bálint Tóth



The participants of the masterclass and the Master in the rehearsal room of the National Theatre
(photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó, source: nemzetiszin haz.hu)



“I Have Always Understood My Role as a Stalker”

Interview by István Kornya With Anatoly Vasiliev

“Theatre is a living art in motion” was the title of the workshop held during MITEM 2021 by the influential director and educator of the theatrical world, Anatoly Vasiliev. “I don’t give interviews to anyone,” the Russian master kept saying insistently, but later yielded. “You can ask one question...”

– One of the most crucial aspects of your theatrical work is teaching. It is even reflected in the name of your theatre.

When I founded the School of Dramatic Arts in Moscow in the mid-1980s, I wanted to move away from traditional theatre. I was uninterested in staging performances that would serve the audience; it seemed entirely impossible for me. I wanted to create theatre for the sake of theatre, and I wanted an audience that was interested in theatre. This was a timely and legitimate idea, which was eventually proven. At the time, acting in Moscow was at its height, and countless workshops, creative communities and companies were – quite rightly – concerned with identifying themselves. It was an incredibly exciting time. Originally, I wanted the name of my theatre to say not just school, but primary school. I wanted this workshop to be for the stars of prose theatre, to help them get away from their daily routine and rescue theatre from the clutches of the audience.

– But theatre is for the audience, they say.

I was never capable of meeting the expectations of the audience. If you think like a true contemporary, besides taking the interests of society into account, you don’t have to “tell” the audience that I am serving your interests. I thought that I would speak about myself, I would deal with what is of interest to me, as a member of society. Through this paradox I wanted to connect myself to the “whole”. I was successful for twenty years, and when I felt that this was no longer possible, I decided to leave my theatre myself. But that’s another story...

What is the main subject at your school?

Stage acting. This is what I have always been interested in. The nature of physical and verbal acting, and how I can convey what I have learned, experienced and developed in this field: what I pass on as an educator, how the transfer works between director and actor during the rehearsal in order to create the performance.

– *As a master, you set a difficult path for your students. What does it take to set out on this path?*

As an actor or director you have to ask yourself an important question: what is theatre? Is theatre an art that entertains, relaxes, unwinds the audience and distracts them from their everyday problems, or is theatre a guide for the soul? Think of Tarkovsky's film, *Stalker*. I've always understood my role as a stalker: to take those who are willing to embark with me and lead them to unknown intellectual places where we address the most important questions of their lives. To choose this path today is very difficult or impossible.

– *Why do you think so?*

Since the pandemic – which, who knows, when we will get over – people have wanted to forget even more. Due to their losses, deaths, illness and isolation, they want to take a deep breath, which is understandable. We are not in a situation where theatre can lead people. They want something else.

– *What is the role of the artist in such a crisis?*

I won't answer that question for you. I don't want to seem smarter than I am. And I especially don't want to play the role of a politician, a social leader or a prophet.

– *Then I'll rephrase the question: can theatre and art help?*

Not now. The theatre I am talking about cannot. I know from my experience that, in times of crisis, theatre has to do some soul-searching so that when the time comes, when the crisis is over, it can return in full strength. The only way to survive a crisis is through serious and uncompromising concentration, through a deep study of the mysteries of art. Theatre can redeem itself by creating small, self-contained communities. I have relevant experience from the time of the Soviet Union. Since I was part of it, I know how we survived, how outstanding creative workshops, havens and islands were created in spite of the restrictions and prohibitions.

– *There is a lot of debate in the world of film and theatre today about the notion of freedom that we were so hungry for during the years of communism. Think of the Hollywood quota system, the excesses of political correctness, the rise of so-called progressive ideologies that limit the freedom of expression of others...*

And you could go on, but please don't! I think the world has gone mad. What we see around us now is a kind of psychological breakdown. There is no other option but to wait for the world to heal. I no longer want to be a part of



A. Vasiliev, András Kozma and the audience at the MITEM-Filmclub 2021 screening on 28 September (photo: Csaba Schumy, source: nemzetiszinhez.hu)

that, and unfortunately, I will not live to see this change, but I do believe that this madness will end. However, these are not issues related to theatre, but politics, and I don't want to talk about that.

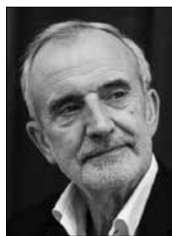
– *A workshop like the one you are holding at MITEM can raise these questions.*

I choose to teach and talk about my own path to those who come and are interested in what I can give them.

– *It is something of a commonplace to say that the generation gap is unbridgeable, and today's younger people are not interested in their elders because they want to go their own way. Weren't you like that when you were young?*

There is a huge difference. When my generation rejected and even denied those who came before us, we rejected and denied what we inherited. Because the passing on did take place; something I've already mentioned. Today it is different. With all due respect to the few exceptions, newer generations renounce what they inherit altogether. They know nothing about it, and they are not interested at all. They would rather invent the wheel. And this is true not only for theatre, but for all walks of life. I do not know how it is in your country, Hungary, but in Russia this is what's happening. It's a disaster. But there are always a few, like those at the workshop here at MITEM, who are interested in transmission. This is where I retreat to from the world.

Translated by Bálint Tóth



"No Talent Will Help Without Flair"¹

Valery Yakov Asks Rimas Tuminas

On the centenary of the founding of Vahtangov Theatre, Rimas Tuminas put one of the greatest works of the pantheon of Russian classics, Lev Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* on stage, which opened in November last year. During the breaks between rehearsals for the production, *Teatral* asked the director some questions about the unusually austere staging of this classic piece as well as the director's conception of actor-centric theatre. Besides this production, the Master, who has turned seventy years old this year, during the conversation gives an opinion on the trends in contemporary Russian theatre, touches on his conflict with the young generation of artists, and shares his *ars poetica* which crystallized from decades of creative experience. Unfortunately, MITEM 8 this year will not feature this production because of the war, but we hope that after Lermontov's *Masquerade*, Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Sophocles' *Oedipus* and Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, the Hungarian audience will be able to see this performance live, too, as soon as possible.

– At the beginning of the jubilee season, you thought long and hard about which one to choose for staging: Goethe's *Faust* or Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. In the end, you decided on Tolstoy. How did you make up your mind?

– I thought of them as equally powerful pieces. Goethe's *Faust* attracted my attention with its playfulness. Not with its philosophical conception of reality, but with Faust's travels all around the world. At the same time, I pondered Tolstoy, asking myself what it was that could be staged after Lermontov. Only Pushkin. But after Pushkin? Only Tolstoy.

I was aware that this would be a risky move, and I thought it through: I have every chance of falling into the trap, to use theatrical vocabulary, and then say sorry, it has not worked out, I will shut up shop. That is, I braced myself for

¹ The interview was published in Russian in the November 7, 2021 issue of the online Moscow theatre journal, *Teatral*.

committing suicide in terms of my theatrical and directorial career.

Adam Mickiewicz once told Balzac that when he had visited Goethe, he got quite a shock: "There was a white-haired old man standing in front of me." Not only was he in a state of shock, but he was also disappointed: an old man and a poet. Poets are supposed to be young and die young, as was the



Portrait of Goethe and Mickiewicz
(source: polskieradio.pl)

case in 19th-century Russian poetry and beyond. Although not of their own free will, they passed away before becoming gray, helpless old men. You are already well up in years, still alive, thank God, so you have another chance to come up with something. Now you have been given an opportunity to provoke and to take risks. Moreover, to do so with pleasure.

I even thought that if I failed massively at this centenary, everyone, critics and audience alike, would attack me. A gigantic fall in the grand finale. No, my pride does not allow that. I feel strong and I am convinced that I am still interesting to myself. But I ask again and again: what is it that still makes me interesting? I do not egg myself on, I do not talk myself into anything, I just look at myself from the outside, have my motivations, I delve into the material, into the interpretation of theatre. This is what gives me power. I know that truth sticks in the throat of a dying man who is about to leave ... He wanted to say something about truth, but the word froze in his mouth. In short, with all this in mind, I wanted to be provocative.

– Well, your interpretation of the novel is quite surprising indeed; there are no mass scenes, no people present, neither Kutuzov nor Napoleon...All that is left on the empty stage is family, unrequited love, inapprehension, and loneliness. As well as the rejection and condemnation of meaningless war. There is not a single happy person in the performance, many dream of happiness and strive for it, but will never have it, only some disappointment.

– Yes, but that is the Russian soul. The soul is embodied in geniuses, in Chekhov and in Pushkin... Many have suggested to me that for a correct reading of Tolstoy, the homonym "мир", meaning both "world" and "peace", must be interpreted as "world", as "humanity". However, there are many expressions in the Russian language where this word is used in the sense of "peace": "pray for peace", "go in peace", "live in peace"... The richness of the interpretation of this word is infinite, and in each of our scenes it has its own intonation and meaning. Naturally, the globe appears on the stage, but it is small, inconspicuous, and does not demand attention.

I banned the use of screens and installations, even though our stage has a huge wall and I felt pretty much tempted to post something on it. Yet we managed to



The huge, neutral set wall of *War and Peace*
(source: localdramaqueen.moscow)

resist that. Everything is filled with a flood of light, destinies, as well as a high-quality dramatic grasp and interpretation of the story. And also with the question of what theatre itself is – an interpretation of what we are doing. What signs are used in today's theatre? What do we ourselves mean by theatre? After all, the modernity of theatre lies in the way of thinking. And we are with it in this regard. The idea needs to be given a rendering: Pierre's idea, Andrey's idea. This is

the right attitude of the actor to the character and the role. At the same time, however, it is like homework: it requires learning and pensiveness...I love it when one way or other everyone begins to ruminate about the text, the age, morals, culture and today's theatre at the rehearsals. Even about our modern-day lives.

– *You are travelling along this path together with the actors. I noticed during the rehearsals how you become engrossed in every detail and ponder. You have doubts, encourage others, and give them a chance to find themselves.*

– I understood that I had failed to say and do a lot of things. And it is also possible that having travelled this path from the 1990s to the present centenary, I should have given up on my principles. It is possible that I should have founded a theatre of my own and altered something markedly and ruthlessly. As they say, I should have implemented a reform. There is only one problem with this, the greatest one you have to experience: as long as you exist, as long as you emit signals, you address an actor with your message, as long as you convey some meaning through your productions – this is exactly the kind of theatre you need. Like in an orchestra, all instruments are tuned to deliver harmony. When this is done, you begin to feel joy and pride. Then guest directors arrive who will not always feel and understand it. That the most important thing in theatre is flair. That no talent will help without flair. It is only through flair that one can move forward and evolve the theatre. Yet time and time again, we fall into some misty, encrypted world in which there is no trace of analysis and no sign of the actors having embraced the subject. Thus they will simply become imitators, who are nevertheless similar to truth, but will only remain imitators.

Then no sooner did we just feel the joy of cognition and self-transcendence than we suddenly give up everything and ... fail. We, actors, have no right to do this. Whatever director may come today (or after me), we have no right to

do this. I often hear them complaining that in the series they are supposed to do everything in a hurry, which may happen with us as well. So even if you are doing it in haste, you will have to grasp and grab and save the night series with your acting, even after two o'clock in the morning. You need to save it by means of your personality. This is the greatest problem because we are running out of time, our days are running out, my time is also running out... And, who knows, it may, or may not be my very last attempt to present to everyone this – for me – new method of storytelling.

I used to want to start playing from the first sentences: the curtain opens, a benevolent and friendly brightness is spreading, and the actor's first sentence can be clearly and intelligibly heard. No word has been uttered, but we have already been touched by the story. I read it off the figures and gazes of the actors what happened to them yesterday or a year ago, and I can feel history living in them. There is something in the air, their state of mind is perceptible and I can feel it, too.

– *Can it be explained by your despondency that some of the premiere productions have been removed from the repertoire?*

– I was not present in the theatre for five months, and my relationship somewhat weakened with the young directors who continued their staging as planned. After I returned, I saw these productions one after the other. It was a most painful moment for me and for them, too. I must admit that I might have offended them a great deal by removing four performances from the repertoire of the New Stage² and one from Simonovskaya Stage³. I understand and accept their grievances, but deep down I know I am right and feel as determined as ever.

It may have been a great gift of life for me after the almost complete darkness I was in at the intensive care unit with only a single blue light burning in the ward. After that, I started looking at things very simply, and I slowly came to realize and understand everything: one man is like this, the other one is like that, and nuances and compromises ceased to exist for me. So when I saw these works, I got very distressed and started thinking: oh, where did I make a mistake? It was them who hurt me, and, in fact, not just me, but also themselves. They lied to themselves and to the audience in that this was today's theatre like. Where had all my messages and signals gone? Are



Tuminas, back from illness, rehearses
(source: yestoto.ru)

² Studio theatre of Vahtangov Theatre since 2015.

³ Member institution of Vahtangov Theatre since 2017.

they to be found in my previous works only? Or in those of Nekrosius⁴ and Butusov⁵ alone?

You cannot even imagine how much paint they used in the performances removed from the repertoire to paint their bodies or smear them with blood. There was plenty of water and smoke, the music thundered at full volume, the monologues sounded amidst howls, and it did not matter what they were talking about. It seemed to them that theatre had to be like that today. They have waited for their time. They are happy now. But they are just intermediaries.

All this does not apply to my mentees who also made mistakes, but in a different way. Let me underline that they are all talented. Yet they made mistakes because they started building their own theatre – we are having cold times, so we are playing coldly. We are making decisions cool-headed. We direct productions coldly. Everything is cold. And everything has – me! I AM! Whatever the outcome, the viewer will forgive. The soul almost gets broken, it wants to be theatre, the more dirt there is, the larger the theatre, the spectacle, the show... But in reality, it is nothing else than killing the classics, killing the text and the word.

Each and all of these methods have existed before. I gave up everything I had been doing earlier, everything I was used to doing or inclined to do by my hand, my intellect and my intuition. Experience suggests it is enough to make use of creating a little atmosphere, a little unspokenness as well as mystery. That is, you had better be following the usual easy way. Yet I said “no!” to myself. This

was no longer possible. And I told them they had to stop making light theatre using shows, installations, screens and displays which obscure the fact that the actor is essential.

– Are you not worried that you will be called a conservative? Vahtangov will come to their mind who, as we know, “blew up” traditional theatre in his day and was a great innovator (which, of course, very much irritated conservative criticism).

– Yes, of course, I am called a conservative, too. But if you go and



Yuri Cokurov, Irina Smirnova and Olga Lerman at the rehearsal of *War and Peace* (source: yestoto.ru)

⁴ Eimuntas Nekrošius (1952–2018), see about him: Valdas Vasiliuskas: Eimuntas Nekrošius és a litván Ifjúsági Színház, *Szcenárium*, March 2019, pp 42–55. Also in English: Valdas Vasiliuskas: Eimuntas Nekrošius and Lithuania’s Youth Theatre, *Szcenárium*, MITEM English, April 2019, pp 87–100

⁵ Yury Nikolaevich *Butusov* (b. 1961): chief director at Vahtangov Theatre since 2018

see *War and Peace*, you will realize that this is not true. And what does it mean to “blow up” the usual notion of theatre? We used different methods at the rehearsals. Different light and sound effects or connections appear, and the story will be different. The huge wall, on which there is nothing, has its own meanings, and these are added by the viewers themselves in their imagination to the actor’s achievement, especially if their acting is not carried through. It is very tempting to have something hanging or be hung on stage...But you must not. We used to be packed with theatrical props, but now we no longer need anything except the empty space and, of course, the actor.

– It is typical nowadays that anonymous “cheer patriots” make their voices heard after the opening of pieces based on classic literary works, claiming that the original has been ruthlessly distorted, that the great work is translated into some particular artistic language, and that the director impoverished it and deprived it of national ideas, patriotism, etc. Are you not afraid of that on the eve of the premiere?

– No, not at all. I have not impoverished anything because I transplanted the story into actors. This story is fully alive in them. It also echoes off the wall and resonates in their lives, too, provided they are able to unfold the subject. This is a journey like that...

I have said more than once and I will keep saying that it is the time of Pushkinian nannies⁶. There are few nannies today, and there are no nannies like Pushkin’s at all. However, there are mothers and grandmothers, who tell you bedtime stories to make you fall asleep, have sweet dreams, awaken with a cheerful spirit the next day, and carry on with your life. You must live cheerfully. I returned to my creative work after getting rid of all sorts of theatrical means, because with such means you only want to assert yourself and not the author. It is a deceptive illusion, like the magic lamp with Tolstoy. It is only sheer deception. Yes, these characters are lonely souls. They are supposed to be loving and happy, but it fails to become a reality.

The most unfortunate person and the most unhappy personality in Russian literature is Andrei Bolkonsky. Still, he is a hero. He



Mariya Ribal (Natasha) and Viktor Dobronravov (A. Bolkonsky) in a scene from the performance (source: ng.ru)

⁶ Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin’s nanny was called Arina Rodionovna, whom the poet loved very much. He dedicated poems to her memory and mentions her several times in his letters.

may not come to the fore in this production, nonetheless he is a hero. I have already spoken of deception, and here I put in his mouth not only thoughts on the futility of war, but also the fact that we have been deceived. This is the main issue. We live in a world of deception. Everything from our daily lives on is based on deception. It is so even if you buy chicken: it is processed two or three times and filled with some artificial material. And we are used to everyone lying. There is a total tyranny of deception everywhere, even in the theatre. Why did I pick on certain productions? Because theatre needs to eliminate deception and turn towards purification. This is presumably the driving force behind the search for style in our performance. To find the way to purity and order.

Let me again bring Pushkin to mind, who said that vulgarity and uneducatedness are very close to modernity, clinging to it almost inseparably. They are fused together. On the other hand, the artist who strives for modernity keeps himself away from the classics because he is scared. Because vulgarity typical of modernists is eliminated in the classics.

– *Do you mean to refer to the present or to eternity with this production? For Tolstoy raised eternal questions and spoke of eternal problems, yet you are putting a further edge on these, clearing them of superficialities. You speak of man and of his soul, like in all your previous work ...*

– Yes, I am talking about man and the soul. I say that we are deceived, that we are cruelly deceived by life. If you think there is a God, the question arises: then why has he forgotten us? Or he had something more important to do, which diverted his attention away from us. He has forgotten us and we have to wait for him to show up. We have to wait. I am very much looking forward to the aliens. I have always waited, and I am still waiting for the moment when we meet there, look at each other, and have an immediate grasp on who we are. We played some kind of kings, leaders, officials, and generals wearing trousers trimmed with double striping...But there are no such ranks over there. So we will all turn ridiculous. We will feel utterly uncomfortable and ashamed. And shame must purify us, destroying lies and deception.

– *It reminds me of how you talked about the eighth circle of the universe, where angels live and sing. You can only get there cleansed from lies...*

– Yes, there is a choir of angels there that needs to be heard. The grandmother heard it, so she told tales, and the people created tales because they had heard about the eighth circle of the Universe. Angels flew to us who exist, but we frightened them off with our lies. We gave them a scare by the lack of order. The creation of order is very important in productions, too, in the manner that stars are organised in the Universe.

Just as there is order in Shakespeare, so is there over here; the spirit of the age must be preserved and only the author evoked, while we had better forget about ourselves. Give up our ambitions. Bringing order to the construction is the largest and most important task. Then we can say: I am aware of order

in the performance. I can see that there is order. We were not lied to in our childhood, we were promised things. So it went on in our youth. Then we got deceived on and off. In it those long gone, who had been “playing through” their lives, also had their share. So we are also playing through life, giving them another chance. We must bring them back to Earth so that they can see us, and see what we have come to ...

The rehearsal involves reflection. Although based on individual beliefs and ways of thinking, everyone contemplates. I have already quoted Pushkin and Chekhov...“Keep chasing yourself until you breathe your last. Talk about others, talk about others – not about yourself.” Then you will also be revealed. You will not disappear anywhere. On the contrary, you will grow up and become a creator. As Bernard Shaw put it, or Lessing, whom I like to quote ...

– *Theatre should be flattering to the ear and pleasing to the eye...*

– Yes, that is a brilliant sentence. But do not let anyone think that pleasing means flooding with beautiful decorations. Not at all. It means entering the other’s sphere of trust. It means that we must be in possession of such power, such a narrative as leaves no other choice than seduction by order. Order is a kind of spiritual attunement. When deception reigns around us, we turn our spirituality and our historical knowledge to the creation of order. To everything that we are going to leave behind on earth.

– *Do you not have the feeling that you are moving away from your previous work by your rendition of War and Peace?*

– I do. I wanted to do everything clearly and simply so that it could be understood as well as possible, and that everything was as plain and apparent as possible. I have always wanted that. Yet the devil whispered to me: “Undress it first, and then beat it. Throw dirt or ashes on it, put ashes all over its face...” I always had the temptation to do so.

– *I was very shocked at how accurately the battle scene expressed the horrors of war when everyone accepted their own deaths. More than once I witnessed in real wars how much abandoned soldiers are when they are facing their fate. How did that lonely soldier with his naked bayonet and the pile of military jackets occur to you?*

– This is a ball. I thought that there had to be balls and masquerade balls. I understood how important dance is in the novel, in the story. Natasha’s waltz. I thought there was no need for anything and she just had to dance by herself. Then you need a bayonet, then a match, and the fire is ignited ... The history of the families, and their losses, when one boy and then the other one joins the army, cannot be ignored. Every boy serves in the army. It is a war with the bayonet and the military jacket as its props. This performance presents war in its own reality. The legend is refuted that the military tactics, or ruse in the background of leaving Moscow was to lure the enemy there. Nonetheless, has anyone added up how many people died in Moscow because of this “ruse”? Would it have been better if soldiers had died in the battle but not given up



Kutuzov and Napoleon
(source: russiahousenews.info)



The last meeting of Andrei Bolkonsky
(Viktor Dobronravov) and Natasha Rostova
(Ksenia Treyster) (photo by Anatoly Markovkin,
source: teatral-online.ru)

Moscow, just as they did not give it up in 1941, fighting to the end? But Kutuzov was afraid of Napoleon, he was frightened to death. He staged a battle on an empty field where half his army was destroyed. Therefore, he was forced to back down and deceive others, to hoodwink the tsar and the soldiers, who had to beat a retreat. Tolstoy extenuated Kutuzov, still, if we follow the novel closely, in some of his sentences we find him flying into a rage and hating him for doing so as a general...

– *Have you ever seen this War and Peace production on the stages of New York, Paris or Beijing?*

– Yes... Yes!

– *So you are not just counting on our viewers?*

– It is exactly our viewer who will be missing something from the performance. A few close-up scenes, something they are used to and fits in the tradition. Or fits in the stereotypes. Yet this production must be transparent, clear and accurate. It must be understood everywhere.

– *By any person anywhere in the world?*

– Anyone. As Ephros said, even the cleaning lady who went into the room during the day, where she heard cries, and lingered there. She sat down because it was about her, too. About today. About life. About reality. She looked in and stayed there. Ephros told the truth. Why do we not take this seriously from Ephros? It seems to us that we deciphered the meaning of his words long ago. No, we have not deciphered it.

– *Now the things you say also often get quoted in your theatre.*

– I know.

November 7, 2021

Translated by Nóra Durkó



ZSOLT EÖRI SZABÓ

Dream Images

Our Shared Passion is Theatre

“What else? It is passion that gave birth to, has kept alive and nourished Madách International Theatre Meeting since 2014. More than forty countries, a hundred and twenty performances, and thousands of poignant, amusing, and emotional moments. They have taken place and, like dreams, vanished. After all, »theatre is a place of dreams,« as Bertolt Brecht puts it. The art of theatre is evanescent and short-lived. Yet, in the photos, if not forever, these theatrical dream images expand into timelessness one way or another. For me, theatre photography means not only walking through the director’s mind, but also constantly exploring my own memories. Unintentionally, not directly. When I am looking at the productions through the viewfinder, a lot of previews are swarming in front of me: visions evoked by paintings, other performances, or reading experiences – I will be called on by these. I only make exposures when I have produced a meaningful reaction to the sight in front of me.”



A member of the art workshop at the National Theatre in Budapest, Zsolt Eöri Szabó is the editor-in-chief and photographer of the theatre website. He was formerly editor, reporter and presenter at Magyar Rádió (Hungarian Radio) (1979) and later Magyar Televízió (Hungarian Television; the programme titled Ablak [Window]) until 2001. His photographs have been featured in journals, books, international and national exhibitions. He compiled his exhibition in the framework of MITEM 2021 from his photos taken at the Madách International Theatre Meetings. A selection from these are published now.



A. S. Pushkin: *Eugene Onegin*, Vakhtangov State Theatre, 2017, directed by Rimas Tuminas



A. P. Chekhov: *The Seagull*, Théâtre Vidy-Lausanne, 2016, directed by Thomas Ostermeier



Based on J. Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, Radu Stanca National Theatre, 2016, directed by Silviu Purcărete



Jan Mikulášek, Dora Vicenikova and co.: *Hamlets*, Divadlo Na Zábradli, 2019, directed by Jan Mikulášek



A. P. Chekhov: *The Cherry Orchard*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2019,
directed by Silviu Purcărete



Sophocles: *King Oedipus*, Vakhtangov State Theatre, 2018, directed by Rimas Tuminas



Tiziana Barbiero: *Rosso Angelico – Dance for a Light Traveller*, Teatro Tascabile di Bergamo, 2017, directed by Tiziana Barbiero



Based on J. Hašek Tatyana Rahmanova: *Švejk. The Return*, Alexandrinsky Theatre, 2018, directed by Valery Fokin



József Katona: *Bánk bán*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2018, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky



József Katona: *Bánk bán*, National Theatre, Budapest, 2018, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky



Based on W. Shakespeare's play: *Titus Andronicus: TIIT*, P. A. Ojunsky Saha Theatre, 2016, directed by Sergey Potapov



Carlo Gozzi: *The Raven*, Alexandrinsky Theatre, 2016, directed by Nikolai Roschin



Luo Huaizen: *Li Yaxian*, Sichuan Opera - Chongqing, 2016, directed by Jie Ping Nan



Molière: *Don Juan*, Ivan Vazov National Theatre, directed by Alexander Morfov



ÁGNES MATUSKA

Shakespeare's *Theatrum Mundi* and Its Hungarian Perspective¹

The present day fame of the idea that the world is a stage comes undoubtedly from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and specifically Jacques' monologue on the seven ages of men.² The lines are recited by a figure described as melancholy in the list of characters, who in the famous *locus* seems to be mostly concerned with the fact that humans are entrapped by an inescapable theatrical situation through their lives. Jacques' monologue does not contain the explicit opposite of mere ephemeral playing, but Sir Walter Raleigh's poem expanding precisely the same play metaphor does.³ According to Raleigh, we are players throughout our worldly lives; the tiring house is our mother's womb, and the graves will hide us when the play is done. The stage of life on earth, however, in Raleigh's understanding, is enclosed by a larger, cosmic reality, where God oversees the comedy of our lives. Jacques' monologue lacks this cosmic or divine perspective. Still, his speech has been interpreted both as a refutation of anti-theatricalist charges against theatre, as well as the celebration of the unique power of theater and its play.⁴ This contradiction can be resolved by taking into account the consequences of the unique moment in history, when the interpretation of the image was diversified not only by its heterogenous roots, but also by the unique

¹ First publication: Ágnes Matuska: "Variations on the Play Metaphor: Shakespeare's *Theatrum Mundi* and its Hungarian Perspective." In Jana Bžochová ed. "In double trust": *Shakespeare in Central Europe*: Bratislava: VŠMU, 2014, 118–128.

² Tibor Fabiny, "Theatrum Mundi and the Ages of Man," in *Shakespeare and the Emblem*. ed. Tibor Fabiny (Szeged: Department of English, Attila József University, 1984)

³ *English Poetry I: From Chaucer to Gray*. Vol. XL. The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14); Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/40/

⁴ Cf. *As You Like It*. The Arden Shakespeare, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London: Thomson Learning), 227n.

and revolutionary role theatre started to play with the appearance of popular theatres in Elizabethan England.

In this present paper I would like to highlight, as a first step, the diverse traditions of the metaphor and the way these inform critical interpretations of Shakespearean drama and theatre. The next step will be the presentation of a Hungarian perspective of the same. Which are the understandings of the image that surface in the Hungarian reception of Shakespeare, and which are the interpretations of Shakespearean drama and theatre that they result in? I cannot promise to give a complete, overall picture of the Hungarian scene, rather, I will highlight some examples that are revelative of the curious ways that interpretations juggle the sometimes contradictory traditions of a readily available metaphor with a seemingly obvious explanatory potential.

Jacques' passage, as well as Raleigh's example, are variants of the *vanitas* understanding of the topos which was the dominant understanding in Elizabethan times.⁵ Stage versions of the same, however, complicate its meaning for obvious reasons. Theatre may claim or carve out a reality for itself, as it is done, for example, in Shakespearean prologues and epilogues that try to negotiate their own ontological status as theatrical play with their audience. The mere paradox of the theatrical self-reference, with which theatre stigmatizes itself as vanity but celebrates its unique power at the same time aligns well with the logic of naming a theatre "the Globe", or allegedly choosing for its motto "Totus mundus agit histrionem".⁶

Presenting an alternative to the tradition of the *theatrum mundi* as *vanitas*, Elizabethan theatre in several ways models itself not based on the earthly stage, but rather the cosmic one. Apart from the fact that the stage includes the entrance to Hell through its trapdoor, and features "Heavens" with its balcony, two important traditions have been explored that provide explanations for the continuity between the cosmic image of the *theatrum mundi* and the Elizabethan stage. The world is not *merely* a stage, and



Ceiling of the new Globe Theatre in London, with the zodiac representing the whole world (photo: Pete le May, source: pintesest.co.uk)

⁵ Lynda Christian, *Theatrum Mundi: The History of and Idea* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1987), 22.

⁶ Tiffany Stern, "Was *Totus Mundus Agit Histrionem* ever the motto of the Globe Theatre?" *Theatre Notebook* 3 (1997), 122-127; Richard Dutton, "Hamlet, An Apology for Actors, and the Sign of the Globe," *Shakespeare Survey*, 41 (1989), 35-43.

therefore separate from the entirety of the divine universe, just the opposite: the chance for us to join in the entirety of the cosmic scheme is precisely *through* theatre. Yates traces back the classical heritage for the structure and design of the Elizabethan theatre to a Roman source.⁷ Stevens, on the other hand, stresses the medieval roots of playing, and the fact that the heritage of Elizabethan drama included mystery cycles as well, together with their strongly ritualistic function.⁸ When comparing the representational logic of medieval mystery plays with Renaissance drama, it is frequently stressed by critics that the charge of the illusion of playing so familiar from puritan opponents of the theatre does not apply to earlier plays precisely because in ritualistic playing the events presented stand for the eternal truth and eternal reality, as opposed to the everyday of the audience.⁹ It is possible to see the function of playing in this earlier, medieval context as a tool that elevates the everyday to the level of the divine, imbues it with the eternity of Biblical time and divine presence. Ritualistic playing turns the playspace – whether the marketplace or the whole medieval city – into the cosmic stage, allowing both its players and audience to participate in its cosmic reality. In Stevens' understanding, thus, the playspace becomes a *theatrum mundi* due to the power of ritualistic playing. This tradition, in his opinion, also informs passages with references to the play metaphor in Shakespearean and other contemporary drama. It should be pointed out, however, that Stevens and Yates use the term not as a rhetorical figure, but rather as a *concept*, an idea for the cosmic design of the theatre, which later influenced specific uses of the metaphor, including the Shakespearean examples. Focusing on the verbatim trope *per se*, Lynda Christian stresses that there is actually a huge hiatus in the use of the metaphor between its last appearance in the 12th century by Salisbury and its reappearance in the writings of the Neoplatonists in the 15th, where its dominant meaning included the parallel between macrocosm-microcosm. In Pico della Mirandola's understanding man (especially the creative artist) and God are both creators, as well as audiences contemplating the world as stage. Christian offers the most plausible reason for this hiatus: in the Middle Ages there were no theatrical institutions or buildings to which the metaphor describing the

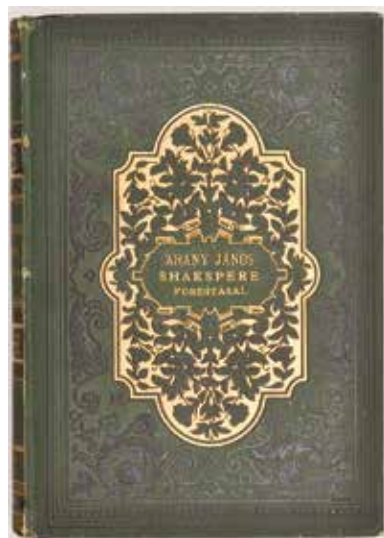
⁷ Frances Yates, *The Theatre of the World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 109.

⁸ Martin Stevens, "From Mappa Mundi to Theatrum Mundi: The World as Stage in Early English Drama" in *From page to performance: essays in early English drama*, ed. John A. Alford (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 25–49.

⁹ Cf. Ann Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), Briggs op.cit; Jean Christophe Agnew, *The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986); Attila Kiss, *The Semiotics of Revenge. Subjectivity and Abjection in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Szeged: JATE Press, 1995).

world as stage could have been connected.¹⁰ Thus, from a perspective different from what Stevens or Yates propose, no *theatrum mundi* could exist during the Middle Ages. This latter argument is expanded by Anne Righter: the world can be equated with the stage, and thus make the play metaphor possible only *after* the moment the actors and the audience are separated, and play ceases to have a ritualistic function.¹¹ This viewpoint clearly excludes the cosmic interpretation of the *theatrum mundi*, and rather than anchoring the power of playing in a metaphysical resemblance between macrocosm and theatre, it celebrates the overall and practical social applicability of the latter.

Combinations of these backgrounds appear within the Hungarian critical scene in connection with the *theatrum mundi* as a Shakespearean device. The story, however, begins with a curiously steady nonobservance specifically of the best known Shakespearean example of the topos, namely Jacques' relevant speech of the world as stage, described in detail by Péter Dávidházi.¹² The first Hungarian version of Jacques' notable passage appeared in translation in 1860 among the poems of Károly Bulcsú, a pastor and schoolteacher with literary affinities. His collection of poems was read and reviewed in 1861 by János Arany, at that time yet to be an ultimately canonical translator of Shakespeare into Hungarian. Although the translation of the dramatic passage indeed could seem like an original and free-standing poem, in its title, *Ages of men [Életkorok]* it included its own clue, specifying that it was "after Shaksper" (sic). The reviewer was misled by neighboring texts, and took the one in question as a poem inspired by the Shakespearean original, rather than the Hungarian rendering of the Shakespearean text. Although being a conscientious philologist himself, Arany has not checked the source, as he admits it in his review. Even more curiously, neither subsequent monographs, nor the critical edition of Arany's work published in the 1960s offer an explanation to this seemingly self-explanatory puzzle; though the editor of the latter tries to solve the crux, he picks up the wrong clue and



The 1884 edition of János Arany's translation of *Midsummer Night's Dream* (source: foldvaribooks.com)

¹⁰ Christian, *Theatrum Mundi: The History of and Idea*, 69.

¹¹ Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, 59.

¹² Péter Dávidházi, "Shaksper után". Egy rejtélyes műfordítás nyomában," *Filológiai Közlemények* 3–4 (2005), 197–206.

looks for the original among Shakespeare's poems. Scholars dealing with Bulcsú and his critical reception were not familiar with Shakespeare's oeuvre, nor did they approach peers familiar with English literature. As Dávidházi points out, the reason can be found in the painful isolation of Hungarian English studies within the domestic circles of literary academia of the time – a situation arguably unchanged since then. The issue also reflects on the dilemma of any academic dealing with a corpus written in a foreign language and wondering about the proper audience of their research.

Before moving on to reflect on specifically literary interpretations of the *topos* in Hungarian Shakespeare criticism, I would like to consider a remarkably modern theatrical example from the early 20th century. Sándor Hevesi, playwright, translator and director of the national theatre (producing eight



Oszkár Beregi in the title role of *Hamlet*, directed by Hevesi, 1911 (source: oszk.hu)

cycles of Shakespeare's plays during his career) staged *Hamlet* in 1911, following a concept that aligns perfectly with the idea that the Shakespearean stage is a cosmic one. An essay he wrote in 1917 reveals his cosmic vision of the theatre.¹³ He considers the Shakespearean stage as the stage of infinite possibilities due to its lack of elaborate props and scenery, allowing for the poet to populate this microcosm with what he creates through the *word*. "The word is all," says Hevesi, a surely brilliant person of the theatre, to describe the creation of the Shakespearean world on stage. The image of the artist-playwright as creator of worlds through the word reflects the Neo-Platonic tradition of the *theatrum mundi*, but in order to describe

the microcosmic idea, Hevesi draws on the tripartite division of the Elizabethan stage, encompassing heaven, hell and earth, and calls it medieval heritage. He does not seem to be concerned about the fact that the *idea* may be medieval only, not its theatrical realization. Hevesi's production of *Hamlet* proved inspiring for contemporary critics as well, resulting in interpretations picking up the idea of the *topos*, more specifically the version that celebrates play on a theatrical stage as parallel to playing on the cosmic stage. Dezső Kosztolányi, a seminal writer, poet and translator of the time praises Hevesi's simple *mise-en-scene* of *Hamlet* in 1911, noting that it looks like one simple, three-storey structure inserted

¹³ Sándor Hevesi, "Az igazi Shakespeare," in *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), 312–316.

on the real stage, a theatre within a theatre, the effect of which is that the audience is aware of the artifice throughout the drama, but the illusion of the play is maintained.¹⁴ The art historian Arnold Hauser, also in 1911, praises several productions of Hevesi, especially his focus on emphasized comic action [Hauser's key word and theatrical ideal is movement and action], since in his mind "the whole thing should be comedy, nothing else," as this seems to be the device to help the audience reflect on (and thus distance themselves from) their own role-play, their acted pathos as theatre audience.¹⁵ Hauser and Kosztolányi, inspired partly by Hevesi's staging, both seem to put their finger on what we could call metatheatrical self-reflection, or even *Verfremdung* in Brecht's terms, turning the whole world into a stage by making the audience acknowledge their own questionable roles and playing in a social setup.

Regarding text-oriented interpretations after Hevesi's theatrical one, I would like to highlight, as a first step, instances where critics use the *theatrum mundi* idea rather as an inspiration or a cursory remark than an explicit basis of an elaborated analysis. Finally, I will present two examples, both of which are fully fledged explorations of the topos, attentive to its heterogenous potential of its interpretation.

It may seem curious that Dezső Mészöly, poet, dramaturg and translator of several Shakespearean and other Elizabethan dramas, finds what he calls Shakespeare's "dream world"¹⁶ alive up to the present because in his opinion it subsists upon the reality of Elizabethan times. Paradoxically, this sense of reality remains a key issue in Mészöly's appraisal of *The Tempest*: he considers Prospero's island a "Theatrum Mundi", "The Stage of the World, not only the world of the stage."¹⁷ Although he refers to the topos as medieval, his understanding does not include the idea of the macrocosmic



Photograph of Sándor Hevesi
from 1911 (source: színház.online)

¹⁴ Dezső Kosztolányi, "Hamlet shakespeare-i színpadon" in *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), 345–346.

¹⁵ Arnold Hauser, "A Nemzeti Színház Shakespeare-ciklusa: Shakespeare és a modern színpadi művészet problémája," in *Magyar Shakespeare Tükör* (Budapest: Gondolat, 1984), 335–339.

¹⁶ Dezső Mészöly, *Shakespeare új tükörben* (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1972), 86.

¹⁷ Mészöly's interpretation relies heavily on Jan Kott's analysis of the play, with both ideas and pages long paraphrases of Kott's text. Jan Kott, "Prospero's Staff," in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (London: Methuen, 1964), 244–261.

resonances of the stage of ritualistic playing representing the entirety of biblical times or of the pilgrimage of the allegorical human being. In Prospero's island he sees "the Shakespearean drama of human society: a senseless and merciless fight for power [...where] human ignobility is revealed in several ways throughout the plot".¹⁸ Mészöly's *theatrum mundi* in Shakespeare, thus, is about revealing false illusions and vile ambitions for power, the vain roles of sinful humans. He sees the end of the play, with the conflation of Shakespeare-Prospero who gives up play, as a resigned exit from both stage and life. Jacques's melancholy ruminations, the Christian/Stoic *vanitas*-understanding of life as a futile race for mundane success, as well as the idea of the microcosmic stage all find their way into Mészöly's take on the *theatrum mundi*. Zoltán Szilassy, a university professor of English and Shakespeare critic relies, in turn, on Mészöly's article in a study exploring traditions for iconographic interpretations of *The Tempest*.¹⁹ The last section of this text is entitled "The tempest and the state after the tempest in the 'Theatrum Mundi'". He stresses that public stages in Shakespeare's time modeled themselves after the presumed structure of the macro- and microcosm, and supports this idea with Prospero as master of ceremony, directing not only the plays within, but creating the world of the drama. Interestingly, however, due to his interest in symbolic and iconographic *tableaus*, he ends his essay with the following idea: despite the fact that *The Tempest* displays a highly complex theatrical play, it is still chasing time, and remains a representation, thus freezes moments into images. This conclusion (which follows the above quotation from Mészöly) is curious since no matter how diverse the understandings of the *theatrum mundi* can be, all versions involve a crucial sense of performance,



Roger Allam as Prospero in the new Globe Theatre's production of *The Tempest*, 2014 (source: csokonaiszinhaz.hu)

and merge playing on the theatrical (sometimes ritualistic) stage with the social stage (which may be corrupt in the lay versions) or with the cosmic (and thus divine and eternal) stage. In other words, connotations generally evoked by the topos involve dynamic action, Szilassy's view is unique in considering the *theatrum mundi* a static image and combining it with an element from Mészöly's interpretation, echoing Raleigh's melancholy. Prospero's,

¹⁸ Translations of Hungarian passages are mine.

¹⁹ Zoltán Szilassy, "Adalékok A vihar ikonografikus értelmezésének lehetőségeihez," in *A reneszánsz szimbolizmus*, ed. Tibor Fabiny et al. (Szeged: JATEPress, 1998), 91–102.

Shakespeare's and our play ends with death as an exit from the stage which is confined to the earthly one, and despite the reference to the *theatrum mundi*, seems ultimately uninfluenced by the cosmic potentials of playing.

A contrary interpretation is provided by István Géher, professor and poet, and a prominent Hungarian Shakespeare critic of the second half of the 20th century, in a seminal book analysing all 37 plays that it attributes to Shakespeare.²⁰ The analysis in question is of *As You Like It*. Géher gives special importance to Rosaline's logic of multiple playing, and connects it both with the first line of Jacques's monologue, as well as with the supposed "*Totus mundus...*" motto of the Globe. Dodging the *vanitas*-aspects of Jacques's speech on the seven ages, his reading of the play suggests that the world is a theatre in the sense that the play- aspects of reality and the real-aspects of playing intermingle; reality is made questionable and relative through the power of play, which is, in turn, capable of shaping it. Ann Righter in her quoted monograph formulates a similar idea when she claims that the play metaphors (in her definition the comparison of the world with the stage), among others, "used within the 'reality' of the play itself, [...] remind the audience that elements of illusion are present in ordinary life".²¹ However, while Righter thinks this idea as incompatible with medieval drama, Géher includes the discussion of the medieval *Theatrum Mundi* in the introductory chapter of his book on Shakespeare's theatre as an important influence,²² although he does not make an explicit connection between this reference to the topos and his interpretation of the *theatrum mundi* in *As You Like It*.

My last example takes us back to what Dávidházi referred to as the unfortunate isolation of English studies in Hungary. The essay in question, written by Tibor Fabiny is a fully elaborated, and highly inspiring essay providing an overview of the understandings of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor in its relation to Shakespeare,²³ as well as the emblematic traditions shaping its reception. The study, however, is the odd one out in the series of my examples, since it is written by a Hungarian scholar not in Hungarian but in English. The essay is completed with an analysis of *Richard III*, in which Fabiny provides us with a detailed account of the diverse aspects of Richard's play. Aware of both the mundane and the cosmic versions of the *theatrum mundi* ranging from the pagan, through the Christian and the renaissance understandings, for some reason, however, Fabiny combines the metaphor (which he analyses as an emblem) with another one, "the wheel of time". This combination, ultimately, frames his rich interpretation of Richard's play, and thus evades what I consider the ultimate

²⁰ István Géher, *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyvkiadó, 1991)

²¹ Righter, *Shakespeare and the Idea of the Play*, 78.

²² Géher, *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv*, 20.

²³ A similar overview is done by Dávidházi in the study quoted above – also in relation to Jacques' monologue, which is the missing link in the plot he depicts. Dávidházi, "Shakspeare után". Egy rejtélyes műfordítás nyomában", 204.



James C. Cristensen: *All the World's a Stage*, oil on canvas, 2000 (source: galleryone.com)

crux of the *theatrum mundi* on Shakespeare's stage: what Richard does as director and player of his own play is not simply a creation of an illusory and thus false world (as Fabiny seems to believe), but also a way to celebrate the metaphor not unlike the way Shakespeare's Globe celebrates it with its name and supposed motto. Once the function of playing is addressed on the stage of the Elizabethan theatre, it cannot be illusion confined to an institution allowing fictitious play, but will appear rather as a model of a larger scheme, be it social, cosmic or divine. So perhaps not surprisingly, in a less precise but more widespread sense, the uses of the topos display the combination of all these – at least in the Hungarian reception of the Shakespearean contexts of the metaphor.²⁴

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²⁴ Research for this paper was aided by a Bolyai János Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

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“There Are Ascetic Young People Today as Well”

Hamlet Director Gábor Tompa in Conversation
With Kata Demeter¹

For about 150 years now Shakespeare has been customarily referred to here as “the most popular and most often played Hungarian classic.” There is, of course, the proverbial Hungarian sense of humor to account for this amusing quip. But at the same time there is the undeniable truth – and it will, I hope, convince the reader that this dictum is to be taken quite seriously – that in some mysterious way Shakespeare has been assimilated into the stock of Hungarian national cultural heritage. The fact is that ever since 1790 (the year when *Hamlet* was first translated into Hungarian, from an altered German version, by Ferenc Kazinczy, “the Dr. Johnson of Hungarian literature”) or, to be more precise, since 1794 when *Hamlet* was first performed in Kolozsvár, Transylvania, Shakespeare’s works have never been missing from the repertoires of the theatres of this country.

KATA DEMETER: *Hamlet* is one of the most iconic plays in the history of drama. How can you cope with layers of meaning hardened over the centuries and with canonised productions to make sure the play comes across as valid and fresh in each performance?

GÁBORTOMPA: Precisely because of its iconicity, every *Hamlet* production raises the question of whether you have to fight *Hamlet*’s own paradigm. And you always have to, to some extent, of course, but at the same time, that doesn’t mean you should introduce some external theme that is not included in the play and thereby do injustice to it. Fortunately, such masterpieces are open:

¹ For an edited version of the interview published in the production brochure in Hungarian, see the February 2022 issue of *Szenárium*.

their layers of meaning are so rich that no single production can exhaust all the meanings, not even a tenth of them. I myself have directed three performances of *Hamlet*. The first one was a production in Cluj in the 1980s (opening in 1987), banned several times and performed with two casts, because people were emigrating along the way. The Craiova production in 1997 was a kind of further development of that; and in between, in 1994, I staged one at Glasgow's Tramway, with seventeen actors in a black box-like space, with three male and one female Hamlets. The female Hamlet came last, ending with the soliloquy *To be or not to be*.

Since theatre is an art form mostly linked to the present, different layers of meaning are always more pronounced or sound louder in each production of the play. All the themes in *Hamlet* are timeless. Tyranny is not a passing problem, and themes like lawlessness, corruption, friendship, theatre, reflections on the stage, the stakes involved in directing all raise eternal questions. At the time, I based my performances in Cluj and Craiova on the stakes and the meaning of stage directing, as Hamlet becomes a director when he realises that the stage is his only means of discovering the truth and exposing tyranny. The quest for truth is extremely important in our lives. Especially in this day and age when we are inundated by different and contradictory news and flooded by a plethora of lies. And this is not resolved by exposing those lies on a daily basis, because their perpetrators no longer bother to keep up even the semblance of truth.

I think *Hamlet* is definitely about choosing an uncomfortable and dangerous path in today's world. Relative to the comfort provided by the world of consumption. We become less cogitating beings as we get enslaved by consumer society. Our addiction is enormous. We are primarily dependent on high-tech and the media, and it is these that manipulate us the most. I think that's at least as serious as being addicted to drugs.

K.D.: The Wittenberg group, with Hamlet at the forefront, play a prominent role in the production. Why is it important to separate them from the rest of the cast? What does the Wittenberg Group mean today?

G.T.: Back then, when I directed *Hamlet*, whether in Craiova or in Cluj, I tried to have a Hamlet who was the same age as me; I was between 30 and 40 at the time, so he would be more experienced than the king who was younger



W. Shakespeare: *Hamlet*, Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, 2021, directed by Gábor Tompa, three members of the "Wittenberg group", in the middle Miklós H. Vecsei as Hamlet (photo: Zágón Szentes, source: huntheater.ro)



Miklós H. Vecsei at the costume rehearsal of *Hamlet* (photo: Zágon Szentes, source: kultura.hu)

than Hamlet. It made the situation all the more perverted: this young king promising to make Hamlet heir to the throne. In 1987, the seemingly infinite dictatorship wasn't expected to end any time soon. If we were to wait for dictatorship to end and the tyrant to die, that would take a generation. Here's the great dilemma now: what will the future of today's teenagers and twenty-somethings be like, if this kind of global and perverted dictatorship persists. They're more vulnerable than we were under the old regime. Back then the cards were on the table, we knew what to expect and what to do to resist – now it's more insidious.

I also feel that the interest in, or desire for, truth is suppressed by the consumer system, because you have to give up certain comforts if you want to follow a radical path. This group of Hamlet and friends could be a model today. For even now, there are ascetic young people who are not necessarily interested in wealth and consumption, but in implementing a more equitable world order. They see the gaping gulf between the wealthy and the poor, they see how manipulative the media are, and to what extent states and governments have been bought by vested interest. They see how people are, like puppets, manipulated by the financial elite, implementing what can be called a demonic plan to create the perception of freedom while slavery grips the globe. Hamlet and his circle have a hard time confronting the establishment and uncovering truth.

I chose this particular play, because I had worked with Miklós Vecsei H. a.k.a. Hasi. He plays the title role of *Richard II* at the Pesti Theatre and I saw him in *Tell me, Attila!*, his solo evening on poet Attila József, and a stage production of Dostoyevsky's novel *The Idiot* directed by Attila Vidnyánszky, Jr., in which he plays Prince Myshkin. I think that Hasi has the makings for bringing to life this Hamlet, this new type of 'monk'. This new community, not necessarily a 'monastic order' in a religious sense, renounces some worldly achievements; they are not interested in wealth or power but in truth. We might even call that a liberal ideal, if liberalism were not so discredited by progressive and extremist ideologies that have nothing to do with traditional liberal ideals.

K.D.: Many people have re-translated the play, it's trendy these days to re-translate the classics, still you decided to use János Arany's translation for this production. What motivated your decision?

G.T.: I think János Arany's translation is still the closest to the original, I feel it has more poetic power than any contemporary translation. There is a problem with dated expressions that no-one understands any more, though. As far as they are concerned, we compared the text with the original and adapted it, taking care not to damage the text as a whole. Shakespeare's language is often more modern and direct than many subsequent translations.

The point is not to compromise the meaning of the play, while making sure it speaks to today's audience. You have to strike a balance between staying true to the spirit of the play and conveying a valid message in a specific context. So we used János Arany's translation as a starting point, but we did not follow him word for word, sometimes we would include a sentence taken directly from Shakespeare, and we left out complete monologues, even roles from this production. For example, there are no stage actors in it, even though the stage scene was pivotal in both the Cluj and the Craiova productions.

K.D.: *Why are there no stage actors?*

G.T.: They're not included, because the stage scene in this production is composed differently from the old one where Hamlet is the director casting for an ideal troupe. Here he has the king and queen act out the mouse trap so they get a personal experience. Except the king is not playing his own role, but that of the brother he killed; the queen plays herself; while the murderer is played by Hamlet. It's a very intriguing situation – kind of therapeutic.

K.D.: *In this performance, Ophelia's role is enhanced. What added meaning does having Ophelia play the ghost give to the story?*

G.T.: Actually, she is not playing the ghost, but a kind of medium who conveys the ghost's message. Ophelia always appears in the play as a humiliated, mad woman committing suicide. She has always been portrayed as a victim, but here she becomes the driving force of the



The "mousetrap scene" from the performance
(source: huntheater.ro)



Ophelia (Zsuzsa Tótszegi) as Claudius' victim
in the backstage area (source: huntheater.ro)

whole story. She is a human being of extraordinary sensitivity and abilities, who instinctively, like a prophet in Greek drama, has a sense of imminent tragedy, but cannot communicate her premonitions. It is as though she is a medium via whom Hamlet can communicate with his father's ghost. We try to follow through with this in the production; Ophelia re-appears even after her death to bear witness, a very important role in today's world. The other important thing about Ophelia is that she does not commit suicide, but is assassinated by the king, whose goal is similar to a lot of regimes worldwide; after his penance and prayers are unsuccessful, he aims to get rid of anyone who stands in his way, including Ophelia.

K.D.: Why did you decide to cast two actresses as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?

G.T.: On the one hand, because these characters provide a contrast to Ophelia, and on the other hand, they are Hamlet's former schoolmates and friends, with whom he may have had a romantic or sexual relationship at some

point. Thus they bring a kind of erotic line into the play and help nuance Hamlet's character.

As no-one in the world is born ascetic, Hamlet's decision to lead a completely different, more restrained, ascetic life is the result of some life experience or some understanding of the world. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are summoned by the King to engage Hamlet in *various pleasures* – so reads János Arany's text. They come into his life as a second



The scene of Rosencrantz (Éva Imre) and Guildenstern (Anikó Pethő) (source: huntheater.ro)

temptation he must resist. In addition, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are the embodiment of the eternal adapters and servants of all regimes who keep cropping up and who tend to outlive those regimes. They are what Hamlet calls sponges: the king squeezes information out of them, then he throws them away.

K.D.: When was the last time a guest actor played the lead role at KÁMSZ (Hungarian Theatre of Cluj), and what does this mean for the company in terms of work?

G.T.: It always means fresh blood, fresh energy, and it hopefully breaks the set routine. Magda Stief guest-starred in *The Visit of the Old Lady* in 2014. True, she used to be a permanent member of the theatre before she moved away, she had played in *The Chairs*, *The Cherry Orchard*, so she was not a genuine guest or an unexpected surprise. By the way, at one point, Imola Kézdi joined the company after we invited her as a guest, too. Sometimes, even our company, like any other, falls into a routine and starts to take it easy, and we must be alert

to that. That's why it's good to refresh our working methods, acting style, and to boost our efforts. Everyone refers to the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj as the best Hungarian-language company, the most awarded theatre – a paradigm to fight at all times.

K.D.: Bianca Imelda Jeremias' costumes push Hamlet's story more towards the present, while András Both's set lets his world unfold in a stylized way. How was this complex world created?

G.T.: That was interesting, because we went through a lot of changes with the set and the costumes. I hope in the end we really achieved what we wanted. There's always a temptation to take the visual world of Shakespeare's plays back to some period – not necessarily the 17th century, but at least 50 years earlier than we are now. The aim should be to get as close as possible to the contemporary, certainly in costumes. At the same time, we have a stylised space. It's an empty space – stylised in so far as it is selective. There is only one prominent, strong element, we call it “*Hamlet's cell*”, which undergoes a metamorphosis. In the same way that monks tend to retreat into a cave or cell with nothing but a board or a cross in it, Hamlet removes everything from this room after his encounter with the ghost, and the space remains empty. When Hamlet is exiled to England, this space is in some way profaned, and then at the end it takes on a sacred meaning again; we return to Hamlet's childhood with a few images, since Hamlet and Ophelia have known each other since childhood. Theirs is actually a puppy love broken by the dictatorship – a very moving and tragic loss. I've always admired marriages that started way back in high school. Something like that could have developed between Hamlet and Ophelia, had it not been shattered by brutal politics.

K.D.: András Rancz's videos also contribute to the visual world of the performance. How does this enhance the production concept?

G.T.: We are trying to create a contrast in this huge and somewhat stylized empty space: it's like a small hut in the wilderness. Solitude becomes greater in this space, but it can also host noisy events – for instance, festivities lasting several days. When the king announces his marriage, we are thrown into the middle of a huge royal party. I use this relatively empty space to show portraits full of anticipation, uncertainty and tension, which intensify the mysterious atmosphere of the story, as no-one knows what's going on, what is being hushed and left unspoken. There are



Hamlet's cell as a “wilderness hut” in the background (source: huntheater.ro)



Background projection (photo by: István Biró, source: huntheater.ro)

foremost a young intellectual – although this is such a vague term these day, since intellectuals are supposed to be in the opposition as checks and balances of power – not necessarily in a critical sense, but by putting their knowledge at the service of the public and by providing information. Art itself reflects on these things. Hamlet and his group, who have trained together and share the knowledge, are the young people who dare confront those in power and forge their own path, albeit at great sacrifice. It would be nice to have strong universities like Wittenberg today, where young intellectuals would receive a similarly complex education. This could be a kind of catalyst for social change,

also looks of horror in the eyes and face of the king or Hamlet. We want to project some of these elements to add both contrast and commentary. In this sense, the projection is not illustrative, but rather, a projection of the players' inner world. As this space has a very broad horizon, the projections sometimes open it up to infinity, and sometimes the other way round, enclose it, narrow it down.

K.D.: *Who could be today's Hamlet? Who is the performance for?*

G.T.: I think Hamlet is first and

so that they would not compromise and take the easy way out. In this sense, the production is meant for everyone.

Great classical plays and tragedies always end in failure. They are attempts at redressing a perceived imbalance in the world – setting things right when 'time's out of joint' – be it Prospero or Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's*

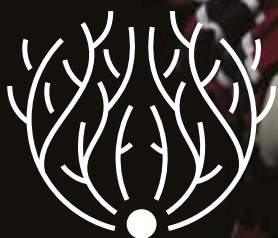


Dream, or Hamlet or in Molière's plays, Alceste in *The Misanthrope*. These stories invariably end in failure, but the failures are instructive. They show up the possibility of a new world, which could only become a reality if the deeply entrenched and well-functioning systems were to disappear. With Shakespeare, this is in fact the tragedy: for a new world to come into existence, the old one must completely disappear.

Translated by László Vértes

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“PECUCHET – I’m reminded of Buster Keaton in his film, *The General*. Totally concentrated on getting back to his girlfriend, he tosses logs into the boiler of the steam locomotive, without noticing that a decisive battle in the Civil War is taking place all around him; that is, History with a capital H.

BOUVARD – I’m thinking about Trotsky, the Bolshevik Revolution, the Whites and the Reds, and the actors’ train that crossed the front from one side to the other, performing plays for enemy troops trying to kill one another.” (*Nicola Savarese*)

“I know from my experience that, in times of crisis, theatre has to do some soul-searching so that when the time comes, when the crisis is over, it can return in full strength. The only way to survive a crisis is through serious and uncompromising concentration, through a deep study of the mysteries of art. Theatre can redeem itself by creating small, self-contained communities. I have relevant experience from the time of the Soviet Union. Since I was part of it, I know how we survived, how outstanding creative workshops, havens and islands were created in spite of the restrictions and prohibitions.” (*Anatoly Vasiliev*)

“We live in a world of deception. Everything from our daily lives on is based on deception. It is so even if you buy chicken: it is processed two or three times and filled with some artificial material. And we are used to everyone lying. There is a total tyranny of deception everywhere, even in the theatre. Why did I pick on certain productions? Because theatre needs to eliminate deception and turn towards purification. This is presumably the driving force behind the search for style in our performance. To find the way to purity and order.” (*Rimas Tuminas*)

“Hamlet and his friends (...) see the gaping gulf between the wealthy and the poor, they see how manipulative the media are, and to what extent states and governments have been bought by vested interest. They see how people are, like puppets, manipulated by the financial elite, implementing what can be called a demonic plan to create the perception of freedom while slavery grips the globe. Hamlet and his circle have a hard time confronting the establishment and uncovering truth.” (*Gábor Tompa*)

“The soul of the theatre is the actor. All emotion, the profound setting-in-motion of all our senses, comes from the embodiment of language, from the offering of language that the actors deliver, from their gift. In its naked truth, at its poorest, theatre is simply the offering of language. Everything rests between the hands – and at the tip of the tongue – of logophoric actors: under their tongues, which are carried, presented, offered to us as true blood... Through them, we see language delivered to space and delivered by it, our tongues unchained, seen suddenly as *other*. Actors do not enter the stage, the actors hold the entire theatre between their teeth.” (*Valère Novarina*)

