

EUROPEAN STAGES



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To the Reader

A New Journal for a New Europe

In 1981 Daniel Gerould and Alma Law co-founded an important new journal called *Soviet and Eastern European Performance (SEEP)*, which for the next three decades remained the most important English language source for up-to-date reporting of the theatre in that part of the world. Eight years later, a sister journal was established, *Western European Stages (WES)*, also housed at the Segal Center of the City University of New York and dedicated to a similar coverage of contemporary theatre in the other half of a sharply divided Europe. Already by 1989 however the Soviet Union was showing major signs of stress and it officially ceased to exist only three years later.

This change was reflected in a renaming of *SEEP*, which became *Slavic and Eastern European Performance*, marking the cultural independence of the states that were no longer part of the dissolved Soviet Union. The old cold war division of Europe, however, continued to be reflected in the areas covered by the two journals, even though the continent steadily became more unified politically, economically, and theatrically. In 1990 the former East Germany entered the European Union, which continued to expand with the addition of other countries, both East and West, and in 1995 the Eurozone established a common currency. Along with these developments, international tours, productions co-sponsored by different European theatres, and directors, actors, and designers moving freely about within the European theatre scene became more and more common.

When Daniel Gerould died in 2012 he was in the process of ending his long-term leadership of *SEEP*, still undecided as to whether to end the journal outright or to find a successor to carry it on. After his death, and in consultation with his co-editors and those of *WES*, it was decided that the course which would best carry on Dan's work and also reflect the new Europe that had come into being since the founding of these two journals more than a quarter century ago, would be the combination of them into a single journal, to be called *European Stages*, that would report on current work throughout the continent, with particular attention to work that involved artists and publics from both the former East and West. Marvin Carlson from *WES* will continue as co-editor of this new journal and be joined by Krystyna Illakowicz, a Senior Lecturer in Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale University. They will be aided by an editorial board composed of some members of the previous boards of *WES* and *SEEP* as well as new members, and by editorial assistants from the City University of New York.

This inaugural issue we hope will indicate the sort of offerings that the new journal will present. There are an approximately equal number of essays from theatres from both former East and West block countries as well as several articles that combine the two. We welcome the submission of interviews and reports on important recent work of interest anywhere in Europe, especially work that crosses traditional national boundaries. Queries about possible contributions should be addressed to the Editors.

Marvin Carlson, City University of New York
Krystyna Illakowicz, Yale University

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Belarus Free Theatre's *King Lear*. Photo: Simon Kane

Belarus in London

Joshua Abrams and Jennifer Parker-Starbuck

In many ways, for the inaugural issue of *European Stages*, there might be no company more ideal for analysis than the Belarus Free Theatre. Founded in 2005 by three artists—Natalia Kaliada, Nicolai Khalezin, and Vladimir Shcherban—then based in Belarus, they moved much of their permanent home base to London in 2011, when husband and wife Khalezin and Kaliada fled as refugees from Alexander Lukashenko's repressive government. However, a base of performers and company members has remained in Minsk, and they often rehearse and work together at a distance through Skype and similar telematic technologies. With support in London from a network of theatre makers, including Tom Stoppard, Joanna Lumley, Kevin Spacey, David Lan, Jude Law, and many others, they continue to perform both in Belarus and worldwide and seek to draw attention to the political situation of the Belarusian dictatorship.

Over the past six months, we had the opportunity to see two drastically different productions: their newest, the devised *Trash Cuisine*, which was first staged at the Young Vic in June 2013, with support from the London International Festival

of Theatre and went on to win the Impatto Totale Award at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and a brief one-week remounting of their production of *King Lear* at the Globe Theatre, originally staged as part of the 2012 Globe-to-Globe festival. The two plays showcase much of the range of the company, with not only differences in the production sources, but a key difference in language as well. *Trash Cuisine* is primarily performed in English, while *Lear* makes a distinctive political statement through its use of Belarusian, which is described by an overwhelming majority of Belarusian citizens as their "mother tongue" despite the fact that Russian is far more widely spoken (the two share the title of official language).

Located in the center of Eastern Europe, Belarus is bordered by Russia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Ukraine; its history is, as in much of that area, a complex one of brief independences alternating with dominance by more powerful neighboring governments. In the twentieth century, Belarus was largely split geographically between Polish and Soviet control until the collapse of the USSR; it has been an independent republic since



Belarus Free Theatre's *Trash Cuisine*. Photo: Tristram Kenton.

1991. Lukashenko, a former officer in the Soviet Army, who as a Deputy in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Belarus in 1991 was the sole deputy to vote against dissolving the Soviet Union, has served as its President since 1994. The country has often been described as the "last remaining dictatorship" in Europe.

Trash Cuisine opens with French actor Philippe Spall, new to the company, describing that the ninety-minute performance will be a gustatory world tour, although anyone expecting Brechtian culinary theatre would be well advised to stay away. With a political agenda throughout exploring questions of repression and torture, the show is a revue of sorts, moving through a series of brief and stylistically devised scenes that use food as prop and metaphor in incredibly powerful physical depictions, combining Shakespearean monologue, verbatim testimony, and *taiko* drumming in its world-spanning episodes. The overall effect is of the incredible brutality and unfairness of humanity, but walking away from the evening (after dropping a donation in the bucket to contribute to their campaign "Give a Body Back" www.freebelarusnow.org/bodies) what remains is a series of vivid images and unsettling moments.

Some of the moments traffic in shocking juxtaposition. The opening scene (after a brief Shakespearean interpolation from *Richard III*, the discussion of the murder of the princes in the tower) depicts two governmental executioners—one from Belarus and one from Thailand, both played by women, who compare different methods and practices, while sitting at a table center stage eating strawberries and cream and drinking flutes of champagne; the back-and-forth of Wimbledon tennis is replaced by a serve and volley discussion of methods of execution. Another scene offers an array of diners at white-linen covered tables who lip sync testimony from British human rights lawyer Clive Stafford Smith describing the Georgia (the US-state, not the former Soviet Republic) electrocution of Nicky Ingram in detail. While the content here might be similar to a Tricycle Theatre-style tribunal play, the shifting of the physical representation creates a sense of physical unease in the audience as we palpably begin to take in what happens to a body as it is electrocuted. The audience struggles whether or not to laugh as one of the performers, Stephanie Pan (who also provides a stunning moment as she masterfully and rapidly flails on a taiko drum), comes center stage with just a handheld microphone to introduce, in the style of a stand-up comedian, her

latest impressions. Yet these "impressions" are not of people but of modes of murder, including the gas chamber, stoning, hanging, beheading, firing squad and electric chair. The levity with which she treats them, "I like the electric chair because it's longer than a firing squad, but it's shorter than stoning, um, so you can do the whole thing" belies the difficulty of the moment. Her performance style draws us in and provides a moment of familiarity through the form of stand-up, before we once more are defamiliarized by the almost irreverence of the content.

While many of the scenes ultimately remain at a distance geographically or politically, the fleeting thought that these are horrors that happen "over there" is replaced with another uncomfortable reality for UK audiences in a scene about Liam Holden, the young Irishman falsely convicted of killing a British soldier, who was the last person to be sentenced to execution (by hanging) in the UK. Although eventually released after seventeen years in prison, this scene draws upon his testimony of the tortures that forced his confession, techniques including water-boarding, which of course is a reminder that these are not stories to ignore or place in neat historical boxes.

Perhaps the most powerful and disturbing moments in the play for us were those that involved the preparation of food. Through this most material and familiar element we are drawn in to the various scenes; food lets us connect to these stories, lets us be drawn in to them before it then reels us back through its unconventional use. The most affective scene was a retelling of a "mixed" marriage in Rwanda between Hutu and Tutsi in which the husband is commanded to kill his children, ultimately preparing and serving his wife their "meat." The scene is narrated by an actress in the role of the wife as beef is fried in a pan onstage. The smell of the frying meat wafts through the theatre, forcing us to further physically encounter the tale and be left with its lingering smell. The horrific ending of this scene, is almost too much to bear; the wife recounts that "Rukundo put the plate beside the bed, threw off the blanket and cut the shirt on my belly. He ripped open the seam of the caesarean section with the same knife, which he'd used to cut into pieces the body of his youngest son. He dumped fried pieces of meat from the dish into the exposed cavity." Our senses are assaulted, making an impression that we cannot be immune to these histories. Perhaps as fitting juxtaposition the performers return to Shakespeare, "O my offense is rank, it smells to heaven."

The piece also concludes with food, and



Belarus Free Theatre's *King Lear*. Alex Sidorchik as King Lear. Photo: Courtesy of Shakespeare's Globe.

violence. A line of performers appear and sit at stools on the very downstage edge of the space and begin to violently and repeatedly dice whole onions as we hear the story of two young men mistakenly arrested and jailed by the KGB. As their story is told and their blood drips down the upstage wall, we witness this chopping, which was accompanied by the sharp sounds of the chopping and the intense smell. While the onions themselves surprisingly didn't produce tears, the detritus was propelled forcefully, hitting our legs and feet (as we were seated in the front row) and we smelled of onion all night; the horrors of the stories produce enough tears in themselves.

An incredibly powerful evening of theatre, *Trash Cuisine* leaves you wishing that you'd eaten before the performance, as it brings together stories of government-sanctioned human brutality from across the world. The one odd moment in the piece is Spall's description of the cooking and eating of the Ortolan. While a strong piece of theatre as he devours a game bird of some sort (quail perhaps) with a napkin over his head, little is made of a connection between human rights and animal rights, or the presence of this (outlawed) delicacy in François Mitterand's final meal, or any political overtones that might connect this recipe, or the rituals surrounding it, to the rest

of the evening. Yet the effect and effectiveness of the evening remains strong due to the power and presence of the company throughout the piece.

An earlier piece and their first full Shakespearean production, *King Lear* was a production initially commissioned for the Globe in 2012. Cut to a rapid hundred minutes or so, the play flies by, although the insertion of a twenty-minute interval seems a very strange and unnecessary choice. The production is strong and clear, with a definite Eastern European feel to it. A small upright piano stands upstage left and is used throughout to underscore the events of the performance, with many of the characters playing it during the evening. Aleh Sidorchik is central to the evening as Lear, who first enters wheeling an old-fashioned pram base with a wooden trunk sitting atop it. An armored gauntlet on his left hand replaces the crown as the marker of kingly presence, and in his first entrance he appears with a long white wig and faltering steps, yet reveals the wig and gait as artifice, seeking to split his kingdom while he remains surprisingly youthful.

He reveals the trunk to be filled with dirt, metonymizing the kingdom he wishes to distribute and as each of the daughters perform their love for him (through song and dance), he fills their dresses

with heaps of it, so that both Goneril and Regan appear pregnant with land by the end of the scene. That scene is played, with aid from the piano, as a sort of competitive striptease seduction scene as each of the daughters rises from benches set either side of the stage and on which all the characters sit for the first scenes of the play, and indeed, as they raise their dresses to receive the promised land, they knowingly reveal their undergarments. Cordelia's refusal to join in becomes here a chance for her to ridicule her sisters, copying their actions with a self-aware sense of absurdity.

In the style of most of the Globe-to-Globe performances from the 2012 festival, the play is performed in the company's own language with supertitled brief scenic descriptions appearing alongside the stage to signify major actions. What at first seemed like a potential loss in translation through these synopses soon became a freeing opportunity to sense Shakespeare as familiar enough to allow for different cultural observations and attention to sound, gesture, and nuance. The strength of this performance is largely in its use of props and objects; in addition to those already discussed, particular mention must go to the use of two plastic tarps in the second act. The first of these, bright blue and covering most of the stage, embodies the storm as the cast members wave and shake it to a violent frenzy. Lear stands upstage and it hides his lower half as he strains into it, the rattle of the plastic creating not only the watery appearance but blowing winds and cracking cheeks of the noisy storm. As the storm settles and the tarp is dropped to the ground, it becomes the heath itself, with its caves and hiding places for Lear and Poor Tom, as

well as his followers. The discovery of Tom, played largely under the tarp, seems to have drawn some of its choreography from the monster's discovery in *The Tempest*, and Lear's recognition of Tom's innate nobility uses the tarp to good effect as well, as he leads all the onstage male cast to strip fully, showing that all are the same underneath, while using the tarp for strategic coverage (not privacy). Perhaps the most striking use, however, is of the second tarp, a red plastic sheet, under which the final battle takes place. While the audience does not see any of the fighting itself, the shifts and thrusts under the tarp make for one of the most effective battle scenes we could recall.

The use of these simple objects to such great effect inspired us to think about the classroom and devising processes we teach our students and it reminded us of the dual purpose and meaning of the most familiar objects around us. Ultimately, the Free Theatre of Belarus reminds us of the theatrical power behind the elemental in life. From food to dirt to the detritus surrounding us, the company defamiliarizes the familiar as a reminder to not take what we have for granted, to use what we have in our power to try to say something meaningful. The play ends in the same physical shape as the beginning, alike, but vastly changed; the dirt of Lear's kingdom spread across the stage and the pram base now the bier for Cordelia's corpse. This *Lear* is a folktale, a return perhaps to its source in a pre-Roman Celtic England, an antique Europe, but here reflected and refracted through Belarus's complex history of its own troubled land grasps and claims. While none of this is made literal, the brutality and the dirt-strewn stage seem clearly intended to evoke it.

Miroslav Krleža's *In Agony* at the Residenztheater München

Beate Hein Bennett

*Those in whom memory lives on bring down upon themselves
the wrath of others who can continue to live only by forgetting.*

W. G. Sebald, *Campo Santo*

Miroslav Krleža (1893-1981), one of the most prolific writers of the twentieth century, is one of the least known outside his native Croatia. His trilogy *In Agony* centers on World War I and its social consequences. *The Glembays* (1928), the first play, depicts the societal degeneration prior to the outbreak of the war through the conflicts within a dynasty. *Galicja* (1920) shows the corruption and brutality in the conduct of war. *In Agony* (1928), the third play, sketches the moral disorientation of post-war society through the breakdown of a marriage. What makes this drama so particular is Krleža's perspective on this catastrophe: namely, the Balkan angle on the collapse of the Austrian empire and his personal perspective as an artist with a European modernist outlook who lives in a provincial society. He was a citizen of several worlds, some of which vanished during his lifetime. He was born in

Agram (present-day Zagreb), capital of Croatia, a province in the Austrian Empire subordinate to Hungarian administration. Agram was culturally oriented towards Vienna and saw itself as a Catholic vanguard against the neighboring provinces, Eastern Orthodox Serbia and Ottoman dominated Bosnia-Herzegovina. Krleža was of modest background, partly Hungarian on his mother's side. His education at an army school in Pecs (Hungary) and the Military Academy in Budapest pointed him towards a career in the army of the Austro-Hungarian Royal-Imperial Monarchy. As feelings of South Slavic nationalism gave rise to the First and Second Balkan Wars in 1912/13, Krleža volunteered in the Serbian army but, suspected of being a Hungarian spy, was sent back to Budapest. The Hungarians considered him a deserter and expelled him from the Military Academy. At the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he was drafted as



Miroslav Krleža's *The Glembays* Act I. Photo: Thomas Aurin.

a common foot soldier into the Austrian army and eventually sent to the Eastern front in Galicia. [For text quotations from the trilogy and background information on Krleza, I am indebted to the superb program of the Residenztheater production, edited by Sebastian Huber.]

I went to see the six-hour trilogy on a sunny Saturday afternoon in July. As I walked through the center of Munich, meticulously reconstructed after World War II, making my way to the elegant Residenztheater, I thought about the worlds that collapsed on that ground during the past one hundred years. One of my first memories is as a three-year old girl in 1948 in Munich, holding my father's hand while skirting the bomb craters. Munich was my parent's childhood home. In 1917 my father went to war from there as an eighteen year old and returned wounded; in 1919 he fought in street battles during the short-lived revolution; after 1933 he was harassed there by the Nazis; and in 1939 he went as a medical officer into World War II. Thus seeing this production in Munich about World War I had a personal resonance, although in the consciousness of my generation the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust had largely eclipsed those of World War I.

Krleza began his career as a writer in 1914 and by the time of his death in 1981, he had created a huge and diverse body of work: essays, novellas, short stories, reviews and criticism, and plays. From a young age he espoused the communist cause in his writings and thus aroused the attention of his contemporary, Josip Broz, later known as Tito, the autonomous Yugoslav dictator. Tito protected Krleza against party pressures when he sharply criticized the conformist Social Realist direction of art under Stalin's directives. Krleza was never a comfortable fellow traveler; his critical disdain hit upon diverse social and political hypocrisies and tyrannies, whether in the private sphere of marriage and family, the public sphere of malfeasance and corruption, military stupidity and arrogance, or the collusion between art and politics. He was harshly satirical in his depiction of the provincial patriarchal society, as he saw it in his native Zagreb. In a novel, *On the Edge of Reason* (1938), he lampoons the so-called pillars of society, calling this type the "*homo cylindriacus*" who, as a rule, is at the head of some man-established institution, thinks of himself, in the glamour of his civic dignity, as follows: On behalf of the seven thousand doctors of all sorts, I stand at the head of my own branch of learning as its most outstanding representative, the most worthy of respect." A bit later in the novel, Krleza unleashes his fury upon the

"top-hatted folly" as well as on those who would be in a position to criticize: "Human intelligence today is but nervous restlessness, or rather neurasthenic fussing amid the post-diluvian conditions of reality. We neurotic individuals are surrounded by dullards, landlords, owners of soda-water factories, honorable citizens and petit-bourgeois folk wearing bowlers and felt hats as they attend one another's funerals." Karl Kraus, the Austrian writer, had assembled a similar cast of characters in his gigantic satirical opus about World War I, *The Last Days of Mankind* (1917/18). Krleza cast the perpetrators and the victims of human folly as being both, depending on the circumstances in which they find themselves forced to act or react.

The first and the third play of the trilogy belong to the Glembay cycle, written between 1926 and 1930; the second play, *Galicia*, written in 1920, is a separate play that belongs in spirit to a collection of novellas with the title, *The Croatian God Mars*. Translated from Croatian into German by Milo Dor, the trilogy was arranged by director Martin Kusej and dramaturg Sebastian Huber for this production which premiered at the Wiener Festwochen in May 2013. The first play, *The Glembays*, belongs to a cycle of texts, stories, and plays about the rise and fall of a fictional dynasty that had its start in the eighteenth century as poor tenant farmers but, through the machinations of generations of patriarchs, becomes one of the richest and most prominent families in pre-World War I Agram. Krleza may have been inspired by Thomas Mann's novel, *The Buddenbrooks* (1901), which also depicts the gradual demise of an upper class mercantile dynasty. Krleza set the play in 1913, but the team Kusej/Huber moved it up to the night before the declaration of war, 2 August 1914. The date was projected on a scrim downstage before the start of the play. The entire action in three acts happens during a steamy summer night between one a.m. and five a.m. with offstage sounds of thunder, gusts of wind, and periodic downpours of rain underscoring the tumultuous events unfolding in the "red salon" of the Glembay townhouse.

Assembled for the fiftieth jubilee of Glembay & Co. are various members of the Glembay clan: the patriarch, Ignaz Jacques Glembay, banker and chef of Glembay & Co., Ltd., sixty-nine years old, elegantly dressed in a perfect cutaway. Played by Manfred Zapatka, a veteran actor of Munich theatre for the past forty years, with a powerful and dangerous charm, Glembay senior's demise is an impressive study of the fragility of status. His antagonist son from a first marriage, Dr. phil. Leo



Krleza's *The Glembays* Act II. Johannes Zirner (Leo Glembay), Manfred Zapatka (Ignaz Glembay). Photo: Thomas Aurin.

Glembay, who can afford the life of a freelance artist on Glembay money, is described by Krleza as "a decadent apparition, thirty-eight years old." He has come back for this jubilee after a deliberate absence from his paternal home for sixteen years. In this production, Johannes Zirner does not conform to Krleza's description of Leo as a decadent man but is a handsome, virile man though the required nervous intensity and his contrariness are apparent from the first impression at the outset of the first act. He is lounging on a downstage right sofa, smoking, and challenging a young woman in a white Dominican nun's outfit. He reveals her former identity in a rather callous manner as that of his sister-in-law, Beatrice, the widow of his older brother Ivo Glembay who had committed suicide seven years earlier. Within a year after his death, she had entered the convent and became Sister Angelica, the name she insists on now. During Leo's challenges she stands downstage center facing the audience and contemplating a painting (unseen by the audience) of her former self as a young society lady, Baroness Beatrix Zygmuntowicz; she calmly defends herself against his barbs and his compliments, which he expresses as his desire to paint a "true" portrait of her imbued with the erotic sensuality that he sees in her. His tone is embarrassing and wooing at the same time but she remains aloof. Played by Britta Hammelstein,

she exudes a dignified inner beauty against his tempestuous aggression. In her white nun's outfit she appears totally incongruous in the environment.

Meanwhile we see in the background other men in evening dress assembled in small conversational groups. Titus Andronicus Fabriczy-Glembay, a cousin of banker Glembay whom Krleza describes (and the program quotes) as an "old bonvivant on whose faded skull several thin little hairs are ingeniously placed"; several other emblematic impeccable pieces of clothing and accoutrements, including a dyed black moustache and perfect dentures, make up the image of "an aging Epicurean who jealously watches over every minute of his sixty-nine years." Dr. theol. et phil., the ex-Jesuit, Aloys Silberbrandt, tutor and father-confessor to the family, stands with his charge, the young Oliver Glembay, son from the second (and present) marriage of Glembay senior. Silberbrandt is about forty, "consumptive, with an expressionless mask-like face." The house doctor of the Glembay family, Dr. Paul Altmann, a middle-aged man of modern science, joins the group a bit later together with Glembay senior. While Krleza's physiologically precise descriptions emphasize the character as type, the Munich production allowed for more individualization that gave the actors a greater behavioral range. The mimetic range and

stamina of the actors was remarkable—most of them appeared in two of the three plays; this enforced the progressive connection in the trilogy. The level of abstraction necessary to avoid melodrama was accomplished through the settings and the lighting.

The settings were designed by Annette Murschetz. The first play takes place in the "red salon." She created a parody of the *Herrenzimmer*, or smoking parlor, where the men would gather after dinner, usually without the women. The proscenium was framed by a heavy blood red frame with an inner darker red frame and a huge painting on the back wall in the style of nineteenth century academic historicism to create an atmosphere of oppressive immutability. Inside the frames the acting space was crowded by an assemblage of dark, heavy, mismatched and rather tasteless furniture which appeared to have been collected by generations of Glembays. Cold lighting (design by Tobias Loeffler) downstage with progressive darkening towards upstage complemented the ominous stuffy quality of place and emphasized the isolation of the characters from one another. The very first silent tableau presents an ambience of discomfort and ennui but Kusej's stage composition created beauty in the midst of this superannuated aesthetic of furniture-clad elegance.

The three acts transpire in a rapid succession of implosions: family scandals and Glembay's business machinations are revealed by Leo; the legal entanglements of Glembay senior's wife, Charlotte Castelli-Glembay are reported in the newspapers. Early in act 1 during a conversation among those present about the painting in the background, Leo unmaskes the ugly truth about several notables of the Glembay dynasty represented in the painting; like donors in medieval altar paintings, they hold in their hands symbolic miniature representations of their business or honorific associations: a scale, a church, a locomotive. Generation after generation, they all had their hands in deceptive business practices, caused murder and suicide, or ended up in an insane asylum, while the clan managed cover-ups and bought public honor. Leo is tolerated as a neurotic crackpot by the family. He admits that his indictments are rooted in a bitter self-hatred for being a Glembay; his mother "died of the Glembay complex"; his sister drowned herself; his brother Ivo jumped from a third floor window. All these suicides are considered by the others as accidents.

In the course of the play the characters hurtle from one catastrophe to the next. The first one begins with young lawyer Bobby Fabriczy-Glembay

bursting in with a newspaper article that implicates Baroness Glembay in a careless hit-and-run coach accident that killed an older poor woman and caused the subsequent suicide of the woman's destitute daughter-in-law who had come to the Baroness for help but was rebuffed. The audience witnesses the bored arrogance of the elegant and seductive lady, played superbly by Sophie von Kessel, who enters the stage after we had heard her play offstage the *Moonlight Sonata*. The discussion centers on what to do, to suppress or respond to the scathing article—this discussion was staged around a big table with occasional drops of rain subtly dripping on the spread-out newspaper. Leo's revelations are relentless. He mocks the Glembay bank holdings in the funeral business among others, such as the armament business—as he says "it is in the interest of the Glembays when as many people die as possible." Then he casually mentions the illicit relationship between his stepmother and her father-confessor, Aloys Silberbrandt—Leo sleeps next-door to her room and hears the nightly activity there. Glembay senior, standing in the shadows upstage, overhears the allegation against his wife and the act closes as he breaks down while thunder is heard off-stage.

Act 2 is mostly taken up by a father-son confrontation in the same space but with a darkened periphery. As Leo packs to leave, Glembay presses him about the truth of his allegation. The form of the altercation between the two resembles a fencing duel; the parries become progressively more dangerous with both of them hitting with uncanny precision at each other's vulnerable points. Leo unpacks one family scandal after another, a series of sexual and business misdeeds. Krleza's stage direction indicates that the verbal jousts come to a brutal fistfight. Kusej gradually intensifies the action by beginning with Leo's icy off-handed accusations countered by his father's various denigrations of Leo as an arrogant freeloader until Leo's ultimate attack, the brutal defamation of his stepmother's history. He drags up her past as a whore whose real name nobody knows since her birth certificate is fake, and whom cousin Fabriczy "the old pimp" had picked up from a bordello in Vienna and presented to his cronies as some Baroness, and whom Glembay finally married, after his first wife's death. According to Leo, she has since become the moral and financial ruin of Glembay. This statement enrages the father and he bloodies Leo with a heavy blow. This prepares Leo for his final *coup de grace*: he reveals that "the Baroness," in order to silence him about her previous adulteries, "forced me between her thighs!" Glembay

collapses with a heart attack and sends Leo for his wife but he cannot find her. Finally, she appears, still in evening dress, followed by Dr. Altmann. As she witnesses her husband's distress, she blithely answers his question about her whereabouts: "Me? In the garden! I have a headache. The air outside is wonderful, so easy to breathe—and my migraine..." Glembay falters and the fire wall slowly descends.

Act 3 begins in the same space, with white light concentrated on the big table downstage centre, where the corpse of Glembay senior is laid out covered with a white sheet; only his head and naked shoulders are visible towards the audience. Sister Angelica kneels to his right, quietly praying, while Leo sits slightly upstage to his left, drawing his father's death mask. Fabriczy, Altmann, and Silberbrandt, sit in various deep armchairs in the shadows of the periphery. After the initial stillness, the action mounts to a furious crescendo, with the corpse in the center the subject and object of more revealing recriminations, this time by the Baroness who turns Leo's defamation into her own existential truth. The staging stresses with tremendous graphic courage the horrific absurdity of this dance of death of a family, emblematic of a corrupt moribund society and epoch. The image of Sophie von Kessel straddling the corpse as she hurls her own anguish at Leo is stunning. She towers at this point above him and displays an elemental force previously unimaginable when Leo mocked her faux elegance

as "playing the *Moonshine Sonata* ... and drinking champagne while standing on top of Vesuvius." Johannes Zirner's transitions are remarkable: from the misfit Leo who childishly demonstrates his moral superiority by simply walking over furniture, to the self-righteous and cold prosecutor, to the sick with self-hatred would-be lover of Angelica/Beatrice—his angelic Beatrice in his Dantean hell. His stepmother walks in on them and calls both moral hypocrites. Leo, like a cornered animal, attacks her and fulfills his own worst self-suspicion as a murderous Glembay. He stabs her in an impulsive rage, absurdly with a pair of scissors that she happened to hold in her hand. All this transpires in rapid succession and the play ends with Bobby Fabriczy-Glembay charging into the room with the morning newspaper announcement of the war declaration between Germany and Russia and his comment: "War, that's it! That's what we need! That will save us!" The sound of birds chirping in the garden is heard as the theatre fire wall descends with an ominous boom.

Galicia is based on Krleza's own wartime experience in 1916 in Galicia during the Brussilow campaign. While he did not participate in actual battles because of illness, he saw the horrendous effects of the Austrian defeat and the Russian Pyrrhic victory, with one million casualties. Krleza commented, "I believe nowhere have I laughed more about human stupidity than in Galicia during



Krleza's *Galicia* Act I: Norman Hacker (Lieutenant Walter), Shenja Lacher (Cadet Horvat), Ensemble in the background
Photo: Thomas Aurin



Krleza's *Galicia* Act III: Photo: Thomas Aurin

the Brussilow offensive." It was his first play to be accepted for performance in the Croatian National Theatre; however, ironically, the premiere was to happen on the day, 30 December 1920, when the Belgrade government issued a proclamation "banning all Communist propaganda, stopping the work of all Communist organizations, and confiscating all Communist newspapers." Krleza who had published a Communist journal, was banned from the theatre; *Galicia* was cancelled and not performed until after World War II.

The Munich production opens to reveal a picture of a demolished school room lit spottily by a grayish low light. The entire floor is thickly littered with books and papers; in the middle a potbellied stove with pipe; upstage left in the shadow a desk against which leans a motionless female figure; some limbs partially buried can be spotted in the clutter on the floor. Downstage left in a zinc tub filled with water lies a young man preoccupied with preening himself—shaving, doing his fingernails, his toenails, spraying perfume—while cheerfully singing the Blue Danube waltz, completely oblivious to his surroundings. Close to the stove another young soldier, Cadet Horvat tries to rest but irritated by the grooming activities, he bursts out with the first lines of the play: "Bobby, I've asked you three times to stop this waltz singing of yours... And your

nail polish is poisoning the air. And your perfume spreads your *Weltanschauung* wholesale." To which Lieutenant Bobby Agramer sarcastically responds while jumping stark naked from the tub: "*Mon cher* cousin, you're so full of it today." Another soldier, Gregor, carries the lifeless body of a child through the room and comments: "Nothing is left of the school. And it's full of rats in here." Thus the scene is set for the disaster of war as the soldiers are subjected to the utter depredation of the officers and forced to commit crimes against the civilians. The immoral and even stupid calamity of military action is seen through situations behind the battlefield. Krleza calls for offstage sounds to augment and contrast the action onstage. For example, we hear rats scurrying, the crying of children, voices of soldiers and horses, carts grinding through the mud, continuous rain, every now and then a clarinet, and distant explosions. Meanwhile the action onstage escalates from Agramer's toilette to Lieutenant Walter's brutal rape of a young Private, graphically acted in the production. In between those two actions the dialogue between Horvat and his comrade, Lieutenant Gregor, reveals several examples of the shift in morality and resultant horrors, as well as the numbing effect on the soldiers—what we now would call the effect of PTSD. Agramer steals local artifacts; an old woman whose cow, her livelihood, was stolen, is condemned

to hang because in her unmitigated frustration, she spat at Baroness Meldegg-Granensteg who happened to pass her on the way to visit her husband on the front; the local postal clerk, Franjo was caught in an explosion—all that's left of him is the blood-soaked newspaper he was to deliver to Agramer. Gregor, the older battle weary resigned officer tries to keep Horvat, his suicidal young friend, alive since the Austrians are in retreat anyway. Horvat, the protagonist, who sees the impending execution of the old woman as murder, plain and simple, expects to go that night to a doomed outpost and be finished with it all. The act ends with Walter commanding that Horvat oversee the hanging of the old woman in front of the local church before he's to go to the doomed outpost, Grabowiecz. It is Walter's act of revenge against Horvat who had testified against him before a military commission because he had witnessed Walter arbitrarily shooting an orderly. The brutal stupidity, sadism, and venality of the officer corps and the demoralization of the troops are thus established in act 1. The images created by the staging and the courageous differentiated acting were breathtaking.

Act 2 takes place at night in a muddy square—there is continuous rain onstage—in front of a ruined church, represented by a large damaged crucifix upstage. The hanging corpse of the old woman is dominant downstage right—an ironic juxtaposition to the hanging Christ. Onstage, stiff from the cold rain and mute in the sight of the dangling corpse, are Horvat and his comrade Gregor; the guarding soldier Podrawetz is dozing in the mud near the corpse. Lieutenant Walter with his lover Private in tow enters and congratulates Cadet Horvat on his "good" execution. In his drunken state, Walter laughs like a hyena and with a vulgar gesture towards the corpse and the words, "Stupid old cow. How dare such vermin rise up against a locomotive." He exits, leaving Horvat immobilized with self-disgust. He wishes he had refused to do the execution; then he would have been shot and, as he says to Gregor, "I would not be what I am now: a ruin, a rotten tooth, a common whore... a dog." He pulls out his pistol ready to shoot himself but Gregor stops him by degrading this suicide as "pure romanticism." The most striking stage image in this act follows: it is Horvat leaping onto the corpse and dangling with her in an embrace, his head buried in her chest and his legs locked around her body. He cries out in despair: "And this dead woman is also pure romanticism? I twisted this dried up woman's neck like the neck of an old crow not an innocent being. I am a murderer

and have no excuse of mitigating circumstances." To Gregor's observation that "all of Europe stands today under the gallows," Horvat retorts "yes, all of Europe, and nobody has the courage to refuse. One must conquer fear and finally say No." The next crisis occurs with the entrance of a tipsy Lieutenant Agramer, who comes to summon Horvat to play a Rachmaninoff Nocturne at the officer's dinner party given in honor of the Baroness. After Horvat categorically refuses to follow that order, Agramer leaving in a huff, trips over Podrawetz; humiliated and muddled, he slugs the poor guard in the face. Cadet Horvat challenges Lieutenant Agramer with his pistol and orders him to leave; Agramer retreats threatening Horvat with court-martial. Gregor takes Horvat from the scene. Walter's Private appears onstage with the order of arrest but Podrawetz claims Horvat left for the front outpost and thus saves him.

Act 3 takes place in an improvised officer's mess hall; on a banquet table the remnants of a festive dinner but the floor is littered as in the schoolroom of act 1. Officers are gathered around Brigadier Malocchio who carries on a discussion about warfare with the more modern minded Artillery Captain Lukacs; also present are a drunk Lieutenant Walter, as well Dr. Altmann and Chaplain Silberbrandt, recognizable from *The Glemboys*. In the background we see a woman making love to an officer. When Gregor and Horvat enter, the woman saunters to the foreground; she turns out to be the Baroness, also played by Sophie von Kessel, who asked for the Rachmaninoff concert. Horvat sees blood in the wine stains on the table; the Baroness sees that he is bloody and dirty but she asks him in most flattering terms to play, "maestro, please." Horvat refuses but she shows her teeth and orders him to play in the name of her husband, the Fieldmarshal. He begins to play a funeral march, gradually distorting the music until everybody shouts for him to stop. Horvat will not be stopped and shouts over the music: "I am no rebel. I am a murderer. My hands are bloody. But I killed on your orders. My only shame: I was not strong enough to say No to you." Into this cacophony the announcement of the fall of Grabowiecz, the last Austrian outpost, crashes like a bomb. Walter intending to shoot Horvat shouts, "Hands Up! I shoot!" Chaos breaks out where somehow all aim at one another and within a few seconds the massacre is complete. Brigadier Heinrich, the only survivor, played by Zapatka, slinks away with the last words in the play: "Must get away from here quickly! Let's drive to... Retreat! Grabowitz fell! This is the end. Total defeat! The collapse of the imperial-royal

empire..."

The acting ensemble was superb in handling the rapid-fire transitions from beat to beat as well as rendering the naked brutality of some of the action. All of the actors who played parts in *The Glembays*, played roles in *Galicja*, except for the actress who played Sister Angelica, but she played the main role of Laura in the third play, *In Agony*.

The third play, without intermission like the others, is very different in texture. Set in 1922, it focuses on the intimate sphere of a dysfunctional marriage. The totally white, totally empty set, except for a black telephone on the floor against the back wall, lit in white shadowless light came as a shock after the previous penumbral crowded sets. It laid bare quite literally the emptiness of the relationships among the three main characters and their moral and psychic disorientation. Baron von Lenbach (only mentioned in *Galicja*), played by Goetz Schulte, is a psychological casualty of the war and the subsequent demise of the Austrian empire—he is a drunk, a gambler, and disdains the new order where everyone has to work to earn a living. Laura, his wife, a modern assertive woman of the Glembay clan, played by Britta Hammelstein very differently from her Sister Angelica, has opened a fashion boutique and earns the money which her husband gambles away. When the play opens, Laura has just uncovered a shameful ruse by which her husband tried to trick her into giving him a considerable sum of money. He considers it her duty and the amount insignificant

but she counters "Two thousand are poker chips for you but I work seven days as a seamstress to earn those two thousand. I don't play cards. I work." This Strindbergian "dance of death" winds its way through accusations, counter accusations, and mutual resentments, that simply demonstrate the moral bankruptcy, and ultimately end in two absurd separate suicides (onstage) of the Baron and Laura. The lawyer-lover, Ivan von Krizovec (Markus Hering's only role in the trilogy), whose help she sought after her husband's suicide turns out to be a useless vapid liar. Her presumed woman friend, Countess Madeleine Petrowna, an apparition out of an Otto Dix painting, played hilariously by Sophie von Kessel, is a high-class whore visibly sick with venereal disease and of no help. The play ends with Laura, alone, back to the audience, toying with the same pistol with which her husband had killed himself in her presence. The curtain comes down, as she fires a shot into her temple and collapses.

Krleza's work and Kusej's mise en scène of this seminal rendering of a period one hundred years ago that was the prelude to the total cataclysm of European culture bears taking notice. Sebastian Huber, the dramaturg, points out in a program note that the tension between a vague hope for change and despair about one's own impotence and uncertainty characterizes the conflicts between and within the characters, and that this makes them into our contemporaries.



Krleza's *In Agony* Act I. Photo: Thomas Aurin.

Modern Polish Theatre in Search of a Radical Language

Szymon Wróblewski

How do you create a language that describes modern-day reality and write a text that can reflect this reality's complexity on stage? This is likely the biggest challenge facing every playwright in recent years. Of course, I am not referring to those playwrights who still believe in the old tried and tested formula for what a good play should be like. I am writing about the ones who choose a dramatic form and seek a radical language to talk about a world bursting at the seams and rife with nuanced complexity.

My intention is not to find an umbrella term for the generation of writers working in Polish theatre today. I will mention only a few playwrights and attempt to describe their strategies for working in theatre. I will no doubt omit certain names and titles while focusing on the ones that I subjectively selected. After all, I prefer to leave the reader with a sense of wanting more and with a desire to dig deeper rather than giving them a simplified overview of what is happening in Polish dramaturgy in the twenty-first century.

But before we move on to a description of the status quo, it is worthwhile to take a quick look back to how things were twenty-four years ago. Shortly after 4 June 1989, the day of Poland's first democratic elections, we saw the beginnings of a

process in which the political system changed and which drastically changed theatre's position. Decades of communism produced a certain complacency on both sides of the footlights. Utilizing Polish romantic dramas, our directors created a communication channel that ran over the heads of the censors and straight to the hearts of audiences. National texts that spoke of years of subjugation and of the road to freedom provided a perfect canvas for discussing the issues that affected society at that time. Growing from year to year was a conviction that an immense shift was imminent. The actors on stage sent indicative winks towards the audiences, who in turn nodded their heads knowingly from their comfortable seats. "We have a common enemy—take your pick: the authorities, the system, the ideology. Cross out the ones that don't apply." Meanwhile, the language of Polish romantic drama, so full of poetics and metaphor, offered abundant room for interpretation. And it was this very thicket of allusions and double entendres that confounded the censors and led them astray, much to the delight of both producers and audiences.

The blissful state of knowing looks and suggestive winks was halted by the change of political systems. Audiences rose from their seats and left the theatre. They headed to the shops, which



Dorota Masłowska's *No Matter How Hard We Tried*, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna. Photo: Courtesy of Tr Warszawa theatre.

were suddenly full of goods to buy. Either that or to pick up their passports and set off for the much-longed-for West. Or to set up in business and finally be their own boss. The actors and directors remained onstage. They were surprised to discover that the knowing looks and winks were no longer working and that fewer and fewer people were coming to the theatre. The result was the appearance of new dramas that searched for a new enemy in bloodthirsty capitalism. They showed the world through the convention of realism, producing well-crafted comedies that sought to depict accurately the shift in customs. Yet, what they lacked was an effective tool for criticism in the period of transformation, a tool that could only arise through analysis from the perspective of... communism and socialism. But how do you make use of tools from a system that had just recently been abolished, forty-four years after the end of World War II?

Theatre artists were faced with a crisis of language. The arrival of free speech meant that winking at the audience was no longer necessary. Polish dramas from the nineteenth century were revived but it was a struggle to make them comment on the current state of things. It was a little better for twentieth century literature, especially those works which the more astute censors had kept under lock and key. However, the plays of Witold Gombrowicz and Stanisław Witkiewicz were still unable to provide a model that would lead to a theatre revival in Poland.

It was only in the late 1990s that something new began to take shape in theatre. Thanks to the availability of quality translations, young directors finally gained access to contemporary dramas from Germany, Austria and the UK. The "Brutalists," as they were dubbed by the Polish media, brought new subjects to the theatre and they staged plays that addressed current taboos. Mark Ravenhill offered us a picture of young Brits warped by consumption and living to the beat of techno music. Sarah Kane delved into the territory of extreme love that lies well past the border of what we consider homosexual identity. It is an identity that is poorly grasped by a society of which 95% claim to be members of the Catholic Church. Even more outrageous is the writing of Marius von Mayenburg, who, as if focusing on dysfunctional families weren't enough, has a brother and sister entering into an incestuous criminal partnership. And how do you stage the plays of Werner Schwab and Elfriede Jelinek, who parody the language of capitalist advertising to poke fun at Austrians (equally ardent Catholics)?

As the subject matter alone becomes harder to swallow by a consumption-hungry palate, the change in the artistic language becomes an even greater barrier (especially to the older segment of the theatre world). Harsh curse words? Video clip aesthetics? Nudity on stage? That is not right, they say. Yet, all of the difficulties of staying true to creative decisions paid off. Theatres began to attract a new, young audience for whom the theatre was a place for discourse on the issues affecting the modern world.

Inevitably, the question arose as to why we still looked to plays written outside of Poland. Roman Pawłowski, a theatre critic for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, Poland's leading newspaper, appealed for more drama writing in Poland. Like the ancient senator Marcus Porcius Cato calling for the destruction of Carthage in each of his addresses, Roman Pawłowski beseeched playwrights to write about their reality. The result was a new wave of Polish theatre beginning around 2002.

New competitions sprung up—Brave Radom, the Wrocław Contemporary Drama Competition, the Gdynia Dramaturgy Award—and brought recognition to outstanding theatres and playwrights. There were also new workshops for playwrights and directors organized near Lake Wigry in the summer months of every year. Stary Teatr in Krakow and the National Theatre in Warsaw—the two oldest stages in the country—opened up their repertoires to new plays.

The directors of theatres in small and large cities alike began to commission new dramas from young authors. Also encouraging new productions was the Competition for the Staging of a Contemporary Polish Play (which is up to its nineteenth edition this year). Theatre companies (institutions, fringe theatres, associations) can nominate premieres to the competition, which are then viewed by the judging committee for a spot in the finals. In addition to awards for theatre artists (writers, directors, set designers, actors), the competition offers theatres a chance to receive reimbursements for a portion of the costs associated with the production (costs of sets and costumes, promotion, artist fees, etc.).

And what is the level of interest in the competition among theatres? In the 2012-2013 season, more than 100 pre-premiere productions were nominated. That accounts for a majority of the 142 total pre-premieres that took place in Poland in 2012. Let's add that in Poland at that time there were 629 theatre companies and 1274 premieres, with a total of 5 million spectators attending 31,000

performances in all (statistics from the Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw for the year 2012). One out of every seven theatre premieres was also the world premiere of a new text and nearly one tenth of all productions were based on Polish texts. Statistically, it all looks quite promising.

However, to those who don't entirely believe in statistics but favor quality and the merits of the writing as a measuring stick, I recommend reading a few of the dramas recently written in Poland. They constitute some of the best evidence for what is on the minds of inhabitants of the Land on the Vistula. Our government likes to boast about economic numbers (Poland was the only country in the European Union to avoid falling into recession; our GDP has increased every year since the political transformation) and ministers eagerly cut ribbons on stadiums and highways which we build with EU money. Yet, in the shadow of this impressive progress there is a society divided. On one side are those who profited from the political transformation and are pleased with the changes that took place in our country. The other side consists of those who maintain that the transformation was a great detriment and that we need to change the course of events. This is, of course, a vast simplification that, all the while, serves to portray the two extremes of the discussion on the state of Poland.

The kind of drama that can arise in such a fractured world is best exemplified by Dorota Masłowska's play *No Matter How Hard We Tried*. The piece's Polish title, which literally translates as "Things Are Good Between Us," sounds like a naïve expression of bliss, but its subject matter raises eyebrows from the very outset and urges us to examine the characters more closely. Masłowska wrote the play specifically for the TR Warszawa theatre, with the resulting production, directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, taking home the main awards at the leading theatre festivals in Poland. A flat in the Warsaw district of Prague is occupied by three women belonging to three different generations: an aging grandmother, an overworked mother, and a young girl. The eldest woman recalls the war and Warsaw of the 1930s with vivid emotion while her granddaughter refuses to believe in such a romanticized picture. To her, Poland means poverty, deficiency, and unfulfilled dreams. Once she even declares that she is not Polish and that she learned the language from records and tapes left behind by a Polish cleaning lady.

This is a bitter truth about our dreams of joining the West—since Poland's accession into the

EU, roughly 2.5 million Poles have gone abroad to work in bars, on construction sites, and as cleaning staff in the West. While the audience often reacts in laughter thanks to Masłowska's strong comedic sensibility, it is a bitter laughter holding back tears. Seeing the mother and her friend reading a magazine titled "Not For You" and lamenting that this year they won't be going to Egypt and that next year they won't be going to Tunisia, it is easy to imagine many Polish families being in the same predicament. Our heads are full of dreams from glossy magazines but the reality in Poland severely limits our ability to fulfill them. All we can do is to live in the sweet dream—the quasi-reality—that the mass media and the smug politicians concoct for us.

The play ends with a discussion between the girl and her grandmother, who reveals in one of her last monologues that she in fact died during the bombing of Warsaw in 1939. So, is the whole play really just a dream? Are the grandmother's descendants just the projections of the dead woman? Or perhaps of the audience, who watches the action unfold from a safe distance?

Another subject that interests writers is the relationship Poles have with the painful past. The chapter in our country's history that addresses our relationship with the Jews is full of instances of glory as well as of detestable actions driven by base instincts. Questions relating to the moral responsibility of Holocaust witnesses resurface periodically like the cry of the Erinyes while each generation grapples with the problem. So, what do we do with stories in which the blame lies on the side of our forefathers? How would we react if the injustice were being done here and now? Such puzzles are addressed by Tadeusz Słobodzianek in his play *Our Class*.

This drama is based on events in the town of Jedwabne, where, upon the outbreak of war, the town's Polish residents corralled their Jewish neighbors into a barn and set fire to it. The author begins his story in an elementary school classroom—simple episodes in the lives of children of both sexes and both ethnicities introduce a story which eventually escalates to a dramatic conclusion. To this day, the smoke from the barn makes eyes burn and leads to tears. For the descendants of the victims, the tears are for lost loved ones. For the descendants of the perpetrators, they are tears of empathy and remorse. This tragic event, exposed by Jan Gross in a very prominent publication, examined the nuances of the violator/victim relationship and questioned the erstwhile image of Poles during the Second World

War. An event as all-encompassing as the Second World War unleashes the latent instincts inside us all, and there is no sense in deluding ourselves that deep down there is a good person in each of us.

The same subject is examined from a modern perspective by the young playwright Mateusz Pakuła. His play *Książę Niezłom* has already been staged several times in Poland. The Krakow-based author's grotesque work is a comedy on the simplest mechanisms of human nature. Greed, the need to channel aggression and ordinary envy are the motivational forces for a simple family keeping Jews imprisoned in their dark cellar. They use simple deception to convince their prisoners that the war is still underway and that they must continue to pay their guardians for hiding them from the Nazis. Maintaining the ruse and keeping the exiles in the dark requires increasingly difficult efforts. The grotesque comedy is a playful variation on the hit German film *Good Bye, Lenin* from a few years ago. I highly recommend reading this bitter comedy.

Dorota Masłowska and Mateusz Pakuła are not the only ones to address the issue of the truth and of what can be defined as reality. Similar subject matter is confronted by Małgorzata Sikorska Mischuk in her play *Popieluszko*. This play was written for

Teatr Polski in Bydgoszcz and was lauded as the best drama written in Poland in 2012. The main character, referred to as the Anti-Pole, is a typical everyman with family problems. His life changes when his flat is visited by mysterious scientists and certain vague characters. They entangle the man in a game to reconstruct the events surrounding the murder of Father Jerzy Popieluszko (who acted in support of the Solidarity movement as a member of the anti-communist opposition) by communist agents. As the initially detached main character goes further in the game he starts to become an active participant. The game is so involving that the play ends with the main character making a phone call to the police to give his testimony. He identifies himself as a witness to the murder which took place more than 30 years earlier. He claims to have been a fish swimming in the Vistula when the priest's body was thrown into the river and that he can identify the murderers. Sikorska Mischuk's play is a perfect example of the functioning of the so-called politics of memory, which is a common tool of the conservative side of the political spectrum. A story from the past told repeatedly—at first having no connection to present life—enters the ears of the listener and eventually gets into their blood, changing their way of seeing the



Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Our Class*, Lodz 2013. Photo: Courtesy of Teatr Nowy.

world. Repeated continuously like a mantra, a story that is weakly connected with our everyday reality can take hold of our emotions and change the way we think.

Twenty-four years since the first free elections, it is surely clear to everyone that the gap between Poland's satisfied citizens and the outraged ones is only going to grow. Obviously, inequality has always existed within society. But in the past, communist propaganda was able to easily cover it up with the use of messages sent through the tightly controlled and censored media. In the age of the Internet and free speech, being free of a single sanctioned mode of thinking, theatre is likewise searching for its place in society. Still—on account of past experience—its closest function is like that of the ancient *agora*, where many people could gather to collectively find solutions to matters affecting them. When a prophet takes the podium to voice his answer to a given problem, directly behind him is a group of opponents who try to drown him out with their shouts of criticism. It is rare for one overriding voice to rule the agora. And rarer still is finding a speaker with a positive course of action or a great new idea. But is it not one of humankind's greatest challenges to assemble in a group and take political

action?

Just such a goal is laid out for the spectators in the play *On Goodness* by the duo Paweł Demirski (playwright) and Monika Strzępka (director). Their drama, presented at Teatr Dramatyczny in Wałbrzych, is an attempt to find a positive course of action with the aid of left-wing criticism of the capitalist system. The story is set in 2016, at a group therapy session hosted by the local Municipal Social Welfare Centre. Its aim is to find a new language to express desire, ask for something, and demand something. The group consists of individuals hurt in the banking crisis, a theatre director (an ironic self-portrait of Monika Strzępka), a resurrected Amy Winehouse, and the investigative reporter duo of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. The workshop for learning to ask for something, to identify goals, and to find a new language does not end with a single solution that unites everyone involved. The fractured ideological material has been torn apart and all that remains are pitiful shreds. All we can do is to labor in hopes of putting them back together and finding a language: a radical language of accord. The play ends with a scene of the group singing "You'll Never Walk Alone" around a bonfire outside of the theatre building. Holding pieces of paper in their hands, the



Mateusz Pakuła's *Książę Niezłom*, Wrocław 2010. Photo Courtesy of Teatr Polski.

spectators join the actors around the bonfire as the place where community is first established. "Walk on with hope in your heart / And you'll never walk

alone."

(Translation Simon Wloch)



Małgorzata Sikorska Mischczuk's *Popieluszko*. Photo: Courtesy of Teatr Polski.

Less Coal, More Art for Germany's Ruhr Valley

James Armstrong

The *Ruhrfestspiele* in the town of Recklinghausen is not one of Germany's largest theatre festivals, but it is one of the oldest. In the aftermath of World War II, theatres in Hamburg were faced with the prospect of having to shut their doors due to a lack of coal in the winter. They sent a delegation down to the Ruhr valley, a major coal-producing region, to see if they could find a way around rationing rules. Surprisingly, miners were sympathetic and shipped up enough coal to keep the theatres open a little longer. In gratitude, the theatres sent troupes down during the summer of 1947 to perform for the miners, using the slogan "Art for Coal."

Every year since, Recklinghausen has played host to an increasingly international group of theatre companies that in May and June turn the small town into a world stage. Today, the Ruhr region has transitioned away from its traditional mining-based economy, and the festival has become much more institutionalized than it was in those chaotic post-war years. Recklinghausen no longer produces as much coal, but it now boasts a state-of-the-art festival house with two main stages. This year it opened a new performance venue in a former industrial site in

the suburbs. A vibrant Fringe Festival also comes to Recklinghausen each year, performing in tents in the city park outside the festival house.

The theme for this past summer's festival was "*Aufbruch und Utopie*," or "Departure and Utopia." While productions do not have to adhere closely to the theme, the festival does try each year to draw connections between its theatre offerings and a writer or period from the past. This time, the festival wanted to examine the powerful cultural shifts taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century, when artists and writers were trying to create new worlds. A special exhibit in the festival house gave a month-by-month history of events in literature occurring in 1913. Another smaller exhibit highlighted some of the early twentieth-century writers represented in the *Ruhrfestspiele* this year.

The Eifman State Academy Ballet of St. Petersburg provided one of the festival's more high-profile international productions, *Red Giselle*. The ballet tells the story of the Russian ballerina Olga Spessivtseva, who is best known for dancing the title role in *Giselle*, and who began her career, incidentally, in 1913. In tracing her rise and fall, the piece uses both en pointe classical ballet and more modern dance



Red Giselle, directed and choreographed by Boris Eifman. Photo: Eifman State Academy Ballet St. Petersburg.



Red Giselle. Photo: Eifman State Academy Ballet St. Petersburg.

forms. Boris Eifman provided the choreography, which was set to music by Tchaikovsky, Schnittke, and Bizet. In telling the story of Spessivtseva, Eifman also tells the story of artists throughout Russia during the early twentieth century.

At the end of the first act, the star ballerina flees the chaos following the Russian Revolution. The audience then sees her life in the West, and there is a wonderful scene where her former lover's disembodied head appears, peeking through the stage curtains. She tries to stroke his face, but then gets sucked in and has her own head pulled behind the curtains. When her head emerges, it is covered with red cloth, which unfurls to reveal a huge flag-shaped piece of red fabric that drapes around her body. From that point on, she descends into depression and madness.

Red Giselle is one of Eifman's more established works, having premiered back in 1997, but the dancers kept the production fresh and exciting. Last year, the company brought its more recent ballet *Onegin* to Recklinghausen, and many in the audience were clearly anticipating this year's production. Judging from the excited chatter at intermission and after the performance, they were not disappointed.

Another international offering was Les Visiteurs du Soir's *Le Navire Night*, a performance billed as a dialogue for voice and cello. French actress Fanny Ardant gave a lush rendition of a story

by Marguerite Duras about a passionate love affair that takes place over the telephone. The performance was in French with German supertitles, while American cellist Sonia Wieder-Atherton provided haunting music. The one-night engagement banked on the star-power of Ardant, who is known for her distinguished film career. In contrast to the visual medium that made Ardant famous, this production contained no set and virtually no movement, focusing entirely on the aural experience. Though this might have been disappointing to those who came to "see" a film star, it was appropriate for the Duras story, which is an ode to the power of the human voice.

Much more visually interesting (though not without controversy) was *Der Tod in Venedig / Kindertotenlieder*. This co-production by Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz Berlin and the Théâtre National de Bretagne Rennes brought together scenes from Thomas Mann's novella *Death in Venice* with Gustav Mahler's settings of poems by Friedrich Rückert. Director Thomas Ostermeier deftly integrated video into the performance. A camera team walked around the stage getting close-ups of the actors, and these were projected onto a large screen above the stage. Though this sometimes divided the audience's attention, it was successful at turning subtle acting moments into monumental events.

At the beginning of the play, the boy Tadzio appears in a traditional sailor's suit as he is

described in the book, but he is playing a hand-held video game (obviously absent from Mann's 1912 novella). The camera zooms in on the game before moving to other things. The audience sees Tadzio's governess, his sisters, and Mann's protagonist, Gustav Aschenbach, all with the viewer receiving an almost voyeuristic level of intimacy. The close-up device is used particularly effectively when Aschenbach and Tadzio exchange a long knowing glare at one another, and again when Aschenbach undergoes his cosmetic treatment in a futile attempt to appear younger. The massive image of the actor's face literally hangs over the action, drawing attention to his embarrassment and bewilderment.

This production also deals head-on with the issue of pedophilia in the story. At one point, the narrator who has been reading Mann's words stops the show and asks for the house lights to come up. He reads aloud one of the more provocative passages from *Death in Venice*. The camera then zooms in on a newspaper article discussing the controversies surrounding "perversion," and the audience gets to see that Mann's book is cited in the article. The issue now confronted, though not resolved, the play returns to its regular style.

When Aschenbach starts worrying about

the cholera epidemic in Venice, he speaks to a waiter at the hotel. This scene is barely whispered (and for some reason, performed entirely in English, in spite of the story's Italian setting and German protagonist). The waiter asks him repeatedly to sign his bill. Aschenbach pauses, but finally signs it. He asks the waiter if there is a problem with disease in the city. The waiter quietly backs away, mumbling half-hearted reassurances.

At the premiere, the scene was performed so quietly it prompted a heckler in the back of the theatre to yell at the actors. Later during the same performance, two people toward the front of the theatre showily got up and left, forcing an entire row to stand as they made their way to the exit. Clearly, not everyone in Recklinghausen appreciated this type of avant-garde performance.

At the play's climax, Tadzio's sisters enter in their nun-like dresses at the back of the stage and take off their shoes. As they move downstage, they begin dancing, both fiercely and sensuously, with Dionysian passion. They shed their nun-like gowns and dance naked with one another, fighting with each other and mercilessly pulling at each other's bodies like crazed Maenads. While all this is happening, dark objects drop from the flies and float



Der Tod in Venedig / Kindertotenlieder, directed by Thomas Ostermeier. Photo: Courtesy of Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz Berlin.



Karl Schönherr's *Der Weibsteufel*, directed by Martin Kušej. Residenztheater München, Recklinghausen, 2013. Photo: Hans Jörg Michel.

down to the stage. These resemble pieces of paper or plastic, or perhaps ash. The plague, and all of the Bacchic forces it represents in Mann's story, appears to be raining down on Venice. It provides a dramatic conclusion to a highly innovative production.

There are inherent difficulties with loading in a large set for a few performances at a festival. That in no way daunted Munich's Residenztheater, which staged Karl Schönherr's intimate drama *Der Weibsteufel* with a massive set that dwarfed the play's three actors. Designer Martin Zehetgruber created a jumble of massive logs that sloped across the stage and intersected one another at harsh angles. Under the direction of Martin Kusej, the actors then walked, stumbled, and climbed across the logs. The psychosexual web woven by the unnamed man, his wife, and the young officer in Schönherr's play resonated with the complex and dangerous-looking mass of timber on stage, which simultaneously called to mind ties to the earth and humanity's exploitation of natural forces.

If for nothing else, the actors deserved their standing ovation for managing to navigate their ways across the set, intimidating, fighting, and seducing each other, all the while managing somehow not to break their necks. Zehetgruber's fallen forest

provided them with virtually no flat surfaces on which to stand, though there were a few handle holds to aid in some of the more steep ascents. The final scene, where the officer kills the man with his own knife, was acted out downstage in front of the logs. This way, the actors could at least perform the climax without having to navigate giant tree trunks. The set, especially under the harsh lighting designed by Felix Dreyer and Tobias Löffler, remained an ominous presence in the background.

What was most interesting was what came following the man's death. After the woman told the officer he was now alone, she proceeded to climb up the logs, ascending as if into the heavens. It added a bit of a feminist twist to a play that contains a rather uncomfortable amount of misogyny. Birgit Minichmayr, performing the title role (which is generally translated as "The She-Devil"), had more of angel than devil about her. She clearly elicited sympathy for a woman dominated by two dangerous and frightening men.

The smaller theatre in the festival house cannot accommodate an entire felled forest, but that didn't stop some creative designers from using it in very interesting ways. Of particular note was the versatile set designed by Christoph Rasche for



Carl Sternheim's *Die Hose / Bürger Schippel*, directed by David Mouchtar-Samorai. Recklinghausen, 2013. Photo: Marion Buehrle.

Die Hose / Bürger Schippel, the Ruhrfestspiele and Staatstheater Nürnberg's mash-up of two Carl Sternheim comedies adapted by David Mouchtar-Samorai. The walls of the set were filled with photographs, some in negative, of various respectable members of society from throughout history. This served as a constant reminder of the world the would-be gentlemen in the play wished to enter. At the rear of the stage was a circular door in this wall of respectability. The door could be opened or sealed off at various times, sometimes granting entrance, and sometimes as a means to expel interlopers.

The piece alternated between scenes of the two Sternheim plays, with actors from *Die Hose* playing parallel roles in *Bürger Schippel*. Louisa von Spies, for instance, played both the put-upon Frau Maske from *Die Hose* and the enchanting Thekla Hicketier in *Bürger Schippel*. Thomas Nunner played both Theobald Maske and Paul Schippel, who according to the production notes were intended to merge into a single face. In fact, toward the end of the play, the characters of Maske and Schippel did start to merge. Nunner did a wonderful job expressing his

confusion, as he became simultaneously both men.

At the end of *Bürger Schippel*, the proletarian Schippel is welcomed into respectable society. Even the prejudiced goldsmith Tilmann Hicketier is forced to take his leave politely, with the line, "*Auf Wiedersehen, lieber Herr Schippel.*" In this version, however, Nunner quickly goes back and forth between his two characters at the end. When it comes time for the conclusion of the *Bürger Schippel* plot, he is presented with the crown of laurels Schippel wins and greeted as "*lieber Herr Maske.*" The merging of the two characters is finally complete.

This was a very earnest production, showing the true human emotions behind Sternheim's characters. That sometimes took away a few laughs, but it made up for it in emotional intensity. Nunner's character at the end seemed to have truly grown, even though, as in the original plays, the portrayal of Maske/Schippel remained ambivalent. If anything, the merged ending further complicated the audience's response to Maske and Schippel. Sternheim's anti-heroes became sympathetic, but not fully redeemed.

Also in the smaller theatre was Bertolt Brecht's *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, a co-production between the Théâtre National du Luxembourg and the Saarländischen Staatstheater. For the first part of the play, director Dagmar Schlingmann had the entire cast cramped in a long, narrow room created by scenic designer Sabine Mader. There was just enough space for the wedding guests to sit behind one side of a long table, making the scene reminiscent of Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. When guests wanted to move around, they had to crawl over one another, which they managed with great comic effect. Adding to the outrageousness were ridiculous 1960s-era costumes designed by Inge Medert.

Downstage from the dining room was a sloping platform, and below that a flat area where the dancing took place. When the bride and groom danced with other guests in an attempt to make one another jealous, the performers went wild, calling to mind some of the excesses of the sexual revolution. The groom's lascivious dancing was so over the top that at one point he fell off of the stage and into the audience. The production found even more comic potential in the groom's shoddily built furniture, which fell apart right on cue. The final offstage collapse of the bed at the end drew loud guffaws

from the audience.

Much of the action was slowed down and drawn out, stretching Brecht's slight one-act play into more than an hour. This allowed the actors to find moments of seriousness in the text that might not be readily apparent. Indeed, the production might have been somewhat weightier than Brecht originally intended the play to be. Nina Schopka, as the friend of the bride, was not just a humorous vamp, but positively frightening in her aggressive sexuality. The bride and groom's reconciliation at the end was also played as highly ambiguous, with their future very much in doubt.

The Ruhrfestspiele's new theatre, Halle König Ludwig, is a converted industrial space that is unfortunately out in the middle of nowhere. The festival runs a shuttle service, but only for certain performances, and it must be requested at least five days in advance. Three city buses stop in the general vicinity of the theatre, running with varied frequency. For the inaugural year of the space, the festival had not even installed restrooms, instead providing temporary facilities in a trailer in the parking lot. Fortunately, the space is beautiful in its bare simplicity, making up for the other inconveniences.

One of the shows premiering in the space



Bertolt Brecht's *Die Kleinbürgerhochzeit*, directed by Dagmar Schlingmann. Photo: Thomas Jauk.

this year was Deutsches Theater Berlin's production of the Kleist-award-winning play *Brandung* by Maria Milisavljevic. Though she is of Croatian heritage, Milisavljevic grew up in Germany and currently resides in Canada. Her play revolves around a group of Croatian young people living in Germany. After one of them mysteriously disappears, her friends become increasingly concerned and attempt to track down what happened to her. Director Christopher Rüping gives the audience an ominous clue at the top of the play, when the cast members don fox masks and menacingly surround the performer who provides live music for the production.

The set designed by Jonathan Mertz appeared to be a large window with numerous small panes of glass suspended above the stage and very much in keeping with the industrial feel of the theatre. Water slowly dripped down from the window onto the stage, creating puddles that were supplemented by buckets of water splashed around by the cast. As the performance went on, however, it became clear that the panes of glass were actually pieces of ice that slowly melted and sometimes crashed to the ground during the show. As the play is a thriller, whenever the ice fell there was a good chance it would be at a tense moment, making the audience jump. At one

point in the play the characters turned their anger on the set behind them, punching out most of the panes of ice. The mostly empty frame still hung in the background, though, leaving the stage littered with water and ice chunks.

Another prominent feature of the set consisted of three microphones hanging from the ceiling. The performers occasionally grabbed the microphones and spoke into them, especially when re-creating telephone dialogue. They also occasionally re-donned their fox masks or made use of seemingly impromptu disguises to take on the roles of other characters. Though the audience eventually does find out what happened to the woman who disappeared, the play is more interested in the increasing anxiety and despair caused by her disappearance. Milisavljevic's heart-rending portrait of the three friends overshadows any plot twists she introduces in the final moments of the play.

As is often the case with theatre festivals, some of the best productions at this year's Ruhrfestspiele were Fringe performances on the festival's periphery. My personal favorite was *Heute: Kohlhaas*, an adaptation of Heinrich Kleist's novella *Michael Kohlhaas* acted out by five performers in clown make-up. This co-production by the AGORA



Maria Milisavljevic's *Brandung*, directed by Christopher Rüping. Recklinghausen, 2013. Photo: Arno Declair.



Heute: Kohlhaas, directed by Claus Overkamp. Photo: Courtesy of Theater Marabu.

Theater in Belgium and Germany's Theater Marabu skillfully used music, puppetry, acrobatics... even unicycle riding! Director Claus Overkamp seemed endlessly inventive, constantly coming up with new methods for telling the story. The performers should also be commended for their willingness to fully commit to some ridiculous stage business, which always worked due to a total embracing of the production's outrageous aesthetic.

Though the Fringe festival billed *Heute: Kohlhaas* as appropriate for older children, some of the play's representations of sexual violence might have been too much for younger audiences. When Kohlhaas's enemies take his horse away toward the beginning of the show, they simulate raping a toy horse, both anally and orally. After the violation of the horse (which also has its ears and much of its skin ripped from its body) three men pose standing over the horse in a manner reminiscent of pictures from Abu Ghraib prison. In a creepy final touch, they get a member of the audience to photograph them. The fact that younger audience members continued to watch gleefully throughout these atrocities is perhaps not flattering to human nature.

An even more disturbing scene occurs later in the play when Kohlhaas's wife volunteers to carry his petition to the authorities. According to the Kleist story, she is struck in the chest with a lance's butt.

In this version, a despicable guard with a long pole harasses her shamelessly, at one point jiggling her breasts with the lance while she has no choice but to stand there, stone-faced, and endure the humiliation. He places the lance between her legs, and after he delivers a particularly violent thrust, she grabs the pole. When he pulls it out, it is covered with blood, and the wife subsequently dies.

This is what sends Kohlhaas over the edge in a city-burning rage. At one point, performers toss small puppets over the back of the set while one of the actors, representing Kohlhaas and his men, bats at them with a club. The puppets go all over the stage, and some fly into the audience, again to the joy of excited children. During another scene, cast members pass out balls to the audience and urge them to try to knock down a puppet representing Kohlhaas's arch nemesis. Police puppets then arrive to protect him from the crowd, and when some of them get knocked over, the actors set them back up again and continue to urge the children (who need no urging) to continue their assault on the police.

One interesting choice was to not have any single actor play Kohlhaas himself. Instead, performers read aloud his various petitions or recited his lines in a deadpan tone directly into a microphone. Instead of distancing the character from the audience, the device tended to make the

audience associate themselves even more closely with Kohlhaas. The wrongs committed against him could easily have been done to us, and his revenge gave vent to our own righteous indignation. Political references, including the horse/prisoner scene and an authority figure giving a Nazi salute, only added to the audience's outrage, helping them to side fully with Kohlhaas in spite of his rather excessive revenge.

Perhaps the most inspired moment occurred when the stage lights went out and the light board operators sitting behind the audience took out flashlights, searching furiously for the source of the supposed problem. After a few moments, one of the actors explained that they were having technical difficulties. Fortunately, they had candles, which would be perfect to light the next scene, in which Kohlhaas meets Martin Luther. The performers lit candles and proceeded to sing the next scene, changing the words to a traditional Lutheran hymn. At the end of the song, the lights miraculously came back on, with a ray of white light beaming down as if from heaven.

It was not this one clever gimmick that made the show, but rather the production's ability to find a long string of clever gimmicks, each one more

creative and surprising than the last. With each new scene came a new innovation, a new twist, whether it was petitions run through an on-stage paper shredder or shadow puppets enacting the burning of a city. Though the performers should have been exhausted after the physically demanding piece, they even rushed outside the Fringe tent afterward to greet the children in the audience and hawk commemorative clown-face buttons.

Not nearly as many young people were in the audience for *Songs for Alice*, a Fringe production put on by Germany's Figurentheater Wilde und Vogel. The performance, in both English and German, included rather adult renditions of scenes from Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books as well as most of the songs and poems that appear in the stories. A hoarsely sung version of "The Walrus and the Carpenter" provided structure for the piece, with the main puppeteer periodically breaking out into verses as the play transitioned between scenes. The performance both began and ended with the poem, concluding with a dramatic blackout when the song announced the betrayed oysters had been "eaten every one."

The puppets were quite impressive. They included one hand puppet of a face placed directly



Lewis Carroll's *Songs for Alice*, directed by Hendrik Mannes. Recklinghausen, 2013. Photo: Therese Stuber.

in front of the puppeteer's own face while he was wearing an elaborate costume and headgear. The effect was to make the puppet look like a mask, but it could be manipulated in ways no mask can be moved. Also notable were a caterpillar puppet that blew smoke and a white rabbit puppet that was both comical and vaguely threatening at the same time (much like Carroll's stories).

While many of the songs were performed in English, a notable exception was "Jabberwocky," which was performed in German. This was an interesting choice, as much of the poem consists

of made-up nonsense words anyway. Though it was surely a feat to translate "'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves" into German, this was probably the right decision for a predominately German-speaking audience. Nonsense always stands out the most when it is juxtaposed with something from one's own mother tongue.

Though the performance (and the festival as a whole) had some slow moments, *Songs for Alice* (like the festival) contained so much creativity it ensured the audience was never bored. That's enough to make one chortle in joy.



Carroll's *Songs for Alice*. Figuretheater Wilde und Vogel, Recklinghausen, 2013. Photo: Therese Stuber.

The 2013 Sirenos Theatre Festival: Lithuanian Showcase

Bryce Lease

Now in its tenth year, the Lithuanian Showcase at the Sirenos Theatre Festival invites international spectators to experience the best of contemporary theatre in the country. The original impetus of Sirenos in 2004 was to bridge artistic relations between east and west in post-communist Europe. As a result, the Lithuanian showcase is followed by the work of international directors and companies from as far afield as Ireland, Georgia, Italy, and Russia. The close proximity between participating theatres inside the Old Town made it possible to walk between each venue through Vilnius's winding, atmospheric streets, making the festival a particularly intimate and comfortable experience. Audra Žukaitytė, the artistic manager of the festival, this year dedicated to the audience noted that Sirenos' spectators do not have a traditional passive relationship with the theatre but are rather coauthors of the performance events. This was perhaps rather wishful thinking. Whilst most of the festival's repertoire was engaging and provocative, the experience of traditional theatre venues and audience-performer relations was left wholly intact.

Although officially organized by the OKT (Oskaro Koršunovo Teatras)/Vilnius City Theatre, the main venue for the festival has become the two stages of the National Drama Theatre (Lietuvos nacionalinis dramos teatras). The opening was

a particularly significant production of Polish playwright Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Our Class* (*Nasza klasa*) by the international director Yana Ross, a graduate of GITIS in Moscow and the Yale School of Drama. Though the play was awarded the Nike Prize, the most highly regarded literary award in Poland, it has also caused some controversy among conservative nationalists, particularly for its examination of Polish collusion in an anti-Semitic pogrom during the Second World War. The Lithuanian premiere was preceded by a public forum on "Art and the Holocaust," attended by the playwright and the director as well as German and Lithuanian critics, where the relationship between historical trauma and the crisis of representation was hotly debated. Ross, who has worked at the Berlin Volksbühne and the Finnish National Theatre, has brought a striking, new directorial approach to the Lithuanian stage. The production differed from other recent premieres of the play in Poland and the UK in its use of live music, tragic-comedic tone, vibrant aesthetics and expressionistic lighting. Circus tricks replaced acts of violence and brutality, offering the audience a Brechtian distance between Ross's lively and mischievous form and the explicitly tragic content. The younger members of the National's ensemble performed the first part of the text, which focuses on Nazi-occupied Poland



Our Class, National Drama Theatre, Vilnius, directed by Yana Ross. Photo by Mikko Waltari.



The Seagull, OKT (Oskaro Koršunovo Teatras)/Vilnius City Theatre, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas. Photo: Tomas Ivanauska.

and the inauguration of Soviet-style communism, while older actors embodied more recent post-1989 history. The shifting of roles between younger and older actors evidenced the significant talent of an ensemble that works together with confidence and striking intimacy. Though some Lithuanian critics snubbed Ross for her unconventional treatment of Holocaust themes, the playwright Slobodzianek judged this to be the most successful treatment of *Our Class* to date.

Two new pieces by Oskaras Koršunovas, perhaps the best-known theatre director outside of Lithuania, were shown in OKT's cramped performance space that resembles a modern office. Koršunovas was successful in his paring down of Chekhov's *The Seagull* to its most basic components, moving away from outmoded and static interpretations of the play that dominate many East European repertoires. The stripped-back aesthetics and concentration on naturalistic acting technique was reminiscent of Thomas Ostermeier's early productions at the Baracke in Berlin. The cast started the performance amongst the audience, slowly disengaging themselves one at a time to perform the text, almost reluctantly at first but with greater nuance and sincerity as the performance

developed. Under harsh fluorescent lighting the stage technology was reduced to a single projection of a lake and Trigorin's mobile phone, which was used to capture photographs of poetic moments in nature for later literary recreation in his novels. The ensemble worked together with a psychological intensity that Koršunovas is well known for producing in his actors. The director's close reading of the text was richly rewarded. Particularly memorable were the performances of Nelė Savičenko as Irina Arkadina, icy and self-important one moment, childish and emotionally vulnerable the next, who contrasted sharply with Martynas Nedzinskas as a violent and troubled Treplev. This very impressive offering was rather disappointingly followed by Koršunovas's production of Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, starring Juozas Budraitis. Though Budraitis is a much heralded actor in Lithuania, the production was limited by the quiet burbling of the monologue, which even in the small space felt overly internalized and ultimately inaccessible, the very opposite of the precise and expressive direction of *The Seagull*.

One of the clear delights of the festival was *Have a good day! (Geros dienos!)* by the movement of young artists known collectively as Operomanija, presented at the Arts Printing House



Operomanija's *Have a good day!* Photo: Courtesy of Arts Printing House.

(Menų spaustuvė), a diverse theatre venue that hosts an impressive archive and offers residencies to international theatre companies and administrators. Writer Vaiva Grainytė teamed up with the composer Lina Lapelytė to make a charming and funny new piece of opera about disgruntled supermarket cashiers. A line of women in blue overalls sitting in simple black chairs under strip lighting sing their troubles as they relentlessly scan items at a checkout. Slowly transforming the contemporary world of commerce into a prison where workers are treated like captives, the performance offered a refreshing appraisal of capitalism and its impact on the individual. On the main stage of the National Theatre, Ginataras Varnas also offered a critique of modern consumerism, though the focus was on the impact global economies have on nature and wildlife. Varnas, known for his frank and humorous portrayals of alternative sexualities, unfortunately produced a very confused and shambolic production of Euripides' *Bacchae*. Though the themes in the text were relevant to the director's emphasis on man's manipulation of nature, the acting was flat and the chorus of Bacchantes pranced around the stage without direction. Video projections only further confused the production with disturbing

images of seabirds choking on oil slicks and—very mysteriously—a camel sliding around a butcher's shop in a pool of its own blood. Varnas' partner, the fashion designer Juozas Statkevičius, created an array of costumes that was incoherent and historically inconsistent, moving between medieval religious robes and contemporary bright green tracksuits. Overall, this staging of a Greek classic was a massive disappointment from a director who has become one of the most respected in the country over the last decade.

Audiences were more divided over the adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* at the State Youth Theatre. Previously known as the Children's Theatre, the institution's name was changed to reflect the avant-garde work of the young generation of artists that is now on offer. Vidas Bareikis started a new company called "No Theatre" that seeks to overthrow conventional theatre practices and to discover a fresh dialogue with audiences. The purported search for a new theatrical language created high expectations in the international audience that were not entirely met. The opening scene took place in the courtyard of the eighteenth-century building, with loo roll, white paper, and red and black flags flying out from open windows onto

fire breathers below in time to classical music. The effect of this scenographic exploit was somewhat dampened by a sudden and heavy outbreak of rain, and the audience hurried inside to the freezing cold auditorium for the main performance. While there was an engagement with new multimedia, from animation, live video and music, and the staging displayed a sophisticated composition that included a ballet of animal taxidermy, it would not be possible to describe the production as challenging conventional theatre in terms of space, immersion, or narration. Nevertheless, this production differed radically from the other works in the festival, and also served as a showcase for some of the country's most talented upcoming actors, Elzė Gudavičiūtė (Marla Singer) and Ainis Storpīrštis (The Narrator) in particular.

Around the back of the National Theatre is the smaller black-box laboratory stage where Paulius Ignatavičius' mounted a production of the young Austrian playwright Ewald Palmetshofer's *Hamlet is dead. No gravity*. Focusing on an experimental and entertaining new piece of writing that regrettably did not offer very much in the way of direction, the production proved difficult for an international audience. The setting was dominated

by muted Armani colors, pale browns and soft grays, and the play is punctuated by long monologues that rely on linguistic tricks for its humor. Following this, festival-goers returned to the main auditorium to see a premiere by Eimuntas Nekrošius, one of Lithuania's most cherished directors, who has also worked extensively in Italy and Portugal. Television cameras were dotted around the theatre to film his highly anticipated adaptation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The first two sections, *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, were shown as one performance with *Paradiso* playing independently the following evening. Known for his highly impressionistic and evocative stage pictures made from simple stage properties and expressionistic lighting, there is often very little text in Nekrošius's productions. In this adaptation, which opened in Vicenza, Italy earlier in 2013 to very encouraging reviews, Dante's poetry is rendered in a series of pictorial vignettes. While the director's understanding of the text is unquestionable and the images he creates are evocative and surreal, the seven-hour production was ultimately let down by its inexperienced cast. Nekrošius employed the students of his graduating class from the local Theatre Academy, and while there were some moments of well-polished ensemble work, the young actors were



No Theatre's *Fight Club*. Photo: Courtesy of the State Youth Theatre.



Ewald Palmethofer's *Hamlet is Dead. No Gravity*, directed by Paulius Ignatavičius. Photo: Courtesy of the National Theatre.

not up to the task of sustaining an entire production at this professional level. In Lithuania, a director leads a single year group of acting students through their entire training, and it is his responsibility to make sure they find professional work. This production showed the pitfalls in using a high-status premiere to showcase freshly trained actors. In contrast to the ensemble, Rolandas Kazlas's strong and well grounded portrayal of Dante in modern dress demonstrated years of work with the director—Klazlas is particularly memorable for playing Iago in Nekrošius's internationally renowned *Othello*—though the actor constantly had to compete with a rather heavy-handed soundtrack of French horns, strings, and piano that tended to dominate rather than serve the stage pictures.

Jonas Vaitkus mounted a musical adaptation of Alexander Vvedensky's *Christmas at the Ivanovs* at the Russian Drama Theatre. Productions in the theatre are always staged in the Russian language, a leftover from Soviet days that has an uncertain future in Vilnius's current cultural make-up. While the absurdist approach did not appeal to the international audience, Russian-speakers were riveted by Vaitkus's playful critique of communist-era musical pageantry,

both banal and bizarre. The plot hinges on a nanny who chops off the head of one of her young charges with an axe, and features a host of talking animals, pantomime dames and Eurovision-esque song and dance routines. On the opposing end of the spectrum of spectacle, the finale of *Sirenos* was presented by the Russian director Konstantin Bogomolov at the Vilnius State Small Theatre (Valstybinis Vilniaus Mažasis Teatras), which is now the Lithuanian home of Moscow-based Rimas Tuminas, the former artistic director of the National Drama Theatre in Vilnius. Bogomolov's production of *My Father Agamemnon* is a patchwork of quotations from Euripides' plays, set in a grim modern apartment that is decorated with a ceramic ballerina and a musical statuette of Christ on the cross. The director is interested in a form of anti-acting that eschews all physical gesture and vocal inflection. Long pauses filled the evening, leading the audience to break into uncomfortable or irritated laughter, while others simply walked out. More might have left, but the position of the exit beside the stage made a discrete escape virtually impossible. While the experiment to play with audience attention was certainly a valid one, the execution lacked a central tension that would have given the experience

impactful significance. Instead, the tragedies felt trivial and boring, and the potency of Euripides' language was reduced to emotionless mutterings. At the festival reception that followed, most audience members quickly forgot about this production, turning their attention instead back to Ross's *Our Class* and Koršunovas's *The Seagull*. Post-festival discussion attested to Sirenos's dynamic and varied programme, though it is worth mentioning that the sole focus on Vilnius means that Kaunas, the so-called "second city" that hosts its own National Theatre, tends to be entirely excluded from the Showcase. Perhaps future festivals might be more inclusive of

theatre practice being created across the country. During the communist era, it was said that basketball and theatre were the "two religions of Lithuania," which is clearly still the case. While many locals were bitterly disappointed at the country's recent defeat against France in the European basketball championships, the country is still pulling its weight in producing significant new theatre, dynamically bridging homegrown experimentation with intercultural influences from Russia, Scandinavia, Italy, Germany and the UK that make statements about 'east versus west' seem increasingly outmoded.



Alexander Vvedensky's *Christmas at the Ivanovs*, directed by Jonas Vaitkus. Photo: Courtesy of the Russian Drama Theatre.

Barcelona: Making Theatre at a Time of Crisis

Maria M. Delgado

Scorched has been doing the rounds on the world festival circuit for a decade now. The Lebanese Canadian Wajdi Mouawad's play is a contemporary *Oedipus Rex* refracted through the prisms of globalization and conflicts in the Middle East. Oriol Broggi, director of La Perla 29, has chosen to present Cristina Genebat's taut Catalan-language translation of the three-hour version first seen in Spain at Madrid's Matadero theatre in a French-language production by Mouawad in 2008. While the former production boasted a cast of nine—and that still involved a fair degree of doubling—Broggi makes do with just seven who, with the exception of Clara Segura in the dual role of the mother and daughter, each take on a plethora of characters.

The tale gravitates around the twin children of Nawal Marwan, Janine and her brother Simon, who are told by their dead mother's solicitor, Lebel (Xavier Boada), of the task she has set them. Janine is charged with finding their father and Simon their brother—both figures they have never known—to

hand them letters written by their mother before her death. And so begins the siblings' quest into the family's past. For only by understanding their past can they begin to come to terms with their present. Their mother had spent the final five years of her life in silence. The play tries to understand where this refusal to speak came from. By finding its roots they can give her the headstone that she currently lacks.

Scorched (*Incendis* in Catalan) begins as a thriller that sees the twins as unwilling detectives going back to their mother's homeland to dig around the past. The narrative shifts from past to present across two narrative streams that converge at the play's end. The first is effectively set up by the opening scene as the siblings meet with their mother's solicitor. It focuses on Nawal's past from adolescence to grave. We see her as a teenager full of idealistic hopes and dreams; we witness her politicization by the difficult social and religious climate, as an adult prisoner caught in the horrors of what we presume is the Lebanese Civil War of the 1970s. There is no



Oriol Broggi's *Scorched* at the Romea theatre. Photo: Bitó Cels/Romea theatre.

specific mention of Lebanon but the dramatist's past and the events recounted tellingly position the play within this fratricidal conflict. Janine discovers that her Christian mother gets pregnant by her Palestinian lover who later perishes, and then gives birth to a child who is given away. She vows to find him but instead is imprisoned in Kfar Ryat for fifteen years. Here she is referred to as the Woman who Sings—a voice of hope in a wilderness of despair. Tortured and raped by Abou Tarek, she gives birth to twin children who survive in this compromised environment. She later discovers, when testifying at an International Criminal Tribunal into War Crimes, that Abou Tarek is her son Nihad. When this is revealed she turns to silence as a mechanism for coping with this terrible revelation.

The second story follows the siblings as they try to find their father and brother. Further stories tumble around these two central tales until the narrative links converge into a central chronicle as stark and terrible as any Greek tragedy. For their brother Nihad, who Nawal was never able to locate, is also the twins' father. His rape of Nawal results in the birth of the twins. At the production's end, as the siblings confront their father-brother, the remainders of the cast look on from the sides. Like the audience they are witnesses to this terrible drama where *Oedipus Rex* converges with *Antigone*.

Broggi understands both the traces of Sophocles that shape the play and the thriller element manipulated by Mouawad. His production opts for an economy of gesture and decor. The floor is bare earth; the costumes deceptively simple with a change of jacket or bag, or the putting on of a pair of glasses, sufficing to point to a shifting role. We are transported from place to place in the blink of an eye. Mouawad's epic tale takes in a range of locations: a bus, camp, classroom, gym, cemetery, and prison. These are realized by Broggi through an aesthetic that draws on the fluidity of storytelling that defines Mouawad's fellow Canadian Robert Lepage as well as the bare minimalism of Cheek by Jowl.

Broggi's staging is presented at the Romea theatre but this elegant venue is reconfigured to resemble something of Broggi's habitual theatrical home, the crypt of the Biblioteca of Catalunya (Catalan Library). There is a gravelly sandy floor, minimal props—a table, a few chairs, bare planks—brought on as required. A sheet functions as a makeshift screen for projections, a clapped out piano sits at the side of the stage. Every piece of furniture looks worn as if it has seen better days and has a tale or two of its own manifest across its shabby features.

The audience confronts the horrors of the tale enacted before them but also themselves. The Romea's habitual configuration has been refashioned. At times, it appears that we are at the Bouffes du Nord. There are seats on the stage with part of the stalls converted into the set. In a tale where nothing is quite what is expected, the audience is plunged into the unknown as the Romea forms part of this strange, unsettling world. At one point Simon comments on the phone to his sister that "we have no option but to forget," but the play seems to implore its Catalan audience to decisively forget the pact of silence that followed Spain's transition to democracy. Using the distancing device of a play ostensibly set in a society far removed from Catalonia (Canada and then the Lebanon), Broggi seems to have found a mechanism for tackling the horrors of his country's domestic past without recourse to direct confrontation. This is a production that asks Spain to face up to its own scorched earth and tackle the demons that haunt its past. It is perhaps not surprising that Nawal's ghost (Clàudia Fons) hovers across the margins of the stage. Until her children discover the truth about her past, the ghost cannot be laid to rest.

On two occasions a stage manager has to come on to clear the debris from the stage. Broggi's focus is always on finding your way through the obstacles—both physical and emotional—that litter the way. Janine and Simon have to wade through the mess left behind by civil conflict and exile. The solution may present itself rather too neatly at the end—a victory that rings hollow in a Spanish nation still bitterly divided by the 2007 Law of Historical Memory—but the production nevertheless pulls a punch, in part because it openly acknowledges the play's mythical elements.

The use of sound is particularly effective: The boxing ring of an early scene allows Simon to let out his anger and frustration; the sounds of insects in the desert speak to an environment where one is never alone; the layers of music from John Lennon's "Imagine" to Bruce Springsteen's "Sherry Darling" position the production within the 1970s and its aftermath and speak of the idealism of Nawal and its destructive refraction across Nihad. Julio Manrique takes on the role of Simon and his brother/father Nihad, embodying the resentment of the former and the frenetic uncompassionate madness of the latter. Further roles include Nawal's teenage love Wahab and the nurse who painstakingly records 500 hours of silence as a way of working through the legacy of the past. Nawal is often enacted by three performers, but here Clara Segura takes the role from idealistic



The opening scene of Alfredo Sanzol's *Aventura!* at the Teatre Lliure. Photo: David Ruano/Teatre Lliure.

teenager to silent pensioner. She is the woman who sings and the devoted friend to Màrcia Cisteró's illiterate Sawda. Putting on a pair of glasses and a red leather jacket she also takes on the role of Nawal's daughter Janine. Cisteró is superb across multiple roles including Nawal's mother Jihane. Xavier Ruano is able to find nuances in each of his roles: as Simon's trainer, Chamseddine, the leader of the resistance movement and Abdessamad, the village elder who functions as the repository of memory. Xavier Boada is memorable as the quirky middle-aged notary-cum-storyteller who opens the play. While the production may be accused of playing down the particular Lebanese context that informs Mouawad's play, it doesn't shy from showing the painful decisions that civic conflict forces humans to make: a soldier demands a mother save only one of her three children; children forcibly removed from parents; mindless assassinations in the name of patriotism and political expediency. *Scorched* reinforces the need to remember at a time when the politics of forgetting seems to be the most convenient method of dealing with a problematic past.

Alfredo Sanzol has never shied from looking at Spain's refusal to come to terms with the crimes of the Franco era. *En la luna* (*On the Moon*) was a brilliantly acerbic examination of the compromising silence that governed the transition to democracy.

Delicades a bittersweet look at the post-Civil War Spain. Now with *Aventura!* (*Adventure!*) he opts to turn his eye to a contemporary Spain devastated by twenty-six percent unemployment where his six thirty-something generation protagonists find their hopes repeatedly frustrated. Six business partners hope to sell their unnamed and possibly ailing—although we cannot be sure of this—company to the Chinese. All are uncertain of what the future holds and contemplating what the sell might offer. All yearn to get as much from the deal as possible and hope to outwit their Chinese buyers. At some point they each contemplate a plan to escape, flee, leave, or run away. Marc dreams of an ambling life in the country but won't convert dreams into action; Elisa won't compromise by learning German but talks of immigrating to Germany. Àngels wonders about the difference between the dictatorship and democracy—the latter has failed to deliver on all it promised. Across a number of successive days the group of six gathers at work and at play to look at their options. Marc notes that the world in which they are living is sinking. He fears his wife, Núria, will leave him; she simply suggests they drink less. Marc can't even take care of Àngels's bonsai—what hope does he have for taking care of himself and his family? Àngels fears Marc might have neglected the tree as some kind of revenge. Elisa hopes that by

moving closer to nature when things are going badly she might find redemption.

This a play of characters who are not quite sure of their place in the world. Globalization and economic collapse have fractured Spain's sense of self and other. When Lee, the potential Chinese buyer of their company, arrives in Madrid, their dinner plans to woo him all go wrong as Sandra slips in the kitchen and they end up as casualties—with Lee and his translator Oriol insisting on coming along. The friends hope to win Lee over with the women as attractive bait. Only while Lee is soon infatuated with Sandra he is nevertheless not prepared to compromise on price—offering them just a half of his previous proposition. Sandra is unsure of whether to join Lee back in China while Pau pines for a life in rural Extremadura that Elisa doesn't want to share. She doesn't want a job cleaning holiday homes for a living, thinking it beneath her. Pau reminds her that this is how his mother paid for his education. "At times where normality is jettisoned, we do things that lie outside the normal," says Marc. The women plot on a weekend break to Ibiza in the hope that their womanly wiles might just be able to win Lee over. Desperate times call for desperate actions. When Sandra returns from her first trip to China her proposal that each of the associates gets 200,000 euros extra out of the sale if she moves to Shanghai to live with Lee meets with the quick approval from the rest of the group. She may be their colleague and friend but when it comes to money they'll jettison her for a quick buck.

Sanzol's production—its short, snappy scenes punctuated by jaunty music with something of a Wild West theme—moves at a brisk pace. Scenes flow effortlessly creating the sense of a society that doesn't want to stand still but doesn't quite know where to go. The cavernous office space, designed by Alejandro Andújar, embodies a culture of waste. The characters rattle around in the yawning room and yet are simultaneously trapped by oppressive low ceilings. There is less of the episodic format of the vignettes that made up *Delicades* and *On the Moon* and a stronger element of screwball comedy—in the vein of Alan Ayckbourn. Fernando Velázquez, a habitual collaborator of Sanzol's who recently composed the music for Bayona's Tsunami film *The Impossible*, crafts a pulsating soundtrack where the Spaghetti Western meets Indiana Jones: an ironic comment on a generation caught in a rut that struggles to act with bravery or vision.

Ágata Rota is superb as the dreamy Sandra—unsure of whether to follow Lee or remain

in Spain to a less than certain future. She also has a delightful cameo as the nurse who takes care of the hapless Sandra at the hospital. Albert Ribalta plays it straight as Lee while also doubling as the passive Marc. His elastic face brilliantly conveys the shifting moods of the play. Jordi Rico also doubles up as the patient Pau—whose answer to everything involves staying put—and Lee's prim translator Oriol. Marta Pérez is the haughty Elisa who thinks she has control of her working life while her domestic life falls apart around her. Carmen Pla portrays Núria's underlying frustration and resentment. Mamen Duch is the calculating money-driven Àngels who always has a plan for everything although precious little ever comes to fruition. The company T de Teatre have collaborated previously with Sanzol and it shows. The actors understand his dialogue and deliver it with little fuss. It is the matter of factness of even the most extraordinary occurrences that make the piece so effective.

While I didn't quite buy the Sandra and Lee "connection," this remains an audacious play where Sanzol demonstrates his ability to put his pulse on the mood of the nation. Few Spanish dramatists have his ear for dialogue and his innate sense of absurdist humor. In Sergi Belbel's idiomatic translation, the play races along with a precise sense of purpose. It may lack the bittersweet brilliance of *On the Moon* but it nevertheless confirms Sanzol's position as one of Spain's most audacious writers and a director of expert precision.

The Lliure may have suffered a twenty-five percent cut to their annual budget since 2010, which necessitates closing the venue for three months during the summer of 2013, but its director Lluís Pasqual has programmed a punchy season of work where Sanzol sits alongside Pasqual's own compelling production of David Harrower's *Blackbird* and a towering production of Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* by Josep Maria Mestres with a stellar cast including Carmen Machi—soon to be seen in Almodóvar's new movie—in the role of a mother who cannot face up to the terrible news that the two soldiers have come to tell her about her son. These may be hard times—with a hugely unpopular twenty-one percent VAT imposed on all theatre tickets by this government—but the Lliure appears determined to continue its tradition of adventurous programming that speaks to the political, social, and cultural issues of the day.

There have been many productions of *Rusalka* over the years. Few have matched the harrowing intensity of David Pountney's 1983 staging

set in an Edwardian children's nursery. Here the events appear as part of Rusalka's imagination—her wheelchair-confined grandfather as the water gnome Vodnik, her sisters as the nymphs, her governess as the sorceress Jezibaba. Melly Still's recent and less satisfying production for Glyndebourne in 2009 refashioned Dvorak's opera as a fantasy-underwater-little-mermaid tale, contrasting strongly with Dvorak's stark obsession with human self-obsession. Now Stefan Herheim's production for Barcelona's Gran Teatre del Liceu (first seen at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in 2008) resituates the early twentieth-century opera from an enchanted forest to a resolutely contemporary European city. For the overture willow trees sway in the evening breeze alongside a lamppost as commuters make their way home, tumbling in and out of an underground station. An endless stream of individuals run through the rainy street past a boarded up shop, church, and flickering ice-cream parlor "Lunatic": a family with a little boy, a woman carrying a violin, a blind man tapping his stick along the road, a flower seller (later shown to be Jezibaba) peddling her wares. A woman appears at a balcony. The same scene is played out as if on an endless reel, a groundhog day in which Vodnik appears trapped.

Inflatable manikins bob frenetically in the window of his apartment like a terrible vision that appears and then disappears once more from human view. There is something of George Tsypin's hellish urban landscape for Peter Sellars' Harlem-set *Don Giovanni* (1987) in Heike Scheele's busy street scene set. Graffiti marked shutters, a fifties style diner-cum bar, the mouth of an underground station, a grand church, an apartment block where a bridal shop mutates into a peep shop parlor in the bat of an eyelid all sit cheek by jowl in this heaving metropolis. A mirror reflects the audience—a reminder that this is a world of our own making and, in essence, ourselves. The stage world is at once alluring and ominous—an urban environment where appearances are deceptive.

Herheim's reading makes Günther Groissböck's Vodnik the central protagonist of his production. He first appears as a businessman en route home; his umbrella knocked inside out by the lashing wind and rain. Later, thrown out by his wife—the woman on the balcony—he wanders the streets where he is approached by Rusalka; here configured as an alluring siren-like silver-suited prostitute with a peroxide wig. He mistreats her but she returns again to his abusive treatment. Camilla



Stefan Herheim's *Rusalka* at the Gran Teatre del Liceu. Photo: A. Bofill/Gran Teatre del Liceu

Nyland's Rusalka appears to have few options available to her. She wanders the streets like a ghost, craving human "respectability" and escape from a life of sexual slavery.

She delivers the "Song of the Moon" surrounded by dazzling TV satellite dishes. Positioned on a cyclical advertising hoarding with a mermaid's tale swishing below as a reminder of past readings of the opera, she surveys a mad world that positions women as either bridal angels or whores selling their bodies for sex. Herheim wittily places a poster promoting his production on the hoarding. He recognizes his own implicit role in the oppression chronicled on stage. Ildikó Komlósi's Jezibaba is the homeless woman seen hovering around the underground entrance in the opera's overture. She explodes from a television screen thrown out of Vodnik's window at the end of act 1 like a terrible genie. The three nymphs frolic off in fifties attire like demented Doris Days with three sailors while a fourth, the Prince (perhaps a younger version of Vodnik), is observed by Rusalka dressed in a wedding dress. The elder Vodnik wanders the streets in search of some part of himself that appears lost to him. In his pajamas he looks like a lost spirit, a senile old man destined to wander the streets like a lost Orpheus.

Rusalka, in turn, is less his Eurydice than female temptation in its many forms. First seen as a prostitute in alluring silver she later appears in a virginal wedding dress. This is the duplicitous female of the male imagination who can take on any guise as required. Herheim appears to position her within a long line of artistic protagonists whose role lies in falling into temptation, suffering, and then paying for her waywardness in death. Herheim's conception of Rusalka leaves room for her to be an ex-lover of Vodnik's, but it is primarily as destructive muse that she is presented in Nylund's persuasive characterization. In act 2 she appears in the same attire as the Foreign Princess. And this Princess visits the opera with the Prince where they appear to watch "the Rusalka show"—perhaps a comment on the opera presented before the audience at the Liceu. Meanwhile Vodnik competes with his own spectacle: a glorious underwater extravaganza with a giant octopus which he aggressively spears in the climax.

Act 3 sees Jezibaba cloning Rusalka in an identical silver sequined gown. She is a kindred spirit, an outsider like Rusalka who at the end of the production appears equally isolated and alone. The tormented Vodnik murders his wife and tries to

destroy the memory of Rusalka but this defies him. In the world that he has conjured nuns transform into prostitutes. Women may be stereotyped as whores or saviors but for the tortured male imagination they always resemble a threat. As the snow falls, a police cordon surrounds the house from which Vodnik is taken away to prison while the drunken Jezibaba hovers around the edges as a homeless tramp rejected by society.

At the production's end a new Rusalka appears ready to take her place on the streets. The show will begin again. Another *Rusalka* "performance" for an audience ready to devour a new tale of a woman tried and tested and ultimately failing. Herheim's production is smart and witty. There are times when it's somewhat baffling including an episode when an array of cartoon like figures of octopuses, starfish, and other sea life swarm through the auditorium but it's consistent in its novel vision of Vodnik as the protagonist of the piece.

At the Tívoli theatre La Cubana continues its hit run with *Campanades de boda* (*Wedding Bells*), coming up to its first anniversary. Over 200,000 spectators had seen the show between March and October 2012. Recent estimates now suggest that by the time the show hits the road on a tour across Spain that will close in Madrid at the end of 2013, it will have reached over a million spectators. Its participatory tale of the trials and tribulations of an intercultural wedding realized across the oceans through the wonders of virtual technology continues to offer a feel-good tonic in an age of austerity. The wedding serves as a celebratory experience—with audience members donning brightly colored hats as they are invited to join the wedding celebrations being held at the Tívoli in act 2. From the farcical screwball comedy structure of the first act's chaotic wedding preparations to the grand ceremony of act 2 replete with audience members acting as bridesmaids and witnesses, this is, as with all La Cubana's previous productions, a loving homage to the labor involved in putting on a play. Jordi Milán offers a backstage musical where family and friends put their differences aside to come together to make the wedding happen: a telling lesson for a nation governed by bickering politicians beset by corruption scandals and unable to revive an ailing economy.

At the CCCB (Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona), one of the city's most emblematic art museums, Xavier Albertí, the incoming director of the Catalan National Theatre, has co-curated a terrific exhibition on the city's El



Carmen Machi in Josep Maria Mestres's production of Mark Ravenhill's *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* at the Teatre Lliure.
 Photo: Ros Ribas /Teatre Lliure.

Paral.lel Avenue. This avenue was once the center of Barcelona's entertainment industry where café theatres and circuses stood next to more conventional proscenium-arch venues. The exhibition focuses on the period 1894 to 1939 when it was the hub of the city's intellectual culture as a meeting point for writers, artists, and social activists seeking improved working conditions for the emerging proletariat. The exhibition opens with a spectacular black and white panoramic image that captures the theatrical eclecticism of the avenue, moving through rooms of photographs, posters, projected films, paintings by artists like Ricard Urgell—the Toulouse Lautrec of the Paral.lel—showing stage spectacles, designs by Josep Castells Sumalla and computer-generated maps of how the theatres sprung up during these years and what now lies in their place. (At one point an incredible seventy-eight percent of the avenue was made up of theatrical establishments.) The exhibition links the Paral.lel's role in the political conscience of the city to its position on the fringes of the city's more established venues. But it is this emphasis on the Paral.lel as a frontier, a place where "alternative" entertainments flourished, a transgressive site where habitual class schisms were temporarily collapsed

that makes this such a fascinating exhibition. Albertí and co-curator Eduard Molner show the differences with Montmartre and Broadway—ininitely more bourgeois—and map how the middle-classes eventually flocked to the area as singer-performer Raquel Meller (later to grace *The Times's* cover) and other *cupletistas* occupied its stages. "El Paral.lel 1894–1939" is as much a history of the city's shifting demographic as it is a theatrical culture that was effectively dismantled in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Albertí's and Molner's aural and visual materials come from a range of the city's archives but special mention needs to be made of the Institut del Teatre that provides a significant proportion of the exhibits.

Regular readers of *Western European Stages* will have remembered the many reviews of work by the Catalan actress Anna Lizaran which I have contributed over the past decade. Lizaran, who died at the age of sixty-seven on 12 January 2013, had had something of the playfulness of Judi Dench, the wit of Maggie Smith, the down to earth humanity of Pauline Collins, the steeliness of Helen Mirren, the vocal intensity of Fiona Shaw. Lizaran was a "doer" who worked tirelessly to improve the

conditions of Catalan theatre. She was a founding member of two of Catalonia's core companies: the physical theatre company Comediants (1972) and the Teatre Lliure (1976). With the latter she worked to create a theatrical culture marked by the civic responsibility and high professional standards of Milan's Piccolo theatre. Here, she performed many of her most emblematic roles under the direction of Fabià Puigserver and Lluís Pasqual. I was fortunate enough to see the revival of Fabià Puigserver's 1978 staging of Per Olov Enquist's *The Night of the Tribades* in 1999 where her characterization of the lesbian writer Maria Carolina David offered a brilliant embodiment of defiant agency. Her stillness was utterly compelling and profoundly unsettling. Her Ranevskaya in Pasqual's 2000 *Cherry Orchard* was a portrait of flighty indecision, a butterfly-like figure unable to grasp the severity of her situation. Her weeping beside the upstage model of the Lliure, as the company was preparing to move out of its legendary venue in the working class area of Gràcia, offered a metatheatrical embodiment of the company's situation on the eve of a historical relocation.

Lizaran's roles were varied; indeed, she refused to be typecast. She could embody sexual desire—as with her obsessive Miss Julie (Teatre Lliure, 1986); she could play arched comedy and Oscar Wildish wit—as evidenced in her delicious Anna in *Boston Marriage* (Teatre Lliure, 2005); and had a panache for highly wrought drama, as in her mischievous characterization of the rancid, pill-popping matriarch of Tracy Letts's *August: Osage County* (TNC–Catalan National Theatre, 2011). At

a time when too many actors are positioned within an ever more narrow repertoire of roles, Lizaran was defined by her audacity and breadth, playfulness and humanity. She was an actress for all seasons with over thirty different stage roles to her name. While associated with the Lliure she had worked regularly at the Catalan National Theatre [TNC] under the direction of playwright and director Sergi Belbel. She was in rehearsals with Belbel for David Hirson's *La bête* at the Catalan National Theatre when she first became ill in October 2012.

The Spanish stage lost another actor in early 2013. Fernando Guillén, probably best known for his role as the philandering suave Iván in Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988) died at the age of eighty on 17 January. The Catalan-born actor was a key force in the Spanish theatre of the 1960s and 1970s—first working with Fernando Fernán-Gómez and Conchita Montes's companies before forming his own company together with his wife, the actress Gemma Cuervo. He oozed sophistication with a silky smooth voice, penetrating eyes and classic good looks that set him up well for a range of leading roles. Guillén had great breadth as an actor. He began with Mihura's and Sastre's plays in the 1950s but could move between the melodrama of José Zorilla and the epic theatre of Brecht with ease. He retired from the stage five years ago but continued working in television and film. He came to cinema during the transition to democracy but went on to collaborate with many of the key directors of post-dictatorship Spain including Álex de la Iglesia, Imanol Uribe, Carlos Saura and, of course, Pedro Almodóvar.

Report from Belarus: *West Side Story*

Aleksei Grinenko

The highlight of my trip to Minsk this summer was *West Side Story* at the Belarus State Musical Theatre (BSMT). Having flown in to see a performance of the show on 27 May 2013, a little over a year after the show's premiere, I was struck by the freshness the Broadway classic radiates in this Russian-language incarnation.

This first fully-mounted production of *West Side Story* in Belarus is the result of joint efforts by the BSMT and the US Embassy in Minsk. The two partner organizations assembled an able Belarusian-American creative team: director Anastasia Grinenko (Belarus), choreographers Paul Emerson (USA) and Dmitry Yakubovich (Belarus), conductors Nikolai Makarevich (Belarus) and Philip Simmons (USA), stage designer Andrei Merenkov (Belarus), and costume designer Yulia Babaeva (Belarus). Unlike the musical's other recent appearance in Russian, at the Globus Theatre in Novosibirsk, the Minsk version is not a transfer of the 1957 Broadway production. While some of the newly-choreographed

numbers in the BSMT interpretation are deeply indebted to Jerome Robbins's original dance lexicon, the overall directorial vision steers clear of imitation, carefully balancing the familiar and the unfamiliar for Belarusian theatre-goers, most of whom have never seen this American musical on stage.

Vladimir Posner's Russian translation of the book and lyrics is scrupulous, inventive, and at times exquisite. It is no small feat to render the compactly worded lyrics of a US musical into a language notorious for its morphologically and syntactically inflicted long-windedness. Posner's unflinching commitment to Stephen Sondheim's ambitious rhyme schemes in songs like "I Feel Pretty" and "America" is uncommon among translators of musical theatre in Belarus and Russia today. His treatment of the spoken dialogue remains as theatrically effective as it was in 1979, when this translation was published in a hardcover edition in the Soviet Union. In converting the language of the Jets into Russian, he takes his cue from the



West Side Story directed by Anastasia Grinenko. Photo: Courtesy of the Belarus State Musical Theatre.

show's librettist, Arthur Laurents, who consciously eschewed over-reliance on the current slang of the day and, instead, developed what Sondheim calls "a hybrid slang," mixing "invented and actual jargon." Dealing with a somewhat heightened, theatricalized argot that never had a strict equivalence in the real world, Posner forges for the Russian-speaking Jets a street language that is satisfyingly consistent with the dramatic and sonic conceit of their speech in the original.

As the house lights dim, a black and white video of what looks and sounds like a congested avenue in the West Side of New York City in the late 1950s is projected on the backdrop, introducing the audience to the time and place of the story. In the flickering light of the screen, we can make out the outlines of the set, a jumble of metal scaffolding pushed up against the back and side walls of the stage. One by one, human silhouettes become discernible on various levels of the set. With the opening bars of "Prologue" the din of street traffic recedes; the video freezes into one still shot, then gradually dissolves.

The floor of the stage, now fully illuminated, is split in half by a double yellow line symbolically prohibiting passage between the two sides. The fight that ensues between two gangs, the white American Jets and the Puerto-Rican Sharks, is soon interrupted by the arrival of Lieutenant Schrank (Alexander Osipets). As he proceeds to badger the members of the gangs, he walks pointedly along the yellow line, which serves as the show's central metaphor. The treatment of this scene exemplifies the indirect ways in which the production suggests connections between the musical's themes and a Belarusian audience's socio-political experience. Schrank's mock tight-wire act is meant to convey to the young "hoodlums" his ability to twist the law any which way he likes. Though dressed presumably as an American police officer, Osipets accentuates his character's bullying and aggression, gesturing towards the corruption of law-enforcement agencies in post-Soviet regimes. His intonation alone makes the underlying commentary crystal clear to a Russian-speaking audience.



West Side Story. Photo: Courtesy of the Belarus State Musical Theatre.

Although the video footage at the beginning zooms in on a specific location, the decidedly abstract mise en scène in the two acts that follow exceeds the spatial or temporal limitations of the musical's narrative. Free of realist concreteness, the wide, balletic stage opens up the action to suggestions of parallel times and places. The operatic sweep of Leonard Bernstein's score, performed brilliantly by some thirty-five musicians in the pit and over forty voices on stage, expands the reach of the dramatic action beyond the here and now.

Among the most effective scenes are those in the bridal shop and in the bedroom. White gowns suspended in the air at various heights sway gently, making the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the acting space seem infinite as Maria (Ilona Kazakevich) and Tony (Dmitry Yakubovich) sing "One Hand, One Heart." The opening of act 2 magnifies this conjugal fantasia: all the airborne gowns have sprouted long veils that stream down majestically to the floor. While this scenic solution complements the humor of "I Feel Pretty" by ironically externalizing Maria and Tony's self-involved way of seeing the world, the multiple copy effect visually invokes the possibility of other marriages, stories, and worlds which are not theirs and not here.

The staging of the dream/nightmare sequence, which seems to take place in the minds of Tony and Maria as they make love, further explicates the production's insistence on other places. In a manner reminiscent of the 2009 Broadway revival, directed by Arthur Laurents, a child weaves her way through pairs of dancing lovers as she sings of "Somewhere," where all might be happy. Yet the Belarusian director's treatment of the next moment reverses this hopeful impulse. The parallel emergence of the ghosts of Riff (Viktor Tsirkunovich) and Bernardo (Denis Maltsevich) on the top level of the set and their grieving partners, placed downstage front, creates a palpable sense of psychic pain, turning "Somewhere" into a song of loss, a ritual of mourning. As all the cast members split into a haunting canon, echoing a single line, "There's a place for us," it becomes clear that in this song they are not dreaming collectively of a shared utopia, as would be the case in the standard Broadway interpretation. Instead, this staging of "Somewhere" foregrounds a multiplicity of irreconcilable, fractured dreams across known and unknown universes. At the end of the dream sequence, Tony and Maria, clad in white, tear off the wedding veils, one by one, lovingly yet implacably, as if plucking petals off white flowers

floating in parallel spaces. They drop them absently on the ground and lie down among them for what will be their last night together.

Kazakevich and Yakubovich both give assured, nuanced performances, domesticating the show's potential for melodramatic excess within the Russian tradition of realistic acting. Their well-matched voices have the light, soaring quality their music calls for, and their vocal stamina is impressive, given the considerable amount of dancing they get to do in this production. (In Robbins's choreography, Tony and Maria's dancing would be kept to a minimum.) Another gem of the production is Svetlana Matsievskaya in the role of Anita. For the most part, she constructs her performance outside the tradition established by Chita Rivera's iconic interpretation. Matsievskaya's biggest triumph comes in act 2. Anita's turnabout within the tight time constraints of "A Boy Like That/I Have a Love" can feel somewhat implausible, as if hastily inflicted by a dramaturgical necessity of the moment. Although beautifully written, the swift reconciliation between her and Maria is tough to pull off in productions that place a premium on the representation of believable behavior. Matsievskaya softens Anita's outwardly powerful personality with hints of vulnerability during act 1 so that her swing to Maria's side within the short span of "I Have a Love" seems less a function of the plot than a natural response springing from the empathic, fragile side we glimpsed in her earlier.

One of the biggest challenges that *West Side Story* presents for this or any Russian-speaking company is that Russian does not have any established reference point for a Puerto-Rican accent, a feature that the musical famously employs to racialize its non-white population. While most of the BSMT actors are familiar with the gestural expressiveness that visually defines the Puerto-Ricans in the Hollywood version of the musical, they borrow from this mode of characterization sparingly. Rather than constructing race through the voices and bodies of the actors, this production of *West Side Story* does it scenically and musically. Thus, the graffiti-ridden back wall of the Sharks' part of the stage features a prominent image of Che Guevara, who, as a member of the creative team explained to me in an interview, is a "rebellious, revolutionary Latino that most Belarusian theatergoers will be able to recognize." For Western audiences and critics, this choice might seem problematic and potentially offensive in its glib conflation of several Latin American histories. In reading the reviews in the Minsk state press,



West Side Story. Photo: Courtesy of the Belarus State Musical Theatre.

opposition newspapers, and fan forums online, however, I find that no one has called into question the use of the iconic portrait of the Argentine political activist as a symbol for the Puerto-Rican gang. On the contrary, many reviewers have commented on it as an effective tool of orienting the local audiences towards an understanding of the Sharks' position in the interracial strife on stage. This fusion of Latin American cultures in the BSMT production is in implicit conversation with the stereotypes embedded in the original musical itself, particularly, in Bernstein's use of Mexican and Cuban music to create a kind of generic Latin sound for the Puerto Ricans. Just as the book and lyrics of *West Side Story* were revised for the 2009 Broadway revival in an attempt to better reflect the changes in the US discourse of race since 1957, so Che Guevara's face in the BSMT production, arguably, recontextualizes the racial history of Puerto Ricans within the current framework of popular notions about Latin America in Belarus.

If one considers the BSMT's internal organization, which has many counterparts across the former Soviet Union, what *West Side Story* does to this company is no less significant than what this company does to *West Side Story*. Historically,

each performer has joined the resident company as a full or part-time employee through one of three available hire lines: actors, chorus, or ballet. While the three respective troupes collaborate on the majority of the repertory's productions, they are essentially autonomous departments, governed by differing aesthetics. This tripartite structure of troupe management made a lot of sense in the late twentieth century, when the company's repertoire was dominated by Viennese operetta. Dramaturgically, BSMT productions of popular pieces by Johann Strauss, Emmerich Kálmán, and Franz Lehár paralleled the principles of formal divisions within the company by having on stage a set of distinguishable singing and speaking characters (actors), unindividuated singing crowds (chorus), and silent dancing characters (ballet). Within these conventions, the actors were privileged as central players on and off stage; the chorus and ballet were treated as supporting, often uncredited ornamentations.

The company's marked shift towards musicals in the twenty-first century, however, has begun to erode this hierarchy. The traditional operetta-influenced approaches to labor distribution within the casts of BSMT productions are being

challenged by the idea of the "triple-threat" performer absorbed from the US musical theatre. While each performer is still assigned to one of three troupes, their functions on stage have intersected and merged considerably over the last decade. Ensemble-driven pieces of contemporary musical theatre intended for actors who should be able to act, sing, and dance equally well have made versatility a prized quality among all members of the resident company, opening up multiple spaces for crossovers among the three performer categories and encouraging horizontal modes of collaboration.

As a musical whose characters depict a great deal of dramatic action through dance, *West Side Story* goes a long way towards redefining working relations among the company's troupes and challenging the persisting philosophy of watertight departmentalization at this state-run institution. Committed to staging the musical with fidelity to its complex form, the Belarusian-American creative team made a clever use of the varying skills of the company's actors, chorus, and ballet. Pursuing the idea of a level playing field across all three troupes, they employed anyone able to commit to the triple-

threat regimen. Over the entire course of the staging process the choreographers offered additional dance training sessions to the cast outside of the intensive rehearsal schedule in order to bring everyone's technique up to a roughly similar level, aiming at a unified movement aesthetic. This was not meant to homogenize the performers. On the contrary, the production ultimately favors individual gifts that, in the opinion of the director and the choreographers, meet the dramaturgical demands of the piece. But the integration of actors, chorus, and ballet within a single dancing and singing onstage community in this BSMT production is so seamless it is hard to tell to which of the three troupes they originally belong. For all of its skepticism about communal harmony, *West Side Story* succeeds in bringing down many of the aesthetic and bureaucratic walls between the company's troupes, pushing against performer hierarchies inherited from the Soviet period.

By renewing the company's overall staging practices, this production of *West Side Story* is enlarging the audience's horizon of expectations. While the musical is definitely a novelty for Minsk in terms of its form and content, its most



West Side Story. Photo: Courtesy of the Belarus State Musical Theatre.

unconventional feature is perhaps the tragic finale. It's not the first BSMT production to dabble in death and disillusionment. Yet none of the company's "serious" musicals have dared end on such a dark note. Even the BSMT's long-running production of Alexei Rybnikov and Andrei Voznesensky's *Juno and Avos*, in which both hero and heroine die, ends with an uplifting hymn that dispels the gloom with promises of spiritual rebirth and love overflowing for generations to come. *West Side Story* is ruthlessly devoid of such promises. In 1957 its bleak conclusion was a shocker for Broadway audiences; today it threatens a sense of unease among many of the BSMT longtime fans, who have come to expect the triumph of marriage or its symbolic equivalent at the end of a musical. The creative team even reported protests among the actors at the first reading. On finding out that Tony does not survive, some of the cast members, who have been with the company for many years, argued for revisions.

The BSTM officially changed its name from "Theatre of Musical Comedy" to "Musical Theatre" in the late 1990s with the goal of pursuing a more diverse repertoire, yet its popular moniker, *muzkomediya*, persists among the denizens of Minsk to this day. Instead of the silent bows envisioned in Robbins's original concept, the curtain calls in this production are choreographed to music, featuring a reprise of the gleeful "Mambo" from act 1. This was the creative team's way of brokering a compromise with the generally conservative Belarusian theatre-goer since the replay of the musical's cheerful moments has the express purpose of sending the audience home in a good mood. Despite this final nod to local taste, much of what happens in this important production points to a gradual process of structural and ideological reorientation in the Belarusian musical theatre, mapping out new vistas for its audiences.

The 2013 Theatertreffen

Marvin Carlson

2013 was a very special year for the Berlin Theatertreffen, the annual festival presenting the outstanding works from the previous year presented in the German-speaking world. In 2013 this festival, one of the outstanding annual theatre events in Europe, celebrated its fiftieth year. Its success has been such that virtually every performance is sold out long in advance and a theatre public from around the world is attracted to its offerings. In acknowledgement of this increasing internationalization of the Theatertreffen audiences, the administration began several years ago regularly offering English supertitles over the performances.

The 2013 festival began spectacularly with a production of Euripides' *Medea*, created by a number of the most highly regarded artists of the contemporary German stage. Its director was Michael Thalheimer. Thalheimer has had six productions selected for the Theatertreffen, most recently the *Oresteia* in 2007 and Hauptmann's *The Rats* in 2008 (both reviewed in *WES*). The powerful minimalist style of Thalheimer is one of the most

distinctive on the present German stage and has exerted a significant influence on other directors.

As is the case with many leading German directors, Thalheimer works almost exclusively with a single designer, Olaf Altman, who is clearly co-equal with Thalheimer in creating the distinctive world of their productions. Altman's setting for *Medea* ultimately recalls the minimalist but enormously powerful settings he created for previous Thalheimer productions, especially the *Oresteia*, but this similarity was by no means apparent as the production opened. We were greeted with what appeared to be a completely empty, grey stage, the cavernous performance area of the Festspielhaus stripped to the walls, with only an occasional lighting instrument visible. Nothing apparently could be further from a typical Altman design which totally fills the visual field with monumental walls and inclined planes. As the production begins, the central section of the apparently solid back wall rises, revealing a shallow inner stage, distinctly recalling that of the *Orestia*, but far removed from the



Euripides' *Medea*, directed by Michael Thalheimer. Photo: Courtesy of Theatertreffen.



Euripides' *Medea*. Photo: Courtesy of Theatertreffen.

audience. For the *Oresteia*, Altman completely filled the proscenium arch with a massive, bloodstained wall. A narrow platform about six feet from the stage floor extended across the face of this wall and an equally narrow platform extended along its base. These two platforms made up the entire acting area.

The area revealed at the rear of the vast Festspielhaus stage almost duplicates this arrangement, except that the wall is not spattered with blood but is a uniform dull grey. Its upper ledge is at first empty, but will soon be occupied by Medea (Constanze Becker), who will remain alone on this platform usually near its center, throughout the evening. All of the other actors perform on the stage floor below. The first of these is the Nurse (Josefin Platt), who begins the action with a stunning opening sequence. In almost total darkness we hear a deliberate and measured clomping of heavy footwear (kothorni, perhaps?). A shaft of light from down left offstage shoots across to fall upon the wall up center.

A shadow appears upon it, which we discover is that of the heavy trodding nurse, who finally appears, lit only from the back, a black-clad, stooped, and grotesque figure, who finally reaches the bottom of the upstage wall and introduces us to Medea, who appears later in a spotlight on the walkway above. Rarely is the entire stage illuminated—actors appear often in pools of light or in powerful and striking beams from the side. The stunning lighting design is by John Delaere.

The next character to appear is the Chorus, played quietly but intensely by another of Germany's best-known actresses, Bettina Hoppe, who normally positions herself upstage left near the base of the wall. Creon (Martin Rentzsch), Jason (Marc Oliver Schulze) and Aegeus (Michael Benthin) normally take up positions further downstage. Although their performances are intense, they are also physically isolated one from another. Each remains in his own pool of light in widely separated locations on the

vast stage.

When Medea announces her course of revenge, however, the entire physical surroundings alter, and we see designer Altman at his most striking. The distant wall with Medea on it slowly begins to move forward, seeming to grow in size, until at last it totally fills the proscenium arch, and we recognize the same spatial configuration that Altman utilized in his famous *Oresteia* setting, essentially an overwhelming wall with two narrow walkways—one at the foot and the other some six or seven feet higher. This remains the configuration for the rest of the evening, with Medea on the upper level even when she is crouched in a suffering heap towering over her victims below. Inevitably one is reminded of Becker's brilliant performance of that other icon of female revenge, Clytemnestra, six years ago in the memorable production by this same creative team.

No children appear in this minimalist interpretation and no exiting chariot. The death of the children is presented as an animated video, created by Alexander du Prel and projected directly onto Medea. In a large black and white box, simple figures of a family like the stick figures on traffic signs indulge in a sequence of everyday family activities, playing, walking, reading, traveling, even watching TV together. The images speed up and flow into one another until finally they are replaced

by images of knives and violence, and at last two diminutive figures lying unmoving side by side. It was an imaginative way to provide an alternative to onstage children, but in my opinion much less effective than the rest of the evening, such as the brilliant articulation of the messenger speech by Viktor Tremmel who had to struggle continuously to produce the ghastly words that seemed stuck in his throat, or the heart-breaking speech of Marc Schulze as Jason when the full enormity of Medea's deeds breaks upon him. For a long moment he struggles with a silent scream, evoking Helene Weigel and Edvard Munch, which stuns the audience.

The conclusion maintains Thalheimer's minimalist aesthetic—no chariot, no spectacle, little closing commentary. Medea, in a simple black dress, picks up a trench coat that has been lying at her feet, walks quietly to the end of the platform, and exits. The chorus, on the level below her, has no closing ode but only two lines: clearly the gods have no duty to explain what may occur, and whatever comes to pass is never what is expected. Upon this dark note, darkness descends.

I had seen the second Theatertreffen offering, Herbert Fritsch's *Murmel Murmel*, last year in Berlin, but the second viewing was just as delightful as the first. Fritsch is today one of the most popular directors in Germany and arguably the



Herbert Fritsch's *Murmel Murmel*. Photo: Thomas Aurin.



Fritsch's *Murmel Murmel*. Photo: Thomas Aurin.

greatest director of farce in today's theatre anywhere. This is his third consecutive year of invitation to the Theatertreffen, beginning in 2011 with an invitation to two of his productions, an honor given to very few directors. His first invited production, a zombie version of Ibsen's *A Doll House*, I still remember as both one of the funniest stagings of Ibsen I had ever seen, and, surprisingly, one of the most revealing of the hidden dynamics of the play. On the whole, Fritsch has worked with older dramatic texts, some comic and some not, but *Murmel Murmel* takes its inspiration not from a play but a book, and a very strange one indeed. In 1974 Fluxus artist Dieter Roth published a 180 page book which consisted of the repetition of a single word, "Murmel." The word means marble in German, but it closely resembles the verb *murmeln*, or "murmur," traditionally applied to the meaningless babble of an onstage crowd.

Fritsch has ingeniously adapted Roth's Fluxus book into a Fluxus production, but where the book was devoid of content, Fritsch's overflows with content, but it is totally theatrical, not narrative. For an hour and twenty minutes his eleven actors say nothing but the word *Murmel* obsessively and repeatedly, but in every sort of tonality—singly, in dialogue, in chorus, in a rapidly repeated uninflected undertone, in a single defiant shout, as the lyric of

a pop song or an operatic aria. As they repeat it, conducted often by a gentleman in military uniform in the pit, they execute a frenetic and constantly varied sequence of physical actions, reminiscent in general of the slapstick routines of silent film comedy, which is a strong influence in much of Fritsch's work. The physical control and acrobatic of these performers, often suggesting a Dadaist ballet, is simply stunning. They hurtle about the stage, interact with a set in as constant and frenetic motion as themselves, and repeatedly fall into and climb out of the pit, all with equal speed and ease. The constantly moving set (also the work of Fritsch), is composed of elements each painted in a single color like the decorations in a child's play room. It consists of teasers above and wings on either side that keep moving back and forth, up and down, constantly hiding and revealing actors, and altering the dimensions of the playing space, sometimes closing in on all sides to confine or even threaten to crush the actors caught between them. Behind all of this is a white backdrop that allows the action to continue from time to time in the silhouetted figures of actors behind it. A music score, partly performed live by the conductor in the pit and partly taped, was created by Ingo Günther and significantly contributes to maintaining the frenetic pace onstage. The enthusiastic audience greeted



Luc Perceval and Christina Bellingén's *Jeder stirbt für sich allein*. Photo: Krafft Angerer.

the entire evening with almost continuous laughter and applause, and although the applause following German productions is generally more extended than in the United States, this was unusually long—more than fifteen minutes of applause for an eighty minute production, which suggests something of the enthusiasm for this impressive work.

When I first started attending the German theatre some thirty years ago, I was struck by the length of the productions—four and five hours being a quite common running time. Toward the end of the century there was an abrupt change, with many of the emerging directors, like Thalheimer, presenting cut-down, rapidly played, intermissionless productions so that classics like Ibsen and Chekhov were often seen in stagings of two hours and under. Today both approaches are commonly seen, as was evidenced by the first four selections of the Theatertreffen. *Medea* was performed in two hours, *Murmel Murmel*, as I have noted, in just eighty minutes. The next two offerings, both stagings of very large and multiplotted novels, provided a sharp contrast, each running nearly five hours.

The first was Luc Perceval's stage adaptation (with playwright Christina Bellingén) of *Jeder stirbt für sich allein* (*Everyone Dies Alone*), the

international best-selling novel published in 1947 by Hans Fallada. This, one of the first anti-Nazi novels to be published in Germany after World War II, was based primarily on the true story of a German couple who between 1940 and 1941 distributed leaflets in Berlin condemning the Nazis and infuriating the authorities. Fallada interweaves their story with the lives of those around them, creating a panorama of the cruel and oppressive conditions within a regime already collapsing but sustaining itself by fear and brutality.

Perceval, originally from Antwerp but since 2000 based in Germany, has long been a leader in the German theatre. He is now the head director of the Thalia Theater in Hamburg, one of the three or four most honored theatres in Germany, where he produced *Jeder stirbt*. Although he is particularly well known for his modernization of the classics, Perceval has twice produced important stagings of the novels of this early twentieth century German author. In 2009 he staged an earlier Fallada novel, *Kleiner Mann, was nun?* dealing with the effects on a group of everyday Germans of the world economic crisis of 1929. This production was also invited to the Theatertreffen.

In keeping with the minimalist trend now

clearly operating on the German stage, Perceval's designer Annette Kurz has designed a simple, but extremely powerful setting, which remains unchanged throughout the evening. Upon the essentially empty playing area there is a single element, a simple, unadorned rectangular table which during the evening is sat upon, lied upon, and placed upright to form various backings and barriers. At the rear of the stage is the dominant visual element, an enormous relief map, rising from the stage floor into the flies, apparently of Berlin viewed from above, containing hundreds of buildings which are composed of found elements—boxes, bits of machinery, purses, briefcases, and countless unidentifiable scraps of material. A pile of similar material lies at the base of the map, apparently either left-over material or material that has fallen off of the construction above. At first I took this striking construction and its elements to suggest that Berlin was built up (as was this story) from fragments of everyday life, but I later consulted a review of the original production in Hamburg and discovered that much of the found material utilized in the construction of the map, thousands of individual objects, was actually boxes, toys, books, and personal items from the 1940s, recovered from

flea markets and junk shops, thus adding another dimension to its appropriateness.

One effective touch utilized throughout the production is the depiction of the stage space as a flow of characters, as on a Berlin street, all crossing from one side of the stage to another, but always as individuals, each absorbed in their own activities and traveling at their own rhythm, some running, some strolling, some moving furtively, glancing about to check their surroundings, others striding with assurance. These form a kind of living backdrop which supplements the brooding relief map against which the major plots develop. At the center of these are the couple Otto (Thomas Neihaus) and Anna Quangel (Oda Thormeyer) the meaningless death of whose son in the war inspires them to begin their act of civil disobedience. Their anonymous postcards terrify their already frightened neighbors and drive the Gestapo commander Prall (the incomparable Barbara Nüsse) to become obsessed with their capture. He assigns Kommissar Escherisch (André Szymanski) to the case, and the center of the action is this pursuit. All the many subplots, each reflecting the corruption, the cowardice, and the bravery of the individuals caught in this fearful time, are carefully tied back to this central action. In the middle part



Perceval and Bellingén's *Jeder stirbt für sich allein*. Photo: Krafft Angerer.

of the production, the focus shifts when Escherisch is for a time misled into thinking that a rather dimwitted if good-hearted malingerer, Enno Kluge (Daniel Lammatsch) is the culprit he is seeking, and when he discovers his mistake, encourages Kluge to kill himself. All ties back to the central action, both narratively and emotionally because Escherisch gradually evolves as a character from an opportunistic Nazi sympathizer to a (still silent) sympathizer to the cause of the Quangels. The production does not end with the execution of the Quangels in their dark prison cell, however, but in the open countryside, where survivors of the horrors we have witnessed gather upon the ever-present table, now a country cart, and ride off together into what must surely be a better future.

The staging and dramatic cutting are powerful, but the honors of the evening go to the superb cast, giving new evidence both to the power of the Thalia ensemble and to Perceval's reputation as an inspirer of actors. The presentation choice is to have the actors remain always in character but to mix their actual lines with accompanying text, a blend which I first saw in the famous *Nicholas Nickleby* production by the RSC, and in the hands of good actors can be remarkably affective. The

already mentioned leading characters, especially Nüsse and Szymanski, dominate the evening, but as is often the case with the best German ensembles, the performances down to the smallest part are powerful and richly nuanced. The placing on stage of a novel, especially a large and complex one, is a tremendous challenge, but one which Perceval and his excellent company have taken on with admirable success.

The same unfortunately cannot be said for the other monumental stage adaptation of the festival, Sebastian Hartmann's five-plus-hour staging of *War and Peace* from Leipzig. I came to this production with high expectations, not only because of the success of the Fallada adaptation but because I had much enjoyed previous Hartmann productions such as his 1999 *Ghosts* and his 2001 *The Robbers*. During the late 1990s he worked for a time with Frank Castorf, with whom he is often compared, and they share mainly a willingness to take great liberties with the classics, often by the introduction of contemporary music and references, as well as mixed media and popular, often rock music. Hartmann is rather softer, however, one might say more romantic, and more inclined to create striking visual images.

All of this can be seen in his *War and Peace*,



Sebastian Hartmann's *War and Peace*. Photo: Courtesy of Theatertreffen.



Hartmann's *War and Peace*. Photo: Courtesy of Theatertreffen.

his final production at the Leipzig theatre, which he has directed since 2009, amidst continuing controversy over his unconventional stagings. Certainly this controversy continued with the present production. During the Leipzig performances (and subsequent showings at the Ruhr Festival and elsewhere) only about one-third of the audience was reported to have stayed until the end. Berlin Theatertreffen audiences are made of tougher stuff, however, and although the audience was clearly diminished by the end, the majority of them remained, as did I, although on this occasion, I distinctly envied those who departed earlier.

To begin with, Hartman makes no attempt to present the story, although he plays individual scenes and debates, often in several variations and with different actors. His fourteen member ensemble begins with a choric chant setting the scene and then distributes roles in each new scene. Thus most of the cast at one time or another play Andrei, the central figure. Particularly striking here is Heike Makatsch, who plays one of the most impressive of Andrei's death scenes on a steeply raked stage, sliding slowly downward as she attempts to hold death at bay. A word must be said about the stage, a monumental construction designed by Hartmann

and Tilo Baurgärtel consisting of two giant plates, each filling the stage, one suspended from the flies and often used to show film or video images, or variously colored ribbon light messages, the other, the major acting area, supported by an enormous metal pole in the center of the stage, upon which the entire area can tilt forward or back, from side to side, or at a variety of other angles, creating a constantly shifting physical space. It is the sort of technological theatre that one could only dream of in America but which is easily created in any large German house. The kind of theatrical space this device allows strongly suggests a number of the stages created by Olaf Altman for Thalheimer or by the ingenious Andreas Kriegenberg, who normally creates his own designs. What struck me here was that although powerful images were from time to time created on this stage, the physical properties of the stage itself were not in any way organically related to the production as a whole, in the way that they inevitably are in Altmann or Kriegenberg. In short, impressive as the machinery was technically, it seemed to me ultimately a great deal of money wasted.

Returning to the actors, most handle the multiple and rapid shifts in character extremely

well, though when Hartmann decides to present scenes of low comedy, which he does more and more frequently as the evening goes on, their attempts seem (perhaps calculatedly) almost painfully awkward and amateurish. Typical was an extended (at least five to ten minutes) slapstick clown show debate on the existence of God by two of the women in fake mustaches that exhausted itself in about thirty seconds and made one long for the sophisticated and professional farce scenes of Fritsch. The final third of the performance is composed entirely of a series of scenes of this kind, exploring, often in the crudest manner, themes extracted from Tolstoi's work, without maintaining any connection to the work itself. The theme of sex for example, is addressed by an extended sequence involving large cardboard boxes in some of which imitation blow-jobs are enacted (built around racist jokes involving a sex-crazed turbaned actor purportedly from Mumbai) and culminating in a sexual act between two of the boxes, carried out by a postal tube protruding from one of them that enters the other, much to the delight of the Berlin audience.

This series of variety acts—including literal clowns, Lewis-Carroll-type white rabbits, mechanical ballerinas, nude couples, imitation Napoleons, actors howling like wolves, and a deformed half-nude female figure crawling slowly

across the stage as if in an early Robert Wilson piece—ended with the entire cast coming out into the audience and confronting individual members with questions about whether they believe in chance, destiny, or great men. The few responses that this elicits are ignored. This is followed by an eight-minute video by Baumgärtel which essentially gives the illusion of rushing headlong through endless corridors of varying architectural styles. Both the graphics and the technique are so crude that they would put to shame any beginning digital art student in the United States, which I must assume was the intention. Occasionally the headlong rush through corridors is varied by a headlong rush toward a cartoon vagina or past open coffins that emit cartoon upwardly speeding ghosts. Finally one such coffin stops as the corridors continue to rush by and the fourteen cast members seem to climb into it, waving goodbye to us as they speed off down the corridors. Most the audience seemed delighted and gave the production extended applause but for myself I had to admit that it seemed to me to represent the worst excesses of what many Germans condemn as *Regietheater*, theatre in which directorial tricks hijack the production.

Now that Hartmann's administration at Leipzig has ended there is considerable speculation in Berlin that he may be selected as the successor



Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Strasse. Die Stadt. Der Überfall*, directed by Johan Simons. Photo: Courtesy of Munich Kammerspiele.



Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater*. Photo: Bert van Hoogenbemt

to Castorf, who has directed the major Volksbühne since 1992, a remarkably long tenure for a Berlin theatre director. Unquestionably Hartmann, if this occurs, will carry on the iconoclastic, post-modern reputation of Castorf, though in his own direction. Despite my uneasiness at this latest production, I think this would be a stimulating addition to the Berlin scene. It is clear that Hartmann, always a divisive figure in comparatively conservative Leipzig, will find a much more supportive public in Berlin. Whether that affects his work for good or ill would prove an interesting process to observe.

Although widely regarded as Germany's great living playwright, Elfriede Jelinek creates texts of unparalleled difficulty for directors, vast chunks of material usually without stage directions, indication of speaker, or even in some cases punctuation. They require a director to find and carve out his or her own theatrical text from this material. A number have risen to the challenge with powerful results, among them the Dutch director Johan Simons, formerly artistic director of the National Theatre of Ghent and at present artistic director of the Munich Kammerspiele. For the centennial of that theatre, Jelinek created and Simons staged a new piece, *Die Strasse. Die Stadt. Der Überfall* (*The Street. The City. The Raid*) clearly dedicated to the city of Munich (in fact it has not been published; the 129-page text from which Simon has carved his play remains in the

sole possession of the Kammerspiele).

Jelinek takes her inspiration from the fact that the Kammerspiele is located on the Maximilianstrasse in Munich, one of the world's great fashion streets. The performance is essentially a meditation on the hollowness and necessity of fashion, how humanity and the mode seek in vain to find a reality, a center, in the other. Like all of Jelinek's work this is an indictment of capitalism, but a surprisingly warm and gentle one overall. The evening is divided into two parts and many critics suggested one should leave at the break, but I found each equally theatrical and fascinating. The first part is the more general commentary on the hollowness of fashion, somewhat repetitive, but always engaging, thanks to the comic and dramatic skills of the six men (Stephan Meier, Hans Kremer, Steven Scharf, Maximilian Simonischek, Marc Benjamin, and Stephan Bissmeier), who appear in various stages of dress and undress, but always in drag and high fashion. They surround the equally fashion obsessed Sandra Hüller in what they themselves call an "orgy" but which is truly only an orgy of vanity and hollow self-seeking display. There is a freezing emotional coldness at the heart of their actions, beautifully captured by stage designer Eva Veronica Born, who covers the stage at the beginning with several inches of bits of ice, rather like some of the covered stages of Pina Bausch, through which the high-

heeled actors must make their way. The glittering ice, like diamonds, but melting away from the heat of the stage lighting as the evening progresses, is a stunning metaphor for the ephemeral subject of the evening. A part of the audience is seated on stage so that this ice-covered playing area has spectators looking across at each other from two sides. Access to the stage is primarily from an enclosed opening with stairs going down that serves, effectively, as the gate to death in the later scenes. Above the stage hangs a huge white globe, and on one side, opposite the stairs, is an enclosed glass area, resembling, and often referred to as a small boutique, behind which sit the five musicians whose music accompanies much of the evening and who provide accompaniment for the occasional somewhat Brechtian songs that punctuate the action.

In the second part the focus shifts from the general to the particular, and the production strongly shows its Munich roots. The focus now shifts to a central figure of the Munich fashion world, Rudolph Moshammer, played in a grotesque parody mask and wig (both of which he eventually tears off) by Benny Claessens. The near-legendary Moshammer's boutique "Carnaval de Venise" was at the heart of Maximilianstrasse's fashion world, creating designs

for wealthy men from furs, cashmere, and silk. Moshammer was an eccentric, but munificent figure, murdered in 2005 by a young man from whom he had allegedly sought sexual favors. The second part is filled with details of Moshammer's life, career and death, including references to the dog Daisy, who inherited his estate, the cable with which he was strangled, his relationship with his mother and his male companions, and his irritation that few people attended his funeral (actually there were some 10,000) because they were all off taking their winter vacations at the Tyrolian resort of Kitzbühel. One can see how non-Munich critics would find all of this quite self-indulgent, but I found this microcosm balancing the macrocosm of the first part quite effective, and although I was not convinced by Moshammer's repeated claim that his death was also the death of the street, of the city, and of the world of fashion they embodied, I still found the extended elegy on the inevitable death of this hollow world quite moving.

Jérôme Bel is internationally known as one of Europe's most innovative choreographers, and one of the leaders of the "non-dance" movement in new French dance, which emphasizes multimedia work, performance in unconventional spaces, and



Katie Mitchell's *Night Train*. Photo: Courtesy of Theatertreffen.

movement outside the traditional dance vocabulary. In 2012, Bel was invited to create a piece with the Theater HORA in Zurich, a professional company composed entirely of actors with mental disabilities, primarily Down's Syndrome. Although their past productions have been of familiar authors like Shakespeare and Conrad, Bel decided instead to present the eleven actors with whom he worked in their own characters, creating work based on themselves and their professional lives. The result was *Disabled Theater*, a performance piece that premiered with enormous success in Brussels, and then went on to major festivals and other European venues throughout 2013 and to New York toward the end of this year.

For most of the evening the eleven performers, ranging in age from eighteen to fifty, stand or sit in a row of chairs upstage, while a narrator/translator sits at a downstage table to the right, introducing the audience to the performance. First the narrator outlines the history of the project and asks the actors to introduce themselves. Their brief autobiographical statements always include their profession: actor. In the major part of the evening, each performer presents a dance piece he or she has created themselves, to a musical accompaniment they have chosen. From a conventional technical point of view some of these are moderately skilled, while others are most commendable for their determination and dedication. All, however, receive hearty applause from the audience, although not unmixed with a certain unease at the entire process. This unease is articulated more fully in a concluding section of the performance where the narrator asks each performer to talk about their experience in creating and performing this piece. Most speak

positively of the experience, but several express the concerns of family members and others that this public display was not so much a celebration of their triumph over adversity as a kind of "freak show." Unquestionably the work, and the performative assumptions behind it are as disturbing as they are moving. Forced to confront the generally suppressed recognition of notions of normality and abnormality, of the public and the private, the audience found this work the most controversial and unquestionably the most memorable and unique in this year's festival.

British director Katie Mitchell, whose multimedia *Wunschkonzert* was selected for the 2009 Theatertreffen (see WES, 21:3) returned this year with a similarly constructed *Night Train*, based on the 1984 poetic prose novella *Reise durch die Nacht* by Friederike Mayröcker. Mitchell began experimenting with a mixture of live action and live video with her 2007 adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* in London, and has continued to refine that technique in a series of works presented since then in Germany and England. In each of these, what seems to be a fairly conventional video film unrolls seamlessly on a screen above the stage, but in fact the audience sees on the stage below how many disparate elements are combined to create this illusory image. In this production the setting beneath the screen was essentially a long railway car, created by designer Alex Eales, with some compartments open, others closed, and others seen only through windows.

This railway car is in fact essentially a kind of film set, however, with scenes played in various parts of it and recorded by live video cameras for projection above. The audience thus simultaneously sees the filmed action and its creation within the



Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards*, directed by Sebastian Baumgarten. Photo: Tania Dorendorf.



Gerhart Hauptmann's *Die Ratten*, directed by Karen Hinkel. Photo: Klaus Lefebvre.

illusory set. The flickering lights outside the windows as another train passes or the passing landscape (created by Leo Warner and faithfully suggesting the Europe of the novel's creation) are revealed as projections or mechanical devices, whose creation we see onstage at the same time that the video camera is recording them as filmic reality. There are also flashbacks within the film to the life the heroine Regina (Julia Wieninger) has left behind in Paris as their sleeper car rolls toward Vienna, these also created within small settings embedded in the car and filmed as if they were part of another location.

The constant moving to and fro of cameramen, technicians, and actors relaxing between scenes or preparing for their next entrance creates a constant bustle in the actual stage area which could easily become confusing were it not for the fact that the steadily progressing film that is being created is always above the action, directing the attention of the viewers to how the complex movements on stage are constantly being integrated into this creation, seemingly following a natural progression but actually being simultaneously created out of disparate elements as we watch. Mitchell has found a fascinating way to reveal the actual labor and mechanics which video and film have traditionally covered in a way that increases

rather than diminishes our respect for this complex phenomenon.

Sebastian Baumgarten's production from Zurich of Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* aroused a certain amount of critical hostility, but not because of its conversion of Brecht into a kind of postmodern variety show, though that was certainly the general impression, with the jazz musician Jean-Paul Brodbeck providing the almost continual musical accompaniment, as if the production were a silent film, a tradition which it in fact often quoted. The complaints had more to do with Baumgarten's decision to carry out his cartoonish visualization of the Brechtian parable not only by extreme exaggeration of many features (the "black straw hats" Salvation Army becoming huge black designer headpieces, more like those of the witches in the musical *Wicked* than in anything by Brecht, and the Chicago capitalists becoming literally Western cowboys whose hapless victims lurk in graffiti-coated teepees), but even more because almost all of the major characters are defined, vaudeville-style, by ethnic and racial clichés. The most protest concerned Frau Lukkerniddle (Isabelle Menke), whose husband accidentally ended up as canned meat. The actress appeared in thick black face and body paint with bright red lipstick, in an afro wig and a

grotesque, white, African-style dress with heavy jewelry (costumes by Jana Findekleee). Nothing in the text or the production supported this extreme choice, which, although it drew the most comment, was by no means unique. The landlord Mulberry (Gottfried Breitfuss) was played in yellowface, with a long thin mustache, continually slurping at a bowl of noodles and speaking with a "Chinese" accent. Another worker (Samuel Braun) wears a fur hat and speaks "Russian." Baumgarten in a post-show discussion explained that Brecht regularly worked with stereotypes and that in order to truly represent the victims of capitalism in today's global economy a variety of ethnic representatives was necessary. Moreover, similar vaudevillian stereotyping was rather inexplicably utilized with the capitalists themselves. Aside from being cowboys, which is perhaps understandable enough, the three central villains all had odd and distinctive speech patterns. Mauler (Markus Scheumann) had a strong lisp, Cridle (Jan Bluthardt) stuttered, and Graham (Lukas Holzhaugen), rather surprisingly, had a distinct Yiddish accent.

Parody and slapstick suffused the evening, pop culture references abounded, from "Lucky Luke" to "Modern Times," to vampire and zombie

movies, with at one point an enormous cut-out mask of Che Guevera in the background with an entrance through his shaded cheek. In all of this reworking, Yvon Jansen as Saint Joan rather got lost, despite her enormous black hat, while Mauler and his blue-suited cowboys carry off the production. At last Joan, frozen by the icy world they are creating, drops rigidly to the floor, her accusing finger pointing toward heaven as if the deity were also implicated in this wholesale crushing of humanity.

The stylized, cartoon-like approach was less troublesome with the settings by Thilo Reuther, using simple forms and imaginative projections to create a fantasy world full of international but especially American pop culture icons. A concluding video montage summed up these images, suggesting the rise of modern America from the 1970s onward, culminating in Barack Obama, while the groups of costumed characters (the workers in red, the capitalists in blue, and the Salvation Army members in white) were suddenly reinforced by an image of Spiderman, wearing a skin-tights suit of these same colors and backed by a huge American flag. The evening seemed on the whole as much an ironic celebration of the icons of late capitalism as a critique of it and while it was unquestionably a



Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*, directed by Sebastian Nübling. Photo: Julian Roeder.

full evening visually, it seemed ultimately strangely devoid of any specific political content, a very strange outcome for a revival of Brecht, but perhaps not surprising at a time when the Americanization of culture, politics, and economics is widely deplored but surprisingly little resisted.

From the Cologne Schauspiel this year came Karen Hinkel's production of Gerhart Hauptmann's naturalistic tragedy, *Die Ratten*. Hauptmann's grim tragedy of switched babies, false claims of paternity, murder and suicide, takes place in a Berlin tenement, watched over by Harro Hassenreuter, a former theatrical manager who resumes that career in the course of the play, and who gives acting lessons to several of the play's lesser characters. This circumstance has led director Hinkel to move the play far from its naturalistic tradition into a meditation on theatricality, with characters often seemingly fully conscious of role-playing with often highly artificial mannerisms and in a decidedly non-realistic environment.

The evening begins with a sharp challenge to audience expectations. Instead of entering the front of the festival theatre which is the central home of the Theatertreffen, or going to the smaller, more intimate stage at the left end of the building, the audience goes through the large lobby and out

into the garden, which normally serves as a kind of extension to the lobby, and then around to the rear of the building and through one of the rear stage doors, normally used only by theatre personnel, to discover a dimly lit space where they mix with the actors who are looking over possible costumes from racks that sit near the stage (costumes by Klaus Bruns). Since most of the actors play several roles (one, Jennifer Frank, plays four, including a barking dog) these costumes, striking though usually minimal, prove an important indication to the audience of which role they are assuming, while adding to the improvised, artificial tone of the whole. This is especially true since the selection of dress is often quite whimsical. Michael Weber plays the policeman in a spiked Wilhelmine helmet, which is arguably appropriate, but also plays the janitor in a bouffant tulle ballet skirt, which is decidedly not.

The actors not only move in and out of their roles, but also from time to time perform what might best be described as acting exercises or tryout pieces. The young theologian and would-be actor Erich Spitta (Jan-Peter Kampwirth) encouraged by the washed-up theatre director Hassenreuter (Yorck Dippe) presents a number of Shakespeare monologues, and one of the high points of the evening is an extended, highly obscene, and



Williams's *Orpheus Descending*. Photo: Julian Roeder.

seemingly at least partly improvised riff on the status of women by Kate Strong, performed entirely in English. The stage design by Jens Kilian, makes no attempt at illusion. The large performing space is mostly open, and offstage actors may simply sit quietly at its edges, but it does have one fairly large unit which can be rolled about the stage and which contains the suggestion of a small room and access to a small space overhead. A few decorative elements, like a small, crude wooden crucifix, can be added, like the fragments of costume, to give the room a bit more specificity. There is also a large, downward pointing floodlight downstage which can be moved to different locations and which is used by individual actors who wish to place themselves "in the spotlight" for certain speeches. Pregnancies are suggested by false, strapped-on bellies, which ironically reinforce the concern of the drama with its confused claims of motherhood. When the guilty Mrs. John (beautifully performed by Lena Beckmann) finally commits suicide in remorse, her fellow actors surround her and solemnly cover her body with fake blood.

Sebastian Nübling took considerable liberties in his Munich production of Tennessee Williams's rarely performed *Orpheus Descending*, but he captured in his own terms the lush exoticism of Williams and created one of the most striking and effective productions of this year's Theaterreffen. The production opens and closes with a huge black Doberman dog standing alone onstage. Later his owner will be revealed as the leader of the town's controlling gang, Jabe Torrence (Jochen Noch). The dog's head is also reproduced on the jackets of Torrence's followers, one of whom is a beefy leather clad figure who from time to time throughout the evening, circles the stage on a huge, roaring, diesel-blowing motorcycle. The distant barking of dogs throughout the evening reminds the audience even during the love scenes of the ever-present menace of these men. After the grotesque and grim cartoons of the male denizens of this Southern town come the female representatives (Annette Paulmann and Angelika Krautzberger), two blond furies, spewing vulgarities and blowing up and decking themselves in phallic pink balloon snakes.

The production is dominated by the fascinating figure of Risto Kübar as the doomed

interloper Val Xavier, whom these figures will destroy. He is here interpreted in a manner as far removed as possible from the exuberant masculinity of a Marlon Brando. This is the first starring role for Kübar, an Estonian actor bought to prominence in Nübling's 2011 production in Munich of Simon Stephens' dark crime fantasy *Three Kingdoms*, a role which Kübar played entirely in Estonian. As Val Xavier, Kübar speaks a mixture of Estonian, English, and Estonian-inflected German, reinforcing his role of outsider, but even more striking than his language is his physical appearance and movement. A thin, almost serpentine, snakeskin-clad, androgynous figure, constantly caressing himself and moving as if in a fluid dream, he combines features of a transsexual street hustler and a pop idol of adolescent female fantasies. A dark clad deathly double follows him about as a constant reminder of his immanent fate.

The most striking visual element of the setting is a giant carousel, which eventually fills the entire stage, but which at the beginning exists only as a large dim circular object hanging in the flies. Nübling and his designer, Eva-Maria Bauer had the theatrically inspired idea to convert the garden restaurant that Lady Torrence (played with a powerful nervous energy by the leading German actress Wiebke Puls) plans to build in memory of her father to a carousel, the construction, lighting, and eventual operation of which by the Lady and Val fills the evening and the stage. The activity of creating this fantasy item together beautifully reinforces the growing physical attraction between Val and the Lady and they slowly and carefully place and gradually illuminate the forest of lights that circle the lowered roof of the structure. In one memorable tender scene, the lovers ascend, approaching each other on a ladder and at last disappear together into the illuminated dome above.

At last, the carousel completed, Val and the Lady enjoy a brief giddy ride, a moment of happy escape from the surrounding darkness, but it is only a moment. Lady Torrence's husband enters and shoots her, leaving her corpse dangling from the seat on the gaudy carousel, while Val is taken off to his death. At the end only the grim Doberman remains on stage, the Cerberus to this dark hell.

Akademia Ruchu: Against the Marginalization of the Art Discourse

Lukasz Ronduda

The emergence of the artistic approach represented by Akademia Ruchu was related to a process of "theatricalization of the plastic arts" taking place in minimalism. Michael Fried, an advocate of modernism, originally diagnosed and described the process with the intention of repudiating it. Later, however, postmodern critics such as Craig Owens and Hal Foster adopted Fried's terminology in order to present "theatricality" as an important trend for the development of the visual arts. In their writings, it was the key to understanding the essence of the revaluation of the modernist artistic paradigm and the emergence of postmodern art strategies. These strategies included introducing temporal categories to the visual arts, until then perceived as mainly "spatial." They were based on dynamic, intermedial crossing of boundaries between artistic disciplines and life, on appreciating the significance of analyzing the process of artistic communication, and on the idea of a conscious artistic strategy rather than unreflective "creative frenzy."

The Akademia Ruchu artists have been operating at the interface of art and daily life since the 1970s. Rather than striving to equate one with the other (in keeping with the avant-garde's radical postulates), they study the specificity of their difference. They are interested in the problem of translation, of rendering meaning between the two languages. Testing the language of art and the language of the everyday involves in their case introducing into the field of theatre ordinary gestures, charged with the connotations of their social applications. According to the AR artists, this virtually anthropological process is related to the need for "noticing the value of the interpenetration of art and life." It is not a question of copying daily life, but in appreciating its often unappreciated meaning, in the structures, rhythms and tensions comprising a model of the activity that fills the space of shared experiences, games, communication, as Wojciech Krukowski explained in 1988 at the 'Dąbrówka' Culture Club. For Akademia Ruchu, the simplest gestures often repeated in public space are natural (independent of politics or ideology) mechanisms of self-regulation of social life—its silent binding agent.

Since the very beginning, Akademia's

practice has been marked by a desire to create specific political metaphors. The collective is aware that even what is supposed to be a purely formal gesture is never devoid of an "order of meaning." Akademia Ruchu strives to gain control, as it were, of the process of the inevitable textualization of its own practice, in an effort to subordinate the creation of formal signs to socio-political commentary. The group's Urban Actions show that from the 1970s (and especially when compared with the then-dominant apolitical and asocial modernist art), Akademia was one of the first Polish artistic collectives to consistently pursue the trope of the "politicization of aesthetics." This was, and continues to be, manifest to this day in their creation of unique, aesthetically distinct performative political allegories, firmly rooted in the artistic tradition, referring directly to Poland's current condition but devoid of any aggressive politicking.

The number of performances and actions carried by Akademia Ruchu in public space so far—about six hundred—is amazing. Whereas many Polish artists have contented themselves with only brief, ephemeral interventions and happenings, AR's urban actions reflect a consistent and lasting (the only one on this scale) artistic presence in Poland's public space. The collective urban actions are geared towards discovering ever-new modes of art's function in society, towards opening ever-new fields of artistic communication. The artistic formula pursued by Akademia is based on confidence in, and respect for, the public, which the artists collaborate with, by opening themselves towards the different ways in which people perceive and describe the world, by initiating forms of behavior that reinforce social bonds and strengthen the community's self-representation and self-organization, and by building creative social capital, devoid of fear of the Other and outside influence. The collective has developed an artistic formula that is comprehensible for ordinary people, inspires their confidence, and yet adheres to high artistic standards. Akademia Ruchu's practice strives to overcome the alienation, elitism and, consequently, marginalization of the art discourse, causing its statements to directly influence ordinary people as well as satisfying art professionals' elevated expectations.

A short history of Akademia Ruchu

Akademia Ruchu was founded by Wojciech Krukowski in Warsaw in 1973. Krukowski remains its artistic director to this day. Other members include Janusz Bałdyga, Jolanta Krukowska Cezary Marczak, Zbigniew Olkiewicz, Jan Pieniążek, Jarosław Żwirblis, and Krzysztof Żwirblis. The group's practice combines performance with all types of visual expression. They usually perform in public urban spaces, private homes, and industrial spaces. Since 1974 they have created about six hundred performances, street actions, and interventions into the public sphere all over the world. Every action is in a sense a condensed sign that questions social and political practice and provokes the spectator, who as passerby on the street is often thrown unwittingly into the action. One of the most famous performances from the 1970s was *The Bus* (1975) in which tension was created out of the lack of movement.

Europa/Europa – Warszawa (1976)

Anatol Stern's 1930 poem *Europe*, which in the year of the brutally crushed worker protests in Ursus and Radom became suddenly relevant, was copied to banners. In the course of the street action, usually carried out in the vicinity of busy pedestrian routes, the poem's individual verses were demonstrated to the gathering public by actors who came running from darkness—in the light of car headlights, to the accompaniment of blaring horns. After a verse had been put together, the banners were thrown under the viewers' feet, creating a tangle of words haphazardly forming themselves into new configurations. After the end of the show (after the headlights and the horn tooting had been turned off), members of the audience often picked the banners with the most meaningful fragments of the poem, carrying them through the city or putting them up on street walls. Besides Warsaw, *Europe* was shown in Gdańsk, Olsztyn, Bydgoszcz, Łódź, Kraków, Lublin, Poznań, and Wrocław.

(Photo on the right courtesy of the Company)

Later AR created such actions as *Europa* (1976), the famous *Kolejki/Sklepy mięsne* (Queues/Meat Shops, 1976/77) *Dom I* (House I, 1978), *Dom II* (House II, 1978). In 1994 they presented *Życie codzienne po Wielkiej Rewolucji Francuskiej* (Everyday life after the French Revolution). *Dwa Polskie głosy* (Two Polish Voices) and an *Esej* (Essay) that summed up the group's work during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Akademia Ruchu participated in many major artistic world events such as DOCUMENTA 8 in Kassel, the festival at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in London, Museum PS1/Clocktower Gallery in New York, NRL Live Art in Glasgow and others. They are scheduled to perform in New York in November 2013. They primarily work and perform in Warsaw.





Stól / Table - Quern (1989)

The village inhabitants (on the Danish/German border) were invited to visit one of the farms, which had a large, rectangular yard. Upon entering everyone pressed their hand for a moment against a pure, white, freshly starched cloth in an act of symbolic purification.

A large table set with simple dishes stood across the yard, and the feast was the first--in the locals' memory--opportunity for them to develop close, natural contact.

(Photo courtesy the of the Company)



Obrona/Defence – Warszawa, Lublin (2010)

One of the characteristic features of the crime-prevention system at the Jarmark Europa open-air market and the Dworzec Wschodni train station in Warsaw was the visible presence of two-strong patrols in bright-yellow vests marked 'Railway Guard', 'Municipal Guard', or 'Police'. The situation gained a dramatic dimension following an incident in which an African small-time trader operating at the open-air market of the former Decennial Stadium was shot dead by the police.

As part of the action prepared by the AR with workshop participants, 20 'patrols' operated in the 'hazard zone' of Dworzec Wschodni/Jarmark Europa dressed in bright-yellow vests marked by the following labels: Shepherd/Shepherdess, Ethicist, Poet, Pilgrim, Hussite, Witness, Tenor, Defender, Musician, Negotiator, Student, Model, Ascetic, Client, Therapist, Patron, Observer, Cyclist, Participant, and Trader.

(Photo courtesy of the Company)

This is Not Chopin

Allen J. Kuharski

My first exposure to Chopin's two Piano Concertos was recent: listening to the Vietnamese pianist Dang Thai Son playing on a nineteenth century Erard piano with Frans Brüggen's Orchestra of the eighteenth century. I later listened to Artur Rubenstein's recordings from the late 1950s, and then to Krystian Zimerman's from 2003. Zimerman, invoking both Chopin and Tadeusz Kantor, conducted as well as played the piano sections. The most immediate connection for me was through Rubinstein. He was, along with Ignacy Jan Paderewski, Wanda Landowska, Józef Hofmann, and Ignaz Friedman, one of the Polish pianists that fascinated my father, a piano restorer. At the height of the Cold War, in the American Midwest, my family heard this music almost daily, which was originally recorded on reproducing pianos in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s. Chopin's music for us was always in the foreground. The mass consumption of such recorded performances of Chopin began with the reproducing piano (which made Paderewski a fortune in the United States). By the time I first heard this music (undoubtedly already in utero) most of these pianists, like Chopin himself, were long

dead. It was like a séance, a musical counterpart to Kantor's Dead Class. We were a technologically-mediated mid-twentieth century Polish-American version of Norwid's larchwood country manor.

Over time, my family had lost the Polish language to the combined forces of Prussian Kulturkampf and American assimilation. By the 1950s, in regard to Polish language and culture we were like someone experiencing total aphasia after a stroke. None of us had ever even seen Poland, so we had no visual memory, either. Our only Polish language, which my father and my brother and I studied assiduously, was the musical dialect of Polish pianism in the Chopin tradition. Which for us did not include Chopin's two Concerti. The physical presence of the piano (a Steinway), combined with the reproducing player mechanism, the recordings of dead Polish maestros, and Chopin's solo piano scores, was what we had. We both listened to and practiced this music. Today I can enjoy Dang Thai Son perform Chopin on a period instrument in streaming digital audio on my iPad. Thus we share a common language with the Vietnamese pianist and others: the language, at once Polish and cosmopolitan, of



Chopin without Piano, conductor Jacek Kasprzyk, director: Michał Zadara.
Teatr im. Juliusza Słowackiego, Kraków. Photo: Natalia Kabanow.

Chopin's pianism. A paradox: by taking Chopin's pianism out of the *Concerti*, Zadara and Kasprzyk render him aphasic as a composer even as they give Chopin speech. That speech may be in Polish—but Chopin's first language is his pianism.

In Norwid's poem "Fortepian Szopena an act of deliberate cultural vandalism is portrayed: the spectacular physical destruction by the Czarist forces occupying Warsaw of Chopin's piano, likely the same one on which he composed, practiced, and first performed the *Concerti*. The destruction of the instrument did not silence Chopin's music, and the symbolic political act by the Russians was countered by Norwid's poem. The poem was not a restoration of the lost piano, which was impossible in any case, but filled its absence with new artistic work in another genre. Now there were two voices: Chopin's music and Norwid's poetry. There is a perpetual need in Polish culture to replace what has been destroyed by such vandalism—and for the understanding that new cultural production is more meaningful than scrupulous restoration to fill the absence. Zadara and Kasprzyk's new performance piece using the orchestral score of Chopin's *Concerti* risks the accusation of being a new act of vandalism, this time within the very performance of the composer's work. If we replace the piano with Barbara Wysocka and the score with text, is this another violation, or something else? This proposition is in significant contrast to that of twenty-first century musicians playing on period instruments: Wysocka is quintessentially a twenty-first century instrument and performer.

The banning of the piano from the performance of Chopin's *Concerti* is a radical act of cultural blasphemy, in the tradition of Gombrowicz's *Trans-Atlantyck* or Grotowski's treatment of the Polish dramatic canon. Rather than mere provocation, the goal is to renew and transform a tradition that began with precisely such creative rebellion and innovation. The question is how to reanimate the creative principle embodied by Chopin rather than historically reconstruct him.

As with the Czarist forces in nineteenth century Warsaw, this is undeniably also a symbolic political act. It is a critique of Chopin's pianism as a tool of mutual oppression by Poles, of its associations with nationalism and *passéisme* instead of as the means of mutual liberation, individual empowerment, and unfettered creativity it represented in Chopin's

day. Understood as a new piece of contemporary theatre, the goal of this experiment is the generation of an unprecedented Polish work, a performative counterpart to Norwid's poem. Which itself was also a symbolic political act. The political exchange here is between Poles. The creative exchange, however, is between artists. Being Polish is only part of that story—as was the case with Chopin.

Today, we now have little choice but to look at the twenty-year old Chopin who wrote the *Concerti* retrospectively, through the lenses of the rest of his life in emigration and of 180 years of subsequent history. An inescapable part of that history is Chopin's death abroad, and the legendary gesture that death included: the surgical separation of the composer's heart from his body, with his preserved heart sent to Warsaw as a symbolic relic and the rest of his remains buried in Paris. If Chopin's pianism is inseparable from his Polish artistic identity, then the separation of the piano from the orchestra in his *Concerti* is a parallel act to the separation of his physical heart from the rest of his body. That body is like the *Concerti* without the piano, and those Parisian remains are what constitute the focus of Zadara, Kasprzyk, and Wysocka in this piece. The European Chopin in contrast to the Polish one. Each is equally important—but the remains of Chopin in Paris contain his brain, ears, hands, and tongue: his means of expression. Chopin's disfigured body echoes the wreckage of his piano on the pavement of a Warsaw street.

Chopin here is reconceived to deliver a postmodern "Great Improvisation," a transgressive and heretical posthumous auto-commentary, scripted and scored, but with the effect of a spontaneous, provocative, and perhaps unrepeatable improvisation with the orchestra and audience. Zadara and Kasprzyk have thus placed Wysocka in a volatile and unprecedented crucible as an actor. It is an agon in every sense of the word. Heroically anti-heroic. Wysocka embodies at once the score, the instrument, Chopin's voice, and a rival to the conductor. She confronts the body of the dead Chopin, the Parisian Chopin, the hole left in his chest. She stands in for the silenced piano. Zadara, Kasprzyk, and Wysocka together have created a new poem, in two parts. Together they perform in a new theatrical language. With Chopin. Barbara Wysocka is not Chopin. She is a twenty-first century Polish artist, with her own presence, voice, and speech. A new heart.

Quo Vadis? The Current State of German Theatre

Roy Kift

German theatre is in a crisis which might be summed up as follows: how to remain up-to-date and "relevant" to an audience whose perceptions and attention spans have been fundamentally shaped by the speed of cyber-communication in a world of constant flux. Theatre has traditionally provided a live forum to enable us to come together to look at images of ourselves onstage, reflect on our personal, social, and political dealings with one another and, as an added bonus, gain new insights on how best to regulate our conduct to the benefit of each and all. But over the last few years in particular, our neo-liberal society has become so fragmented and individualized by the power of computerized media that it is legitimate to ask if society as we knew it in the twentieth century has practically ceased to exist. Interpersonal communication seems to take place, if at all, primarily in the form of SMSs, blogs, emails, and twitters, the only physical contact being between a person's eyes and fingers and the computerized gadget in question.

Whether people are walking down the street or stuck in a train or bus, the majority of them—even those travelling together—seem to have their heads bowed over their smartphones and iPads, with the result that any communication with other persons in their direct vicinity is reduced to the briefest of telegraphic snippets. On the one hand, the internet has isolated and atomized us; on the other, it has made us more globally aware. Individual knowledge once meant individual power. But now the three Big Uncertainties—climate change, terrorism (religious, urban, and nuclear), and the global economic instability resulting from the deregulation of the banking system—are ever-present in our consciousness, and all of them seem to be beyond individual control. This is further aggravated by the awareness that every cyber activity we make exposes us to global government and corporate surveillance.

In this context we are compelled to ask ourselves to what extent individual freedom still exists? And if, as Margaret Thatcher once famously claimed, society no longer exists anyway, can theatre have any social function over and beyond providing "events" and "spectacles" for individuals in a social void? Circuses indeed for those who have the "bread." For people who have grown up in the Anglo-

Saxon theatre tradition whose staple diet has been good commercial shows spiced with an occasional smattering of experiments, such questions might appear outlandish if not to say utterly irrelevant. But in Germany and the Eastern European countries, they are germane to the whole idea of what theatre should be about. In a paper published by Friedrich Schiller in the 1780s he famously asked, "What can a theatre in good standing contribute [to society]?" and suggested that it had to function as a "*moralische Anstalt*" (moral institution). Looking at current developments in German theatre, is this still the case?

One of the first dramatists to try to pin down the features of middle-class society was Carl Sternheim, the son of a banker who was born in the revolutionary year of 1848, lived through the heyday of the middle-class and died in 1942 in the middle of the Second World War at a time when Hitler's star was about to plummet. Sternheim's comedy *Die Hose*, usually translated as *The Underpants*, is possibly his best-known play. Although seldom performed today, it came to public attention in New York in 2002 in an adaptation by the comedian Steve Martin. *The Underpants* (along with two later plays, *The Snob* and *1913*), forms part of a satiric trilogy *The Heroic Lives of the Bourgeoisie*. Because of their length the plays are usually performed individually, but at the Bochum Schauspielhaus—one of the most respected theatres in Germany outside Berlin—the Swiss dramatist Reto Finger was entrusted with compacting them into a single evening, the idea being to provide us with a broad through-line tracing the rise of bourgeois individualism and its effects. The opening scene in *The Underpants* is as unforgettable as it is—or was—at the premiere in Berlin in 1911—outrageous. For the underpants in question belong not to a man, the low-grade civil servant Theodore Maske, but to his wife Luise, who loses them among the crowds gathered in the streets to cheer the Kaiser as he passes by. Maske is so outraged by his wife's display of immorality that he fears for his reputation. But what at first appears to threaten his status turns out to be the trigger to his rise in society.

In his desire to earn a little extra money to top up his salary Maske has advertised a room for rent, and in no time two witnesses to the scene, both of whom have been heart-struck by the sight



Carl Sternheim's *The Underpants*, directed by Anselm Weber. Photo: Thomas Aurin.

of his wife clutching her underpants, are begging to become tenants. One is a failed poet by the name of Scarron and the other a sickly hairdresser called Mandelstam, each of them in his own way as false as Maske himself (Maske is German for mask. The name says it all). Theodor Maske is, on the one hand, a conventional and highly conservative member of the lower middle class who would never openly contravene conventional morality, but who at the same time dreams of doing so clandestinely. His new source of income not only ensures a regular Sunday roast, but also gives him the material wealth and confidence to take a mistress in the form of the woman next door and simultaneously start a family of his own. Hypocrisy is the order of the day and anything goes in terms of personal satisfaction and private profit as long as appearances can be kept up. In Bochum the leading role of Theodor Maske was taken by a well-known television star, Dietmar Bär, whose corpulent presence and comic talents matched the role perfectly. Luise Maske (Xenia Snagowski) is usually played as an extremely attractive young woman oozing innocent eroticism. Here the director of the play, Anselm Weber (who is also the theatre's Intendant), chose to present the character as a dowdy, downtrodden housewife in an apron and

conventional haircut, thereby emphasizing the gap between her decidedly unerotic aura and the fevered fantasies of the two gentlemen who had caught a brief glimpse of her underpants before she stuffed them in her pocket.

While *The Underpants* provided a highly entertaining prelude to the evening, the second "act," *The Snob*, was several degrees nastier in its effect. The play is set some quarter of a century later in the drawing room of a villa, here vulgarly furnished with a stag's head, a zebra skin, and an elephant's foot serving as a waster-paper bin. Maske's son, Christian, (Felix Rech), a successful businessman, is ruthlessly intent on abandoning his nondescript background and moving up the social ladder. To do this, he has paid off his parents for the costs incurred by his upbringing—with interest, of course!—and dispatched them to live in Zurich. Having pumped his mistress Sybille Hull for money and lessons in etiquette he casually discards her in favor of marrying the daughter of an impoverished aristocrat. In order to further increase his aristocratic status, Christian now claims that he is the product of an affair between his mother (recently deceased) and a member of the French nobility. Could there be a better recipe for social status than entrepreneurial

success and an aristocratic background?

In the third play, *1913*, the aging Christian Maske von Buchow (as he is now known) is the head of a large industrial concern involved in arms manufacturing. Although in his seventies and in frail health, he still insists on keeping the reigns in his own hands despite the intrigues of his eldest daughter Sofie. His son Ernst Philip has no interest in the family business and prefers to spend his life in Bohemian circles, while his favorite daughter Otilie turns her back on the cold financial world in favor of a more idealistic life. In many respects *1913* has a contemporary resonance: the economic elite, unregulated financial capitalism, wheeler-dealing, brute exploitation, and contempt for the needs of society at large. We are not far from the vampire world of Goldman Sachs. To drive home the parallels Reto Finger chose to write his own updated version of the play, *2013*. Finger has clearly done a lot of research and reading. This shows not only in his copious program notes and analysis but also (alas) in his text, which turned out to be little more than a short primer in modern capitalism divided into lengthy monologues interspersed with spoken choral dialogues showering us with such revelations

as "Privatize profits"/ "Spread losses" / "More for us, less for the masses"/ "Too big to fail!" (repeated three times just in case we don't get the message). These statements, as banal as they are forgettable, sadly provide the audience with no fresh insights.

The only theatrical image that remains in the mind is that of the ghost of Theodor Maske observing the proceedings unnoticed until the final scene when he accuses his son of betraying his aspirations and capitulating to the selfish attempts of his daughters to take the business into their own hands. "You aren't a Mask(e), it can't be true. A Mask(e) would have put up a fight." An evening which had started with the promise of a rich satirical investigation into human behavior motivated by individual greed and a desire for power generated by wealth-creation, finally petered out in a recitation of ideas by mouthpieces. Masks indeed. But what's a mask without a face beneath?

The theatre in Bochum must at least be congratulated for its attempt to provoke a debate on the dangers inherent in uncontrolled individualism. Even more so, because the evening consisted of plays with stories, characters, conflict, and dialogue. What else, you might object, does one expect to see in the



Sternheim's *1913*, directed by Anselm Weber. Photo: Thomas Aurin.

theatre? But in German theatre at least, over the past few years completely new forms of presentation have been relentlessly seeping into the repertoire, not only on the fringe, but also into large subsidized mainstream theatres. All this is theoretically fine because good theatre must forever be in a process of renewal. The problem comes when the so-called alternative forms begin to dominate to such an extent that any forms of "traditional" theatre are dismissed out of hand as being out-of-date, and to bring them up to date and make them "relevant" to contemporary audiences it is essential to dispense with any form of realism and psychological interpretation. Much of this has to do with a phenomenon which has become increasingly conspicuous in German theatre over the last quarter of a century; mixed-media shows. The intermixing of different art forms on stage and the dissolution of the boundaries between live and recorded performance (recorded music, film, and videos) and even between amateur and professional performers, has led to new flights of unregulated artistic expression. Might there be artistic parallels here to the social and economic global developments following the collapse of communism?

Whatever the case, most people agree that Frank Castorf, director of the Volksbühne in Berlin, was the moving force behind the introduction of video cameras and transmissions on stage alongside a rebellious new aesthetic which paid scant regard to the text and traditional characterization and more to a performative approach which might be summed up as "I'm not acting in this play because that would be a lie, so just experience the real me as I am in the present moment and forget about theatre." This might sound great. The problem is that it's a contradiction. For "experience the real me as I am" is an impossible demand. Whether I like it or not, once I am presenting "me" before an audience, I am no longer "the real me as I am" but a "performative theatrical me." And this is just as inauthentic as it is authentic.

How has the current situation come about? For some years after the Second World War, Germany's heavily subsidized state and municipal theatres were considered bastions of conservatism. Their repertoires mainly consisted of a blend of "classical" texts (Shakespeare, Schiller, Goethe, Lessing, Greek tragedies, etc.) and new plays (Rolf Hochhuth, Peter Weiss, Botho Strauss, Franz Xaver Kroetz, George Tabori). The directors were by and large men who were dedicated to using the texts to put over "moral" messages to their audiences, and most of the productions were what is known in

Germany as "*texttreu*" (faithful to the text). In fact "*texttreu*" productions of Shakespeare, for example, had more to do with following a nineteenth century tradition of Shakespeare interpretations than with what was presented to the audience in Shakespeare's age. Nonetheless, "*texttreu*" generally meant playing the text as it was written (with or without the usual cuts) in the way the director imagined the author would have wanted it. Of course there were the occasional outrageous interventions in the sixties and seventies, but in retrospect even these now look conventional and even extremely "*texttreu*."

The real revolution began after 1989, the fall of the Berlin wall, and the global development towards a media-dominated world in which first video and then the internet began to intrude into theatre. Since then, directors have slowly become the undisputed "authors" of the show, and any text there may be is used as little more than a basis for the director's visions. You only have to take a look at the daily theatre website www.nachtkritik.de to see that directorial designations are now an integral part of the critical headlines. Practically all of them speak about, for example, Peter Stein's *King Lear*, David Bosch's *Orestes*, Nichola Stemann's *Faust*, Thomas Ostermeier's *Doll's House*, Michael Thalheimer's *Jungfrau von Orleans*, and even Frank Castorf's *Götterdämmerung*, as if Shakespeare, Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus, Goethe, Ibsen, Schiller, and Wagner did not exist. Tellingly enough, the text used by David Bosch in his *Orestes* production (which begins with an obligatory video!) was an adaptation by a modern dramatist, John von Düffel. I once saw a production of the play in Bochum which opened with a twenty-five minute dialogue taken from a film by Mike Leigh. I was so perplexed I thought for a moment I had come to the wrong theatre. Was the director booed off the stage and sacked? Not on your life. She was promptly engaged to do a show in one of Berlin's major theatres.

The inflation of the director's status in Germany is mirrored in the increasing lack of regard—some would even say respect—for the work of the author. Back in the 1980s I can remember Peter Stein saying that the job of the author was to leave his text at the stage door and not be seen again until the first night. Even in his collaborations with Botho Strauss, Stein would sometimes take interpretations and approaches which were radically different from Strauss's written instructions. Nonetheless, as in all Stein's work, there was a huge degree of respect for the author. By contrast, almost all the latest generation of directors think they have a right, even a

duty, to change and cut texts at will without regard to the author's intentions or prior consent as long as this chimes with their own vision. Just a few days ago the well-known novelist Daniel Kehlmann (*Measuring the World*) walked out of a theatre in Frankfurt after witnessing all the changes and substitutions made in the first ten minutes of "his" play *The Mentor*.

Most reactions on www.nachkritik.de were unsympathetic to Mr. Kehlmann and agreed with the idea that, whether the author likes it or not, directors have the ultimate right to decide what finally goes on stage because in the end theatre is not literature. True enough. But when productions are based on a literary text, authors (let alone audiences) might reasonably hope to be able to recognize their play as it was written. Unfortunately that is not the practice of the exclusive circle of directors, both male and female, who now dominate the theatre scene in Germany. Düsseldorf recently witnessed an all-male (wouldn't all-female have been more revolutionary?) production of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The Forest of Arden consisted of little more than dung-filled straw on which the actors rolled around to get themselves equally stinking dirty, while continually grimacing, waving, and putting their tongues out at the audience. And when it finally came to Jacques's famous "All the world's a stage" speech, instead of Jacques we were presented with a group of children reciting the monologue as they marched around the stage in a line. Not to be outdone, the Schaubühne in Berlin, is currently offering a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that is little more than a series of nonstop coupling to new-wave rock in front of trashy cardboard sets. During the famous ball scene Lady Capulet appears dressed as a vagina, Juliet wears a rubber mask and an all-body skin-colored costume and when the two lovers meet for the first time they cling to each other like two octopuses covered in tinsel. The wonder is that audiences endure and often even seem to enjoy such presentations.

It is of course possible to conceive an utterly new angle on a play while miraculously retaining the spirit of the original. We only have to look at Peter Brook's legendary versions of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *King Lear* to see the truth in this. And the most amazing version of Goethe's *Faust* I ever saw was a version by Jan Bosse for the Hamburg Schauspielhaus in 2004 that began, not with the usual prologue, but with an image of Mephisto as a black-winged Lord of Darkness tumbling through the heavens to lie broken and almost inarticulate on the stage, and in which Faust

himself sat unrecognized amongst the audience until his first appearance. I would argue here that such truly authentic reinterpretations succeed because they manage to conjure up and get behind the spirit of the original text. Anything else quickly reveals itself as superficial sensationalism masquerading as originality.

Irrespective of directorial styles, however, if we look at German theatre repertoires in the current season, the trend seems to be going quite against dramatists and written plays. Instead we have an epidemic of "projects" and adaptations. The projects mostly consist of documentary examinations of contemporary life, mostly in the town or city in question, and related to the sordid underbelly of urban life, whether this be prostitution, homelessness, unemployment, or drug addiction. The usual procedure is for the people in question to be interviewed, upon which their statements are edited and pasted together to form an evening of monologues. In some cases actors get to play these monologues. But in others, the protagonists themselves, most of whom have never been inside a theatre, let alone performed on a stage, are invited to speak to us in person. Thus, as in the outside world, full-time expensive professional skills can be dispensed with in favor of temporarily employed untrained workers paid at the lowest rates. This is truly a case of theatre mirroring neoliberal capitalist society. The justification for such social projects seems to be that audiences, especially the elusive "new, younger" audiences will be (or should be) more eager to experience "authentic" life than a theatrical vision of reality as in plays like Gorki's *Lower Depths* or Edward Bond's *Saved*. A less obvious reason might be that directors are no longer interested in traditional storytelling, or that both they and the actors no longer have the necessary tools to tackle the complexities of characterization. A more cynical explanation might be that projects and adaptations are an easy way for the directors to increase their not inconsiderable fees by creaming off royalties as the creators or even writers of the show. Professional skills are ignored in the interest of personal profit. But do audiences really prefer such shows? Isn't theatre more about escaping the banalities of everyday life and showing us the world from more visionary and imaginative perspectives?

The other disturbing trend in this season's German repertoire is the massive amount of new adaptations of books, most of all by Kafka, and films. As a result, dramaturgs have been inundating play agents, not for plays, but with requests to

acquire the dramatization rights to adapt a novel or movie and sometimes even a work of non-fiction. If new plays are to be ignored in such a way, one might reasonably expect an agent to insist that, as a quid pro quo, the theatre in question uses one of its writers to adapt the work. I have yet to hear of such a case. All this might be acceptable if the results made exciting theatre. But more often than not, the outcome is a series of unstructured, overlong, tedious, out-front narrations and commentaries with little dialogue, sometimes dressed up with avant-garde clichés. Indeed sometimes the adaptations are so obscure and associative that audiences have to have studied the original work in detail to be able to get anything out of the evening at all.

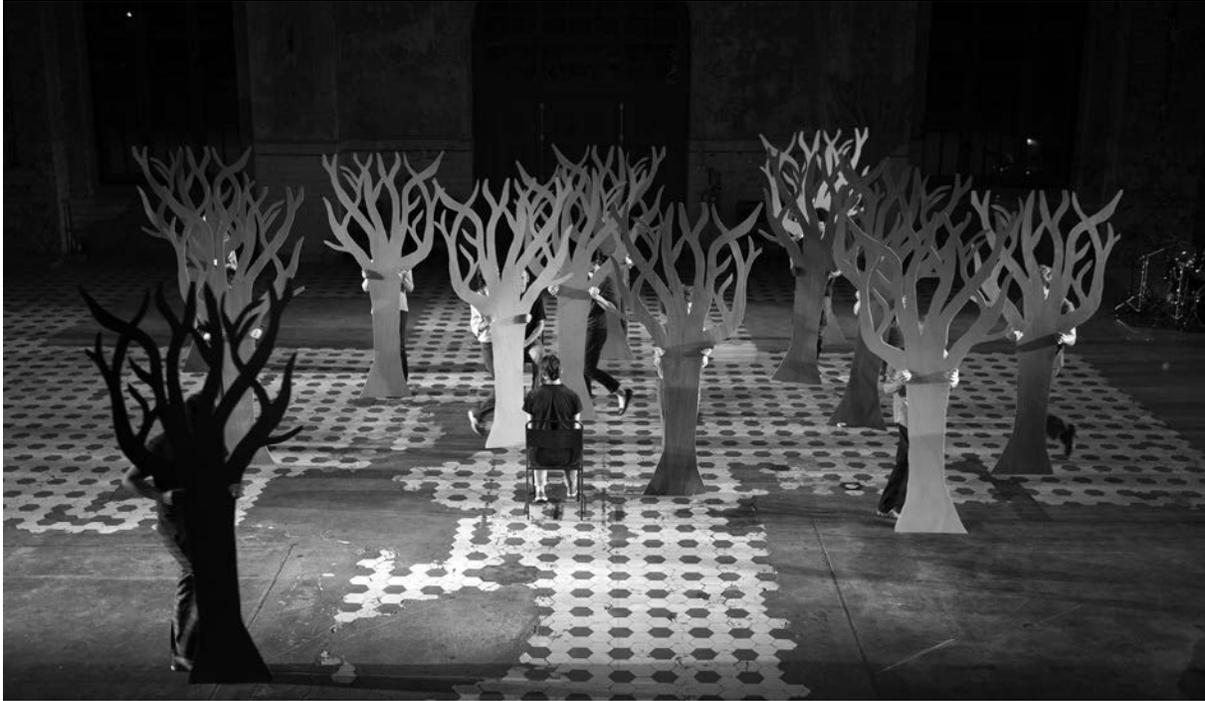
The Ruhrtriennale in North-Rhine Westphalia is famous for being at the cutting edge of performance art, and over the years I have seen some truly remarkable productions there. So I thought I would take a look at a selection of this year's shows to take the temperature of the latest trends in theatre. The Intendant responsible for the current three year cycle is the renowned avant-garde composer and director Heiner Goebbels. It was therefore no surprise to see how much the program was biased towards music. The much publicized highlight of

the festival was the European premiere of a piece of music theatre, *Delusion of the Fury*, by the US composer Harry Partch (1901-74). Partch was one of the great outsiders in twentieth century American music. Nevertheless during his lifetime he was rated on a par with John Cage by musicians as far apart as György Ligeti and Frank Zappa. Not only did he reject the Eurocentric canon of music in favor of the richer polyphonies of Eastern tone systems, he lived for many years as a hobo travelling the freeways and railroads of the States and writing a diary on his experiences.

Not content with declaring his utter dissatisfaction with conventional instruments and notation—a Partch "octave" consisted of a forty-three tone scale—he proceeded to construct a whole armory of huge, mostly percussive alternatives including Cloud Chamber Bowls, the Chromelodeon, the Quadrangularis Reversum and the Zymo-Xyl to take account of his compositions. Given the need for such instruments, it is no wonder that his works are so seldom performed. Thanks to massive funding the Ruhrtriennale was able to commission Thomas Meixner and a team of instrument builders to reconstruct no less than thirty-two percussive instruments, and give the musicians from the



FC Bergman's *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*. Photo: Silbermann. Courtesy of Ruhrtriennale.



Forced Entertainment's *The Last Adventures*, directed by Tim Etchells. Photo: Courtesy of Ruhrtriennale

excellent musikFabrik ensemble in Cologne the necessary time to learn to play them. At the premiere the different oversized instruments made up an integral part of the set. At times their partially lit silhouettes stood out against the background like colliery winding-towers and miners' washroom hangers. Flanked by the instruments, winding steps led down towards a small pool reminiscent of a Japanese garden. Huge black inflated pipes protruded onto the stage like gigantic tree roots, giving the impression that the musicians were in some sort of hellish cave far below the surface of the earth.

My coal mining associations were confirmed by the twenty-one musicians, many of whom appeared to be wearing protective helmets. No bowties and coattails here: rather shirt sleeves and jeans and hard-working musicians dashing up and down from one instrument to the next. Deliberately so, for Partch envisaged his musicians as playing roles "in a visual or acting sense": theatre had to combine with music so that the theatre embodied the music. Hence Partch's term for his art: corporeal music. As with his music, Partch took his theatrical influences more from the East. Ancient Greek theatre and Noh theatre in particular influenced him greatly. Indeed the first of the two stories in *Delusion of the Fury*, that follows an eighteen minute instrumental prelude is solemn and Japanese in tone, whereas the second is African and farcical in spirit. Both are

non-realistic and each is characterized by a sparse text mainly consisting of short arias, some of which are spoken rather than sung. In the first we witness a pilgrim in search of the shrine of a man he murdered. The ghost of the murdered man appears and sees his own son searching for a vision of his father's face. The ghost relives his torment but at the end finds reconciliation. The second play also involves reconciliation—but this time with life. A young hobo is cooking a meal on some rocks when he gets into a brief dispute with an old goatherd looking for a lost kid. Villagers force the two to appear before the local justice of the peace who is both deaf and near-sighted. The judge hands out his sentence and the chorus sings "How did we ever get by without justice?" Given the ludicrous condition of the judge it is not clear whether this is meant to be ironic or not.

Devoid of any real conflicts, the action is more epic than dramatic, while the music, a mixture of oriental sounds and percussion effects, is at first fascinating in its bizarre freshness. But as the evening continued, its relentless rhythms and minimal tone changes finally proved too much to hold my attention. The director Heiner Goebbels does his best to provide the slender narratives with some theatrical effects. But whether *Delusions of the Fury* is more an interesting piece of twentieth century musical history than an eye-opening discovery depends



Delusion of the Fury by Harry Partch. Photo: Wonge Bergmann.

on subjective reactions. The night I was there the majority of the audience were highly enthusiastic. The ninety minute show is scheduled to play at the Lincoln Festival in New York. Try to catch it for its maverick uniqueness. As a post-script I talked to some of the performers after the show about my visual associations thrown up by the set and none of them could confirm this was the designer's intention. Nor could any of them enlighten me as to what the piece was about. Who knows? In his insistence on non-realistic, privately encoded presentations which elude any definite interpretation Partch might finally be coming into his time.

A few days earlier I had gone to a playing space in the disused coking plant at the Zollverein colliery (a UNESCO "World Heritage site") to see *300 el x 50 el x 30 el*, a show put together by a young Belgian ensemble called FC Bergman, whose name combines team spirit with the filmic charisma of Ingmar Bergman. The presentation had been a surprise hit at the Klepper Festival in 2011 in Antwerp—where the company is based—and as a result the group had been catapulted into festival prominence. The events take place in a ramshackle village in a forest of inverted conifers, consisting of five or six dilapidated huts surrounding a leaf-strewn open-space at the center of which is an angler

sitting alone in front of a pond. Normally one would expect the play to proceed with the entrance of more characters onto the realistically leafy space. But here there is a cinema screen hanging above the angler's head and, thanks to a camera on a track circulating the stage, the events we see mainly take place inside the huts. In other words, we are asked to be voyeurs at second hand. And voyeurs we are, as we see an old man in bed remove blood transfusion tubes from his body before exiting across the stage and disappearing into the woods forever.

Other scenes show a man full-frontal, masturbating in a bed behind which is a painting of a naked woman, while his wife sits on a toilet trying to solve her constipation problems. A group of drunken rowdies play darts and later revel in a bloody replay of a William Tell shooting. A lonely soldier practices war games with his pistol and then makes love to a woman from one of the other huts. A child captures a living pigeon and hacks its head off. The camera continues to move round and round in increasingly faster circles. At some point, the performers begin to gather on stage and the angler finally catches something: not a fish, but the decomposing corpse of a dead lamb which is then hoisted above his head to drip relentlessly through the rest of an eighty minute evening which contained not a single piece

of dialogue. In the end, the lonely soldier appears to blow himself up and the stage is covered in debris and dust. The cast then appear onstage to be joined by no less than eighty local children who proceed to jump around to loud pop music.

What does it all mean? Nobody was even able to explain to me the meaning of the title. Even its subtitle "a theatre play about things we don't see" was a misnomer. Firstly, it was nothing other than a filmed performance, and secondly, we did indeed see everything in close-up graphic detail. The program notes provide little help: "We are working in images because words are never enough to tell what we want to tell," or "I like the way of storytelling when people have to fill in their own words and thoughts." And most depressing of all, "We know that it [theatre] is useless ... like everything is useless... in this world... Things happen and in the end they are all gone." Too true. The performance happened and then was gone.

The third show I saw at this year's Triennale also arrived with a fanfare of trumpets and drums. This was another eighty minute nonstop

show called *The Last Adventures* performed by the British group Forced Entertainment under the direction of Tim Etchells and with computerized music by the Lebanese composer Tarek Atoui. Forced Entertainment usually uses a lot of text in their shows. But here what text there was (written by Etchells) was all concentrated at the start of the show when the sixteen actors (five permanent members of the company and eleven so-called guest performers) gathered on stage like a school class sitting on chairs to repeat in rote a series of absurd phrases spoken by two "teachers" opposite them. "A door cannot remember." "A hand cannot see." "A river cannot sing." After about ten minutes the actors began to disperse with their chairs to the side of the stage and each picked up a large emblematic tree. There then followed a ten minute sequence where they walked back and forth and between each other to the bangs and crackling of computerized music. The tree sequence was then slowly replaced by the actors marching around with mops and golf clubs across their shoulders and saucepans on their heads playing war games, with some of them dying



Delusion of the Fury by Partch. Photo: Wonge Bergmann

swathed in long red strips of cloth. People in skull and skeleton costumes encounter courtly ladies and robots meet dragons. An axe chases a tree and then the tree chases the axe.

I'm sure this was all great fun in improvised rehearsals, but at the performance I saw, there were no lighting effects, the musician was not Tarek Atoui but a man called Uriel Barthélemy, and worst of all, the performers seemed to be totally bored by what they were doing. And who can blame them? I had plenty of associations, but that's the trouble with shows in which there is no definable subjective position from which the productions emanate. They can mean anything you like. Etchells clearly had a well-paid commission before he started work on the show, and I guess he had to produce something or hand back the loot. Heiner Goebbels can surely do better than this.

Interestingly enough, there has also been a similar trend towards associative performances and projects in Poland over the past few years. But in 2012 this led to a vehement reaction from the Modjeska Theatre in Legnica who launched a three year program in favor of a return to "storytelling theatre." Supported by a group of prominent directors (Leszek Bzdyl, Andrzej Celiński, Piotr Cieplak, Łukasz Czuj, Agnieszka Glińska, Paweł Kamza, Marcin Liber, Lech Raczak, Ondrej Spišák, Piotr Tomaszuk, Adam Walny, and Linas M. Zaikauskas), the theatre issued a manifesto that claimed that the current crisis of communication between one human being and another has led to... "the breakdown of interpersonal relations and a commercialization of culture" and that these are equally painful to people irrespective of where they live in the world. "This is the reason we wish to stress that our theatre will be a theatre of universal tales, open to everyone. We want to follow individual lives, tell stories about humans

that portray both the beauty of differences between people and the value of unanimity. This is the only way for a theatre to be authentic and sought after... We believe that the replacement of the ancient model of storytelling by loose collages of images, clichés, and performances is detrimental in its results because it denies the audience any deeply-rooted reactions, an identification with history, and a confrontation of viewpoints. It breaks the bond between the present and the past, between generations and between contemporaries. By contrast, we are not afraid of emotions in the theatre... We believe there is a direct connection between storytelling and emotions. We do not want to and will not build a theatre that considers it banal to present stories with a beginning, a middle and an end, that have a protagonist and a rationally discernible meaning... Art as a mirror of reality practically does not exist today: it is easier to mirror the shallows and kitsch. We want to reflect more beautiful, varied, and ambiguous worlds. Not those that are plastic, garish and already downright boring..."

For anyone ignorant of the theatre in Legnica, it might be tempting to assume that it is an insignificant small-town conservative playhouse. Far from it: over the past fifteen years, Legnica has built up an extremely challenging, radically unconventional repertoire of classic and new plays. Indeed its status within Poland is so great that its shows are regularly invited to the prestigious annual Warsaw Theatre Meeting and other festivals in Eastern Europe. In autumn 2013 the theatre is even touring to Argentina with a sensational new play, *The Three Furies*. Might a similar return to "storytelling" theatre—however reactionary this may sound—provide a way forward out of the crisis currently affecting German theatre?

Sofi Oksanen's *Purge* around the Baltic Sea

Pirkko Koski

Since the beginning of the 1990s and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the contacts around the Baltic Sea have been rapidly increasing. Earlier some prominent Baltic theatre directors had already become well-known names in Finland and in other Nordic countries, but their visits had been occasional and cooperation had required long formal procedures. One important example of the change was the annual Baltic Circle Festival, founded in 1996 and initiated by the small Theatre Q in Helsinki, uniting the fringe theatres around the Baltic Sea. Among all these countries, Finland and Estonia belong to the same linguistic group and the renewal of Estonian independence activated theatre connections between these countries. Sofi Oksanen's (who is both Finnish and Estonian) *Purge* and its realizations as play, novel, opera, and film reveal something of the range of recent collaborations between these countries.

Purge was premiered at the Finnish National Theatre in 2007. After that Oksanen rewrote the story as a novel and it was then translated into numerous languages and won several European prizes. Subsequently, the play was produced in many countries including the United States. In Estonia, it was first performed in 2010 in Tartu. The comparison

between the first Finnish interpretation and the Estonian one indicates how complicated the role of theatre can be when the play takes up important current political topics.

Purge focuses on the history of Estonia, which was occupied by the Soviet Union from 1940 to 1991. The events of the play are set in two time periods—the political turmoil following the Second World War and the 1990s, when the country reestablished its independence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The title refers to historical events known as purges during which ideological enemies of the Soviet system were either killed immediately or deported to Siberia. *Purge* tells the story of an Estonian woman, Aliide Truu, who was born before the Second World War and lived through the Stalinist period until Estonia reclaimed independence. The starting point of the play is 1992, when a young woman, Zara, shows up on the yard of old Aliide's house in the country. Her appearance brings back the memories and the shame Aliide has suppressed. Zara, who grew up in Siberia, ended up being abused, and fleeing from Tallinn, Estonia, she seeks refuge at her grandmother's sister's house. The flashbacks from around year 1950 show how Aliide's



Sofi Oksanen's *Purge*. Photo: Courtesy of Helsinki National Opera.



Oksanen's *Purge*. Photo: Simon Kane.

family falls apart. Young Aliide, who was also raped, saved herself by sacrificing her sister and niece—Zara's mother—during an aggressive interrogation. Aliide's moral shame makes her fear for her family's return from Siberia. At the end of the play, in the "present time," Aliide helps Zara to flee. She writes a letter to her sister in Siberia and asks the family to return. Then she sets fire to the house she has lived in.

The story was not new in Estonia. Since the 1980s, the purges as historical events have been discussed widely and it has been admitted that not only the occupiers were responsible for them. Viivi Luig wrote about the topic as early as 1985 in her novel *Seitsemäs rauhan kevät* (*The Seventh Peacetime Summer*) and returns to it briefly in her *Varjoteatteri* (*Shadow Play*) (2010/2011), where she comments that "the muddy boots of the transporters have left everlasting traces onto Estonian floors." Sofi Oksanen and Imbi Paju write in their *Kaiken takana oli pelko* (*Behind Everything was Fear*, 2009), that Estonia lost 17.5 % of its population in these purges: e.g., in 1941 about 10,000 inhabitants and in 1949 about 20,000 inhabitants were transported to Siberia. About 1,500 men were killed and 10,000 arrested of those who were hiding in the forests. Ene Mihkelson in *Ruttohautaus* (2007) writes about "fellow travelers" who "needed to do this if they wanted to live". He

condemns those who managed to escape with their parents to the West and after 1990 came back to take back their land and houses. They blame those who had to remain, as if they had not been robbed as well. In Finland, Estonian history was generally known, but it was often hidden in order to maintain a good relationship with Russia.

The world premiere of *Purge* in 2007, directed by Mika Myllyaho in Helsinki, did not highlight the historical aspects of the play. The few stage objects were stylized and did not seek to remind audiences of the historical context and the political debate in Estonia. The production emphasized the humanity of the characters and the frailty of human nature. The reviews linked this production with the director's previous work, e.g., *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* by Irish playwright Martin McDonagh and with a series of new plays staged in the small theatre space at the Finnish National Theatre, many of which included physical violence. The Finnish production highlighted the universal presence of violence in our world (only tangentially connecting it to the Estonian history) and the spectators did not react to the play emotionally, whereas when the Finnish National Theatre staged a visiting production in Estonia, the same performance created a strong emotional charge.

The production in Tartu, Estonia, in 2010

was directed by Liisa Smith, an Estonian director living in Great Britain. The interpretation was quite faithful to the stage directions. The performance tied the events to the Estonian locale. Estonian characters were depicted through psychological realism and deep understanding and the text was slightly adapted to add a stronger sense of relationship. The most violent scenes were related and, whenever violence was enacted on stage, the language was Russian. The performance showed who was the enemy in the historical story and gave psychological justification to the actions of the main character and especially her cathartic sacrifice in the end. The national slant was at the heart of the reception of the play, and the reviews stressed the authenticity of representation. Though different ideological and generational perspectives were reflected, the historical flashbacks touched many people on a personal level. This was a play about women, but instead of being metaphorical it reflected on the reality. In the cathartic final scene many people in the auditorium pulled out their handkerchiefs.

The ideological slant of the Estonian production resulted from their way of reading the play. The director said that Estonians feel that the original play text offers a black-and-white representation of events, because it's written for Finnish people. What was seen on stage is a result of the director's research into local history: "We mustn't deny the events of the past," he said, and I think it's important to remember what was done [underlining added] to the State of Estonia and Estonian people." Estonian commentators mentioned that the playwright was a foreigner, although they acknowledged that the writer had acquired an insight into the history of the country. Less attention was focused on the fact that Oksanen's mother was Estonian-born and that Oksanen had mentioned that the experiences of her own family had influenced the writing of the play. On the other hand, the director himself had been living abroad and had not experienced the recent Estonian re-evaluation of the past.

We can say that the play portrays events that are ideologically invested, if we agree with Jonathan Charteris-Black that ideology is "a belief system through which a particular social group creates the meanings that justify its existence to itself." An analysis of these productions seems to indicate that Estonian society is reluctant to view its national trauma critically on stage and that theatre makers and the audience share this stance. In fact, this was the director's choice, following a popular myth; Estonian public discussion had been more

varied, as well as was the original play and especially the novel. Resorting to such a myth justifies placing yourself within the group of victims. In Estonia, the production joined a general discussion outside the theatre on the "real" history, although the performance as such had few debatable features. On the other hand, the strong focus on the actual history and on the collective memory dispelled most aesthetic discussion and the evaluation of the performance as theatre.

The world premiere of the play in Finland was less ideological, which is supported by the fact that the production was associated with theatrical tradition. As a theatrical production, it had been distanced from the reality of the spectator, which made it possible to examine the events from a distance—and perhaps it was easier to take it in as a universal depiction of personal existential contradictions—in other words, as an object of identification. Locating the play explicitly in Estonia worked better due to the general knowledge of the historical facts and the Estonian poems included in the program rather than the performance itself. The fictional characters remained, indeed, fictional—they didn't represent the whole of any certain nation.

In these productions, the question of history is linked with the concept of genre. The printed version of *Purge* has been named a tragedy, but the writings on the play refer to the play as a melodrama more often than a tragedy. The play includes murder and rape, betrayal of and love for fellow humans as well as an ideological social order. Even though the play includes tragic elements, it cannot easily be interpreted as a tragedy. In melodrama, the fear of the enemy is at least as important as pity for the tragic main character. Those who are regarded as victims of injustice receive reconciliation in melodrama. In Tartu, the reviews didn't take a position about what would have been "right" in history, but treated the events as a sort of a myth, arousing a collective emotion. One reviewer who analyzed the performance as a melodrama compared its workings with the way Hollywood films defuse social tension. The world premiere of *Purge* presented the play as inspiring a sense of pity for all human beings. Alienation through theatrical representation and conceptualization invites commiseration for suffering rather than condemnation of the enemy. Thus the question of collective guilt loses its weight, and the work begins to shift toward tragedy.

In fact, the interpretation of *Purge* in Estonia does not resemble the general recent portrayals of Estonian society. Many highly praised

performances have been quite critical of this society and have employed new, often post-dramatic performance techniques. However, this indicates the difficulty of discussing nationally contested topics, and in this case removing the play from its original location allowing for more freedom in choosing one's viewpoint. This can be seen, for example in the La MaMa production of *Purge* in New York in 2011, directed by Zishan Ugurlu. It stayed away from suggesting a specific national locale even though it showed the events concretely through theatrical means and directly under the eyes of the audience. There was no house in the space; the space was constructed through movement and dialogue. The director expressed her goal in these terms "I believe a woman's body in this play is a metaphor for an occupied country which has been stuck by an asteroid, by the power of the male dominated political structures, ideology and secret violence. Under occupation, different generations of women are faced with the same challenges and they are left with impossible choices." On stage, the dominant masculinity of the male characters erased the national features that would tone down the aggression, and the female perspective was also created in general terms. At the La MaMa Theatre, pathos was shown to the audience at a close range, but with stylized exaggeration. The story was stripped of explanations and detailed decorations, leaving only the essential on stage. The representation, however, had its shortcomings. In the context of American society, the social problems instigated by the turmoil in European countries do not carry the same meaning as in Europe, and even though the La MaMa production recognized the political metaphor, the female body in it ultimately became transparent and began to represent a "greater" metaphoric concept: turning from the incident of rape to the actions of nations and of war as a whole.

It was surprising to see how the operatic version of *Purge* managed to link together the national narrative and the aesthetic power of a stage production. The production at the National Opera in Helsinki in 2012 was a cooperation between

the dramatist and a young Estonian composer, Jüri Reinvere, who was responsible for score, libretto and direction. He wanted to pay homage to classical opera, and he emphasized the open discussion seen in Estonia: "I claim that the past can only become the past," he claimed, "when we have faced it eye to eye." In the end, the pathos in opera made the tragedy more visible. The use of the chorus, for example, distanced the storyline and gave the national references wider dimensions. To a theatre researcher who is not an opera expert the music did not appear as typically operatic; instead, the challenging music for the soloists and chorus and common spectator especially was an extra distancing feature and made the message stronger: the fate appeared as unavoidable.

The Finnish film *Puhdistus*, directed by Antti Jokinen, also in 2012, was a Finnish-Estonian cooperation and cast with well-known Finnish actors. It did not raise any serious topical discussion, possibly because of the genre or because many others had already discussed the topics more critically and deeply. In a way *Purge* returned to where it began: as a representative of its art, in this case film instead of theatre.

Sofi Oksanen's next novel was published in 2012 and will be staged as a play at the National Theatre of Finland in late 2013. It also discusses war-time Estonian history and the years after that. This time the play came after the novel, not the other way around. The new novel has not raised similar international interest to that of *Purge*, and Estonian history as a topic does not call for the sort of strong implicit physicality that was found in the former novel, written after the play. That physicality seems to have made *Purge* effective, even when the national history becomes more distant – by also making the history familiar. This situation also recalls Sofi Oksanen's interview in the beginning, often forgotten later. She then said that she decided to write the play after having read about women during the Balkan war, and chose Estonia as topic because she knew its past and present.

Madrid Theatres Open Doors to Living Spanish Playwrights

Phyllis Zatlin

New Policy at the María Guerrero

In past issues of *WES*, I have overtly lamented the relative absence of living Spanish playwrights from Madrid's public stages: the National Drama Center (CDN) and the municipal Teatro Español [*WES* 12.1, Winter 2000; 12.3, Fall 2000]. My failing to place the problem center stage later did not mean it had disappeared. In 2012-13, however, with playwright/director Ernesto Caballero (born 1957); [*WES* 18.3, Fall 2008] at the CDN helm, the national stage is actively promoting the nation's dramatists. Prior to assuming this position in January 2012, Caballero announced that Valle-Inclán (1866-1936) and García Lorca (1898-1936) would be pillars of his programming; this year he has turned to contemporary authors. The season began with *Los conserjes de San Felipe (Cádiz 1812)*, a history play by José Luis Alonso de Santos (born 1942). Because the María Guerrero was still under renovation, that production took place in the Teatro Español. During my week of theatre-going, starting Easter Sunday, I

was able to see two excellent Spanish plays at the María Guerrero: *Kafka enamorado* by Luis Araújo (born 1956) and *Transición*, co-written by Alfonso Plou (born 1964); [*WES* 12.3, Fall 2000; 23.2, Spring 2011] and Julio Salvatierra (born 1964).

The CDN has two playhouses and rotates plays in each of them. *Kafka enamorado* ran 15 March to 28 April; *Transición* from 8 March to 7 April. With multiple playing spaces, productions limited to several weeks, and a strong emphasis on Spanish authors, Caballero has indeed offered a new opportunity to many of his fellow playwrights. Araújo affirms that this kind of welcome had never existed previously in the national theatre.

Araújo's recent triumph at the María Guerrero was preceded in 2008 by *Mercado libre* (Free Market) at the Teatro Español. The playwright had sent scripts over the years to Mario Gas, a much admired Catalan director who headed the Madrid municipal theatre 2004-2012. Araújo recalls that he submitted eight to ten texts, to no avail. But Gas read *Mercado libre* when he served as a judge for a



Kafka enamorado by Luis Araújo. María Guerrero National Theatre. Photo: Marta Vidanes

play contest with anonymous entries. He liked the work enough to produce it; in turn, Araújo says its success opened the doors of the Teatro Español to other contemporary Spanish authors.

A theatre critic in one newspaper affirmed that Araújo's arrival on the CDN stage was an opportunity to celebrate a playwright who had not been performed as much as his plays merited. Indeed Araújo, like many of the playwrights of his generation, has had to struggle to reach audiences, even before the current economic crisis. A native of Madrid, he remembers a childhood in a family of modest means whose situation was complicated by his grandfather's imprisonment after the Civil War because he had fought on the losing Republican side. Araújo's teenage years at a Catholic seminary in Segovia introduced him to classic theatre and convinced him he did not want to enter the priesthood. He was fifteen when he returned to Madrid and sixteen when he began his university studies. At the Complutense University, he became involved in theatre groups, an activity he continued after graduation even though he needed to work to support himself. His immersion into the theatre world came with an acting role for Tábano, one of Spain's outstanding independent theatre companies. Like many other young authors, he also wrote children's theatre.

When he found his possibilities in Spain limited, Araújo went to France, where for a short time he was associated with the prestigious Jean Luis Barrault-Madeleine Renaud company. From France he moved to Canada, where he stayed for two years, working in Quebec theatre and teaching acting classes at the University of Montreal. He returned to Madrid in 1991, greatly enriched by his experiences abroad.

Araújo states that his exposure to another culture and to French-language theatre has been invaluable. *Kafka enamorado* (Kafka in Love), in my opinion, is a play that would function well for French audiences. At the María Guerrero, it was staged in the Sala de la Princesa, the playhouse's little theatre. Because of a required duration of about an hour, it was performed in an abbreviated version of the original text. The production, directed by José Pascual, who also suggested the title that deliberately mirrors the film *Shakespeare in Love*, runs so smoothly that spectators would not realize there had been cuts, and the intimate space is perfect for this three-actor script. The play and the outstanding cast have been enthusiastically received by audience and critics.

Kafka enamorado was slotted in a cycle labeled from novel to theatre, but Araújo has not written a stage version of Kafka's fiction. Rather he has sought, through letters that the author wrote from 1912 to 1917, to give expression to a romantic relationship between Franz Kafka and Felice Bauer. The focus is not political history as it was in his earlier play *Vanzetti* (English translation by Mary Alice Lessing), but the strategy of extensive research and use of the title character's correspondence is similar. In both cases, Araújo read extensively in order to understand his characters' time periods and family circumstances but always with the idea of finding the contemporary implications of history. These two plays also reveal Araújo's interest in subjects that transcend Spain's boundaries.

There is great temporal and spatial fluidity in *Kafka enamorado*. Original music, composed by Luis Delgado, underscores much of the action, following Franz's emotions in cinematographic fashion. Pilar Velasco's lighting likewise guides the spectator, as does the single set, designed by Alicia Blas Brunel. Consisting of slats, like decking, both for the floor and vertically on stage and extending along the side walls into the auditorium, the open slits between pieces allow spectators to see upstage action simultaneously with what is happening downstage. There are additional openings for a window and doorways. For example, stage left, we can see Felice dancing even as Franz remains center stage, reluctant to join into the engagement party merriment.

Jesús Noguero portrays the anguished Franz Kafka, who both loves Felice and fears that any romantic entanglement will detract from his writing. Beatriz Argüello doubles as Felice and her friend Grete, with whom Franz has a brief love affair before his sexual encounter with his fiancée. To make the transition from one woman to the other, Argüello moves to a doorway stage right, turns her back to the audience, and changes costumes. Chema Ruiz not only plays Max Bond, Franz's loyal friend and editor who introduced him to Felice, but, with appropriate costume changes, also the tailor who prepares him for his engagement party, a uniformed officer in the street who threatens him, and a bellhop in a hotel in Marienbad where Franz and Felice escape together for ten days in adjoining, interconnected bedrooms. Red lighting is used to highlight that romantic interlude.

Felice Bauer is a successful, independent businesswoman who travels a great deal. Among the commendable aspects of Rosa García Andújar's



Chema Ruiz and Jesús Noguero in *Kafka enamorado*, María Guerrero National Theatre. Photo: Marta Vidanes.

costume design is the shift in Felice's appearance from the conservative dark blue jacket and long skirt she wears in the opening scenes—the equivalent of a power suit from a century ago—to a feminine, summery, light gray dress she dons after the Marienbad tryst.

The failure of Franz Kafka's romance may be attributed both to his belief that marriage would destroy his creativity and to his father's interference in his life. Although the latter aspect is downplayed in the shortened stage version of the text, Franz's emotional struggle is fully apparent in Pascual's stunning production. Araújo told me that the audience when I attended on Tuesday, 2 April, was relatively cold; on other evenings, he reported that spectators had left crying. Even without tears, applause from the full house called for repeated curtain calls.

The major clue to Franz's conflict with his father is provided in the opening scene. Downstage right, Franz, presumably locked in a bathroom, covers his face while his father yells at him to open the door and get ready to go swimming, an activity Franz truly hates. Felice will later hit a sensitive chord when she unwittingly suggests that she and Franz go for a swim.

The prime source for Araújo's text are letters, which are read aloud to the audience. This strategy could lead to a static performance, but author and director cleverly avoid that pitfall, thus converting passive reading into dramatic action. In several scenes, Franz and Felice, separated geographically, are at opposite sides of the stage and, as writer and recipient, take turns reading fragments of letters. Lighting draws attention from one to the other. Felice is an active woman, constantly in motion, in contrast to Franz, who is or wishes to be immersed in his anguished inner world. For brief moments that inner world emerges on stage in allusions to Kafka's fiction: when the man in uniform questions him and when he wakes up from a dream in which he has become an insect.

Temporal fluidity also leads to scenes in such varied places as train stations, hotels, homes, and a tailor shop. The lighting design reinforces shifts evoked by the actors. Changing scenes at times lead to comic moments. The most extended one is of a reluctant Franz being fitted by the tailor for the suit he will wear to the engagement party. Franz won't hold still for measurements and even ducks out from under the tie the tailor is trying to put on him.

Not only do Argüello, Noguero, and Ruiz turn in outstanding performances, but, as revealed by photos on the CDN website, the two male actors in performance bear striking facial resemblances to the historical figures they portray (Franz and Max). The effort visually to represent accurately well-known personalities is somewhat less apparent in *Transición* although the king is the tallest actor in the cast and the communist leader is appropriately short and wears glasses.

The transition in question is Spain's transformation to democracy after the long Franco dictatorship (1939-1975). The production treats, in detail, recent Spanish history, with emphasis on 1975 to 1981. Besides referring to later public events, the actors present behind-the-scenes efforts by then Prince Juan Carlos (Carlos Lorenzo) and the future president Adolfo Suárez (Antonio Valero) to liberalize Spain. Also portrayed are efforts to reach compromise with Santiago Carrillo (Eugenio Villota), leader of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), which was outlawed during the Franco years. Because the text is so connected to the post-Franco government, *Transición* is the only play of the five I saw in Madrid that is local, not universal, in theme and therefore not likely to travel abroad.

The authors and directors involved in this collective project, however, were aiming for Spanish spectators who might not remember or perhaps were too young to have experienced the major changes that were guided by Adolfo Suárez, as the first democratically elected president of the new era. They believe it is essential to know about that period in order to understand the present. Key team members range in age from forty-two to forty-eight and hence had to research carefully a past they lived themselves as children and adolescents.

Transición is a joint production of the CDN in Madrid with L'Om Imprebis (Valencia), Teatro Meridional (Madrid), and Teatro del Temple (Zaragoza), a unique collaboration for Spain. The co-directors, Carlos Martín and Santiago Sánchez, are from Zaragoza and Valencia, respectively. Alfonso Plou is a founding member of Teatro del Temple in his native Zaragoza and Julio Salvatierra, the other co-author, is from Granada and a founding member of Teatro Meridional. Plou states that the idea for the project began with the three groups, who formed a working team, and was already developed when their proposal was presented to the CDN. The authors worked together half on the internet and half in person. Sixteen actors participated in preliminary workshops in Madrid; that number was reduced to

the outstanding cast of eight for the final production. The cast's fine achievement as an ensemble reveals noteworthy singing and dancing talents.

Rehearsals began in September. Prior to the March premiere at the 450-seat main stage of the María Guerrero, *Transición* successfully toured to various provincial cities, starting in November 2012. The text, which runs an hour and thirty minutes, without intermission, was not cut by the Centro Dramático Nacional; there were only the usual minor changes that arose in rehearsal. Like Luis Araújo, Alfonso Plou warmly praises Ernesto Caballero for inviting Spanish authors to the national theatre.

When I saw *Transición*, on Friday, 5 April, two days before the end of its Madrid run, the orchestra seats were all taken, as were some of the balcony ones. The audience was enthusiastic. The Spanish friend who went with me and other spectators near me smiled and laughed appreciatively not only at jokes but also at TV commercials and songs from the end of the Franco era and the *movida* period of new freedoms following Franco's death. The friend, a retired teacher, believes that young Spaniards could have trouble capturing all the allusions. Spectators our evening did not appear to have that problem and critical reception, as reported in *La guía del ocio*, Madrid's entertainment guide, has been very favorable. A continuing tour of the play will no doubt fulfill the goal of making Spaniards of several generations think again about the late 1970s.

Transición is a satirical commentary on Spanish political history, perhaps inspired by works of the Catalan group Els Joglars, but on a deeper level it is also reminiscent of the psychological expressionism of Antonio Buero Vallejo (1916-2000). The central figure, Adolfo, is a patient in a mental health clinic. His memories, real or imagined, are visualized on stage. Indeed the translucent set designed by Dino Ibáñez and consisting of dozens of square panels, each divided into twenty-four smaller squares, immediately evoked for me the set of long, vertical panels divided into small squares, created by Vicente Vela for the original 1974 production of Buero's *La Fundación* (*The Foundation*, trans. Marion P. Holt).

There are many humorous moments in the play and considerable parody of political figures except for Adolfo. Other actors change rapidly among roles; Valero is the only one in the cast (six men and two women) generally limited to a single role. Nevertheless, it is not intended for his portrayal to be historically true in absolute terms. As Jaime Salom (1925-2013); [WES 20.2, Spring 2008]

pointed out to me with reference to his own history plays, theatrical truth must take precedence over historical truth.

The theatrical structure of *Transición* is extremely complicated. The dramatic present takes place in the early 21st century. On the one hand, a man named Adolfo, who may be suffering from Alzheimer's, has just been admitted to a special clinic. On the other hand, there is a televised debate on the transition held thirty years after the historical events—most likely in 2001. The patient Adolfo evokes from memory that debate, along with a series of episodes beginning before Franco's death.

Whether the memories are his is also a matter of debate; late in the play he is identified as Adolfo Martínez, a fictional usher at the congressional building who has been a great admirer of Adolfo Suárez and a witness to the unsuccessful military coup of 23 February 1981. That explanation, never fully confirmed, allows the production to deal freely with the historical Adolfo Suárez, who was admitted to a clinic in 2003 with apparent Alzheimer's.

The set is of primary importance in this creative, entertaining, and at times beautiful production. In the opening scene, a snowy television screen appears in a panel, stage right. Adolfo

watches that screen and hears voices until the screen disappears and the action shifts to a television studio. A young woman, Inés (Elvira Cuadrapani), whose knowledge of the Suárez era comes from her academic studies, is debating Adolfo himself, who disparages her information. The male moderator (Álvaro Lavin) tends to cut the young woman off, but Adolfo is clearly more frustrated than she because of what he considers misinformation being given to the Spanish public. The repeated request from the two female actors (Cuadrapani and Eva Martín), in this scene and others, that women's issues be taken into consideration, is noticeably ignored.

In fragmentary fashion, the debate will continue at two other moments. Adolfo's dreams or memories, in keeping with stream of consciousness, are not linear. All of the cast members, except Adolfo, also have functions in the TV crew. Highlights of the performance are sequences of singing and dancing that may involve all of them. The history lesson that served as initial inspiration for the production is lightened by those sequences.

Inés is a nurse in the clinic, along with other roles from Adolfo's past. The moderator will later play Felipe González, leader of the socialist party (PSOE) who served as prime minister 1982-



Transición by Alfonso Plou and Julio Salvatierra, María Guerrero National Theatre. Photo: David Ruano.

96, as well as Dr. González. In Adolfo's mind, the clinic staff and other patients will be transformed into members of his family and historical figures. When Adolfo has drifted into the past or fantasy, it falls to the other actors to jar him back to present reality by identifying themselves. The shifts from patient to historical figure, aided by lighting effects, are typically done in comic tone.

In one of the funniest scenes, labeled *deliria* in the published text, the medieval hero El Cid (Balbino Lacosta), his daughter Elvira (Martín), and Franco's widow Carmen Polo de Franco (Cuadrapani) inexplicably appear. Humor is foregrounded by their costumes, designed by Elena Sánchez Canales. El Cid wears an ancient helmet but has on a soccer shirt; his cape is the national flag, with a bull replacing the usual shield. Elvira's colorful dress is made of fabric that includes flags from the contemporary autonomous regions. Carmen wears black widow's weeds and a veil. In this wild parody, a civil guard (Lavin), weapon in hand, demands identification from these visitors from the past. A civil guard with a drawn gun is certainly a familiar stereotype, but asking the dictator's widow for her national identity card is surprising and hence causes laughter. (Americans might compare it to asking Barack Obama for an ID so he could vote in the 2012 election.)

The delirium scene also introduces songs in the regional languages, with a translator (José Luis Esteban) aiding the civil guard in understanding the lyrics. Notable among these is the Valencian singer Raimon (Valero), whose "Al vent" (Al viento), was written in 1959 and launched in 1963 as an expression of opposition to the Franco regime. A song in the Basque language, made famous by Imanol, no doubt needs translation for many Spaniards but the Valencian lyrics are so close to Castilian Spanish that the guard's failure to understand can also provoke laughter on a par with his failure to recognize historical and political figures.

The upper panels of the set are used for projections of actual news clips that add to historical background. The first of these is an October 1975 speech by Francisco Franco. The television moderator wants the sound deleted and says the less seen of Franco the better. That intervention also makes clear that "live television" is being faked. The "live" debate is recorded and can be revised as needed.

The last of the news clips is of Gonzalo Torrente Ballester (1910-99), a noted writer from Galicia of fiction, essays, and, in his youth, theatre

criticism. Torrente's speech should resonate in the contemporary world with Americans as well as Spaniards. He affirms that in a democracy everyone should pay his or her just taxes without deceptions.

The upper panels are also used to add beauty to the stage set. They become a starlit night near the end of the production when the patient Adolfo sits looking up at the moon. Most impressive in this respect is a final scene, when the full panels, stage right and upstage, project a lovely garden where Adolfo, emerging from his dream world, enjoys working with plants. In the touching last moments, the garden disappears, and the translucent set is bathed in blue light as the tall figure of King Juan Carlos, his back turned to the audience, aids Adolfo in walking upstage.

Of the five outstanding productions I saw during my week of theatre-going in Madrid, *Transición* has the largest cast. It shares with all of the other plays a relatively short duration, run without intermissions, as well as moments of humor, and, with most of them, an extended use of music and cinematographic devices.

Welcome at Commercial Stages

In the week beginning 31 March 2013, it was not difficult to find interesting plays by Spanish authors on the commercial stages of Madrid. One newspaper critic affirmed that in 2013 more of the nation's living playwrights were being produced in Madrid than ever before, in spite of the continuing economic crisis. The three excellent productions that I saw were *Hombres de 40* (*Men in Their 40s*), by Eduardo Galán (born 1957); [WES 18.3, Fall 2006; 19.2, Spring 2007; 23.2, Spring 2011], *La visita* (*The Visit*) by Antonio Muñoz de Mesa (born 1972), and *Hermanas* (*Sisters*) by Carol López (born 1969). All of these, like the two plays I saw at the María Guerrero National Theatre, are relatively short works, running an hour and a half or less. All address contemporary social issues, are marked by surface humor, are episodic in structure, and, to varying extents, incorporate cinematic techniques.

Galán's play was directed by his frequent collaborator Mariano de Paco Serrano at the 500-seat Marquina. On Easter Sunday, the theatre was only half full but *Hombres de 40* has been playing to larger audiences since its opening in Madrid on 14 March, after touring provincial cities starting in late November 2012. Critics have given high praise to the production and its author, some even suggesting that it is his best work to date. When it reached its

fiftieth performance, *Secuencia 3*, Galán's production company, announced that the run at the Marquina was being extended.

Even in the best of times, theatre is faced with financial difficulties. In Spain today those difficulties are severe. Of great concern to *Secuencia 3* is the recent increase to twenty-one per cent in VAT (value-added tax) for theatre, film, and concert receipts, now categorized as entertainment, not culture. (Books and museums are still considered culture.) A corresponding increase in prices would certainly reduce ticket sales. The alternative of cutting into a theatre company's operating budget can also have drastic results. Galán, while continuing his active involvement with the company and writing plays, has returned to his earlier profession as a teacher. When I asked him if, because of his two full-time jobs, he has given up sleep, he replied that he still manages to get five hours a night.

Uroc Teatro, with which author-director-actor Muñoz de Mesa is associated, likewise perseveres to overcome budgetary problems. It was founded in 1985 by Juan Margallo and his wife Petra Martínez. Margallo became well-known in the Spanish theatre world for his contribution to independent companies like *Tábano* and *El Gayo*

Vallecano and for directing the internationally acclaimed Iberamerican Theatre Festival in Cádiz six times. As actors, the couple frequently stage works by Franca Rame and Dario Fo. Muñoz de Mesa is married to their daughter Olga Margallo. Uroc Teatro is a family enterprise that currently performs in one of the little theatres of the Teatro Arenal, in the center of Madrid, just steps away from the Puerta del Sol.

The Arenal Theatre, like the Marquina and the *Príncipe*, belongs to the Grupo Marquina. The consortium works together to promote productions. In the case of the Arenal, this landmark playhouse, established in 1923, has been divided into various spaces. In addition to the fifty-some-seat auditorium where Uroc rotates their plays, sometimes at two-day intervals, there is an active *café-teatro* that juggles thirty different performances, a company offering plays for children, and a larger theatre, where Neil Simon's *Los reyes de la risa* (*The Sunshine Boys*) was being staged during my stay in Madrid.

The third commercial production reviewed here, Carol López's *Hermanas*, is doing well. If anything it has exceeded the success of her 2005 work *V.O.S. (Versió Original Subtitulada; Original Version with Subtitles)*. Directed by the author,



Hermanas by Carol López. Photo: Paolo Taglioni.

Germanes opened in Barcelona in 2008, ran for more than 200 performances and, like *V.O.S.* before it, is being made into a movie. The play was awarded such important prizes as the Max for best text in Catalan and the Barcelona Critics' Prize for best direction. Since 18 January, *Hermanas* has been playing in Madrid to near capacity audiences at the 400-seat Maravillas. Moreover, its spectators tend to be younger than those at the other plays I saw.

Eduardo Galán's *Hombres de 40* has a cast of three men and one woman. The men indeed are in their forties and are faced with personal and professional crises. Carlos (Roberto Álvarez) at forty-nine is an unemployed architect worried about mortgage payments. He has become a stay-at-home dad while his wife, Mamen, an airline pilot, flies around the world, sometimes working and sometimes playing—with another man. They keep in touch with a comic series of cell phone calls. Carlos's younger brother Santi (Santiago Nogués), over several months of episodic action, leaves the priesthood, attempts to overcome his hypochondria, works out to become physically fit, and discovers the joys of sex. Javier (Francesc Galcerán) is a self-centered actor and producer who believes he will become rich and famous if only he can get enough money for his next project.

Despite the title, the central figure of the text is Eva (Diana Lázaro); at thirty-nine she is an unemployed biochemist, with a doctoral degree, who valiantly hopes to restore the boxing gym that was co-owned by her late father and the two brothers' father, also deceased. She is unhappily married to Javier. There is little communication between them now that Javier no longer hears her at all. Their relationship is as distant as that of Carlos and Mamen.

As a prologue, the four characters run downstage and speak to the audience. They discuss the concept of a mid-life crisis while remembering how optimistic they had been at thirty. This introductory direct address is somewhat related to the beginning strategy of the 2011 production of Galán's *Maniobras (Maneuvers)*, as is the reference to art. In the earlier play about the rape of a woman soldier, Eduard Manet's "Luncheon on the Grass," with its painting of a nude woman accompanied by well-clad men, is projected at the conclusion. In *Hombres de 40*, the action is framed by Carlos's intermittent work and completion of a complicated jigsaw puzzle that depicts Dalí's "The Persistence of Memory."

In the first scene, Carlos is off to one

more job interview. He calls his annoyed wife, who is several time zones away, for advice on what to wear. As he soon learns, he is not qualified for teaching positions and is overqualified to be a clerk at a department store. The solution to his economic problems, along with those of Javier, could be the sale of the gym.

A major element in the success of this production is the set, created by Verateatro, which represents an old-style boxing gym. In keeping with the boxing metaphor, scenes two through twelve are announced by a bell as if they were new rounds in a fight. According to the author, the set was inspired by the film *Million Dollar Baby*, and the background music, also heard between scenes, is taken from *Rocky* films. Another deliberate cinematic reference is the appearance of Javier, who wears glasses and a long neck scarf: any resemblance to Woody Allen is purely intentional.

Details in the set include a punching bag and two heavy bags, located to the left and between three double sets of columns that support the gym ceiling. Rear stage right is an old-style red ice chest for storing cokes.

A stunning feature of the production is the symbolic use of red for Eva's boxing gloves and for her attractive dress in the final scene when she is headed to a breast cancer operation. There is no doubt that she is a fighter, with or without her red gloves. She enters vigorously into the struggle to keep the gym going and to beat her disease.

Earlier, when Eva returns from a doctor's visit, clutching her medical results to her chest, Javier ignores her. As always, he is only thinking of his own project and thus learns nothing about her major health concern. The audience easily understands why Eva has separated from Javier and chooses Carlos instead to go with her to the hospital. At the beginning, the men are farcical, two-dimensional figures. Gradually Carlos and Santi evolve into more complete, realistic characters. Santi's changes, particularly in his clothing and what he says about his new lifestyle, are on the surface and evoke laughter. Carlos's evolution is more profound as he ceases to be Eva's antagonist and comes to share her idealistic views on preserving their fathers' heritage.

Despite serious themes about the economy and life-threatening illness, *Hombres de 40* in general is a fast-paced comedy. When Santi makes his first visit to the gym, Eva quickly wheels out a massage table. He is exaggeratedly dismayed at needing to remove clothing. His subsequent first efforts at skipping rope are humorously clumsy, in contrast to



Hombres de 40 by Eduardo Galán. Photo: Courtesy of Teatro Marquina.

Eva's well-coordinated, expert display of this boxing exercise. Nogués excels as a comic actor; there is no question that his apparent clumsiness is the result of careful training. Lázaro worked out daily at a gym during the six weeks of rehearsal and has learned to genuinely enjoy boxing. In several scenes we see her punching the heavy bags. She also took classes in physical therapy in order to handle the massage scene accurately.

Hombres de 40 is likewise marked by rapid-fire dialogue in which Galán shows his mastery of traditional devices of humor. Notable among these are repetition and word play. After the second or third cell phone gag, the audience is fully prepared to laugh: if Carlos mentions a woman's name, his wife invariably calls immediately. Carlos, following linguistic habits of his father, frequently stumbles on pronunciation or, like Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's classic comedy *The Rivals* of the eighteenth century, is guilty of using the wrong word. Eva, to spectator amusement, begins to correct him automatically.

The main story line relates to the fate of the gym, left jointly to the deceased friends' heirs. Gradually we learn that Carlos initially seeks out Eva because Javier urged him to do so: For his current theatrical venture, Javier hopes to get his

hands on his wife's inheritance to which he has no legal entitlement. When Carlos is greeted by Eva with a resounding negative to the proposal that they sell, he sends Santi to see what he can accomplish. Gradually the brothers join forces with Eva, helping her run the gym. As an architect, Carlos even drafts plans for their building's renovation.

With the disintegration of their respective marriages, Carlos and Eva are free to pursue their romantic feelings for one another, but fate intervenes in two ways. Not only is Eva now battling cancer, but in the final scene, they receive a legal notice that the building is being claimed by the city, for half its value, under public domain. The play is open ended. The audience cannot know either what the surgeons will discover when they operate or how successfully Carlos and Eva will be able to fight city hall. Spectators will leave the theatre, however, convinced that these two, as role models for all of us, will fight.

Eva has been wearing sweats throughout the action. Her hair has been pulled back. In the final scene she is radiantly attractive with beautiful, shoulder-length hair worn down and her lovely, short-skirted red dress. Even her suitcase is red, her fighting color.

I questioned Galán about Eva's hair. Given that the frightening lump had been discovered in the winter, had her surgery been delayed until May because the doctors had ordered chemotherapy first? In that case, wouldn't she have lost her hair? The author replied that the theatrical company in fact had debated how the illness and cure would realistically progress and had chosen to walk a fine line with chronology. The script required enough time to elapse for the relationship between Carlos and Eva to develop and yet not enough to raise the issue of hair loss. In our discussion afterwards, the friend who went to the play with me made no mention of it, and quite possibly I was the only spectator who was attempting to analyze breast cancer treatment. Audience response to the performance was overwhelmingly enthusiastic.

La visita, directed by the author and produced by his wife, features a cast of two: the priest (Iván Villanueva), who is in charge of a Catholic school for boys and a summer camp, and a woman insurance agent (Rosa Mariscal), who for some dozen years has handled policies for the diocese. At the outset, the priest establishes his superior position by insisting that she call him "Father;" she addresses him with the formal you (*usted*) while he speaks to

her using the informal form (*tú*). He repeatedly makes her bring a chair into his study when they meet to go over papers and he interrupts their conversations to water his plant.

In their episodic cat-and-mouse game, carried out over a period of weeks, the priest wants to add two new clauses to the policy: confidentiality and a definition of sexual abuse of children as a work-place accident. The action of Muñoz de Mesa's play takes place in Spain, but the insurance clause is based on a real lawsuit from the Netherlands in which the insurance company lost its case and was required to pay the victims' families.

Although less overtly cinematic than *Hombres de 40* and *Hermanas*, short scenes in *La visita* are reminiscent of film sequences and the passage of time is indicated by visual clues. From one episode to another, the insurance agent changes jackets, ranging from bright red at first to patterned to black. That final costume points to her now being on the same level as the man in his black clerical garment.

In another visual index of passing time and shifting relationships, the priest drinks more and more wine—from a holy chalice—and munches communion wafers. After saying no to alcohol in



La visita by Antonio Muñoz de Mesa. Photo: Courtesy of Uroc Teatro.

an early scene, the agent joins the priest in drinking, from a regular glass, and even serves herself both wine in the chalice and wafers when he is not there. She also turns the tables by beginning to water the plant for the priest, and he starts to have her chair in place at his desk. Near the end of the action, she hides his chalice in a bright red waste basket.

The lights fade out between scenes as the actors visibly move the props themselves.

The see-saw action of Muñoz de Mesa's play reveals impeccable structure built on a series of surprises. The insurance agent expresses outrage at the immoral suggestion that sexual abuse of children is a work-place accident. Later, after consulting her superiors in Barcelona, she seems to accept the proposal. When she learns that there has been a recent case of sexual abuse at the school, she is once again angered; her own son is a student there. After questioning her child, she is sure he was not victimized, but her anger returns when the priest wants to include summer camp in the policy. The recent rape, which he hopes the policy will cover retroactively, took place in the camp; her boy is planning to be with the priests during vacation.

Following each of these moments, the priest appears to be in control. But the final scene, to the audience's delight, indicates that the woman, who is a lawyer by training, has outwitted him over and over. The agent has had him sign the confidentiality clause on-line, thus undermining his later excuse that, given his lack of computer skills, he had no idea what he was doing when he signed the second clause on-line. He never noticed an asterisk that, by scrolling down, would lead to a disqualifier. He says he can use the secretary the agent called for a clarification as a witness in his behalf, but that phone call was a fake. Through investigation the agent has discovered that this priest has a criminal record as a sex offender; therefore his signature invalidates the contract. She had brought him a check from the insurance company to settle a claim against another priest, but in the final scene, she triumphantly rips it up. The church will have to pay for the sin of sexual abuse.

The priest, in language that reminded this American spectator of Vince Lombardi, proclaims that he and the agent are engaged in a game where winning is the only thing. That game is a conflict between his greed and her sense of morality. This time, however duplicitous the agent's strategies, morality wins out. The underlying subject is serious, but the performance, like that of Galán's *Hombres de 40*, is filled with comic moments. To evoke laughter,

Muñoz de Mesa uses such classic techniques as repetition and role reversals.

La visita opened at the Arenal on 2 April; I saw its second performance, the following night. The little theatre was barely half full, but spectator enthusiasm assured me that word of mouth would have a positive impact. The play subsequently was incorporated into Uroc's spring repertory through 2 May and then was scheduled to go on tour.

Carol López's *Hermanas* is an overtly cinematographic production, in part because the author-director says that she has seen far more movies than theatre. Critics have compared it to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and Woody Allen's *Hannah and Her Sisters*. The comparison is more obvious with respect to Allen's 1986 film than to the Russian play of 1901. The resemblance between publicity posters for López's work and the movie is intentional. The play program, however, quotes Chekhov ("There's one thing as inevitable as death: life.") and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* ("All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.")

The circular structure of *Hermanas* features projections across a partial screen above the stage; these multimedia aspects were designed by Javier Franco and Diego Martín. The first projection, as a prologue, depicts the family at the tomb of the father, Ignasi, who has just died. The second projection is an epilogue that reveals the death of one of the sisters. The author comments that her two-act work follows a classic play format. Its running time of an hour and half without intermission, however, is linked to that of film.

Audience members in Spain at *Hermanas* will recall García Lorca's *The House of Bernarda Alba* for several reasons. Guests who come to pay respects after the off-stage funeral of the father are never seen. The mother and daughters in that classic tragedy, like López's characters, have many conflicts, and the play likewise ends with the death of one of the sisters.

On the other hand, despite the two deaths, *Hermanas* is a comedy. With respect to this wacky family, López has effectively put the fun back into dysfunctional, starting with preparations for the father's funeral. The three sisters: Inés (Amparo Larrañaga), Irene (María Pujalte), and Ivonne (Marina San José) opt for a wreath of red flowers (after all, their father had communist leanings) with the phrase "Eternal love from the I's"—if that would cost less than spelling out the names.

Both parents' names also begin with I. The

mother, Isabel (Amparo Fernández), as a widow proves even wackier than her daughters. Her favorite beverage is martinis, a choice that gives rise to some funny business. Rather than grieving, she'd like to kick up her heels. She does so in one riotous scene. She takes off her dress and, wearing a sexy black slip, dances on the dining room table. In a show with lots of singing, at times involving the whole company, her performance of a song à la Piaf, is one of the highlights. Like *Transición* at the María Guerrero, this production is noteworthy for its entertaining use of music and its ensemble acting.

Fernández is the only member of the cast to have performed with the original company in Barcelona, where she was awarded the Critics' Prize for best actress.

The cast is rounded out by Irene's teen-age son Igor (Adrián Lamana) and her current boyfriend Alex (Chisco Amado). Igor's eagerness to lose his virginity leads to incest with his promiscuous, drug-using younger aunt, Ivonne. Although Alex's first visit to the family on the day of the father's funeral seems timed inappropriately, in his tolerant, good-natured way, he becomes a key support to all of them. He even seems to understand Igor—while suggesting that introducing his love partner as such to the family is not a good idea. He asks Irene to believe in his love, despite all her romantic disappointments over the years, and he encourages her photography. The epilogue projects the family album photos that she took before becoming ill.

The set design, revealing a working kitchen stage left and a dining area stage right, was created by Bibiana Puigdefabregas in Barcelona. Realistic in

detail, it has an upstage stairs leading to the bedrooms and a wide doorway that provides a view of the garden, as well as additional, unseen side entrances. It might recall scenery for a traditional bourgeois play were the family members not so comically unorthodox. Except for the brief tryst of nephew and aunt, it does not follow the pattern of bedroom farce. More emphasis is given to kitchen humor. One of the repeated jokes is Inés's obsession with making cold gazpacho and Alex's counter effort to prepare warm broth. Accidents do occur in the kitchen and dissatisfaction with the two cooks' culinary treats is another repeated gag.

The play completely distances itself from farce when Irene announces that she is dying. Having accepted Alex's love, she has changed her life and her clothing. She now appears in a lovely, summery white dress with green and pink flowers. (Costumes were designed by Vicente Soler.) Isabel, in a softened tone, sits down at the table with her daughter. She tells her how very sick she had been as a child and how she, as her mother, had stayed by her side in the hospital and saved her through sheer force of will. This time her efforts fail, but the epilogue with the projection of a photo exhibit pays beautiful tribute to Irene's life.

These three plays that I saw at commercial theatres, as well as the two I have previously noted at the national theatre, are all entertaining, thought-provoking productions that have met with audience and critical acclaim. They augur well for the future of the Madrid stage even during this period of Spain's financial crisis.

In Search of the Author's Voice: *The Strindberg Project*, a Performance by The Cullberg Ballet (2012)

Ruthie Abeliovich

The year 2012 marked the centennial of August Strindberg's death. His persona and artistry held center stage in the many productions commemorating the poetics of one of the founding fathers of European modernism. For the Swedish Cullberg Ballet this was an opportunity to pay tribute to one of Sweden's major national culture figures and to re-examine the legacy and the memory of Strindberg.

The Strindberg Project, a dance performance by the Cullberg Ballet, premiered in March 2012 in Stockholm (the Strindberg project is co-produced with Festspielhaus st. poelten, Austria). This performance does not present August Strindberg's biography, nor is it an adaptation of any of his dramatic or literary works. Instead, it seeks to investigate the cultural and artistic memory of Strindberg as an iconic figure.

A Swedish icon in its own merit, the Cullberg Ballet, a part of Riksteatern, Sweden's National Touring Theatre, unsurprisingly rose up to the challenge and readdressed the works of Sweden's

literary icon. This is not the first time the Cullberg Ballet has staged a choreographic interpretation of Strindberg's works. In 1950, the centennial of August Strindberg's birth, Brigit Cullberg, founder of the dance company, adapted his play *Miss Julie* (1888) as a ballet and created a performance that won her company world acclaim as it became one of the most staged and popular ballets of modern times.

More than half a century later, the Cullberg ballet produced *The Strindberg Project*—a performance that deals with the relations between the author's artistry and his interpreters; it questions the presence of iconic cultural figures in our lives and seeks to understand their part in staging our identity. This performance thus encapsulates a multi-layered cultural dialogue between the dance company and an emblematic figure in Swedish culture, presenting contemporary perceptions of Strindberg's poetics and examining the relevance of his presence as a cultural symbol. Accordingly, in this review I wish to examine development of understanding and thought about Strindberg's authorial voice.



The Cullberg Ballet's *The Strindberg Project*. Photo: Courtesy of Dansens Hus.

This project consists of two parts: the first, titled *August did not have what is commonly considered good taste as far as furniture is considered*, was created by dancer and choreographer Tillman O'Donnell; the second part of the performance, created by theatre director Melanie Mederlind, is titled *Translations*. The two parts differ in their themes, scenography and choreographic language. Whereas the first part of the show presents a white cubic stage on which Strindberg's mental illness is presented in regard to his poetics, the second part of the production shows a dark space focusing on Strindberg's occupation with the Chinese language during his later years. However, despite these differences both parts of the project attempt to shed light upon the gap between the poetics and persona of Strindberg and its contemporary understanding by redrawing the boundaries on stage between the vocal and the visual, between what is heard and what is seen.

The performance showcases a performative approach that perceives the stage not only as a visual and physical place, but also as an acoustic one. The danced sequences in this performance are combined with scenic miniatures that include acted episodes as well as group sequences in which the dancers recite texts and perform vocal acts: they speak, sing, shout, scream, and bark. The dominant presence of vocal acts in a highly visual performance offers a discursive investigation of the tension between the dancers' bodies and the natures of their vocal acts.

Vocal acts in contemporary dance performances are often regarded as secondary texts in the construction of the *mise en scène*. In contrast to this approach, this review considers the voice a primary element in the staging of the dancers' bodies and in the communication of the performative experience. I am referring here to the notion of voice as a generative principle that operates in two registers: in the first, the voice is understood as a metaphor signifying Strindberg's authorial identity. In this register imprints and echoes that characterize rhetorical features of Strindberg's poetic style are traced and revealed.

In this performance Strindberg's authorial voice is depicted in representations of characteristics from his dramatic techniques. These include the spatial perception and the cinematographic effects interlacing the different scenes in the performance. The second register refers to the materiality of the vocal utterance as manifested in this performance. The after-effects of Strindberg's dramatic techniques and public persona regain their presence through

the vocal configurations performed by the dancers. These include fragments from his writings and abstract vocal acts that stage aural images and metaphors from his plays.

During the first part of the performance, three small photographed portraits of Strindberg are present on the stage. The performance space thus prompts a stage in the spirit of Strindberg who haunts it as a visual image and as an authorial presence. Moreover, this space materializes an abstract interpretation to some key elements from Strindberg's fictional worlds. Freddie Rokem has noted that the stenographic metaphor of a claustrophobic space was frequently used by Strindberg to express a universal determinist human condition. The same spatial logic is applied to the stage: in the first part the stage is designed as a wide closed room with few articles of furniture, where six dancers are imprisoned. In the second part of the performance, the black cubic stage is marked by white masking-tape outlining the borders of the imaginative habitual space of the dancers.

As in many of Strindberg's fictional worlds, the actual stage action is dynamic and multifocal. The first part of the performance unfolds in a fragmented flow of scenes, scenarios and dance sequences montaged together by associative logic. This effect is reached mostly through the stage-lighting design. Three fluorescent lights hang above, illuminating and darkening the space in interplays, thus producing the impression of edited moving-pictures, creating a cinematic effect that echoes Strindberg's preoccupation with the art of photography. Sometimes the scenes cross-fade into each other; at other moments they shift abruptly from light to darkness. The stage lights thus manipulate the audience's perception as the viewers' angle of vision jumps from one spot to another. Strindberg's interest and experiments with the aesthetic and rhetorical features of photography is furthermore cited in the second part of the performance, by combining video close-ups from the staged action.

In both parts of the performance the dancers present exaggerated notions of Strindberg's public identity, ridiculing the clichés that comprised contemporary understandings of Strindberg: misogynous, mad, and inspired. At these moments one cannot avoid noticing a sense of self-reflexive irony regarding the applauding of a symbol, seasoned with irony at the habit of butting the icon.

August Strindberg's artistic voice is thus the substance of this performance, carried out and heard through a fabricated dialogue with the sensual



The Cullberg Ballet's *The Strindberg Project*. Photo: Courtesy of Dansens Hus.

materiality of the dancers' physical and vocal actions. Features from Strindberg's poetics are mediated by the performers, undertaking the action of utterance, and simulating the author's artistic voice. The dancers' bodies are transformed into an artistic sign by the syntax of their choreography: throughout the first part of the performance the dancers present repetitive movement motifs of fractured, stand-still and fast-forwarded dance sequences. These physical configurations resemble the moves of animated figures, or marionettes movements, and create the image of dancers that have lost control of their body.

Hence, the choreographed syntax presents the dancer as a vehicle to channel the voice of the author—be it the choreographer or August Strindberg. Positioning the dancers' corporeality as an apparatus to stage Strindberg's voice indicates a fundamental distance between the narrating agent—the performers—and the narrated object—August Strindberg. Melanie Mederlind acknowledges the discrepancy between the theme of the performance and its enactment, as she explains in the performance website: "I want to take in the different linguistic backgrounds of the dancers and create an ensemble piece out of language, associations and images."

The gap between the author's voice and

the body of the dancer producing it is presented by staging the non-linear relations between the heard voices and the performers' bodies. Three central vocal practices formulate these relations: the first is the barking dancer; the second is the female voice-over and the third is the conflict presented between the source text and its translator. These strategies stage a voice that is detached from its source and attached to a separate, perhaps disembodied existence.

The first vocal practice refers to the materiality of the voice. The vocal act of barking is repeated in various phases of the first part of the show, accompanied by the imitation of doglike behavior. Although Strindberg was well known for his fear of dogs, uttered barking presents a common motif in his drama: Strindberg's fictional characters are often driven by their untamed urge to a fatal condition that reveals their animal-like nature. An obvious example of this can be found in the scene from *Miss Julie* where Julie's purebred dog who had been consorting with the gatekeeper's mutt, is presented as an analogy to Julie's condition in the kitchen: the pet dog is in estrus and Kristin tells Jean that it is Julie's "time of the month" that is making her behave strangely.

In a similar fashion, the dancers in O'Donnell's performance are captured in recurring movements and vocal patterns that echo the repetitive behavioral pattern and the expected and uncontrollable archetypal schemes often presented by Strindberg characters. From this point of view, the barking serves as a vocal act that animates a universal primal mental condition of characters enslaved to their behavioral configurations and inescapable drives.

At one point during this scene, the delicate balance between the different movement patterns of the dancers on stage is violated and a storming and aggressive attack of the dog troupe begins. The moment of attack presents an abstraction of a familiar moment in Strindberg's drama, in which the characters rip off their domesticated and educated masks and expose a beast-like aggression in their carnal lust for prey. "To eat or be eaten- that is the question"—Strindberg dictated these words to the Captain in his play *The Father* (1887). This statement is further exemplified in the performance by presenting the vocal lateralization of the metaphor. In the second part of the performance, the carnal metaphor is translated into the sublimation of the actual act of eating, as the dancers peel and bite oranges.

The moment of the savage attack also presents the formation of a community comprised of resonating bodies sharing the Darwinian survival struggle. Noises from the aggressive assault continue to flood the acoustic space long after the stage is darkened. During these moments the viewers' field of vision is revoked, and their stimulated imagination and fantasies replace the necessary visual anchor. In these moments the performers' voices serve as voice-overs and create an alternative mental image of the assault. The audience experiences the actual process of acknowledging bestial human nature as it hosts the voices of the brutal attack in its mind.

The second mode in which the notion of voice operates in this performance is the disembodied female voice-over. During the first part of the performance the entire cast wears fake beards and moustaches, imitating Strindberg's. These visual attributes signify that the performers' corporeality is inscribed and authored by Strindberg's own male persona, both textual and corporal. However, despite the male dominance of the visual score, the configuration of the disembodied narrator's voice as female suggests the supremacy of the feminine in the acoustic space. In this perspective, the female voice-over repetitions the familiar Strindberg theme of the

gender-based battle as a conflict between the visual stage and the acoustic space.

Who then wins this battle? Throughout different moments of the first part of the performance, a female voice-over recites a text describing Strindberg's mental and social peculiarity. This text is delivered in perfect diction with a distinct American accent, creating an acoustic image of an act of patronage. The female voice-over thus disrupts the male dominance of the stage and alters the perceptual hierarchy of sound and image. By using the reference to Strindberg's iconic look, the battle between the sexes shifts to one of dominance between the author's voice and its enactment. Understood from this perspective, the female voice-over emphasizes the split between the authorial voice and the actual place of its production.

The third, and final, mode of the voice focuses upon the tonality of Strindberg's language through the concept of translation. The aural and acoustic aspects of Strindberg's drama are hardly a present aspect of his staging, since most of the performances of Strindberg's works are in translation. The second part of the performance illustrates this idea, since, as Egil Törnqvist has pointed out, Strindberg's plays are dependent on their translation due to the simple fact that few non-Scandinavians have any knowledge of Swedish. The voice in this performance is present through the different sounds and accents of the language games performed by the dancers.

The associative image flow of Strindberg is performed by a multilingual translation combining video projection, Cha-cha-cha dances, and echoes of fragmented writings by Strindberg. In this part of the performance the act of translation is played out through the reconstruction of Strindberg's poetics in a new form. His authorial voice collides with a shifting flow of imagination and conception of China, merging with the dancers' various national and personal identities.

To conclude: the vocal practices I have presented outline the acoustic dimension of the performance as one that emphasizes the liberation of the voice from its source. However, while the voice detaches Strindberg, it symbolically reattaches itself to the corpus of August Strindberg—it animates his voice and translates it into a contemporary artistic language. August Strindberg died a century ago. His artistic pulse, however, continues to beat as it reverberates in the bodies of his adaptors, translators, and interpreters.

Contributors

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JOSHUA ABRAMS is a Senior Lecturer in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies at Roehampton University and Assistant Editor of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*. His publications have appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *TDR*, *PAJ*, *Western European Journal*, among other places. He is completing a book-length manuscript on notions of Levinasian ethics in relation to performance.

JAMES ARMSTRONG is a graduate student in the PhD program in theatre at the City University of New York's Graduate Center. He has published theatre reviews in *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* and *The Dickensian*. His own plays have been published by Applause, Eldridge Plays and Musicals, and Original Works Publishing.

MARVIN CARLSON, Sidney C. Cohn Professor of Theatre at the City University of New York Graduate Center, is the author of many articles on theatrical theory and European theatre history, and dramatic literature. He is the 1994 recipient of the George Jean Nathan Award for dramatic criticism and the 1999 recipient of the American Society for Theatre Research Distinguished Scholar Award. His book *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine*, which came out from University of Michigan Press in 2001, received the Callaway Prize. In 2005 he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Athens. His most recent book is *The Theatres of Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia* with Khalid Amine (Palgrave, 2012).

MARIA M. DELGADO is Professor of Theatre & Screen Arts at Queen Mary University of London and co-editor of *Contemporary Theatre Review*. Her books include *"Other" Spanish Theatres: Erasure and Inscription on the Twentieth Century Spanish Stage* (MUP, 2003) and *Federico García Lorca* (Routledge, 2008), the co-edited *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* (Routledge, 2010), three further co-edited volumes for Manchester University Press, and two collections of translations for Methuen. Her co-edited volume, *A History of Theatre in Spain*, was published by Cambridge University Press in 2012.

ALEKSEI GRINENKO is a PhD student in the Theatre department of the CUNY Graduate Center and a graduate teaching fellow at the City College of New York. His articles have appeared in *American and European Studies* (Minsk), *Studies in Musical Theatre*, and *Slavic and East European Performance*. Prior to his studies in the USA, he was a member of the resident company at the Belarus State Musical Theatre. His translations of American musicals are part of the active repertory in Belarus.

BEATE HEIN, Ph.D. Comp. Lit., has worked as a teacher, translator, and freelance dramaturg. Born and raised in Germany and trained in all aspects of theatre arts, she has a high respect for the art in all its complexity from front to backstage, from spoken language to the language of the body. Her latest involvement has been as dramaturg for the New Yiddish Rep/Castillo Theatre premiere production in Yiddish of *Waiting for Godot* in New York. A theatrical highlight was as translator and dramaturg for The Living Theatre production of Else Lasker-Schüler's IANDI on Avenue C. She is currently translating Judith Malina's book *The Piscator Notebook* (Routledge, 2012) into German.

ROY KIFT is a playwright, currently living in Düsseldorf (on which he has also written a travel guide: *Düsseldorf, Aachen and the Lower Rhine*). His holocaust play "Camp Comedy" (in *The Theatre of the Holocaust*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Skloot, University of Wisconsin Press) is well-known throughout the academic world. Plans are afoot for a production in Canberra, Australia in late 2012 and Paris in 2013. It has been translated in German, French, and Polish. One of his latest works is an adaptation of Janne Teller's "Nothing." For more see: www.roy-kift.com.

PIRKKO KOSKI, Professor emerita, was responsible for the Department of Theatre Research in the Institute of Art Research at the University of Helsinki, and was the director of the Institute of Art Research until the end of 2007. Her research concentrates on performance analysis, historiography, and Finnish theatre and its history. In addition to scholarly articles, she has published several books in these fields. She has also edited several anthologies about Finnish theatre, and volumes of scholarly articles translated into Finnish.

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ŁUKASZ RONDUDA is an art historian, a critic, and a curator in the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw. He specializes in the media art, aesthetics, history and theory of film. He is an author of numerous articles and books such as *Strategie subwersywne w sztukach medialnych / Subversive Strategies in the Media Arts* (2006) and *Sztuka polska lat 70. Awangarda / Polish Art of the 1970s. Avant-garde* (2009).

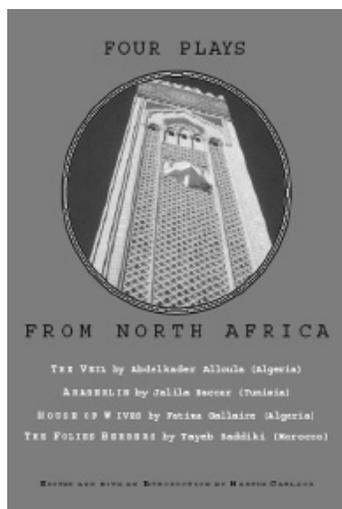
SZYMON WRÓBLEWSKI, Born in 1983 in Gdynia, curator of theatre projects, currently works in the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. As dramaturg he worked with Michał Borczuch, Rene Pollesch, and Redbad Klynstra. Between 2007 and 2012 he worked in the Literary Department of the National Sary Theatre in Krakow organizing international cooperation projects. He lives in Warsaw.

PHYLLIS ZATLIN is Professor Emerita of Spanish and former coordinator of translator-interpreter training at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey. She served as Associate Editor of *Estreno* from 1992 to 2001 and as editor of the translation series *ESTRENO Plays* from 1998 to 2005. Her translations that have been published and/or staged include plays by J.L. Alonso de Santos, Jean-Paul Daumas, Eduardo Manet, Francisco Nieva, Itziar Pascual, Paloma Pedrero, and Jaime Salom. Her most recent book is *Theatrical Translation and Film Adaptation: A Practitioner's View*. See www.rci.rutgers.edu/~zatlin.

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Translated and edited by Marvin Carlson



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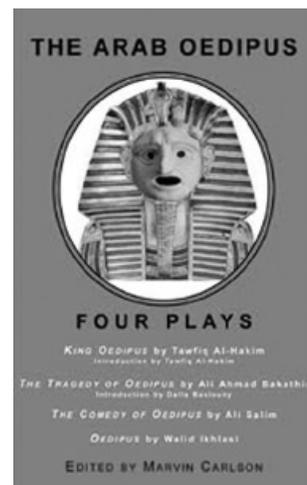
This volume contains four modern plays from the Maghreb: Abdelkader Alloula's *The Veil* and Fatima Gallaïre's *House of Wives*, both Algerian, Jalila Baccar's *Araberlin* from Tunisia, and Tayeb Saddiki's *The Folies Berbers* from Morocco.

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Edited by Marvin Carlson

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An awareness of the rich tradition of modern Arabic theatre has only recently begun to be felt by the Western theatre community, and we hope that this collection will contribute to that growing awareness.



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FOREWORD BY RICHARD SCHECHNER



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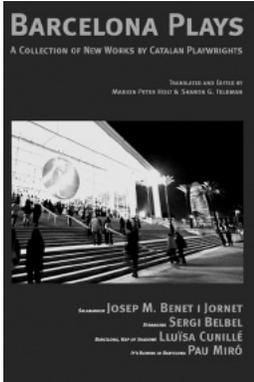
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A Collection of New Works by Catalan Playwrights

Translated and edited by Marion Peter Holt and Sharon G. Feldman



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Playwrights Before the Fall: Eastern European Drama in Times of Revolution

Edited by Daniel Gerould.

Playwrights Before the Fall: Eastern European Drama in Times of Revolution contains translations of *Portrait* by Sławomir Mrożek (PL); *Military Secret* by Dušan Jovanović (SI); *Chicken Head* by György Spiró (HU); *Sorrow, Sorrow, Fear, the Pit and the Rope* by Karel Steigerwald (CZ); and *Horses at the Window* by Matei Vişniec (RO).

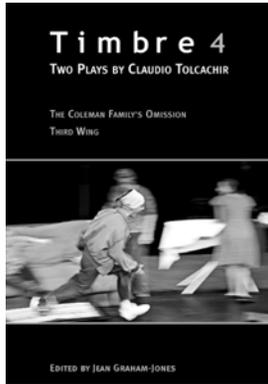
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Claudio Tolcachir's Timbre 4

Translated and with an introduction by Jean Graham-Jones

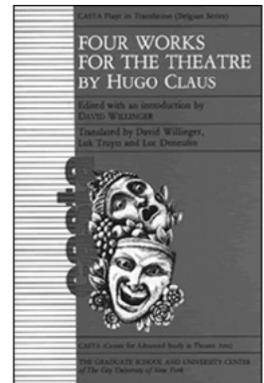


Claudio Tolcachir's Timbre 4 is one of the most exciting companies to emerge from Buenos Aires's vibrant contemporary theatre scene. *The Coleman Family's Omission* and *Third Wing*, the two plays that put *Timbre 4* on the international map, are translated by Jean Graham-Jones and Elisa Legon.

Four Works for the Theatre by Hugo Claus

Translated and Edited by David Willinger

Hugo Claus is the foremost contemporary writer of Dutch language theatre, poetry, and prose. Flemish by birth and upbringing, Claus is the author of some ninety plays, novels, and collections of poetry. He is renowned as an enfant terrible of the arts throughout Europe. From the time he was affiliated with the international art group, COBRA, to his liaison with pornographic film star Silvia Kristel, to the celebration of his novel, *The Sorrow of Belgium*, Claus has careened through a career that is both scandal-ridden and formidable. Claus takes on all the taboos of his times.



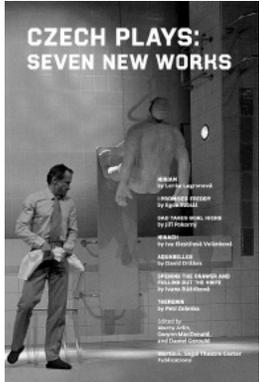
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Flemish-Dutch theatre artist Jan Fabre has produced works as a performance artist, theatre maker, choreographer, opera maker, playwright, and visual artist. Our two Fabre books include: *I am a Mistake* (2007), *Etant Donnes* (2000), *Little Body on the Wall* (1996), *Je suis sang* (2001), *Angel of Death* (2003), and others.



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roMANIA After 2000

Edited by Saviana Stanescu and Daniel Gerould

Translation editors: Saviana Stanescu and Ruth Margraff



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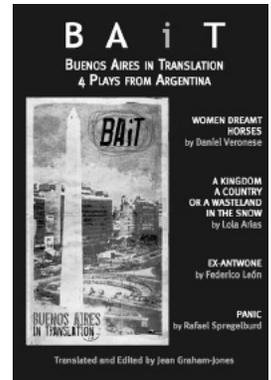
This publication produced in collaboration with the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York and Bucharest.

Buenos Aires in Translation

Translated and edited by Jean Graham-Jones

BAiT epitomizes true international theatrical collaboration, bringing together four of the most important contemporary playwrights from Buenos Aires and pairing them with four cutting-edge US-based directors and their ensembles. Throughout a period of one year, playwrights, translator, directors, and actors worked together to deliver four English-language world premieres at Performance Space 122 in the fall of 2006.

Plays include: *Women Dreamt Horses* by Daniel Veronese; *A Kingdom, A Country or a Wasteland, In the Snow* by Lola Arias; *Ex-Antwone* by Federico León; *Panic* by Rafael Spregelburd. BAIiT is a Performance Space 122 Production, an initiative of Salón Volcán, with the support of Instituto Cervantes and the Consulate General of Argentina in New York.



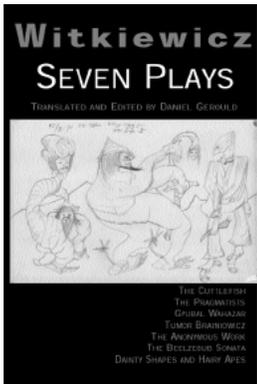
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Translated and Edited by Daniel Gerould



This volume contains seven of Witkiewicz's most important plays: *The Pragmatists*, *Tumor Brainiowicz*, *Gyubal Wahazar*, *The Anonymous Work*, *The Cuttlefish*, *Dainty Shapes and Hairy Apes*, and *The Beelzebub Sonata*, as well as two of his theoretical essays, "Theoretical Introduction" and "A Few Words About the Role of the Actor in the Theatre of Pure Form."

Witkiewicz . . . takes up and continues the vein of dream and grotesque fantasy exemplified by the late Strindberg or by Wedekind; his ideas are closely paralleled by those of the surrealists and Antonin Artaud which culminated in the masterpieces of the dramatists of the Absurd. . . . It is high time that this major playwright should become better known in the English-speaking world.

Martin Esslin

Josep M. Benet i Jornet: Two Plays

Translated by Marion Peter Holt

Josep M. Benet i Jornet, born in Barcelona, is the author of more than forty works for the stage and has been a leading contributor to the striking revitalization of Catalan theatre in the post-Franco era. *Fleeting*, a compelling "tragedy-within-a-play," and *Stages*, with its monological recall of a dead and unseen protagonist, rank among his most important plays. They provide an introduction to a playwright whose inventive experiments in dramatic form and treatment of provocative themes have made him a major figure in contemporary European theatre.



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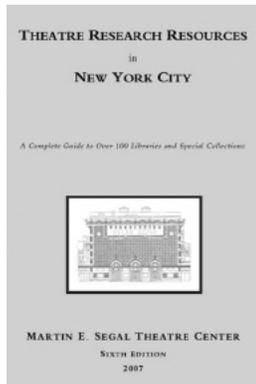
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Sixth Edition, 2007

Editor: Jessica Brater, Senior Editor: Marvin Carlson



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Comedy: A Bibliography

Editor: Meghan Duffy, Senior Editor: Daniel Gerould

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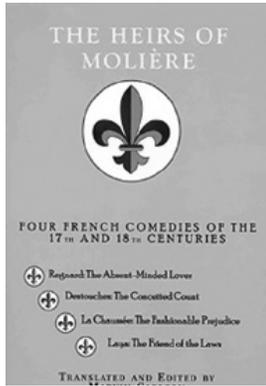
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The Heirs of Molière

Translated and Edited by Marvin Carlson



This volume contains four representative French comedies of the period from the death of Molière to the French Revolution: *The Absent-Minded Lover* by Jean-François Regnard, *The Conceited Count* by Philippe Néricault Destouches, *The Fashionable Prejudice* by Pierre Nivelles de la Chaussée, and *The Friend of the Laws* by Jean-Louis Laya. Translated in a poetic form that seeks to capture the wit and spirit of the originals, these four plays suggest something of the range of the Molière inheritance, from comedy of character through the highly popular sentimental comedy of the mid-eighteenth century, to comedy that employs the Molière tradition for more contemporary political ends.

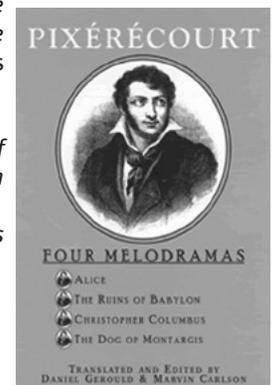
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Translated and Edited by Daniel Gerould & Marvin Carlson

This volume contains four of Pixérécourt's most important melodramas: *The Ruins of Babylon or Jafar and Zaida*, *The Dog of Montargis or The Forest of Bondy*, *Christopher Columbus or The Discovery of the New World*, and *Alice or The Scottish Gravediggers*, as well as Charles Nodier's "Introduction" to the 1843 Collected Edition of Pixérécourt's plays and the two theoretical essays by the playwright, "Melodrama," and "Final Reflections on Melodrama."

Pixérécourt furnished the Theatre of Marvels with its most stunning effects, and brought the classic situations of fairground comedy up-to-date. He determined the structure of a popular theatre which was to last through the 19th century.

Hannah Winter, *The Theatre of Marvels*



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