

## 65<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje Festival

### Selector's Report

#### REALITY – STRANGER THAN FICTION

Theatres in Serbia are ending their 2019-20 season in a state of deep existential crisis, but, at the same time – at least when talking about the most relevant productions in these theatres – in a state of an artistically elevated and social self-awareness. What does this (apparent) paradox consist of?

The most obvious sign of crisis is shown in quantitative measures. The fact that – according to the statistics – the number of premiers in the entire 2019 was at a historical low unfortunately corresponds with the situation in the 2019-20 season – when talking about the entire “domestic production,” as well as the first performances of contemporary Serbian dramas. Namely, when compared to the previous season, when 52 domestic productions were realized, including 35 first performances, this season witnessed only 38 domestic productions, including 27 first performances of Serbian dramas, concepts, or dramatizations of Serbian prose works.

It is evident that this critical state was contributed by deteriorating financial conditions (irregular funding or lower production budgets), as well as organizational and structural difficulties (inability of theatres to hire professional and artistic cadre, artistic balancing), but the main problem is (still) the absence of long-term (sometimes even short-term) repertoire concepts. This absence causes, among other things, unbelievable oscillations in the stage presence of the contemporary Serbian drama – from the dominant stream to the almost episodic role in a single year. Therefore, in the past season, we have witnessed only two new playwrights whose texts were presented on the stage (Staša Bajac and Dimitrije Kokakov) and two real debutants (Ognjen Petković and Isidora Milosavljević) – while a relative counterbalance to this scarcity is the presence of a few successful productions of the new wave of dramatizations. Finally, not even those few established or relatively confirmed authors offered solemn dramatic patterns – they move between impenetrable esotericism (*On the Darkening Green* by Milena Marković) to a direct yet one-dimensional actualization (*Šumadija* by Filip Vujošević).

However, even though a number of institutionalized structures, plans and factors damaged the previous season, it has not ended catastrophically – on the contrary, I believe it was above average. And the main reason for that are the actions by those independent factors – more precisely, the artists with unique attitudes or affinities. Faced with numerous crises, these authors have – instead of accepting an escapist game of forms, styles and “concepts” as a more comfortable solution – chosen a much riskier and harder path: led by their own passion and self-awareness, they turned to *reality* – as a concrete inspiration, cause, material or an (active) converser. Though all dramatic and stage efforts of the authors who have followed in this path were not equally successful, they have, in most cases, showed us an exciting, bitter and often shocking “map” of different kinds of realities that we live in or that live in us: *the historical reality* (deaths of innocent victims in wars, horrid maturing of individuals in the middle of global aberrations); *the reality of concentration camps and genocide*; *the reality mediated by the media* (cultural phenomena, representative biographies); *the reality of burning social tensions* (unemployment, strikes); and, finally, *the reality of man and nature surrounded by the terror of technology and civilization*.

Taking an active and critical stand against the society, authors of this orientation reject the Manichaeism position of the theatre as a bearer of elevated purity and moral suppression, and, simultaneously, depict it, with *self-awareness and passion*, as a “broken mirror” – i.e. as a witness, but also an accomplice to social delusions and wrongs doings of reality. The authenticity of the proportion of this passion and self-awareness in a concrete dialogue between the theatre and the reality led me to make a decision to suggest the following plays for the 65<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje Festival Competition Selection:

**1. SMEDEREVO 1941 – written and directed by Ana Đorđević; Serbian National Theatre Novi Sad (Serbia)**

Using a historical event (the deaths of the ensemble of the Serbian National Theatre in an explosion in a military arsenal in Smederevo in June 1941), but only partially following its chronology, Ana Đorđević, though a complex yet modern and smooth textual narrative, develops a parable of three worlds – historic, intimate and theatrical. Upgrading this situation with a directorial setting that convincingly combines a pulsating reduction of emotions with symbolic accents, the author manages to – through a combination and mutual relativization of those three worlds – present an idea of forgiveness as the only possibility of survival both for an individual and a theatre.

**2. WORKMEN’S CHRONICLE – written by Petar Mihajlović, directed by Veljko Mićunović; National Theatre Subotica (Serbia)**

The director Veljko Mićunović, together with the dramatist Slobodan Obradović, revitalizes Petar Mihajlović’s play – a fragmentarily organized story about personal and general temptations of our rough transition and criminal privatization – in an extremely dynamic, expressively satirical and anti-illusionistic “mode.” Within a visually attractive environment, this directorial staging sovereignly combines a grotesque polyphony of a workmen’s choir with moving testimonials of individuals, nightmarish repetitions of social manipulations and satirical charge of a melodramatically intonated instrumental.

**3. THE MARATHON FAMILY – written by Dušan Kovačević, directed by Paolo Magelli; Magyar Theatre Budapest (Hungary)**

In one of the most diligent stagings of Dušan Kovačević’s cult play in the past quarter of a century, Paolo Magelli – together with a dramatist Željka Udovičić and a compact and playful ensemble of the Magyar Theatre from Budapest – pulls off a very hard task. He does not ignore the contemporary twists on a story about the older members of the Topalović family – Laki, Milutin and Aksentije – as “merchants of death” (this story still brings ghoulish associations even today), Magelli uniquely deepens it, putting forward – using a sovereign mixture of black humor, grotesque and absurd – the equally parasitic live of the younger, wasteful generation that has been disoriented and suffocated by alcohol, cocaine and cynicism.

**4. SEMPER IDEM – written by Đorđe Lebović, dramatization and direction by Gorčin Stojanović; National Theatre Sombor (Serbia)**

The staging of Đorđe Lebović's unusual, moving and polyphonic confessional novel by Gorčin Stojanović presents an epic achievement, not just regarding its duration, but also as a successful confrontation of individual's inner development (the protagonist, the narrator) with the bizarre yet friendly energies of the environment of his family and town, but also with the increasingly riskier and, finally, fatal forces of the History. Staging this Goethe-like story of becoming human through the process of understanding the world, Stojanović reveals – in a subtle, layered and thorough manner – the eternal process of (reemerging) evil as a flipside of that humanization process.

**5. MOVEMENT – written by Dimitrije Kokanov, directed by Jovana Tomić; Bitef Theatre Belgrade (Serbia)**

Dimitrije Kokanov's play, consisting of five parallel/intertwined monologues on representative endangered situations forced by the contemporary world and portrayed from the position of the "body" as a pseudo-participant, is one of the first authentic patterns intended to the "immersive" theatre strategy. Finding the right combination of identification and distance, and criticism and introspection, the director Jovana Tomić consistently pushes the borderlines of stage illusion forward, as well as the level of audience's participation (the audience is separated in five groups and takes part in five different scenes) in order to – by using the antonyms such as "the past and the future", "the human and the machine" or "the inside and the outside" – constantly maintain the tension between compassion and resistance – and this tension in the final, collective ceremony of the performers and the audience allows only temporary relief.

**6. LEPA BRENA PROJECT – written by Vedrana Klepica, Maja Pelević, Olga Dimitrijević, Tanja Šljivar and Slobodan Obradović, concept and direction by Vladimir Aleksić and Olga Dimitrijević; Bitef Theatre Belgrade (Serbia)**

Using the framework of an unprecedented dramatic mosaic and depicting different aspects of the biography, charism and culturological function of the eponymous cult folk singer, a group of our prominent young playwrights creates a moving "inner history" of the former (Yugoslav) community, its compromised ideals, but also its (our?) utopian desires that are alive even today. From the builder Brena and the businesswoman Brena, over the singer Brena, to the Yugoslav Brena and the sexual Brena, this discreet and symbolically layered direction – whose genre playfulness opens the creative space for a group of amazing actresses – turns one para-biographical stage essay into a ballad of freedom that is constantly lost but never forgotten.

**7. WHO KILLED JANIS JOPLIN? – written by Tijana Grumić, directed by Sonja Petrović; Serbian National Theatre Novi Sad and European Youth Capital OPENS Novi Sad (Serbia)**

Tijana Grumić and Sonja Petrović, as the creative duo behind this production, found the tragic destiny of the legendary rock singer a grateful cause for a metaphoric shaping of the thesis of a critical point of every (modern) "lost generation." On the other hand, the explosive mixture of wilderness and creativity of the real (and media-generated) Janis Joplin served as an exciting starting point for a moving and layered theatrical "rock ballad" that includes the "live" performances of this cult singer's songs that become a *dramatically equal* element of the staging

– ultimately due to the amazing acting and singing potential of two actresses who portray Janis Joplin.

**8. ALL IS GUSTAV'S FAULT – concept and direction by Kokan Mladenović; Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre Subotica (Serbia)**

Trying to depict the mostly tragicomic responsibility of the “Everyman” for huge social or ideological deformities, as well as his own enslavement, Kokan Mladenović reached for Gustav, a well-known character from the Hungarian animated short cartoons from the 1980s. Using humorous associations, effective *mise-en-scène* and, most importantly, a biased “silent language,” Mladenović presents archetypical scenes from Gustav’s imagined modern life and creates a provocative and rich parody, ranging from humorous “harlequinade” to caricature and grotesque in which we, fortunately or not, recognize ourselves, with a shameful enjoyment.

**NON-COMPETITIVE INTERNATIONAL SELECTION “THE CIRCLES”**

Due to circumstances, after the selection process for the selection “The Circles”, which included seeing a total of nine productions from Germany, North Macedonia, Russia, Croatia, Lithuania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the final selection includes three productions that articulate certain aspects of a concrete “dialogue” between reality and theatre in different ways.

**1. JEDVANOSIMSOBOAKALOMISTOBO – written by Nejra Babić and Aleš Kurt, directed by Aleš Kurt; Sarajevo War Theatre SARTR Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina)**

Connecting the essential question of all “ex-SFRY” countries – “Why are the young people leaving their country” – with another, seemingly not that important question (at least not today) – “Why have we stayed here (for centuries) in the first place? – the authors of this based-on-a-true-story and rather illusionistic and “raw,” yet metaphorical and genre sophisticated play manage to create the impression of an absurd carnival, but, at the same time, a melodrama that is not compromised by optimism.

**2. BURSAKI: SCHRÖDINGER'S GOD – dramatized and directed by Yuri Shekhvatov; Teatr.doc Moscow (Russia)**

Enriching the strategies of “documentary theatre” that are characteristic for this Moscow-based theatre collective, Yuri Shekhvatov uses, articulates and analyses the testimonies of students – both current and former – of orthodox theology. Choir polyphony interwoven with irony, moving or bizarre individual testimonies, video clips that serve as elements of distancing and setting the mood – these are all dimensions of the peculiar stage “solution” out of which, more or less directly, rise the universal questions: the relationship between the individual and the system, temptations of (not) being a part of a collective, and, finally, the ability to know oneself.

### **3. EICHMANN IN JERUSALEM – concept and direction by Jernej Lorenci; Zagreb Youth Theatre Zagreb (Croatia)**

Using Hannah Arendt famous book *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* as his own precious (Virgil-like) guide, Jernej Lorenci introduces us – first via Eichmann’s monstrous destiny of the “Holocaust technician,” then via his (lesser by “scope,” but not any less monstrous) analog Artuković, and, finally, via “echoes” of Jasenovac that are scattered even over individual biographies of the real characters in the play – to the last Big Story, *the story of Evil that is in ourselves*, using magnificent simplicity and unbelievable strength. Managing to – on the dangerous and mesmerizing crossroads of the theatre and life – arouse in his actors the spaces that were unbeknown even to themselves, Lorenci manages to fight the undead banality of Evil using collective energies of life and imagination.

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I recommend the play **DO YOU REMEMBER DOLLY BELL? (written by Abdulah Sidran, directed by Kokan Mladenović; Chamber Theatre 55 Sarajevo)** to be performed at the end of 65th Sterijino Pozorje Festival, on June 3rd, in honor of the award winners.

Svetislav Jovanov, dramatist  
Novi Sad, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

As a separate segment of this selection, I recommend the following plays as a part of the off-program SECOND STAGE, as selected by Ivona Janjić, the assistant to the selector.

#### **SECOND STAGE (off-program)**

From the start of the season until mid-March, I had a privilege and satisfaction to follow all those theatrical events that are mainly held under the radar of the leading theatrical tendencies of Serbian theatre community, trying to select two plays that would fit into the concept of the Second Scene: to have a substantially different approach to the theatrical expression, both in their presentation and their articulation of meaning. In this quest, I came across around 20 plays that differed in content and quality, from strictly narrative structures to visual *durational*s (*In Him We Trust* by Ivana Ivković). However, the most obvious deviation from the ordinary was noticed in two non-verbal plays that surpass the narrow yet firm framework of the genre and narration, and both of these plays are grounded, in one way or another, in contemporary Serbian society.

#### **1. DOWN AND OUT – directed by Ana Popović; Puls Theatre Lazarevac**

Basing her play on George Orwell’s memoir *Down and Out in Paris and London* only in principle, but also seeking inspiration primarily in everyday life, Ana Popović depicts life on the

edge of society, the edge of major cities. This production insists on physical theatre instead of verbal and articulates social criticism – mostly of capitalism and transition – using dancing, body gestures, rhythm and tempo. Rigid theatrical frameworks are surpassed in the cast that includes, besides an actress, also a circus acrobat, a dancer, and a percussionist. Though the aspect of social subversion is strong and obvious, it is not the only one; *Down and Out* depicts simple but touching and intimate relationships of three women from the margin who firmly reject to succumb to modern dreams, no matter how inviting they may be.

## **2. RETURN – directed by David Glass; Serbian National Theatre Novi Sad**

Collaborating with eight actors and actresses, David Glass questions the influence of violence, especially a collective violent past, on the life of the later generations. Taking trauma and legacy as the foundation of this project, the ensemble presents a purely visual, inventive production that processes a number of causes and consequences of individual and collective aggression. Since this play is a result of a two-year collaborative process, it is not a simple implemented concept, but a careful projection of a deeply grounded spirit of the past and the present.

Ivona Janjić, theatre critic  
Belgrade, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

**NOTE: 65<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje Festival will take place between May 26<sup>th</sup> and June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. Depending on the current state of emergency, there is a chance of postponing the Festival, and the public will be notified of any changes in due time.**