

64th Sterijino Pozorje Festival

Selector's Report

Rebellion – Female

During the past year – more accurately between March 15th the previous year and March 15th the following year - I had the opportunity and the privilege to, as a selector of Pozorje, testify to one thematically intriguing, aesthetically contradictory, socially provocative and ultimately, outstanding theatre season. Among the arguments that are in favor of the last claim is, first of all, the fact which goes beyond the level of quantitative indicators: out of the 52 plays I have seen in the competition for the Selection of the National Drama, as it happens 35 of them are premieres of the modern domestic drama text. Complementary to this is the fact about a significantly more successful presence of our contemporary drama in the wider European context, as evidenced by the premiere of Iva Brdar's play in Stuttgart (*The Rules of Thumb*, the Schauspielhaus/Schauspielhaus) and Tanja Šljivar's play in Berlin (*All Adventurous Women Do*, the Deutsche Theatre/Deutsches Theatre).

Even though the significance of orientation to the contemporary domestic drama is often relativized by unfounded stage interpretations, production difficulties, or the lack of reliable criteria in the text selection, domestic texts domination in the last season has at least two positive consequences. First of all, there is a diversity that is reflected in the play representation of numerous significant authors of all generations - from Vida Ognjenović, Ljubomir Simović, Dušan Kovačević, Nebojša Romčević, Biljana Srbljanović, Milena Marković, Jelena Mijović, Maja Pelević and Tanja Šljivar. Particularly valuable stylish and genre tones are brought by Jelena Mijović, with her dramatization of *The Chronicle of a Small Town Cemetery* (although she did not experience the most complete staging on the scene of NT Kruševac), as well as the Fedor Šili-Boris Liješević writing duo, with their creation of *The Night Watch*, an effective vaudeville which suggests even more subtle ambitions (*The Atelje 212*).

When it comes to directing, such context has obviously inspired precious impulses of maturity in the poetics of the already well-known authors such as Anđelka Nikolić (*Negri Joakim Vujić*, Princely Serbian Theatre Kragujevac) and Bojan Đorđev (*Regime of Love* by Tanja Šljivar, *The Atelje 212*), at the same time indicating to the author potentials of the younger creators, such as Jana Maričić (Trifković's *The Choosy Bride-to-Be*, NT Kikinda), Jug Đorđević (*Triptych on Workers*, Čačak City Theatre) and Momčilo Miljković (*The Abuse* by Andrić, NT "Toša Jovanović" Zrenjanin). On the other hand, it seems as though most of the realization problems of contemporary national dramatic text have been concentrated in the stagings of several plays by Tijana Grumić: the unsuccessfully completed staging of her brutally introspective, symbolically complex and modern sensibility-oriented style, testifies, if not about the crisis of national directing methods, then surely about their serious misapprehension of the vital aspirations of our contemporary drama.

As the highest value of the last season, I highlight a number of theatre performances which, regardless of their mutual aesthetic, poetic or ideological differences, are distinguished by a common characteristic: an authentic and exploratory approach to the problem of female emancipation. I am talking about plays in which the rebellion of a neglected, suppressed and / or enslaved female identity, woman as the Second - becomes the code for the struggle for social, moral and civilizational changes. Since this group includes, with two exceptions, performances

characterized by the highest coherence of meaning, poetic consistency and performance sovereignty, I have decided to propose the following titles for the 64th Sterija's Pozorje Competition Selection:

1. Petria's Wreath – based on the novel by Dragoslav Mihajlović, dramatization by Mila Mašović-Nikolić, directed by Boban Skerlić, The Atelje 212, Belgrade (Serbia)

Mila Mašović-Nikolić transforms gorgeous naturalism of Mihajlović's *bildungsroman* about the peasant Petria into a muffled tragic morality using a fine illusionistic multiplication (triple character of the heroin), and fragmentally intoned, and yet organically "melted" narration. Directorial staging of Boban Skerlić succeeds, by using the effective simultaneity of the scene, as well as by developing a consistent "metaphorical network" (ropes that allude to "the thread of life", transforming the figures of the heroines into the mythical fairies of fate), in giving Petria's protests against the primitivism of the family, the brutality of the society and her own cowardice, the note of the universal.

2. The Evil Woman – written by Jovan Sterija Popović, directed by Iva Milošević, The National Theatre/Népszínház Subotica (Serbia)

After the solemn reinterpretations of Ljuboslav Majera (1998) and Egon Savin (2011), Sterija's cult play about „the taming of the shrew“, thanks to the interpretation of Iva Milošević, is again before us in a painfully modern and actual light. Using the mechanisms of mockery and grotesque, the director translates the ambience of the Sterija's civil borough into a stylized world in which masks have "erased" faces, so Sterija's personality replacement becomes merely a function of the general game of imposed roles. Entering the labyrinths of violence and deceit, guided by the most sincere motives, her Sultana must recognize that any longing turns into violence, and every game of illusion ends in a play of power.

3. DRAUFGÄNGERINNEN. ALL ADVENTUROUS WOMEN DO – written by Tanja Šljivar, directed by Salome Dastmalchi, Deutsches Theatre Berlin (Germany)

Tanja Šljivar creates her, so far, most complex and by all accounts, the most memorable dramatic text, inspired by a recent actual event - a case where seven thirteen-year-old girls have become pregnant in a town in the Republic of Srpska after their school trip. As the church, state, schools and the media have given their opinions on the matter; the author decides, as she mentions, to give the voice to the protagonists themselves, to be more precise, to give the voice to the irrational energy of youth: through exciting fragments, multiple retrospections and strange vocal polyphony, the conflict of the principle of life (birth) and principle of freedom (choice of abortion) is represented, and director Dastmalchi functionally sharpens this quest for identity, transferring the game on the level of a collective ritual wrapped with touching documentary improvisations of actors in an ascetic space.

4. CAROLINE NEUBER– written by Nebojša Romčević, adapted and directed by Kokan Mladenović, The National Theatre of the Republic of Srpska, Banja Luka (Republic of Srpska, B&H)

The value of Romčević's extraordinary drama, inspired by the biography of the German actress reformer of the eighteenth century, is not even so much in the subtle insights into the structure of the theatrical mechanism and its protagonist, as it is in the interweaving and collisions of this mechanism and social context. And precisely on this level of the play Kokan Mladenović justifiably bases his interpretation. Using Romčević's text as an apocrypha, and subtly "fitted" apocrypha as a quasi-documentary base, wittingly rotating "gender positions" and duplicating the heroines' identity in order to reinforce it paradoxically, he transforms the Romčević's game of metatheater into a confrontation with the actual world as pseudo-theatre (reality), as well as with the theatre today, as a commercial or ideological project.

5. HASAN AGA'S WIFE – based on the motifs of the drama by Ljubomir Simović, directed by Andraš Urban, The Novi Sad Theatre/Újvidéki Színház Novi Sad (Serbia)

At a maximum distance from the formal structure of Simović's play, Andraš Urban remains, not only essentially loyal to it, but he succeeds in giving the archetypal situation of a manipulated heroine psychological, social and cultural reality. Focusing on the key motif of rejection of Hasan Aga's wife by her husband, family and social environment, that is, on the mechanism of total abolition of female identity, the director, by means of a multi-genre "solution" of aggressive rock performance, cynical quiz and demystified confessions, establishes a fascinating equation between the patriarchal chains of "male power", and the maze of political manipulation.

6. CAPRICIDE – written and directed by Vida Ognjenović, City Theatre of Podgorica (Montenegro)

Genre combination of mentality comedy and satire, long ago identified in the author's style of Vida Ognjenović, it has been enriched in this play with the impulses of the carnival intonated absurd, Brecht's displacement and sophisticated anthropological analysis. Inspired by the seemingly unproblematic historical footnote - campaign of the goat annihilation in Montenegrin rocky villages as a component of the socialist "reconstruction and construction" immediately after the Second World War – the author succeeds, by pointing out the ideological repression as a reverse of the maleficence mentality, in forming the authentic allegory of our current faltering.

7. M.I.R.A. – concept, direction and stage design by Andraš Urban, Bitef Theatre Belgrade (Serbia)

On the primary level shaped as a kind of *hommage* to Mira Trailović, the creator of Bitef and "anima movens" of The Atelje 212, Urban's play shows us the destiny of a woman who has led a triple life battle: against the rigid ideological conventions, against patriarchal prejudices

regarding the role of woman as a leader, as well as against our parochial and anachronistic understanding of the theatre. Through the lavish and painful firework of irony, anger and suffering, through renaissance, but at the same time an ascetic mingling of genres, styles and procedures, with the help of heroine figure, who at the same time embodies the title character, the protagonist who plays her (Mirjana Karanović), and a Third party (the theatre itself?), Urban throws a fierce and unmercifully genesis of our social perversities and theater misapprehensions in our face.

8. BOLLYWOOD - written and directed by Maja Pelević, music by Anja Djordjević, National Theatre Belgrade (Serbia)

Social disaster in a remote town on the border, caused by the doom of the local factory, which has (temporarily) been delayed by the promise of the arrival of Bollywood film producer, is the foundation on which Maja Pelević makes her bitterly bright, charmingly nihilistic parody of the symbolic doom of our contemporary factory of illusions. Efficiently manipulating and separating dramaturgic and music conventions of a musical, with the help of the attractive matrix of Ana Đorđević, the author finds her own dimension of social engagement from both sides of the boundaries of the illusionist game.

Non-competitive International selection “The Circles”

Considering that, given the current production and repertoire circumstances in our theatre lives, it would be advisable to broaden the base of the international program “The Circles”, I have decided to take into consideration one broader, European context, when choosing the plays for this program. That is why, based on to eight plays I have seen in theatres in Germany, Poland, Hungary, Macedonia, Croatia and Montenegro, I have decided to include the following plays in the selection for “The Circles”:

1. CYCLOP- based on the novel by Ranko Marinković, adaptation author and director Saša Anočić, City drama theatre “Gavella”, Zagreb (Croatia)

Work of art that is still considered the best Croatian novel after the Second World War emerges at the Pozorje in a new stage attire, 43 years after the triumphal endeavor of anthological performance of the same novel directed by Kosta Spaić. Existential struggle facing the world cataclysm, the complexity of dilemmas of the intellectual mind (the theatre critic Melkior), adventurous burden of the everyday as inextricable splice of Eros and Tanatos (according to some, Fobos as well, fear), in a word, all classical stage potentials of this novel are, in a new and excitingly current way, embodied in the contemporary interpretation of the director Anočić and the masterful acting ensemble.

2. ITHAKA- based on the *Odysseus* by Homer, written by Peter Zavada and Armin Sabo-Sekelji, directed by Krista Sekelji, Theatre “Katona József”/ Katona József Színház Budapest (Hungary)

Among the numerous possibilities of interpreting the legend of an adventure, which lays in the very foundation of European artistic imagination, the authors of this play have decided to follow the dimension which gives the archetypal figure of Odysseus the note of hypermodernity. Presenting the wanderings of Homer's hero as a deliberately delayed return home, during which each Odysseus attempt to find serenity in the haven of an absurd variation of "eternal Female" (the mistress, the naive one, the sorceress) ends up in a sobering confrontation with the concrete and unpredictable female identity, the authors, ironically, in a fairy tale like manner and leisurely cynically, outline the imperfection of a pragmatic and rational "male" principle.

3. PUPPET HOUSE. CURATIVE– author Magda Fertacz, director Jędrzej Piaskowski, Theatre Rozmaitości, Warsaw (Poland)

Inspired by the central motif of Đorđe Lebović's play *Puppet on the bed No.21* as well as the destiny of the Warsaw actress star Marija Malicka (who performed in the theatre during the Nazi occupation and therefore was persecuted from the public life after the war), Fertacz and Piaskowski, starting from the confessions of girls, who served as prostitutes in Nazi brothels, present us with the creepily absurd and paradoxically bare scenic history of the reverse side of heroism and relativity of betrayal, and, finally, of susceptibility of each historical statement to the ideological manipulation, as well as the elusive abyss of memories.

In Novi Sad, 19th March 2019

Svetislav Jovanov, dramatist