

An Experiment of Strangeness: The 2016 Interferences International Theatre Festival in Cluj



What does it mean to be a stranger or how does someone become a stranger? Is a stranger always a sign of something dangerous? Can we speak about the strangeness of our own self? These are the questions that were raised by the performances at the 5th Interferences International Theatre Festival (24 November–4 December 2016), organized in Cluj-Napocca, Romania. This year's theme was stranger/strangeness, which was selected as the focus of the festival in light of such current political concerns as identity, migration, and the refugee. The festival offered twenty-two performances in thirteen languages from fourteen countries during eleven days. I attended the festival at the invitation of the festival director Gabor Tompa, and also attended the Young Critics Seminar organized by IATC that took place at the festival. In this essay, I will report on those shows that corresponded to the dates of the seminar, held from 26 November to 2 December.

On the evening of 26 November, a German theatre group from the Schauspielhaus Bochum performed the play *Job*, based on Joseph Roth's 1930 novel, adapted by Koen Tachelet and directed by Lisa Nielebock. The production uses this ancient story to address important contemporary concerns, such as migration, religion, war, capitalism, lack of social and family bonds, and belief in a better life somewhere else like America. The play presents the story of a Russian-Jewish family, the Singers, on a stage which is made up of a bright, freshly sanded wooden scene without any doors and windows (designed by Oliver Helf). The apparent tension of the performance can be understood by looking at the stage design, which seems

to say “no exit.” It is a confined, entrapped space, but it can open and to reveal scenes representing the fortunes of the Singer family. The family relationships center on a repulsion felt for a fourth born child with epilepsy, Munichm (Jana Schulz).



Schauspielhaus Bochum's *Job*, based on Joseph Roth's novel, adapted by Koen Tachelet and directed by Lisa Nielebock.

The plot tells how Mendel Singer (Michael Schütz), his wife Deborah (Irene Kugler), and their three children (two sons, one daughter) depart for America, leaving their youngest, the helpless, mentally ill Munichm, behind in Russia. The parents see Munichm's illness as a punishment from God. Deborah often wonders about the fate of this son, because a rabbi once told her that there would be a miracle and Munichm would get well, but this would be realized only if his family stayed with him. Nevertheless, the family goes to America to save their lives, leaving Munichm behind because he is not able to fly. But everything changes during their life in America. Their sons die in the World War, their daughter Mirjam goes crazy, and after all these terrible events the mother Deborah dies. Then one day Munichm, who has gotten well and become a musician, finds his father.

For that moment, I strongly anticipated a miracle on stage not only for Munichm, but also for the trap-like stage. Until that moment, the choreographing of the family movements was made up of elastic attractions and repulsions, suggesting their relations and estrangement in spatial distances, without any change of lights, without even music. But after Munichm's miracle has come to pass, then the back of the stage opened up to suggest his emergence as a musician, while all the music composed by Munichm fills the room. Actually there were two important changes in the stage picture. The first one happened when the family went to America. To show that they are moving to a better life, the mother Deborah opens a hidden trapdoor in the floor and takes out a lot of new costumes, Nike shoes, jewels, and dollar bills. This scene suggests how the family becomes driven by a love of consumption in America.

Job is an engrossing adaptation of the novel based on a human problem: how does one deal with life? Is it possible to embrace something that one cannot, or does not want to, accept?

On 27 November, there was a very interesting, funny performance called *Medea on Media*, staged by the Korean theatre group Seongbukdong Beedoolkee from South Korea and directed by Kim Hyuntak. The homophonic title of the play references two things simultaneously: the first refers to the title of Euripides' tragedy and the second refers to the whole technological apparatus that services today's communication. This was one of the most interesting plays of the festival.



Seongbukdong Beedoolkee's *Medea on Media*, directed by Kim Hyuntak.

The story of Medea is the same as in the original, but the director changed the form of narrative by using various kinds of contemporary media in the stage design as well as in the body language of the players. The stage is basically a white floor, its edges separated from the walls of the space, with props and costumes surrounding it. The players change their costumes or accessories scene by scene. They also use an actual backstage not seen by the audience. The narrative employs many different types of modern media forms, like the reality show, the action movie, magazine programs, video games, yoga sessions, and Korean popular culture with its melodramatic movies, songs, and dances, all helping to tell the story of Medea. By way of example, when the performance begins, four actors appear, playing journalists and asking the spectators "Has it already started?" and "Did we see Medea?" She makes her entrance then as an object of media attention, perhaps a pop star, with huge dark sunglasses that cover her suffering face.



Seongbukdong Beedoolkee's *Medea on Media*, directed by Kim Hyuntak.

She holds a press conference by speaking into the microphones and presenting her domestic tragedy to the media. She complains about her husband, and the press corps, resembling an antique chorus, leads her on. The next sequence continues the story with a melodramatic scene in which Medea begs for support from King Aegeus, an angry old man. Other scenes suggest a reality show, a video game, children's cartoons, music shows, and a sword fight. In fact there isn't any technological or media apparatus on stage except for microphones. Yet stage and the relation between audience and actors suggests to a kind of TV program. The Greek chorus is transformed into press and TV reporters, who try to interview Medea the media victim, following her destiny on TV, or acting as policemen trying to catch her as she's killing her children.

Kim Mi Ok as Medea, Kim Myong Sub as Jason, Lee Jin Sung as Creon, Heo Sol as Nurse, Kim Min Sung as Chorus 1, Anupam Tripathi as Chorus 2 and Aegeus, Kim Jin-a as Chorus 3 and Glauce, Lee Song Hee as Chorus 4, were all both energetic and persuasive. Their acrobatic virtuosity kept the audience concentrated on the performance.

Medea become a kind of device to suggest how the media manipulates people, raising the question of whether this interpretation is a kind of criticism of media/TV—or, rather, is the media's condition a kind of crime which reminds us of Medea's? So who or what is the murderer or the victim? We have witnessed a crime in the play, but is it that of tragic heroine? Maybe the meaning of Medea's murder of her children can be understood as the killing of theatre by the media and finally is the story of the death of tragedy. Another question is: why was *Medea* the chosen text? Could this story—*Medea* in aspects of media—be narrated choosing another classical text? I think *Medea* may be the most suitable tragedy to tell how media manipulates people. The focus of the show is, however, not on Medea, but on the manipulation of the media in narrating Medea's crime. This leads in turn to another question: are we are also being manipulated by the show itself?

The next play I attended was Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, directed by Gábor Tompa, staged by National Theatre of Targu with the Mure?-Tompa Miklos Company. The performance followed Beckett's stage directions closely. A room made entirely of metal, two round windows, at the left side, two tubes rising from the ground, hide Nell (Biluska Annamária) and Nagg (Makra Lajos), Hamm's old parents, and Hamm (Bíró József) in a wheelchair with a bloody rag on his head, positioned in the center of the stage. All this is totally grey and covered with a silver-colored sheet. The theatrical space thus reflects the states of mind of the characters and their monotonous lives. The ground is a little sloped, with the result that when Clov moves Hamm around the scene and pushes him in the wheelchair to the wall, he always slips back.



Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, directed by Gábor Tompa, staged by National Theatre of Targu with the Mure?-Tompa Miklos Company.

As in every Beckett play, you are in the middle of something that has no beginning or ending. And also from the beginning it is easily seen that the player on the stage is doomed at the end to start to play all over again. The performance begins with an extended silence that shocks the spectators. It clearly attempts to push the audience's limits and patience from the beginning. They are forced to watch Clov (Bartha László Zsolt) limping across the stage over and over again. A highly depressing atmosphere is created, strengthened by the music, which dominates the characters' lives, and encourages us to invest ourselves in their situation. This condition of waiting for something portrays the whole performance, creating an awful boredom. Besides this, pauses and silences also play an important role. As in the original play, the

performance is full of gaps, resulting from the lack of communication that exists in Beckett's fragile universe.

Since throughout the play everything remains very close to the original, I kept expecting to see some difference, a new thing or an adaptation from the director. This finally happened at the end of the play. The director, who clearly thinks that any Beckett play is not a dark drama and that desperation is not the highest form of hope, adds a final scene, an "end game" in *Endgame*. Nell and Nagg get out of the tubes, walk slowly to the back of the stage hand in hand, and then take up Hamm as well. At the same time, a bright light fills the back stage, and Clov stands up in front of the stage. Despite all the desperate, solidity, gloomy atmosphere, the director wants to close with an image of hope and togetherness.

One of the most interesting stagings was Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, directed by Frank Hoffmann at the National Theatre of Luxembourg. The performance begins in the auditorium with a funny dispute between two men, Brendel (Wolfram Koch) and Jean (Samuel Finzi). After several minutes, the other players, Mrs. Boeuf from the other corner of auditorium and Daisy, walking from the exit, join in this dispute. They walk around the spectators and go to the stage slowly and spontaneously. All these strange conversations suggest that we are part of society in question. Then the red curtains open slowly, and they find themselves on the stage. It is a colossal stage design (Christoph Rasche) with an iron cage/grille covering pieces of cut up papers over all the stage. The tables and chairs belong to the office workers or to the cafeteria, and a terrifying, unfamiliar animal-like sound signals the presence of the rhinoceroses when the lights turn off. Despite the uncanny sounds and the huge stage space, the acting and character's relations employ comic elements such as exaggerated jokes and gags, even John, in a strange costume resembling a metamorphosed animal, comes on the stage as a rhinoceros. John is the one character that we see actually metamorphose from human to rhinoceros. The other transformations into rhinoceros form are narrated by the actors while looking at the spectators. In this way the spectator himself seems transformed slowly into a rhinoceros. Towards the end of the play, after Daisy transforms into a rhinoceros, Brendel closes the iron cage/grille and leaves himself behind, in order not to become a rhinoceros as, presumably, all the spectators have.



Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, directed by Frank Hoffmann at the National Theatre of Luxembourg.

There was another performance concerning some of the same themes suggested by *Rhinoceros*. It was an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, directed by Declan Donnellan for the Cheek by Jowl and Pushkin Theatre. In fact it is not so much a dramaturgical adaptation as an attempt to transpose the play into today's world. In other words, the play is the same as the original, but director Donnellan uses theatrical devices to transpose Shakespeare into a contemporary visuality. There is much use of red, such as the three red cubes on the stage. To underline the concept of justice or injustice he uses police costumes. We see also Duke (Alexander Arsenyev) in the costume of a modern minister, or the brother of Isabella in a modern sporty costume that suggests he is a foolish young boy. Isabella (Anna Khalilulina) is in a white nun costume. So, on one side there is Shakespeare's blank verse style, and on the other side contemporary costumes and stage design. The three red cubes take an important role on the stage. They are used as a prison, as a place of sex, or Isabella's praying room, simultaneously. In the last scene we see the Duke in a modern politician's costume, in a black suit, speaking at a meeting.

The 5th Interferences International Theatre Festival in Cluj-Napocca was an important artistic experience that brought participants from around the world in the context of "The Stranger's Odyssey." It featured a rich program of conferences, young critics' seminars, performances, films, dances, and it heated up the snowy weather with the Christmas fair and Romania's National Day. The theme "strangeness" of this year's festival was echoed not only in the thematic concerns of many performances such as *Rhinoceros*, *Stranger's Song*, *A Dairy of Madman*, *It's Not The Time of My Life*, but also in the form and theatricality of the plays, especially those adaptations of classics such as *Measure for Measure*, *Medea on Media*, *Electra*, and *Faust*.

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