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Editor's Preface

Ian Herbert

The contributions in this book are from some of the critics who took part in the young critics' seminar organised in conjunction with the 7. Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (7th Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest). The term "young critics' seminar" is accurate but possibly misleading, since the group included critics of considerable experience, who could hardly be described as beginning their careers. It also included several critics who had already taken part in a whole sequence of seminars organised by a number of other festivals during 2008 – a bunch of 'seminar junkies' getting an extra fix in Hungary, some of whom may have started out with little experience but all of them by now well versed in the to-and-fro of such gatherings.

Some of the critics in the group were newcomers, as was I, having been drafted in at short notice owing to the indisposition of Dirk Pilz, the noted German critic who had originally undertaken to moderate the event. Dirk had drawn up a plan of action, much of which we jettisoned as we got to know one another's needs and demands. We did spend quite a lot of time discussing such important topics as the ethics of criticism, but we found that in this group, with its widely varying levels of experience but very firm individual views, one of the best ways to develop our relationship to the subject (and to one another) was by discussion of the productions which we saw in the course of our week together.

My job was to listen and to some extent guide, but there was no question of my attempting to teach – I was there to learn, just as much as any other participant. For it is my firm belief that theatre criticism cannot be taught – but it can be learnt. My personal learning process has consisted of seeing thousands of shows before attempting to criticise any of them in print. It has since been greatly reinforced by regular contact (and often heated argument) at gatherings of this kind with young and enquiring minds from other countries and theatre traditions. For me, these opportunities for frank and unfettered exchange, away from both the seminar room and the Green Room (the actors' retreat), can be far more productive and even life-changing than any formal instruction.

My fellow "students", many of them possessed of - or in the process of acquiring - a doctorate in theatrology or theatre criticism, were thoroughly experienced in the formal approach, since such courses are now commonplace in that part of Europe from which most of them came. One of my first questions to the group was whether they were aware of Hans-Thies Lehmann's seminal book on postdramatic theatre. All of them had read it, from those blogging to a general audience to the specialists writing in high-level academic journals. Not one of them, however, was tempted into the long-discredited belief that any criticism can be "objective". It was quickly apparent that the medium for which we were writing was key to our individual approaches to criticism. Yet we all were united by a passion for theatre, which was expressed during our meetings in highly subjective terms.

You will find that subjectivity in the papers that follow. They are fascinatingly varied in their choice of topic and in their critical approach. Some deal with the Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest from a national perspective, giving us valuable insights into not only Hungarian theatre but also the "home" theatre with which it is contrasted. Others look in detail at particular shows, revealing the high level of observation that I noted among all the participants in our discussions. Others use the shows seen to elaborate on an aspect of dramatic or performance theory that especially interests them – and interests *us*, the readers, because of the skill with which it is presented. I would like to think that these papers reflect in some measure the development of critical sharpness and perhaps stylistic effectiveness (given that the work appears in languages which are not the students' own) that has been produced by our time together.

I certainly cannot make any claims to have influenced my colleagues' views: we were entrusted with the task of choosing the production to receive the "International Young Critics' Award" as the best Hungarian production seen in our festival visits. The two productions which most attracted the group's

interest, as you can see from their regular mention and expert dissection in these essays, were TÁP's *Curators* and Viktor Bodó's *Council House Stories 0.1*. As you can also see from my own report on the Festival (*Theatre Record* Volume XXVIII Issue 23), I was seriously underwhelmed by either of them, the first because I failed to gain more than a general impression of TÁP's deliberately chaotic evening, the second because, as a fervent admirer of Bodó's work, I found its overlong, often shapeless improvisations desperately in need of editing and polishing to achieve the level that I would expect from such a fine director.

Bodó's show got the prize, with TÁP in close contention.

Reading between the (story)lines

Readings, monologues, dialogues - the beauty of the international point of view on text, absence and theatre in general

Dóra Juhász

Reading. Between the lines. Between the storylines. Reading (but not only) the surtitles - though it is quite common in an international theatre festival for those who do not speak the language of the country. Of course this special kind of reception, perception leads to a special way of understanding and interpreting the various pieces.

Marvin Carlson refers to Wolfgang Iser, in his essay entitled *Theatre Audiences and the Reading of Performance*, setting out the questions of reading and interpreting a theatre performance and the topic of text and its concretization. What does "reading" and "text" mean in the context of contemporary Hungarian theatre? Zoltán Imre, to give but one example, says that traditional Hungarian (or even Western) theatre generally adopts a structured, linear and hierarchical order, which proceeds from a pre-written text to performance through such intermediate, 'subordinate' texts as the 'prompt copy' and the 'rehearsal text' (see Constantinidis 1993: 7). In the last two hundred years of its history, Hungarian theatre – as Gerald Rabkin says of Western theatre – 'has been defined in relation to the history of species of literature rendered palpable by a secondary group of artists' (Rabkin 1983: 54). In this model, the dramatic text is regarded as a stable, self-contained, and autonomous unit, existing as a permanent presence in historical consciousness, and the conventions of its staging allowed performance to (re)interpret the dramatic text by transcoding its lingual signs into visual and aural images.¹

That is why it is important and exciting to confront the latest texts – drama texts - and their on-stage interpretation – performances – during a festival dedicated to contemporary drama year by year. The programme of the 7. Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (7th Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest) gives us an interesting view of the new tendencies for dealing with text on stage. There are big differences of course. The piece *Kalevala*, directed by Csaba Horváth, is regarded as a Hungarian representation of the genre "physical theatre", but it is mainly about combining the languages of theatre and dance on stage. *Kalevala*, as written by Balázs Szálinger, is a special textual mixture of traditional-mythological themes, motifs and contemporary – ironic and up-to-date – poetry. In contrast, the Bladder Circus Company (Hólyagcirkusz Társulat) works with their textual material from a rather different point of view, in a really special way – words, sentences become part of a unique musical composition, a music-like structure on stage (made up of meanings, objects, gestures, rhythmical forms, intonations, expressions, looks, melodies ...). Viktor Bodó's performance *Council House Stories 0.1* deals with the textual - and intertextual – reality

¹ Zoltán IMRE, *Theatre of Citations - 1003 Hearts or Fragments from a Don Juan Catalogue*

of an apartment block, which turns surrealistic at a point. While the *Curators* of Vilmos Vajdai and TÁP Theatre presents the latest work of the most important Hungarian playwrights in a particular context. These short texts were written especially for this performance, as a strong and characteristic reflection on the Hungarian theatre and cultural scene and our everyday life, in and out of the cultural system.

These variations have different meanings for the Hungarian and for the international audience. We “read” these textual structures very differently, but this is what a contemporary drama festival is about: the professional alignment of absences, meanings, questions in connection with a piece. And it is especially interesting in the matter of a critical jury situation, when these very different – internationally varied – interpretations and “readings” have somehow to be fused. The critical process – being a critic, writing a review – is basically about expressing a point of view and analyzing the theatre performance as a structure, as a logical artistic system on stage. The critic’s opinion should be an articulated, explicated explanation of a professional like or dislike. Is it a judgement? Perhaps it is, but not in the very formal, and quintessential way that an award can be.

Taking part in a jury, like writing critical texts, basically raises the issue of responsibility. But what kind of responsibility are we talking about? “The critic is responsible, above all, to the text,” says Samuel Weber. But can it be that easy? Critics have to write well-structured, well-written, good text. A jury has to make a good decision about its award. But is that all?! Of course not.

Both as a critic and as a member of a jury one has to face the fact that writing reviews and making decisions as a jury are not the same thing. Not at all. While a critical text can be a question, awarding somebody seems more like a kind of answer. Criticism theoretically is the field of transformation, mediation, intellectual replacement, since the critical text is regarded as the verbal transformation of the critical opinion. Writing a review is ideally not a simple translation between dramatic texts and the movements of the bodies on stage, the impressions of the audience and words at all. A critical text is equivalent to a method of interpretation; it is an independent structure created by one person. One verbalized position, qualifying but not judging, from one certain viewpoint. A good text is always responsible for itself and its author, and the piece it is written about. Criticism is a constant dialogue with the piece, a constant monologue of the author. On the other hand, an award is not able to represent the whole process of judging. It is a symbol, an answer for a social and cultural situation, for an institutional background. It is a gesture. The declared possibility of a synthesis, where one of the most important tasks is to figure out which is the more important to a professional, critical jury: acknowledging the piece as it stands, or the new forms and ideas, the promise it contains.

During the decision process of the **International Young Critics’ Award** – an award given in 2008 for the first time in the history of the Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest – the young jury members had to face the difficulties of using the same system of categories. During the process of “collective and comparative reading” of the whole programme we heard some exciting and provocative sentences like, “Yes, sure you like *Jelizaveta Bam...* because there is something so “Polish” in the performance.” What does that mean exactly? And, what is really interesting for the Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest: are there some theatre pieces, gestures, atmospheres, that are absolutely “Polish”... is there also a manner of theatrical speaking/being which we could call “so Hungarian”?

Most of our jury knew some companies and directors from Hungary quite well. It is an amazing field of professional expectations. Thinking about an award means we must deal with these expectations, share such expectations and stereotypes with one another, so as to figure out why we can experience that “something is missing” feeling in some pieces. When and where can we find something new?

It is very thought-provoking, but not really surprising, that there are some pieces and artists who are automatically associated with the Hungarian theatre culture. The *Feketeország (Blackland)* from Krétakör Színház (Krétakör Theatre), the *Ledarálnakeltűntem (Rattled and Disappeared)*, directed by Viktor Bodó. Theatre directors like Sándor Zsótér, Béla Pintér, Árpád Schilling, Tamás Ascher are landmarks of the Hungarian theatre. They are still the centre of the frame of reference. They are the base line. Any dialogue about their new pieces or the pieces of new companies are always about comparing and analyzing those

performances and old/new tendencies against earlier ones. But it is all right this way. And it is symptomatic and really important to notice that all these artists are at the point of starting something new. Now they are taking the risk to set off in a new direction. This new way leads to a redefinition of theatre in Hungary, as the idea of “collective theatre” is not a utopia any more; it is the new form of making theatre: the actor is no longer just an actor, but the representative, the emblematic figure of group, of a house, of a district. Árpád Schilling has just redrawn the chalk circle of Krétakör Theatre, with the intention of focusing on possible forms of collaboration with the citizens of a district, so as to exist together and – finally – create art. Viktor Bodó’s new company Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság - Modern Színház- és Viselkedéskutató Intézet - Labor (Szputnyik Shipping Company - Modern Theatre and Behaviour Research Institute - Lab) is also about work, an experiment in the field of group theatre, working together with artists and the audience-to-be, the inhabitants of Budapest. Going one step closer to the people all around: this trend is very strong nowadays in the Hungarian theatre scene and it is being realized in site-specific projects and in special venues, scenes, locations. Vilmos Vajdai works in an old school building in downtown Budapest, using all the rooms, corridors - even the stairs - with TÁP Theatre. Péter Kárpáti’s new piece is performed in a simple apartment in the centre of the city. The members of the audience meet the organizers in the nearest metro underpass and they walk together toward the flat in small groups, as if it was the beginning of a private birthday party for one of our friends. The illusion of reality is a basic experience.

This special approach to theatre is not new at all, but very popular and inspiring now among Hungarian theatre-makers, and it is worth comparing with the forms and tendencies current in other countries.

That is exactly what the young critics did during the **International Young Critics Seminar** week. And the gesture of giving the award to Viktor Bodó’s piece is just the middle of a long, long conversation, the middle of a very important dialogue, which started by finding a common language to talk about the similarities and differences between Hungarian theatre forms and the theatre forms of other countries, and discussing the question of professional support, and the responsibility inherent in giving critical feedback. And hopefully this dialogue will continue through texts, reviews and articles just like the ones you can read in this publication.

In the Shadow of the Theatre Industry

Tamás Jászay

Professional theatre circles in Hungary have been arguing for quite a while about how the country’s theatre structure, which is at present based on institutional theatres and the resident companies working in/through them, could be renewed. I quote the characteristic features of the existing system from a study by Zoltán Imre (2003). According to him, a traditional theatre: “1. has a permanent company, 2. works in a repertory system, 3. operates in an industrial way, and finally, 4. is part of the nationally financed theatre structure.”² Hungarian established (so-called “stone”) theatres are organizations testifying to a strong economic, artistic and political co-operation, which are, however, incapable of renewal or keeping pace, even with the usual delay in Eastern Europe, with the changes taking place in the world, more precisely in international theatre life.

As this paper’s title implies, in their way of existence these theatres are industrial, factories which have been working practically unchanged since the end of World War II. After the system change the

² Quoted by Balázs Leposa: *Az ellenszínház mint alternatíva: A Stúdió „K” Woyzeckja* [The counter-theatre as an alternative: Woyzeck by Studio „K”] in *Alternatív színháztörténetek. Alternatívok és alternatívák*. Ed. Imre Zoltán. (Bp: Balassi Kiadó, 2008) 207.

mechanism of coded performance lost its purpose and the function of theatre suffered a visible relapse. Theatre is not a social cause anymore or a tool of ideological resistance. Theatregoing is no longer a weighty pursuit: for the majority of people it is only a habitual way of entertainment.

Established theatres occupy a prominent position in Hungarian cultural life, even due to their mere existence, yet because of social, political, technological and other changes it has also become evident by now that their role needs serious rethinking in order to make Hungarian theatre a recognised segment of European and global theatre life. If we wish to see the theatre as an important tool in understanding the world around us, we must answer the question of what we expect from theatre, and what perspectives we offer in return, in the era of globalization, of the unified Europe and – now we can add – of the financial crisis.

Instead of trying to cope with the novel challenges, it seems that the life of established (stone)theatres is closed, inward-looking, navel-gazing, a system that not only rejects visible changes but also says no to all kinds of alternative thinking, its main aim being to preserve the results achieved during the last few decades.³ The spread of political influence does not make the situation of theatres easier at all: in the provincial counties one can scarcely find a theatre where political interests do not govern the assignment of theatre managers, coupled with a cynical disregard for all professional aspects. Yet theatre means power, especially so in a country where 4-4.5 million (!) theatre tickets are still sold each year. But if the scene is ruled by party militants focusing not on the education of new audiences but rather on the re-education of the existing audience, the consequences of this for the future generations will be unimaginable.

Yet I come to save the theatre, not to bury it: the aim of my paper is to show possible solutions after a short sketch of the present situation. There is a common point in all of the realized or planned suggestions of the last couple of years, namely that they imagine theatre as a mobile, open, intriguing institution in close touch with society. (One of the main paradoxes of Hungarian theatre is that a theatre meditating on the most important social and political issues in Europe, about our most immediate present, is practically nonexistent in Hungary. When it appears, however, a well defined group of the political persuasion and their sympathizers immediately launch an aggressive assault against it.)

Of those who think differently about the theatre, the longest lasting and most internationally acclaimed attempt is related to Krétakör Theatre. During almost fifteen years of activity the group, led by Árpád Schilling and Máté Gáspár, recognized among other things that in a changed world the theatre also needs to change: if the spectators do not go to the theatre, the theatre must go to the spectators (see the performance *hamlet.ws*). They proved that professional and popular success are not mutually exclusive (see *Siráj, Blackland*). After a while they did receive regular support but still no regular venue of their own: showing that theatre can be done not only in the luxurious palaces erected at the end of the nineteenth century but also in underground hospitals, church ruins, rocket bases, circuses or virtually anywhere. They pointed out that art is not of a local value and interest by touring around the globe with their internationally acclaimed performances. When the company's director Árpád Schilling –one of the winners of the 11th Europe Prize New Theatrical Realities given by the European Theatre Union in 2009 – decided recently to redraw the shape of Krétakör (the Chalk Circle), many began to suspect the draining out of the company and, with this, of all the theatrically reforming spirit so characteristic of their work.⁴

³ cf. László Hudi and Zoltán Imre, Application for the managerial seat of the National Theatre, Bp., 2007, especially chapters II. (Historical overview of the National Theatres) and III. (Hungarian theatre ambiance). The full text is available online here: http://www.nemzeti.szhaz.hu/palyazok/hudi_imre/hudi_imre_palyazat.pdf. Date of download (9. March 2009)

⁴ For how Schilling imagines theatremaking today see his volume titled *Egy szabadulóművész feljegyzései* (Bp., 2007, 2008.). The full text can be read on the internet. The first version: http://m.blog.hu/kr/kretakor/file/schillingarpad_szabadulomuvesz2007.pdf, the second version: http://m.blog.hu/kr/kretakor/file/schillingarpad_szabadulomuvesz2008.pdf Downloaded: 9. March 2009

An important lesson to learn for the leaders of Krétakör was the drawback of intense professionalization: they decided to erase the chalk circle, the symbol and hallmark of an intellectual theatre, and start everything from the beginning again. László Hudi and Zoltán Imre made a similar step when applying for the post of manager of the National Theatre in 2007.⁵ Their concept, having as its model the activity of the “virtual” National Theatre of Scotland, would have resulted in the abolition of the permanent company and the permanent building for the sake of more effective functioning. According to their belief, the National Theatre could serve the needs of the largest public as a production house (their project is also titled: *National Theatre – for everyone!*). Their paper – not surprisingly, bearing in mind the aforementioned issues – did not win the competition, which ended with the victory of Róbert Alföldi, who came up with a vision of an exigent art theatre and numerous reforming ideas, but far less radical changes to the theatre’s profile than those of the Hudi-Imre team. To quote theatre critic István Nánay on the competition: “It’s not Zoltán Imre’s concept that is erroneous but the Hungarian state that is immature. One did not need much prophetic talent to anticipate the fate of his plan, co-written with László Hudi, since neither the political community nor the theatre profession is ready to accept a change so radically different from present practice.”⁶

What are we ready for then? Instead of recalling the aimless battles of words we should start out from the practical side. It seems that the much condemned system, rusty though it be, has already produced the antidote: roughly during the last decade – presumably not without the influence of Krétakör’s example – several workshops have been coming to life which exemplify the possibilities of a different theatre existence. The differences between these companies make it difficult to put them into the same box, yet almost all of them have to work under the same circumstances.

Before I venture a short presentation of these companies let me mention here the Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest which, from its debut in 1997, has explicitly undertaken the support of innovative Hungarian theatrical workshops. This has been done by the organization, first every second year, recently annually, of a festival in Budapest in which companies outside the established structure have the possibility to present themselves. Even if all the alternative theatre festivals, often with a long tradition, have the same aims, the Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest stands out with the novelty of being international: foreign theatre professionals have a chance during the festival to meet an important segment of Hungarian theatre life, which usually falls outside the scope of the average theatregoer. And this is a major opportunity for Hungarian independent groups, which often have only quite embryonic international relations.

The terminological uncertainty in the definition of these companies is shown by the terms I attempted to use before as quasi-definitions: “outside the structure”, “independent”, “alternative”, “working next to/against the establishment”. Based on the circumstances of their foundation and operation, however, Patrice Pavis’s term “collective creation” (*création collective*) can be applied, with some minor restrictions, to most of these companies.⁷

The most important characteristics of collective creation are: the work is not created by a single person but developed by an entire theatrical company. The text is often finalized after improvisation, the actors often have to carry out research and collect materials themselves (cf. e.g. Mnouchkine; to this is related the strong interest of the collective creation in actual political and social issues); the dramaturgical work only interferes in the creative process with suggestions; when the moment of harmonizing the improvised elements arrives the director or the dramaturge can carry this out, but this does not contradict the concept of collective direction. The main point is not so much the premiere, the end product, but the process itself, the path walked together.

⁵ see footnote nr 2.

⁶ István Nánay, *A missed chance*. In: Színház, 2 May 2008.

⁷ *Collective creation*. In: Patrice Pavis: *Dictionary of Theatre. Terms, Concepts, and Analysis*. Translation: Christine Shantz. University of Toronto Press, 1998.

The notion of collective creation initially appeared in the sixties-seventies⁸, where the starting point was the revolt against the tyrannical reign of the author and the director, coupled with a revolt against the industrialization of theatre and a desire to rediscover the collective and ritual aspect of theatrical activity. When improvisation, collective work, experiment comes into the limelight, theatremakers are actually returning to the most ancient, community-based model of the theatre.⁹ The relevant article in the *Oxford Companion to the Theatre* claims to find a connection through this between the collective creation, the *commedia dell' arte* and the artists akin to Shakespeare or Molière.

Pavis also discusses the persistence or revival of the method, most relevant to my topic:

“This method of work is frequently encountered today in experimental theatre, but to be successful it requires its participants to be highly qualified and versatile, not to mention the problems of group dynamics that may cause the whole enterprise to fail.”¹⁰

In the closing section of this paper I would like to focus on several of the groups that were present at the 7. Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (7th Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest) in 2008. My aim is to point out the common or different roots and elements of their work. The path these companies follow, regarded in a larger context, can be interpreted as an alternative solution to the crisis and an attempt to restructure the theatrical establishment. While constantly bearing in mind the unique nature of each case, person, situation, company and problem, I would like to elaborate on the possibilities of contemporary theatre to think about itself by looking through the filter of structure. The companies in focus are: TÁP Theatre, which has existed for a decade and a half but only acquired a wider reputation in the last couple of years (led by Viktor Vajdai), Bladder Circus Company (Hólyagcirkusz Társulat), founded in 1997 (led by Szabolcs Szőke), the internationally famous Béla Pintér and Company, founded in 1998 (led by Béla Pintér), Maladype group, founded in 2002 (led by Zoltán Balázs) and the youngest, Viktor Bodó's Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság - Modern Színház- és Viselkedéskutató Intézet - Labor (Szputnyik Shipping Company - Modern Theatre and Behaviour Research Institute - Lab), founded last year.

The **fulcrum of each group** is a strong, well-educated personality, who usually knows classical theatre practice and forms - with which, however, he does not wish to identify. We find artists with past (and partly present) experience in music (Szőke), alternative theatre (Pintér), acting or directing in established theatres (Balázs, Bodó, Vajdai). They come from different directions and are heading in different directions but they have already proved that, with permanent fellow artists on their side, they are capable of organizing the life of a company. They are also capable of creating the background of a real workshop research, in the sense that they can offer a perspective to their colleagues to help them develop, and not just use them for the accomplishment of their own plans and visions.

⁸ Guglielmo Schininà discusses the processes described by Pavis in the context of world theatre (Guglielmo Schininà: Here We Are: Social Theatre and Some Open Question About Its Developments. In: *The Drama Review* 2004, 17-31.) The author mentions Julian Beck and Judith Malina (Living Theatre) as a starting point later followed by: Richard Schechner (Performance Group), Luis Valdez (Teatro Campesino), Peter Schumann (Bread and Puppet Theatre), Augusto Boal, Vianna Filho. From Europe he mentions Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Peter Brook as followers of the “new theatre”. And we cannot forget the theatre workshops which sprang up also in Hungary from the sixties onwards and the representatives of which (Tamás Fodor, Péter Halász, István Paál, József Ruszt) created the notion of “alternative” theatre or of “the other theatre”. Here I use the concept of “collective creation” in its original meaning, partly cut off from its original historical context.

⁹ Compare with a remark by Ariane Mnouchkine, who was mentioned by Pavis as a user of the described model: “But creation can be collective, and absolutely collective, precisely if everyone is in his or her place, ensuring maximum creativity in each function, and if there’s someone who centralises. This does not imply any hierarchical vision. One does not create all together, it is not true. Everyone creates, one after the other, and if everyone creates at once, there’s a short circuit, like when everyone speaks at the same time. Each person must at least be able to have the floor; otherwise it’s a brouhaha, and the brouhaha exists in improvisation!” Towards a New Form: From an interview with Ariane Mnouchkine by Denis Bablet. In: *Collaborative Theatre: The Théâtre du Soleil Sourcebook*. Compiled and ed. by David Williams. London and New York: Routledge, 2005. 57.

¹⁰ op. cit. p 62.

The leaders can generally feel the moment when a change is needed, a moment that inevitably comes at a given time in the life of each company led by an influential personality, **they are open to new impulses**. At the same time the decisive role of the leader is shown by the fact that Hólyagcirkusz Társulat (Bladder Circus Company) has only once (András Jeles) and Maladype only twice (Sándor Zsótér, Claudio Collová) worked with a guest director. As for the others, we can talk about collective creation (Bladder Circus Company) or the permanent directing work of the group leader (Bodó, Pintér). TÁP Színház (TÁP Theatre), which for many years gave more the impression of a loose group of friends, is the odd man out. There are core figures, but no company, while the majority of the guest actors are famous artists who, after finishing their work in the established theatres, at around 10-11pm are eager to join their completely frantic projects, often based entirely on improvisations accompanied by the rollicking laughter of the spectators.¹¹ The almost six hour performance, entitled *Curators*, which was premiered at the Drama Festival, stands out, beyond the fact that it used all the rooms of a typical council house, for the fact that sixteen playwrights and fifteen directors worked on these scenes, which were finally “head-directed” together by company leader Vilmos Vajdai.

But back to the changes: the most surprising turn is arguably linked to the name of Zoltán Balázs, who in leaving the relative financial and infrastructural stability of the Bárka Theatre and his already developed aesthetic language, a ritual theatre unique in Hungary, closest maybe to Robert Wilson, has managed to transgress his own boundaries and get down to question the very foundations of theatremaking with his new productions *Leonce and Lena* and *Tojáséj*. Whereas the performances of Bladder Circus Company, with the actors playing curious instruments crafted by themselves, seem to be rethinking the same questions over and over again for years, with a certain monomania, against a more and more spasmodic theoretical background.

Béla Pintér, for several reasons, occupies a special place among the listed artists. The repertoire of his company increases with one, or maximum two new items each year, directed in each case by Pintér himself, with him usually playing the leading role. This fact seems to be what mostly bugs Hungarian reviewers, even if they are arguably the most successful group of all, managing to attract a **permanent audience** – even a large circle of aficionados which may sound strange in the independent theatre medium in Hungary. Their theatrical style is considered unclassifiable even by the company members themselves: they seem to stand halfway between the traditional and alternative spheres, while the adjectives describing their performances range from the sacral to the kitsch. One thing is certain, however: Béla Pintér’s unique formula has paid off well, despite some critics repeatedly complaining of their boredom with it.

A similar twist in the **critical reception** could also be noted in the case of the other companies. The ritual theatre of Zoltán Balázs was acclaimed by the critics at first, lavished with prizes and festival invitations, then criticized for its formalism, for making art for art’s sake and for crafting meaningless formal patterns. The bitter clowns of Bladder Circus Company also went through this process: their performances testifying to a rare synchronization of the acoustic and visual elements were first glorified by the amazed critics, while lately their works have almost become invisible to professional acclaim.

The companies in question also share the fact that they **do not have a venue of their own**, although they all relate to a given theatre building which has taken them in. The conditions seem ideal for Béla Pintér’s company: their performances have been housed by the Szkéné Theatre, working as a theatre venue for forty years, situated in a building of the Technical University (Műszaki Egyetem) on the Buda quayside. The company’s presence is also advantageous for Szkéné as a receiving venue, since most of their performance nights are used by Béla Pintér’s group, which attracts a stable and large audience. Maladype was for years tied to an established venue, the Bárka Theatre, at first rather loosely, then more

¹¹ About the running of the company and its position in the Hungarian theatre structure see Kornélia Deres – Noémi Herczog, *Egy népszerű alternatív(a)*. In: Színház, January 2009. An online version is available here: http://szinhaz.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=35035:egy-nepszer-alternativa&catid=26:2009-januar&Itemid=7.

tightly. Leaving the *Bárka*, the group's composition underwent considerable changes, as well as their artistic means of expression. At present they are housed in the studio hall of the Thália Theatre in the city centre, working on refreshing their repertoire. Szputnyik managed to find a place in the MU Theatre, a very influential venue, if not the most important centre for contemporary alternative and dance theatre, but they have also played in different other places. TÁP Theatre is attracted to a great range of different sites: from open-air happenings to the largest pleasure-grounds of Budapest nightlife, so popular among young people.

In their aspiration, interests in theme and choice of texts these companies show a great dispersion. The Bladder Circus Company is attracted to a well defined range of authors (Daniil Kharms, Thomas Bernhard) and theatrical means (clowns, circus). In the case of Maladype, after the staging of plays almost never played in Hungary, by Ghelderode, Genet or Hölderlin, their shift in interest is shown by the two plays by Büchner: *Leonce and Lena* and *Woyzeck*: after their meticulously elaborated formal language they felt a desire for freedom, fulfilled by a fragmentary construction. The plays of Béla Pintér often stem from personal, autobiographical experiences, while TÁP Theatre is the closest to what could be called a social theatre: they have already organized a charity for politicians in need, while in the already mentioned *Curators* performance they satirized the financing structure of the Hungarian theatre system.

I have deliberately said little about the Szputnyik Shipping Company. The group was founded in 2008 by Viktor Bodó, former member of Krétakör, who also worked at the Katona József Theatre. He sailed off into the unknown with a crew of young, recently graduated actors. Their unmatched advantage is that they can study from a certain "historical distance" the mistakes and successes of their predecessors. Yet they also have a great handicap, having to build up a company of their own during the financial crisis, when the position of theatre in society is barely visible because of the constant allusions to the lack of money. Bodó admits to being a strong devotee of author's theatre¹², the essence of which he sees as a mixture of genres, acting styles and theatrical tools, a constant experimental attitude and a quest for new means (the word 'laboratory' in their name is also an allusion to this).

The leader of the experiment, however, has a strong responsibility not only towards the company members but also towards those who form the audience for their research attempts. Bodó sailed off with a strong tail-wind from the theatrical community as a recognized, established theatremaker. The reviews give a mixed reception to his work so far: the more patient critics, who expect results in the long term, have given accounts of better or worse stations along this path, while the more pragmatic ones cried failure. The truth must probably lie somewhere in between, while it is certain that as long as someone has the courage to act and think despite the economical and political situation, we still have a strong reason to keep up hope – on the stage just as much as in the audience.

Work in progress on an open platform

Contemporary theatre festivals and the performance Council House Stories 0.1

Miriam Kičičnová

The word festival - and the event itself - has a very long tradition, especially when we speak about theatre festivals. They follow a tradition which started more than two thousand years ago in ancient Greece. And now I have done something totally forbidden, connecting contemporary theatre festivals, about which I would like to write, and the ancient Greeks. An impossible connection? No, it is logical. We need to repeat the context – or maybe only I need to repeat it... The word festival came from the Latin *festivus*. Festival is

¹² see 'Esély nyílt a társulatalapításra. Kovács Dezső beszélget Bodó Viktorral' (an interview with Viktor Bodó) . In: Kritika, September 2008, online at: http://www.kritikaonline.hu/kritika_08szept_kovacs.html

a special time of celebration, when normal life is stopped for a while. In Ancient Greece it was a celebration of gods and heroes. It was also connected with ritual. Theatre festivals in Greece had a special role in society, supporting a political and educative ideology as both sociological phenomenon and artistic event. A festival was a social gathering, where people were confronted with old myths. One of its goals was *to present a new, different, better, more creative, progressive, more interesting etc. approach to mythical stories*. All of which is to say that in ancient Greece also, the birthplace of theatre, festivals had the same role as today's contemporary festivals – *to bring new "waves", approaches, forms*. But with these big differences: they are not connected with ritual, although theatre itself is ritual, and their stories are mostly modern. It is better to write that we want to create new, modern content as well as form, not simply re-creating or remaking old, known stories. (Although this is not true either, because we do also re-create and remake ancient myths and old stories.) Can we simply say that ancient theatre festivals were also a form of "research" in a known area? I think so.

Over the centuries festivals changed their faces. The 20th century brought something totally different, to conform with our different expectations: theatre festivals transformed into showcases. We started *to expect the best, the nicest, the most beautiful, perfect, grand, wonderful piece*. Which is not surprising - after all, we don't want to pay for something that is not "excellent". As theatre became a part of the market (trade), of course people began to accept this point of view. But I hope that we can not be pleased with this situation, even if we work in this "market".

With some festivals nowadays it is not so easy. They want to show the best of the best, but they also want to model themselves on festivals which would be far from these showcases. Or better to say, their role in society is different. Their focus on contemporary methods of theatre writing and staging makes them more of an open space for theatre research. Therefore we cannot expect great and magnificent "finished" works, but more open "work in progress" and "work in process". Festivals of contemporary theatre and drama become an open platform for new approaches to all elements of performance. This transition is also visible in established festivals (LIFT, Krakowskie Reminiscencie...)

There are more reasons for this. It is important to say that theatre has for a long time followed the "*performative trend*", the movement from a textual to a performative culture. This also means that the way of working is changed. From this point of view, a performance is never finished. It is not some kind of fossil, but a lively and constantly changing organism. All the time there is a continuous process of work, rebuilding, creating and at root (re)searching. Actors changed to performers. They also lost their traditional role in the written text. Very often they have to form their character in performance from "nothing", let us say from different material (personal stories, old letters, documents, improvisations, exercises, photos...). A role is not written anymore, it is born in another way from classical theatre.

A lot of young directors now concentrate on research as a method of work. The result – product – in its final form is subordinated to other things than normal, typical, conventional work. It is on the same level as process. The effort is not only to prepare the best show, but also to get a lot of personal enrichment and develop one's research further in one's professional field of work. Such a performance is not intended to show what it knows about this world, to show answers, but to present the theory that an audience can recognise. It has changed the position in which a message is created.

But the problem remains. After all the "normal" festivals, the showcases, came a time when we began to make a strict division between theatre festivals and festivals of contemporary theatre - contemporary drama festivals. Drama took first place again, which is quite surprising in this period of postdramatic theatre. The problem is that under the title contemporary drama, or contemporary theatre, we think of both content and form, on a textual level as well as in staging. In other words, artistic leaders don't know how to decide what they want to bring to such a festival. Are they to bring new plays, but done in an "old fashioned" way, or should they concentrate on a modern way of direction, or acting, or special set design in not so old pieces. I think that at the centre are really both – new texts and also new ways of staging.

I am happy, that Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest) brought both. If I compare it with our Slovak festival Nová dráma (New Drama), this idea is better preserved in Budapest. An idea is extended on the presentation of contemporary drama and its treatment in different regions. This year there was a focus on Slovenia, but there was also an international section. What was really interesting is that the organizers chose a country which is not big or famous, but where a stream of contemporary theatre is still flowing.

The Slovak Festival concentrates on contemporary drama. It started its history only a few years before, in 2005, in Bratislava. The founders of the festival had problems for a while in deciding their focus. In the title was new drama. But what can we hide under this name? Actually, can it be anything new, when we are living in times of postmodernism and eclecticism, where “rewriting” is more interesting than “new writing”, because we don’t believe any more in terms of originality, or primacy? This was also a problem for the dramaturgy of the festival. How to define this “new drama”? Where are its borders? Is it limitation of years, or limitation of form? Is Thomas Bernhard new? Or is it just that we are so backward? Or do we want to see Bernhard in a new kind of staging? These were problematical issues. And it was important to decide, to say, what we wanted to bring and present as new at the Festival Nová dráma. Now in the fifth year of this festival we see changes. In the focus are contemporary plays, not only with a recent date of creation, but also with differences of form (and also way of staging). The festival started to encourage the writing of new and contemporary drama texts in Slovakia. At one level the festival is an inspiration for creators, but it is also a space for presentation. A competition to find the best drama text is connected with the Festival. They are read during the festival in a “triathlon”, featuring the three best plays from those submitted. On one side we want to defend text as the basic component of staging, but on the other side we want to call for different approaches and different ways of treating this text. Maybe it is not possible to unite all these aims.

A good example of all the themes I have mentioned (theatre as research, unfinished, open form) is the performance in the programme of Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest, *Council House Stories 0.1* directed by Viktor Bodó. His group, Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság - Modern Színház- és Viselkedéskutató Intézet - Labor (Szputnyik Shipping Company - Modern Theatre and Behaviour Research Institute - Lab), created this type of “not finished”, “unready” work in progress. It was not only because we saw the last general rehearsal, but particularly because there were elements of form and text which emphasized this. Its liquidity of theatre form was well balanced by its playfulness, theatricality and contemporary style of reduced spectacle.

One of authors of the text was himself the show’s director and one of its actors. Text in this case is also connected with space. The old council house gave the performance a special atmosphere. It is one empty room, a one-room flat with normal windows, without any sign of classical theatre space. This space is connected with the content of the text - stories of this house, or any council house in this part of Budapest. We are witnesses of people searching for a new flat. We are confronted with various inhabitants of this council house and with various things, relationships, which happen there. But its texture gave us more freedom of interpretation. It is also possible to understand the textual base as a game played with different times and spaces. We can see the council house as whole, in which case the empty playing space becomes a setting for all the flats in one council house. But it could also be the history of a single flat with its different succeeding tenants. Stories intertwine, depicting different types and characters. The text also contains spaces outside this flat, people outside this room, which are also part of the performance. Various stories connect the landlord of the flat(s) and the space. Usually walls in front of us hide inner life. Here the main principle is to open everything, which is why the production’s texture is also open. We cannot find linearity and finality in its text structure or performance. It could be possible to continue this play for a very long time with even more new human stories, or more correctly apartment stories.

This fluid text form was also present in the performance - in constant movement, with for example the two doors on the left side open all the time. Someone entered the room, went across it, or only watched it, observed, brought cables, knocked or any other activity. The voices and visits of neighbours in more

unexpected moments were also confirmation of this circulation. The structure of the text was so free that it raises the question, if we changed particular parts, would it still be possible to play this play? I suppose that the answer is yes. The same applies to changing the time sequence. The relationship of its parts would have an inner logic and the viewer should be able to reconstruct all the stories. This is also for me work in progress. That piece allowed me as an audience member to “play” with the play, try to think about it, change it. It offers more space for imagination and also for research.

The building of situations was also an open form. It really reminded me sometimes of a way of work which consists of research on reactions and behaviour in similar situations. The situations were not “finished” in the classical sense, where we can analyze a situation and afterwards interpret it, then decide on one solution and stage it. Here, the work with situations was a little bit different. Each situation is somehow real, even when it is put in surreal contexts, or forms. But each situation as such was only one out of all those possible and still offered the possibility of change. In the way in which Viktor Bodó worked with the text, it seems possible to understand the final, performed situation as an example, which could be replaced by another and another and another one with worse or better results. The opening, expository scene, with its terrible violence being recorded at the same moment, established a code of performance. Things are not what they seem. Reality has two sides and so does its presentation.

This performance had great value in terms of theatricality. Bodó played with the absurd and the imagination. That means that his work is full of creative invention. A lot of directors forget this. The feeling of freedom leads them to open expression in acting, or inventive construction in concept. But they can lose all feelings for theatricality and the idea that everything is possible in theatre space - that theatre can create not only a mirror of the present, but primarily a *new* and *other world*, which is based on, or which has emerged from the normal, realistic world. Bodó used real stories, but put them into extreme, weird contexts, where they were given a new level of understanding. (For example, a woman auditioning for a big part and her developing craziness, or the arrival of a Pioneer chorus in the middle of the performance.) This reversal of reactions is typical for the text and also the performance.

An interesting question for me is: would be possible to take this text and put it in another space, with other actors, another director? Would it function in different conditions? Or it is too tightly connected with its creators and authors and space? I suppose that it could be adapted by others, why not? But in that moment it would be interesting to observe if it would also offer space for research to the new creators. Would they be able to “conserve” this open form in text and performance level?

Work in progress as a performance may sometimes not be a voluntary decision. It may be only the result of its creators finding too much material. I have a feeling that the long duration of the performance *Council House Stories 0.1* and its “incompleteness” is a result of these long improvisations, playing with a situation, after which there was not enough strict and cruel selection. Selection here would be quite helpful. An open text form doesn’t mean that you also have to make an “open” theatre form. When it is like this as in Bodó’s piece, it means that work needs to continue...

So ahead of us there may really be times when we have to accept that theatre is evolution, performance is evolution and on the stage there will be more and more “incomplete”, “unfinished” texts and performances. Work in progress may become a new theatre form.

Contemporary Drama In Contemporary Space

Dária Fehérová

In theatre it is possible to move worlds - literally. What we see on stage is our world, represented by a series of signs, symbols and generally accepted rules used in more or less innovative ways. As creators we

put our ideas of the world on stage. But we have to have a stage. When there is no place to show these ideas, the whole concept of theatre as we have known it for centuries disappears. In theatre there is always a distinction between actors and audience, just as in film where it is between the screen and the audience. No matter how much the public becomes involved in the performance and no matter how much the actors move among the audience, there is always a place we can call “stage”.

Today, when new private theatres are appearing and disappearing day by day, it seems to be a problem to find that place. The process of rehearsing the show can happen basically anywhere, but it is important for the creators and for the actors as well to know where they will eventually play. Lack of regular theatre buildings (or some other reasons, like high rent) has forced creators to seek out unusual places to perform in. Schools, cellars, town squares, culture houses, museums, gardens, factories ... any of them can become a theatre stage.

The thought of an unusual space can be behind the whole concept of performance. You see an old, abandoned building and you immediately know that *this* is the right space. Then you start choosing the text. And usually, the interpretation of that particular text is very much influenced by the space. The whole performance gets new meanings. You cannot watch Romeo die in an old factory hall and pretend that this story is 400 years old and has nothing to do with you. The space gives it a certain shift, bringing the performance closer to us, the contemporary audience.

The 7. Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (7th Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest) offered two performances in unusual spaces. TÁP Színház performed the premiere of *Kurátorok (Curators)* and Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság - Modern Színház- Viselkedéskutató Intézet-Labor (Szputnyik Shipping Company - Modern Theatre and Behaviour Research Institute - Lab) presented their almost finished work in progress, *Bérháztörténetek 0.1 (Council House Stories 0.1)*.

Performance In Space, Space As A Performance

The concept of *Curators* was indeed interesting. More than ten short dramatic sketches were divided into three groups. The audience was also divided into three groups according to colours (by random selection of colours at the beginning, which some friends, who come together and are split up, might not like). The groups travelled around the “theatre” separately and took turns in watching the pieces.

The theatre was actually a non theatrical space. It was an old building, a school with a small yard inside, very useful for taking a smoking break. The narrow balcony overlooking the yard gave fresh air and allowed us to breathe while we were going from one room to another. There were lots of corridors and staircases, rooms and toilets. The corridors were well used for exhibition, with objects, pictures and photographs on the walls. It made our journey around the building more interesting, in that there was always something to look at. But for performances they used only three rooms and the building had much bigger potential. I can imagine the performances going on in circles in many rooms of the Tűzraktér building: the audience would choose where to go, which groups to see. It would make the building much more alive, always full of people going from one room to another, with the doors and shows open for anyone to stay however long they want. This building cries out to be made alive, buzzing with people.

Curators was a great project to start with. It was on the borders between a performance and a happening. Unfortunately, with such projects, especially one this big, you can never predict the reaction of the audience. So it might turn out very well and wrong at the same time. The TÁP group is well known for its original and unique shows. This one brought out many practical issues which are not easily addressed without a real audience. But when the audience is in, it is already too late ... So one evening can be a flop, next evening a marvellous performance.

Council House Stories 0.1 by Szputnyik Shipping Company was exactly what its title suggests. It showed us stories from one apartment, in a block of flats. How people co-exist next to each other, how they influence their lives. In such an apartment you can hear your neighbours taking a shower, arguing, watching TV, partying. These stories were performed in an empty room of one building. The actors used

everything the room offered: a window on the left, two doors on the right, white walls. The space was flexible. As there were many stories to be performed, the actors always brought their props with them, leaving traces after their episode finished. At the end the room was full of television cables, which were being pulled from one storey to another, from one flat to another, as a symbol of connection among all the people living in the block.

The effect of this performance would not work in a regular theatre building. This room offered not only “design”, but also a view from the window – the real world outside, which we can see from our flats, too. There was also a realistic corridor, no empty space behind the door, no backstage. There was no stage, no “behind the scenes” - the audience was made a part of the performance.

Curators and *Council House Stories 0.1* were two opposite examples of using non theatrical spaces. TÁP Színház worked with the space they had, but the text itself (or the texts, because we are talking about a lot of short plays and sketches) is able to exist and be performed outside the rooms of the Tűzraktér building. The idea of three rooms, three groups of audience, exhibitions on the walls is an “upgrade” to the performances.

Council House Stories 0.1 is able to exist outside of the space it was performed in. But let's be honest, in a baroque theatre building it would completely lose its impact. Even the name of the piece focuses on something very specific, which exists in a specific place.

Looking For Alternatives

Performing in non-theatrical spaces is “in” these days. There are several reasons for it. These spaces create an alternative to regular theatres. It is not only in terms of experiment: many theatres now have alternative stages, so called “studios” where they stage some contemporary drama as well as on their main stages. So this has been in motion for quite some time now. What is more important, these spaces allow the audience to come closer to the performance (let's remember Ariane Mnouchkine's performances, where you can see the actors before the beginning, and watch how they put their make up on). And it allows us to become a part of the performance.

The reason for searching for a special space and stage can be also very practical. It might be easier and sometimes even cheaper to rent an old abandoned building than a theatre (or there may be no theatre in the city). Cities usually support projects that also somehow help the city itself. And when a theatre company promises to bring some old house back to life at their own expense, what more you could wish for...

In Slovakia there are some independent little theatres fighting year after year against the lack of space to rehearse and perform in. This has led to maybe strange, but often successful and interesting results. Theatre Pôtoň used to work in a little town not far from Nitra. They performed in various places from a castle to a bar. After 10 years of existence they rented an old culture house in a village called Bátovce (close to Levice and Nitra). Their plan is to reconstruct the building, and have there a big stage and two small stages (for rehearsing, small performances and workshops), offices for administration and accommodation for guest creators. There is a garden around the house which can be used for workshops for designers, who can work outside, but also for actors. The new building will be a whole complex for artists, where they can do everything from painting and music to performing.

Stanica Žilina-Záriečie is another example of non-theatrical space. Stanica means train station in Slovak. And this really is a little train station, in the suburbs of the city of Žilina. The uniqueness of the project lies in keeping the native function of the building as a train station, with its waiting room and ticket office, connecting with using the space for creative artistic and social activities. At this place there are exhibitions, concerts, workshops, performances and movies - and the trains still leave every hour...

In Košice in the North of Slovakia they are working on the project of Kasárne Kulturpark. One of the old barracks is being used for theatre, workshops, music. Where soldiers once were housed, there are artists now.

The search for alternative spaces can sometimes be tiring both psychologically and financially. But the urge of talented people to work seems to be strong. Young people today appear to be willing to sacrifice a lot to bring theatre to the people. There are many advantages in such an approach, some of which I have mentioned above. But non-theatrical spaces can also offer some kind of an “excuse”: we may tend to have lower expectations of the performance, or sometimes give it higher credit than it deserves in order to support the experiment. Therefore, when we discuss such performances we should also point out their mistakes to allow the company to grow and not get stuck at a certain level, which may have been achieved by choosing a special space. Theatre is a complex art and space is only a part of it.

Site-generic friends

Martin Bernátek

A theatre festival could be described by Michel Foucault’s term *heterotopia*. Originally a medical term describing the displacement of an organ from its normal position, he developed it to mean a spatial concept of present utopias, “other places” which are here and not here, shaking the hierarchy of the external world. Heterotopias consist of time shifts, multilayered meanings, where the access is also limited by a system of sanctions. Using the metaphor of a mirror, Foucault described how the spectator’s presence is perceived through virtual images which make the whole environment present and at the same time not present in complex form, because of the non-existent space behind the mirror.

A project taking place in a specific space, such as TÁP Theatre’s *Curators*, intensifies and sharpens the theatrical relationship with the external world, and at the same time makes it more fluid. Chosen spaces in site-specific projects are usually the subject of textual and semantic reference. Christopher Balme offers the term “site-generic”, a sub-category which covers productions with a loose relation to any particular space; they use the aesthetic of the space, its spatial conditions, but implement their own independent production. The following projects can be described as a series of such site-generic performances.

Find your specific site

As part of the Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest) in 2008 TÁP Színház (TÁP Theatre) presented *Kurátorok (Curators)*. In fact, it was a collaboration between different directors and writers under the overall direction of Vilmos Vajdai and the dramaturg Bori Sebők, involving many actors and other participants – and, of course, spectators. The old gallery Tűzraktér (VI. ker. Hegedű u. 3.) was converted to a mansion which became a promenade theatre where the audience was divided into groups, equipped with a sheet of instructions according to a relevant group colour and guided up and down to watch short scenes and also movies. The theme “curators” mostly refers to the position of the artist in today’s world. Problems of financial support, relations to institutions and critics were presented mostly in an ironic way. As well as conventional interview formats, part of the programme was also a film projection. The contrast between professional actors and amateurs arose very obviously and contributed to an overall mish-mash of various approaches and formats.

Besides the scenes themselves, the movement through the building contributed to the spectator’s experience. First of all, the place was aesthetically marked. The actions took place in a block of four rooms and while moving from one “mansion” to another the audience could observe paintings, collages and decorations on the walls - partly the decoration of the original building, which also serves as a kind of squat and rehearsal space. The atmosphere of an artistic squat was mixed with echoes of socialism from the linoleum floor and tiled surfaces. Downstairs, after passing through an open courtyard and crossing

security stripes, there was a kind of foyer or living room with a carpet, couch and armchairs, reinforced by simple wooden benches.

The audience was treated in a very disorganized manner; people were rushing up and down, after they were let in from the corridor where they were squeezed for some minutes more than usual before the start of the performance. The whole building looked like an anthill but without the secret order of nature, just chaos. This mess was a significant part of the spectator's experience, the struggle to find any information about what's going on, the fight for tickets and the fight for seats afterwards.

While entering the house the spectator passes the area where the performers and organizers are gathered, which creates a tension and expectations of interactivity. The second aspect of the dramaturgy of space was the first break, which gathered people in the first floor corridor, standing near the balustrade, smoking cigarettes or just observing life in the courtyard. The divisions of the audience reinforce the feeling that all spectators have to deal with the same situation; to the contrary, an ironic sense of humour also arises between the group that leaves one space and its new visitors. Even though the event was supposed to last 120 minutes, after three hours it was just at its halfway point and a lot of people had already left, partly because of the bad organization, partly – in my case – because they didn't understand Hungarian, were not able to match the short English descriptions to scenic action and didn't understand the local context presented in most of the shows.

Anxious optimism

Just three days before, on Sunday November 23 the students of the Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television at the University of Ljubljana (AGRFT) organized under the supervision of the director Sebastijan Horvath, as part of Exodos festival, a scenic event based on Voltaire's text *Candide or The Optimist*. Almost the same structure was used as in *Curators*. The audience was divided into groups according to the numbers they were given. The event occupied the whole building of AGRFT from basement to attic. Different approaches were also used, from live video performance to theatre installations and a final happening with an audience. A special "party" room with wine and biscuits was also arranged for refreshments. And no translation or English information was provided. From the central refreshment room the audience was invited to the performances.

The dramaturgy of the event emphasized the inner rhythm of the performances itself as well as in relation to the whole. In a basement we observed the torture of a big doll, starting slowly like a preparation or reverse striptease, continuing in repetitions of loads of hits and small breaks. After this rhythmical and aggressive section the audience moved back to the "party" room, having time to chat and relax. In the next room the path was marked to a shadow room and low lights. Mostly personal stories and unrealistic love affairs were described on paper or evoked through video and sound in headphones. At the exit everyone got a flower blossom. The event ended in the space where the whole programme started, with a scene featuring priests and references to sexual crimes within the church.

But the last situation denied any semiotic or representational level and stressed the performative aspect of the event. The audience enter the room from backstage and sit on a small podium, being silently observed by the actors and organizers in street clothes sitting in the auditorium. Roles were switched, and the border between audience and "audience" – the performers – was marked by security stripes. Even though the visitors were not pushed to particular performative action and no instructions were provided for us, apart from empty chairs, the tension condensed the situation and supported the emergence of performative action by the visitors. The direct gaze of the performers, even though not trying to find eye contact, and their silence, perturbed the relaxed mood of the visitors. Laughter was the first reaction, and then came banal jokes and stupid comments. As the stress grew, one member of the audience stood up and tried to give a flower to one of the watching performers, who accepted it after some seconds, without any special interest. After 15 or 20 minutes, the performers silently left the room, followed by the disoriented audience.

Friend on the other side

From April 2008 the German group Rimini Protokoll presented their “International phone play” *Call Cutta in a Box*. The word play in the title refers to the concept of the performance. The single spectator is invited to spend one hour on the phone with a person from a call centre located in Calcutta, India. The tiny box-like office where the call took place was equipped with fax, PC, chair, shelves and other typical office furniture. After entering the box, a phone starts to ring and is supposed to be picked up by the visitor. Then the conversation with an Indian person starts, consisting of chat led by the performer according to secret instructions. A part of a game was little tasks given to the visitor, which guided him to rediscover things hidden in the box space. Posters on a wall or a view from the mirror were precisely described by a voice from the phone, which creates a certain feeling of being trapped. A conversation evolves— or should according to the predicted structure - into deeply personal mutual confession on the issue of family. An Indian woman sang her favorite song to me and I was also invited to sing one. Despite a strict structure the spectator could appreciate the theatricality and vivid communication and performative skills of the call centre ‘staff’.

I experienced *Call Cutta in the Box* at the Baltic Circle festival in Helsinki. Here the box was situated in the “white cube” Kiasma contemporary art museum. White cartons fit into clean corridors. Although it appears as something external and anonymous compared to *Curators’* house, it presents a flexible, almost “pocket theatre” model, or better, a mobile tool for performative communication. In *Curators*, conversation between visitors emerged spontaneously, as a kind of anti-theatrical or self-entertaining strategy; in *Call Cutta* it became a subject of performance and evolved into a contrast between instruction and spontaneous openness. The very open and friendly atmosphere of *Candide* ended up in a confrontation. Apart from the emerging topic of space itself, these site-generic performances stress also the issue of the emergence of spatial interaction. The design or dramaturgy of spaces opens up the issue of the dramaturgy of communication. As the subject of aesthetic experience, it explores the material presence of theatre as a medium for ethical experience. This evolves to conceptual inequalities. As communication is generated by the open spatial-aesthetic relationship between audience and performers, a stricter exposition of the ethical or eidetic/sensorial aspect of theatre is being established.

Praise for Oddity or Circus Central Europe

Jakub Škorpil

They are strange. They are slow. They sit behind the table and stare in silence or hum some melody. Or walk incredibly slowly on the stage, panicking, as if they would like to run away. And then they do. Or they are cooking something on the gas ring, singing (although not very well), announcing “world-class acts” while stammering out their words and snarling until (not only they) forget where they started their speech. They are odd. They are true to their type.

I have seen two performances from the repertoire of the Hólyagcirkusz Társulat (Bladder Circus Company). The first one, *Flop-twitterer*, three years ago (and again last year in Český Těšín) and the second, *Jelizaveta Bam*, in November 2008 in the small auditorium of the Merlin theatre in Budapest. Only strangely inconsistent, but still very strong, impressions remain from the first experience: a small crowded club somewhere in the centre of Budapest with a humble but homely auditorium. And above all a strangely slow performance, with very odd, probably homemade musical instruments, performers in white (clownish) make-up and a text (or plot) that I was not able to understand. The printed synopsis which was handed to us before the performance was redundant. Redundant, not inadequate or confusing (as happens

quite often). It was redundant, because the text was not essential. The key to the performance is in its atmosphere, which is almost immediately familiar. To respond to it I do need any special “set of codes” and I even dare say that it communicates with me on a non-intellectual (connotative, not denotative, if you wish) level. I very soon gave up attempts at intellectual decoding of its structure and meanings and let myself flow slowly (very slowly in this case) with the stream. And so I watch how somebody fries eggs on a gas ring, how someone else from time to time leaves the stage with a guilty and apologetic look and returns after a while with a jar full of some liquid (only after some time do I realize that it is his own urine) and how another is – such is the fate of the blind – just sitting there and patiently, but attentively, listening. And from time to time they play music – perfect and imaginative music. On two strings strung across the stage as on ... is it bass or percussion? Probably both. Or on the sidewall of the set, where are some sounding boards... Or on a nail violin, a wooden cube with nails, or the jars ... More traditional instruments, such as cello, violin and drums, are also present. I am not a musical expert and – to be honest – do not possess a very good musical ear, so I particularly admire the inner verve, the energy of unpretentious music-making, which is a totally natural part of the performance, one of many “voices” collaborating in my experience of its perfect atmosphere.

The acting is also specific. For quite a long time I have a feeling that I am watching non-professionals; non-professionals with unique ability and sense of interplay. I particularly remember the specific dispassionateness of their scenic existence. I intentionally do not speak about “distance from their characters” or understatement, because that would imply that some acting technique (even though intentionally minimal) is being used and I did not see any. All the scenic actions in *Flop-twitterer* look accidental and above all – surprisingly – natural. But natural in the same way as if we can say (and I think we can) that natural is when a clown trips on a perfectly flat surface and somersaults while falling. It is not the natural (and boring) logic of faked reality, but the non-causal and imaginative logic of eccentrics, clowns and comedians.

There are plenty of ideas, each one more admirable than the next and all of them presented absolutely precisely, with a great sense of humour, timing and proportion. And I have not even mentioned the famous opera singer, for whom – as again I realized later – everybody is waiting and who is “sick with arias”, or the man hidden inside the giant mechanical metronome standing in the centre of the stage.

And the very metronome keeps bothering me and I keep wondering, where have I seen it before? And then I remember – Man Ray’s picture (and “statue”) of a metronome with God’s eye on top of the pendulum, the object I have seen in a book about dada and surrealism. Does that mean that the work of the Hólyagcirkusz Társulat can be linked with any of these artistic styles? Directly not. Ostentatious imaginativeness (not to mention demonstrations of Freudian symbols and other “gimmicks”) is missing and there is also no trace of the direct provocations and caricatures of dada. The affinity is more in what both styles borrowed from the cabarets of their times and what was present in them more incidentally and living on its borders: metaphor, hyperbole, playfulness and specific, rather sad humour. See the collages of Max Ernst, the paintings of René Magritte and also – for example – the poems of Christian Morgenstern.

One of the key – and as yet unmentioned – terms, which kept coming to my mind during the performance, is nostalgia. The feeling of something dusty, hidden in our memory (or sub consciousness); something strange, odd, but at the same time very familiar. A feeling, I would say, that is substantively Central European. The world of “petites joies” and “tremendous trifles”, a world that is not ambitious and not fighting. A world that affirms itself through the smell of those fried eggs, wiener schnitzel, bratwurst, or through the daily beer in a smoke filled pub or coffee drunk at a favourite café table. A world that is not by any means modern, that is impractical, but still strangely stable and giving its citizens a feeling of security – the security of home.

And of course it is also the world to which all the characteristics of the humour present in *Flop-twitterer* belong: especially playfulness, hyperbole and nostalgia. And so I must ask how it is possible, that even though I come from a more or less totally different language area (and cultural paradigm), I feel – as I have already said – “at home” there. And I wonder, if we cannot demarcate that Central Europe about

which we all keep talking in a different way than by using measures of politics (such as Visegrad Four), geography or history - if it cannot be done by humour. A very specific sense of very specific humour. And at the very same time as this thought comes to my mind, I see the complications. For example: there is no doubt that Poles belong to Central Europe. But would Poles laugh at the same things (omitting – of course – all jokes about Catholicism) as the other members of Central Europe? My personal experience is that they would not. If there is something – in my opinion – missing in Polish humour, it is a sense of non-committal, nostalgic humour. And of course, self-ironic hyperbole. Very illustrative of this sense was my conversation with Roman Pawlowski, a man who is definitely not without cultural and other scope, and who a couple of years ago in Český Těšín, after the performance of Petr Zelenka's *Theremin*, kept explaining to me, very seriously and at some length, that what we had seen was not humour, and – in particular – not Czech, let alone Zelenka's humour. They, the Poles – he said – do know what Czech humour looks like.) And on the contrary: I am sure that the humour present in *Flop-twitterer* would be understood in Austria with no problems, especially in Vienna. Not by accident does it contain passages of texts by Thomas Bernhard. Performances of his texts are – as far as the feeling for Bernhard's humour is concerned – different in Poland (see Krystian Lupa) and the Czech Republic (Jan Antonín Pitínský). Where Lupa is existential and philosophically absurd, Pitínský brings on stage odd (and cute) characters and an atmosphere of old-fashioned nostalgia (and gives Bernhard's trademark bitterness – in my opinion – more appeal). And so I wonder whether, measured by this factor, a common sense of humour, we should not move the borders of our (imaginary) Central Europe to copy the borders of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. Or, maybe we should not care about borders at all and instead of this rather sardonic search for what unites us (Central) Europeans, enjoy and be amused by what separates us and be happy when we find a “common note”. For example the use of drumsticks to produce odd characters in the backstage (or cellar) of the opera house.

Seeing Hólyagcirkusz Társulat as a representative of the spirit of the “other” Central Europe, I was curious last year to see how would they present Daniil Charm's *Jelizaveta Bam*, a text based in an apparently different – Russian – tradition and above all a text that is encumbered (every time I have seen it staged so far) by allusions to the thirties in the Soviet Union and the tragic fate of its author. Charms's, or Vvedensky's, texts can of course be read as allegories of the times of their origin and their dark humour understood only as a defensive reaction to the era of Stalinist terror, so that directors stage them with (almost literally) a KGB agent behind every corner. Such a “reading” is correct, but – I am afraid – rather simplistic.

But Hólyagcirkusz Társulat did not disappoint me. There is no direct portrayal of cruel times. Once again – similar in many ways to *Flop-twiterrer* – everything is presented by evocations and atmosphere. A young maidservant, probably the Jelizaveta of the title (but somehow, everybody in the show is more or less Jelizaveta), is cleaning a revolver; she takes her time, with almost professional detachment. Three (comic) policemen burst into the room without knocking or asking for permission to do so and act as if this were their house and such a thing was pretty normal. They are not aggressive in the way we often connect with our image of a member of a totalitarian police force. They are more like yokels or stupid village men who have been given authority and office and so they use it. But at same time it seems they feel some bashfulness or maybe respect towards the other characters. One of them keeps telling funny (well, in Charms' terms) stories, the second falls in love and the only dangerous one seems to only their leader. He may be “doing his duty”, but he is somehow tired, so he first sits down, unbuttons his coat, removes his shoes, drinks a little tea, some vodka ...

If I have said that *Flop-twiterrer* has “plenty of ideas”, *Jelizaveta Bam* seems to be much less blessed in this respect. As before, there remains that strange dreamy atmosphere, the feeling that you are watching characters living in their own world, a world whose rules and laws are not the same as ours. But such is the world of Charms's characters anyway. My feeling is, that this time, the performance is dominated by the text, or – to put it better – the urge to communicate, narrate or recite the original. *Flop-twitterer* was a scenic collage or musical cabaret, where the interplay of all its elements created superb

atmosphere. *Jelizaveta Bam* reminded me more of a “concertina book”, a series of relatively solitary images illustrating Charms’s stories and literary curiosities. As if the desired atmosphere was already given by the original and the performance was only trying to find a way to demonstrate it. Not to produce or evoke it, but to imprint and illustrate. I found the world of *Jelizaveta Bam* much more logical and causal. There was nothing (or not enough) to surprise and amaze me.

Those facts unfortunately produce some negative effects. First of all: the performers there seem to be forced to be more like actors in the traditional meaning of the word, that is someone who plays the role and recites the text. In *Flop-twitterer* they seemed to be natural – like musicians beset by all the strange things by which they are (like true clowns) surprised and startled. And as such, the performers were perfectly believable. But as “characters from Charms” they are not, at least not 100 percent. This time they are unsatisfactory because they want us to believe in the roles they are playing. They “play upon us” with – unfortunately - several false tones. I am not talking about the music in the performance, which was in my opinion (and keeping in mind my above mentioned limitations) flawless. But there was only a little of it and it also – such was my feeling – it functioned there more as a illustration or accessory. It was not one of the key parts of the performance, as it was in *Flop-twitterer*, and the atmosphere of the performance was only supplemented, not complemented by the music.

Personally I was also disappointed by the absence of some of the various strange musical instruments and other gadgets which I admired in *Flop-twitterer*. I remember only a long drainpipe coming through the set, which – besides having a strong scenographic effect – was also used as a musical instrument, or “noisemaker”, when various balls (or maybe also other objects) went through it.

The main problem of the performance is in the text, which requires interpretation. I do not think that in this case Hólyagcirkusz Társulat changed its “working method” based on collective improvisations in rehearsal on, and with, musical or literary sources. Unfortunately it seemed as if Charms’s text was enforcing itself and demanding attention, not letting the creators work with it freely.

In *Jelizaveta Bam* Hólyagcirkusz Társulat seems to be much less the circus and more the “traditional” theatre. It keeps its basic “identification marks”, but loses something of its magic. Come to that, its Czech “relatives” – puppeteer, performer and artist Petr Nikl or the Brothers Forman’s Theatre) – experienced the same thing. When they allowed themselves to come out from strictly authored performances and worked for Divadlo Archa or even the Czech National Theatre, there was always something substantial missing from their productions. They bore all the “marks” of their creators, but it could be seen that they had had to give up too much of their real self in favour of the whole performance, working with another director or staging the work of another author,. They are – like Hólyagcirkusz Társulat – truly at home somewhere on the fringe, working in rather small scales. Small scales not only in the sense of the performing space, but also measured by ambitions. They are in some way similar to small children playing with their toys. They play their games, they enjoy them and therefore can give perfect joy to their audience. What they are producing are actually trifles. But – as Gilbert Keith Chesterton puts it – trifles that are tremendous.

Lost in Translation?

The Consequences of the Hungarian-Croatian Bilingualism

Ivan Curkovic

It is a well known fact that the Croatian and Hungarian cultures are bound together with several ties. All this is mainly due to the “good neighbour” relationship, which is a consequence of their common historical background. The practices of cultural life, however, show a radically different picture of these relationships

in both countries. In 2004, when I started my exchange semester at the Faculty of Humanities of the Eötvös Lóránd Science University, as a university student of double ethnicity and culture (Hungarian and Croatian), I thought I was arriving into a culture which I knew quite well. After all, even if I live in Zagreb, I was born in Vojvodina, and for a while I grew up in a partly Hungarian community, and later consciously tried to be “at home” in the Hungarian culture. By then I had already been to Hungary several times, especially to Budapest; my second discipline was Hungarian at the university and I have always had an ardent interest in Hungarian cultural life, especially the theatre. So all the conditions were there for me to fit into the city well, since – as at least I thought – I could freely swap between the two cousin cultures.

Yet they are not so closely related after all. After WWII the two countries found themselves in radically different political situations and during the nineties both were strongly preoccupied with system change. As for Croatia, unfortunately, the war was also taking place, so neither of the countries had much time to come up with different ingenious ways of cultural cooperation. For Croatia, in the process of acquiring sovereignty it was important to put emphasis on its cultural ties with Europe, identifying as its neighbours (with a certain shame) more the Balkans than the later so fashionable term: “Central Europe”. Because of these factors the two cultures only started to get in contact with each other during the decade after 2000. The first notable theatrical point of contact was the International Small Scene Theatre Festival in Rijeka. By the time I arrived in Budapest, *Bacchae* by Euripides, directed by Sándor Zsótér and *Woyzeck Worker’s Circus* by the Krétakör Theatre had already been to Rijeka and - especially the latter - had made a big impression on the Croatian theatre professionals.

It didn’t take me too much time to realize that in Hungary the theatre system is built on a different pattern. True, the population of the country is twice that of Croatia but the theatrical milieu of the two countries (and especially of the two capitals) does not follow a two-to-one ratio. I will never forget the moment when I first laid hands on the *Súgó* programme magazine. I was dazzled by the unbelievable quantity and, not counting the few established theatres I had previously known, I could not even memorize the names of the myriad companies and theatres. Not to mention the repertoire! Plays which have not been staged since my childhood in Zagreb, where you find the biggest theatrical bill of fare in Croatia, even if they belong to the core of the dramatic canon, were featured in the programme of Budapest theatres - even simultaneously in different versions by different directors. Naturally, back then it was difficult for me to grasp the poetics of all the Hungarian writers, often unknown to me, and of the theatres with totally abstract names. Besides the hallmarks of the few prestigious directors I knew I could only be guided by the names of authors and plays. I bumped into performances of doubtful quality several times, but these too were valuable sources of experience. The market mentality, which also started to spread to the cultural world and was a frequent cause of discontent in Zagreb after the system change, often appeared to me in a positive light in Budapest – especially since, despite all these experiences, I was and still am a newcomer to this stimulating medium. The elitist in me often worried that just out of politeness the theatre staff (the cloakroom attendant or the ticket clerk) wished me “a good time!” on the way in, but in time I had to accept that this formality was honestly spoken and valid for each and every example of the colourful genre and style repertoire of Budapest. If the audience attends either an operetta (I could not imagine that this genre would be so popular in Budapest), a musical of doubtful value or a contemporary dance and alternative theatre performance, they do it out of sheer joy and they are always, in some sense, entertained! And let the alternative theatre complain as much as it wants - in vain - it is the commercial and traditional theatre which serves as a basis for these alternative tendencies, one implying the other. At least as an antithesis, if not else, since one needs something to break out from! This is how I got to know Budapest theatre life, mostly as a spectator, while I slowly managed to sneak into so-called professional circles.

At the Department of Comparative Literature at the Faculty of Humanities of the Eötvös Lóránd Science University, unlike in Zagreb, the education is not limited to theory, teatrology. And even if I did attend lectures in Zagreb too, by excellent Croatian theatre specialists, somehow theatre practice could not find a place in our faculty. In Budapest it was specifically at the faculty of humanities that I took my first steps towards learning the trade of review writing. Almost accidentally a process started, as a consequence

of which – somewhat paradoxically – I gained a better insight into the activity of the Hungarian professional circles than the one I have today of the Croatian ones. This is quite strange, because the theatre critics in Hungary have no more cultural impact than their Croatian colleagues and, even if they are much more numerous, their number is not proportional with the difference in size between the two theatre worlds. At the already mentioned Rijeka festival or at the World Theatre Festival in Zagreb, similarly to the much larger POST, the bulk of the country's theatre critics gather. But besides this I was struck with the impression that the Hungarian circles of critics are more open, more dynamic, they have many forums of publication and even “outsiders” like myself have the chance to express their opinion.

Even more, there are also possibilities for “supplementary education” in the seminars for theatre critics organized worldwide, of which I managed to take part in two in Hungary. It is interesting to note that both these workshops came to life in connection with an alternative theatre festival. This is definitely a proof of the openness of the alternative theatre, of how important high quality feedback and communication with the audience is for them. I was a participant in the seminars organized at the Alternative Theatre Showcase in Szeged in the summer of 2005, and recently in the autumn of 2008 of the seminar organized by the Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest), returning from both with extremely useful experiences.

I find it crucial that the evaluation of these theatrical events reflecting more alternative values be carried out in a workshop atmosphere, since this way the heterogeneous programme on offer manages to avoid the danger of superficial judgement, the danger of a fossilized perspective and invites a spontaneous reaction! Next to this, however, it can also supplement the more traditional, text-centred theatrical experiences.

Let me mention only one example, which is also a good illustration of the difference between Hungarian and Croatian culture. As I see it, contemporary poets and writers have better opportunities to cooperate. Therefore, whatever one might think of Balázs Szálinger's text of *Kalevala*, used in the performance of Fortedanse, one cannot dispute that he had been co-operating closely with the choreographer-director Csaba Horváth. As opposed to my previous Croatian theatre experience, it was also a novelty that the performance, using the means of contemporary dance, managed to tackle such contemporary issues as the environmental situation, for example. Conversely, the Croatian dance theatre often escapes to a total lack of reference or to those so-called “hot”, expressly contemporary topics, refusing to point out the continuity of theatrical experience by referring to different literary or theatrical traditions. Recently we can find counter-examples here as well, for instance the two performances by Teatar ITD from Zagreb, titled *Dido and Aeneas* and *Ariadne in Naxos*, which often refer to the opera world using the means of dance or physical theatre, neither of them using, however, a self-sufficient text like Szálinger's.

Thanks to the Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest I reached the peak of my humble and short career as a theatre critic: the ranking of performances. I felt that I was duly representing Croatian theatre by being the firmest of the members in support of giving the prize to *Council House Stories 0.1* by the Szputnyik Hajózási Társaság - Modern Színház- Viselkedéskutató Intézet - Labor (Szputnyik Shipping Company - Modern Theatre and Behaviour Research Institute - Lab). Viktor Bodó's performance, titled *Ledarálnakeltűntem (Rattled and disappeared)* was a great hit in Croatia (as well), winning the first prize at the already mentioned Rijeka festival in 2007. Despite all my efforts I did not manage to watch the performance in Budapest, so the *Council House Stories 0.1* was my first encounter with Bodó's theatre. I had no twinges of conscience, however, at being maybe too enthusiastic about the performance out of mere inexperience. On the one hand, with my knowledge of the Hungarian language and Hungarian (theatrical) culture as opposed to many of my foreign colleagues, I could better evaluate the performance. On the other hand, I guess I truly reacted as an “average” Croatian spectator, representative of the Croatian theatre culture. The same is true and proven before, this time in the case of a Hungarian guest performance. My positive opinion of Béla Pintér's *Parasztopera (Peasant Opera)* at the *Eurokaz* alternative theatre festival, of *Blackland* by Krétakör or of *Ivanov* by the Katona József Theatre at the World Theatre Festival in

Zagreb was unequivocally shared by the Croatian critics as well. I still felt more an initiate in the topic, with the ability to evaluate deeper and more profoundly the merits of the performances, supplementing the reception also with other activities, e.g. during the last two performances I helped as an interpreter at the setting of the stage, the press conferences and the different interviews. About Tamás Ascher's *Ivanov* I felt that as time passed I managed to appreciate it more and more, secretly proud to be simultaneously part of the Zagreb audience but also standing out of it.

As the request was to write about the Hungarian theatre from a Croatian perspective I cannot judge to what extent I have managed to fulfil this with my text, since next to its advantages, my position has drawbacks too. No matter which one I choose from the two possible viewpoints I feel that I have to disappoint the other, since if I try to write in any depth from one aspect, I may become superficial from the other. I felt that this time I was partly unfair to the Croatian theatre, because it is natural that a town with about fifteen theatres (Zagreb) is not comparable with the huge performance "market" and theatrical tradition of Budapest. Yet I feel that after meeting with the Hungarian theatre I can better evaluate Croatian theatre as well. I believe that by being "initiated" in the world of theatre, thanks to my encounter with Budapest theatre life, I can react more sensitively, formulate my opinion more precisely about either the Croatian, the Hungarian or the international theatre. It might happen sometimes to get lost in translation, to paraphrase the title of Sofia Coppola's film, but I hope that the original theatrical message will not follow it into oblivion!

Theatre Criticism Here and Now

Eva Kyselová

International theatre festivals and their accompanying workshops for theatre critics can be great occasions, not only as a meeting point for theatre critics from various countries, but also as an opportunity for confrontation with reality, which is not always kind to theatre criticism as an artistic genre or to theatre critics as artists.

The workshop *Theatre. Criticism. Today.* which was a part of the 7. Kortárs Drámafesztivál Budapest (7th Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest), Hungary 2008, was this kind of event, where you as a critic can meet your colleagues from different countries, discover their situation and the level of their criticism, compare it with your own conditions and of course evaluate them as positive or negative.

It is also a chance to examine the positive or negative aspects of theatre criticism, where you are asked to talk about problems, the reasons for these problems and maybe to look for some solutions, in a very concrete way. I think the main aim of these workshops, including our workshop in Budapest, should be to discuss freely, to identify the difficult situation of theatre criticism and not to be afraid to remark on any negative effects or the possible impact of ignoring critics and their work.

During our discussions with colleagues from Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Estonia, Romania and Great Britain, we noticed that there are so many similar facts, facts that are regularly repeated as problems or difficulties which we have to face.

The open conference that took place also tried to talk about these 'hot' topics, but with no tangible result. Although a lot of foreign guests described their situation and the reasons for it, everything stayed on a hypothetical level, with no practical outcome that could be useful in the real world of theatre criticism. I find this disappointing, because everybody already knows the advantages and disadvantages of writing about art and when nobody is able to offer solutions the conference has no point. One of the reasons why the conference did not work well enough, as I see it, was its one-sidedness, just presenting the views of theatre critics, without those of theatre creators and audience

members. I think that theatre is closely connected to these three axes, and if we want to talk about a possible crisis, and find some solutions, it is necessary to do so in collaboration with the creators and the audience. Maybe if each of these three elements were more represented, it would create a more favourable situation: by talking to creators and theorists, theatre criticism might aspire to another level in the audience's perception and finally occupy the place it deserves.

Another aspect of theatre criticism nowadays is the search for the right reader. Personally, I do not think this is an important topic, because I do not see any deeper sense in looking for the ideal reader: we should concentrate on writing as well as possible, on achieving full-value reviews which can survive as future evidence of the theatre and social state of a country. Focusing on the ideal reader can tend to have the opposite effect. It can affect the artistic value of a review when it seeks to appeal to a concrete or specific group of people.

And now we have to face the relation between objectivity and subjectivity in theatre criticism. Some say reviews should be objective but on the other hand there are voices that call for subjectivity. As a critic, I try to write first of all about my experience of the theatre performance, and how it has influenced me both as a human being and as someone who is deeply interested in theatre. From the intersection of these two points of view, my own integrated opinion or vision can emerge. I think criticism should be subjective, because it is a personal and individual perception of a work of art, and art itself is always subjective. But this perception should contain not empty phrases but arguments, agreements or disagreements that should be explained. Without responsible explanation, a review loses its value. And this is the task of objectivity. I think the critic should be objective only in his or her responsibility for the words written and use them to vindicate his or her opinions and judgements.

A frequent topic during critics' seminars and forums is the opportunity for young critics to practise. The current situation is not very pleasant, but when we look back to the past we can see that the critic's position has always been somehow in danger. We should admit that writing reviews is not a full-time job: even in the best conditions: today it is not possible to survive just by writing reviews. But on the other hand there are now a lot of alternative options: today it is quite common to have your own blog; there are a lot of on-line magazines; the web is actually a great space for publishing and also an easy way to get feedback.

Personally, I have to admit that, as a young critic, I have quite enough possibilities to publish and also earn money from writing. As a student I was an editor of our school theatre magazine, which focused especially on writing reviews and performance analysis. I am also a member of the web project *IS.Theatre*, that covers almost every Slovak theatre, not only the biggest theatres in or near the capital. This project is very useful, because as a young author you can gather a lot of experience, you can improve your own style of writing and it makes you more flexible in writing. It is also interesting to judge one concrete theatre: you can see how it develops or declines. What I find very important is that I and my school colleagues are really encouraged by our teachers to write and practise a lot. I have to say that the department of theatre theory in Bratislava and its teachers tries not only to educate its students but also to force them to write regularly in order to help them expand their own unique style and personality.

During the Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest these topics were those most discussed and by comparing our experience we found out a lot of similar but also some different facts.

When we look at the state of Hungarian criticism, for instance, it could be said that it is quite the same as in Slovakia, especially in one controversial issue which is often discussed, the relationship between critics and theatre creators, and the ethical code of theatre critics. This topic is talked about also in Slovakia and I think there is no obvious view that is right or wrong, nor any single solution. We should admit that it is very hard to avoid relationships between these two groups, since they are inevitably in close contact, not only because there is such a small theatre community in Slovakia or in Hungary but also because a lot of theatre critics work in theatre as dramaturgs, directors, actors or playwrights. If we were strictly against this kind of accumulation of jobs, it would probably be

impossible to find critics who just write or dramaturgs who just practise in theatre.

I think the problem lies in the danger to objectivity of judgement, in the sense that I was describing above. A lot of critics are influenced by friendships and bonds between them and creators, but that is the wrong approach. They should separate friendships from their own work, which should not be affected by prejudice or good relationships. This is often very hard and not always possible, but I believe that this approach should be natural for both sides.

As a viewer of contemporary Hungarian theatre performances I have to stress that my opinion is influenced by translations that were not always ideal, and indeed some performances where there was no translation at all, making it hard to judge or discuss them. But for a foreigner it was interesting to realize how Hungarian theatre is tied to the social, historical and political context of the country, to its traditions, dialects and national particularities. And this is actually a big problem for us as foreigners, because we do not know all these aspects, making it complicated to understand and make sense of performances and thus judge them in the most responsible way.

But we could notice some common themes of the drama texts that are similar to those of contemporary Slovak drama. A lot of the performances concerned individual responsibility for one's past, bad life experiences, the power of social, political or religious influence, the conflict between biological instinct and morality or resistance to society, all of them searching for the appropriate view of these themes.

The Contemporary Drama Festival Budapest offered not only interesting theatre performances and with them a lot of topics for discussion, but also a chance to meet interesting people - theatre makers, critics and theorists - and to compare and share our own points of view, experiences and opinions, that provided the ground for our discussions. And discussions about theatre, about problems, about positive or negative aspects are the most useful way to know, learn or improve our knowledge in relation to theatre and its creators. This was the biggest benefit of visiting the Festival.

In praise of kamikazes

Impressions from Contemporary Drama Festival in Budapest

Laur Kaunissaare

Throughout my experience of seeing theatre performances in foreign countries I have noticed that by some weird paradox actors in foreign performances seem more adequate, more "real", alive as it were, compared to the ones I've seen at home.

Well, maybe actors in other countries than Estonia are just "better"? No, I don't think they are. Acting talent will always spread evenly, I think. Hardly is Estonia such a global center for untalented theatre.

I think the reason lies just in the fact that what you see abroad is crucially different from what you see at home. Most probably abroad you will see theatre that you never dreamed would exist. Different sounds, different body stances, different habits, different voices. And in addition – when You go to see shows in a foreign country then you've deliberately and consciously come to see the shows and there is less background noise of everyday life around you. The background is there but it melts together with the actors and things on stage. You see the atmosphere and background of the society of the country – but you see it through the actors. Actors are better connection to how people live than a Lonely Planet guidebook.

On the whole I think I perceive actors abroad more as people, as personalities and actors at home more as actors, as public personas. In this sense it is easier to look at a good foreign production, as you don't have the constant reality check you have at home. You can just look at the the art in it.

Hungary is the first European country I have been to and whose theatre I have seen, where the language doesn't sound familiar at all. Even performances from countries like say Poland, the language of which I don't speak, still sound a bit familiar. You feel you can understand this word or another. You can catch the stresses in the language. But walking around in Hungary, as a country, I felt as if I was reading the language of the blind. Besides the obvious references in everyday life that just relate to common European style of life, there was nothing that I understood in people's communication. And in a way it is good in both real life and theatre too, as you can concentrate on form, think your own thoughts and follow your associations.

I suspect that the impression is somewhat due to the paradoxes I described before but the main impression that Hungarian theatre and Hungarian actors made on me was that they were very natural. Normal people. I saw a clear connection, a similarity between how people behaved on stage and how they behaved in real life. On streets, in cafes, in bookshops and shopping centers. In order not to be too big on generalizations I should say that I am speaking of performances or events that I thought were the best ones in the cycle of festival productions I saw – Victor Bodó's new show *Bérháztörténetek 0.1 (Council House Stories 0.1)* and the joint project of *Kurátorok (Curators)*.

In these productions I found a sort of naturalness that was expressed in the sense that even very good actors behaved on stage as if they were not actors, as if they were totally normal people. It's somewhat hard to find the right word in English for it, as even "naturalness" ironically sounds pretty artificial. It sounds like a word from the dictionary of philosophy. Maybe "artless" would be the one. Or that they were "people of flesh and blood" if I may become a bit biblical. Many of the actors I saw in Hungary don't flirt with the audience, they don't try to overtly impress the audience. Just doing their stuff on stage. I have also observed this in other performances from Eastern Europe that I have seen – notably in the productions of Krzysztof Warlikowski from Poland and Alvis Hermanis from Latvia. I feel that there is a crucial difference in that sense with the mainstream theatre actors in Estonia.

What I liked about Victor Bodó's show was the natural flow of scenes. The want, the need to do this show. It is always good to see young actors on stage doing something of what they clearly seem to be thinking that it is cool. You can just feel the energy of "we don't care whether you like or even understand it, we just think it's fun to do". And this energy of course comes from the actors having created their scenes, their text, their performance themselves instead of using a prefab material.

The thing I liked about *Bérháztörténetek 0.1* was that it seemed to be about real people in Budapest, people speaking real Hungarian as it is spoken. I understood that by the laughs in the audience. I was of course difficult to follow the production through headphones translation but the main essence of the performance – a homage to surrounding reality in its absurdity seemed to come through to me even without translation. What I liked about it was that through this homage to reality of Hungary as of November 2008 the spectator maybe realizes that raw material for art does not exist in some imaginary space or distant past – say Chekhov Russia, but that is around us, even in this bad autumn weather and it is our duty in a way to learn to see it and bring it on stage even if many of the attempts are bound to fail.

Exactly this trying to create a performance from one's own ideas and observations is what I most liked about visiting Drama Festival in Budapest. And to draw a comparison, this I think is a weakness in the Estonian theatre scene. There are in Estonia a few directors and troupes who create their own shows – notably Tiit Ojasoo and the theatre NO99, Mart Koldits with some of his shows, and Von Krahli Teater. But on the whole Estonian theatre is pretty text based and even in interpreting classical or not so classical texts it is seldom inventive in drawing intelligent links between the classic work and the life around us in Estonia now. This, on the contrary, seems to be a strong feature in Hungary – besides else I also say this because of what I have read about productions by Krétakör Theatre and Árpád Schilling and Tamás Ascher's works.

I very much liked the production of *Curators* that consisted of various shows produced by different companies and groups that were produced within an evening and were united by the fact that they all took place simultaneously in one house. What I liked about it was the innate democracy of the project

that united fairly well-known directors (well known even to me coming from abroad) like Ascher and Mundruczó side by side by less known ones. And the fact that one organizes in Hungary such brainstorm projects where different people from the field are brought together. In Estonia as I see it now it would be quite improbable. Besides there is something very heart farming in the fact the there is no problem for Tamás Ascher having come from a major tour of his show in say France to come and make a short vignette that just plays for a few times production in a run down house. These sort of projects are quite rare in Estonia, sadly.

To take this generalization further (but I hope that foreign generalizations would be of interest to Hungarians reading this paper) – it seemed that Hungarian theatre as much as I saw of it didn't seem to be afraid of reality. On the streets you saw quite a few down-and-out people and even if you didn't directly see them transferred to the stage you saw people on stage who seemed to be aware of all this and the idea of theatre doesn't seem to be a beautiful box where everything is neatly polished. At least compared to what seems to be the case in Estonia. Of course these are generalizations.

There's something crucially precious in creating your own shows from zero. It's like learning to swim by yourself not using any sort of helping balloons that hold you on the water. If what you observe in reality and present on stage will be embarrassing, people will not like it. But it's all about being brave enough to have the courage to fail. I find it beautiful to watch shows that are made from scratch by the company themselves (even if they are not too good) for one simple reason – Shakespeare and Moliere too were at their time just guys writing plays so that other guys from their troupe had something to go on stage with. Making something of your own, something that maybe nobody else thinks is a true contribution. A contribution of culture. Of course there are traditions and one can and must use them to create something new. But there is something beautifully poetic in letting loose of them sometimes, in creating from zero. It's like flying to your goal like a kamikaze not knowing what will come of it. It's like walking without crutches.

Biographies

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