

Krystian Lupa and Thomas Bernhard in Paris, Fall, 2016



Krystian Lupa, special guest of the Paris Fall Theatre Festival 2016, presented during November and December outstanding productions of Thomas Bernhard, his favorite author: *Wycinka Holzfällen* (*Des arbres à abattre*: Woodcutters), performed in Polish by the Wrocławski Teatr; *Didvyrių Aikštė* (*Place des héros*: Heldenplatz), performed in Lithuanian by the National Theatre of Vilnius, and *Ritter, Dene, Voss* (*Déjeuner chez Wittgenstein*), presented in Polish by the Narodowy Stary Teatr of Cracow. All three showed the harsh vision of Bernhard's Austria: *Woodcutters* parodies the Austrian artistic world, *Heldenplatz*, the antisemitism, the racism, and the political prejudices of the Austrian people; *Ritter, Dene, Voss* the family life of an intellectual icon, Wittgenstein, who is presented as quite unbalanced.

In all three productions, a stable social frame that is established at the beginning is undermined by criticisms, by verbal and psychological violence, and by the personalities of the characters, who exhibit their meanness, their dark and hidden side. However, at the end of each play, strong social conventions make it seem as if nothing bad had happened.

The three productions have very clear structures, each in three distinct parts, separated by intermissions. For instance, in *Heldenplatz*, the public is asked to leave the auditorium, although the changes of scenery are not very important, emphasizing the impression of the time passing between the scenes; in *Woodcutters*, Lupa introduces clear sequences in the development of the action, while Thomas Bernhard's novel, upon which the production is based, presents a repetitive flow of consciousness,

mixing many different periods and shifting constantly from one to another. Instead the separated and different sequences focus on different themes, underline the main character's journey, Joanna (Marta Zieba) that led her to suicide a few days ago and the progressive degradation of the atmosphere of the dinner, with the revelation of the true nature of the characters, portrayed with caustic irony.



Krystian Lupa's production of *Woodcutters*, performed in Polish by the Wrocławski Teatr. Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

In *Woodcutters*, the production presents a dinner of the Austrian artistic society of Vienna, parodying the theatre, the actors, and the society. Lupa's production reflects the hypocrisy, the pretentiousness and the superficiality of this society, speaking about art and desiring to be profound, but also wanting to maintain the etiquette of a wealthy group of recognized artists.

At the beginning of the production, the set represents a cozy living room with red armchairs that is behind glass, like in a closed and claustrophobic space, where the different characters appear, sit and wait for the arrival of a famous actor of the National Theatre. Although her husband, Gerhard Auersbergen (Wojciech Ziemiński), already drunk, sometimes shouts what all the characters are hiding, his wife, Maja Auersbergen (played by Salina Rasiakówna), tries to create a pleasant atmosphere and welcomes her guests: the writer Jeannie Billroth (Ewa Skibińska); another female writer, Anna Schreked (Bożena Baranowska); the young "surrealist" painter, Alfred Rehmden (Andrzej Szeremeta); and two young writers, Joyce (Adam Szczyrczaj) and James (Michał Opaliński). The conversation is often about Joana.

As in the other two productions, the excellent acting succeeds in making the play clearer in an intelligent and precise way, underlining the main trends, revealing aspects of the characters and highlighting relationships that are not obvious in the text with scenic metaphors: it shows the indifferent and distant attitude of the characters, and creates a subtle atmosphere, which is rather friendly at first, although the weird presence of Joana's companion, John (Marcin Pempus), dressed in a suit and black tie, reminds the amused audience that a funeral took place that same afternoon. A revolving stage, used to change the set, helps to create in creating the impression of time passing during the dinner but also in the narrated stories.

The parody of the theatre mainly takes place during the second part, the dinner where all the characters are seated in a row in front of the public, as if they were at the main table of a banquet, and the public were the other participants, or the other side of the table: the actor of the National theatre (Jan Frycz), speaks without interruption about his roles and their preparation, preventing any one else speaking, indifferent to the growing general boredom and impatience. This ends with the outburst of the drunken husband which finishes the dinner, and drives away all the guests. Humorous criticism is also present in the old maid (Krzyszława Dubielowna) who brings the fish to the table, and moves in a casual way in contrast to the stiffness and pretended elegance of the other characters. The criticism reaches its peak in the third part, after the dinner, when the characters are again in the living room, all drunk and exhausted, when one after the other explode, finally telling the truth about their feelings. The production ends when Thomas Bernhard sees off Mrs. Auersbergen, telling her that the dinner was very interesting and all the guests maintained well their assumed personae: she asks him not to write about it, and he lies, assuring her that he will not.

Many aspects of the production move it away from realism. When the actors begin to speak, the audience realizes that the narrator of the novel, present on stage and played by Piotr Skiba, represents Thomas Bernhard himself. Perhaps in tribute to one of his masters, Tadeusz Kantor, Lupa has this actor remain present during a large part of the production, set apart to one side of the stage. He witnesses and reflects on what he sees, but he also stands up and delivers his harsh comments about the social recognition of the artists, widely awarded, but only locally known. During the first part of the production, he delivers his lines when the other characters are speaking, portraying the excited atmosphere of the beginning of a gathering and the vacuity of the abundant speech pronounced; in the second scene, he also participates in the dinner, as a character.

Lupa also presents Joana on stage, acting out past events with the other characters, as if she were alive. Her figure creates many moving moments, for example when she is lying in bed, depressed after her husband had left her for her best friend, and the narrator/Thomas Bernhard visits her, evoking memories of their past relationship, when they were young.



Krystian Lupa's production of *Woodcutters*, performed in Polish by the Wroclaw Polski Theatre. Photo by Christophe Raynaud de Lage.

The scenery of the three productions contains many subtle pictorial references that provide many layers of interpretation. For example, in the first part of *Woodcutters* the living room where the guests are is behind glass; at some point all the characters are smoking, and the space is filled with smoke, reminding me of the infra-mince of Marcel Duchamp. In *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, the scenery is within a red-painted frame that is illuminated at the end of each scene, stressing the fact that we are in the theatre. A red string at leg level establishes a clear limit of the scenery itself and creates an empty space of three meters between the scenery and the front of the orchestra; this red strip also reminded me of Felice Varini's work. The image is also divided into three parts by two thin metallic structure that create the aspect of a triptych. This perhaps is to suggest the three members of the family, framed in a rigid external structure although their relationships seem anything all but conventional. The perspectives of the scenery reminded me of the classical perspectives of painting, as those of Poussin. The doors and the walls, in *Heldenplatz* and in *Dene, Ritter, Voss* seem worn, an aspect that seems to be constant in Lupa productions: the text depicts that the characters are wealthy, but the scratched doors and the dirty walls seem to locate the scene in a used, abandoned house from another age, as if the action had already taken place.

The cinematographic skills of Lupa appear in this production, in the striking use of video images. The production begins with a film projected onto a screen over the stage: a young woman, Joana, is interviewed about her profession, and she answers in regard to her commitment to acting and how it has transformed her whole life. This film, projected while the public are taking their seats, adds a text that is not included in the novel. Video projections suspend the action on stage many times during the

production: all the actors watch the film that sometimes presents a past event — like the invitation by the couple Auersbergen, repeated in the novel many times—the images of Joana’s cortege and funeral; and sometimes also simultaneous scenes like the conversations between the two young writers gossiping about the dinner and what they have to say, which takes place in the bathroom.



Krystian Lupa's production of *Heldenplatz*, performed in Lithuanian by the National Theatre of Vilnius. Photo by D. Matvejevas.

Heldenplatz shows the gathering of a Jewish family, the Schusters, and their friends for the funeral of professor Joseph Schuster. The characters make violent criticisms of the Austrian people, accused of being both nationalistic and xenophobic and, even nowadays, national-socialist. More maybe than *Woodcutters*, it shows a hostile world that pushes certain characters toward self-destruction. The scenery represents a large room in an apartment that is being emptied, with high grey walls that seem unkept and a grey floor, and with two huge wardrobes in the middle covered by plastic, a door on the far left, and with many cardboard boxes on the right side. A huge window on the left side, provides the main stage lighting.

The production stresses the division into scenes, that seem like almost three different productions. In the first scene, a servant, Herta (played by Rasa Samuolyté), and Ms Zittel (Eglé Gabrénaité), the pretentious housekeeper, both dressed in dark grey colors, talk about the professor Joseph Schuster, who has committed suicide, throwing himself out the window, and about his family. His loathing of Vienna had

been partly created by the situation of the apartment, in front of the Square where Hitler had been acclaimed as a hero on March 15, 1938, the day after the Anschluss. Each time, Hedwig, the professor's wife, is in this living-room, she hears the past cheering as if it was happening now, which makes their life impossible. The housekeeper and the servant are emptying two huge wardrobes: Herta is waxing shoes in the light from the window; Ms Zittel irons and folds the shirts that she takes from the wardrobe, while she comments how obsessive the professor was to do it himself and how he ordered Ms Zittel to repeat the same gestures. Their conversation portrays the relationship between the authoritarian character of Ms Zittel and the soft and enigmatic personality of Herta. The now phantasmagoric professor appears in a film projected onto the wall, after both women have left the stage.

The second scene presents the professor's daughters, Anna (Viktorja Kuodyté) and Olga (Eglé Mikulionyté), who are also professors, after the funeral, in a sports field where they are waiting for their uncle, professor Robert Schuster (Valentinas Masalskis), who walks more slowly. A photograph of a landscape is projected onto the wall of the scenery, with the shadow of a fortress. The rhythm of conversation between them, with sharp comments to each other, is much more vivid than in the previous scene, underling the relationship and the differences between the sisters: the younger sister is more sensitive to her uncle, laughing when he criticizes society; the elder one shows her harsh character, criticizing the society but also her uncle. Valentinas Masalskis, playing Robert Schuster, finally arrives, he complains, with mixed anger and humor, how the atmosphere is even worse than before the war, with still more racism and mediocrity.

The first part of third scene, while the characters are waiting for the arrival of the widow, is dominated by Joseph Schuster: the ruthless memories of his brother's past, of his difficult personality, of his indifference for real discussion are mixed with criticisms about Austrian antisemitism, about the theatre, and the vulgarity of the university, showing his contempt for the upper class, and especially for his nephew Lukas (Arūnas Sakalauskas), a superficial character, obsessed by an actress. He finds no resistance among the guests invited to this funeral wake: one of his brother's colleagues, Professor Liebig (Vytautas Rumsas), and his wife, Mme Liebig (Neringa Bulotaité), and a disciple of his brother, M. Landauer (Povilas Budrys), tied by etiquette and all of a most rigid disposition.



Krystian Lupa's production of *Heldenplatz*, performed in Lithuanian by the National Theatre of Vilnius. Photo by D. Matvejevas.

The second part of this scene shows a meal, with the family and the friends sitting on one side of the table, as in *Woodcutters*. They criticize the university world of Vienna. During the meal, while all the characters are talking to each other, Hedwig, the widow, becomes more intensively illuminated, and seems to become progressively paler, as the sound of the acclamation and the Hitler's voice, which only she can hear, becomes louder and louder. The production ends suddenly when she collapses, dead, with her face on the table, while the image of a large window projected on the backstage projects images of the Nazi Night of the Broken Glass, November 9th-10th 1938, one of the starting points of the Holocaust. More openly than the others, this production criticizes Austrian nationalism and xenophobia. Although the play was written in 1989, it is still meaningful in December 2016 in France, where the far-right National Front is more powerful than ever before.

The first scene of *Déjeuner chez Wittgenstein* [Ritter, Dene, Voss] presents two main characters, Dene, the elder sister (played by Agnieszka Mandat) and Ritter, the younger sister (Malgorzata Hajewska-Krzysztofik), in a luxurious living room, where the walls are covered with paintings of family members, although the door and the window display the passage of time and the lack of upkeep; in the center of it, a table is carefully being laid by the elder sister during all of the first scene.

Beginning very softly, the first scene reveals the complexity of the relationship between the two sisters; from the beginning, the attention they give to their brother, Ludwig, is the center of their concerns and their conversation: the elder sister takes care of Ludwig and seems to live only to please him, while the

younger sister points out that he has destroyed their lives. While the elder sister is constantly moving from the table to the kitchen, the younger sister is lying on a sofa, drinking. Both sisters seem tied by their affection, but also by a hint of hatred, provoked by the apparently different attitude towards their tyrannical brother, who was in Steinhof, an asylum, where the elder sister had gone to discharge him, and to bring him to their home. During this first scene the really outstanding acting reflects with subtlety the shifts of the character's mood, from complicity to raging fights. The play presents a rich and challenging text for actors, which is indicated in Bernhard's title, *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, which are actually the names of the three leading actors for which he created the work.



Krystian Lupa's production of *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, presented in Polish by the Narodowy Stary Theatre of Cracow. Photo by Marek Gardulski.

Both characters and their brother are eating quietly when, after the intermission, the curtain rises at the beginning of the second scene; everything is the same although the younger sister is wearing a red-haired wig, in the fashion of the forties. The scene shows a progressive degeneration of mood, although both sisters try to prevent Ludwig's crisis. Nonetheless the unjustified and increasing aggressiveness of Ludwig (Piotr Squibb) towards his sisters continues and grows. He criticizes painting and mainly modern art, breaks the old and precious dishes in the cupboard, provokes his sister to break the coffee cups, and

finally, after shouting cruel insults to his sisters, ends by pulling off the tablecloth and knocking over all the things that are on it. However, this degradation, that shows Ludwig's unbalanced character, goes through subtle variations from friendly conversation to the final crisis.

The same changes of mood happen in the third scene, that includes many funny moments of theatre parody, as when Ritter tells his brother about the fact that they owned 51% of the theatre, which allows the two sisters, as actresses, to perform when they wish to in the part they want, in any play, like Dene, the elder sister, who is playing a blind person, a part of two minutes in an insignificant production, but who prepares herself conscientiously taking classes for it, or when Dene shows to her brother the cotton underpants she has bought for him. This scene shows the complexity of the characters, the close ties between the younger sister and the brother, although their friendly conversation is followed by Ludwig's unexpected burst of violence. The threat of violence is always present. Nonetheless the production ends with the three characters sitting at a table and having coffee peacefully as if all the conversation had been pleasant.

The excellent acting of the three productions portrays the characters precisely, strangely vivid, each of them presenting a tempo and a very neatly differentiated rhythm: their accurate presence and the intensity immediately reveals at each moment their individual pasts. The acting creates a fluidity in the production. This fluidity in the development, this constant movement, remains when the pace slows down. For instance, in the last part of *Woodcutters*, the duration seems to extend, reflecting the boredom and discomfort of the characters, showing their emptiness and their artificiality, but it is also the time required to explore and to display the complexity of the characters. In *Heldenplatz*, the very slow rhythm, with many pauses, of the first scene, that lasts almost two hours, justifies the interruptions and the ellipsis of the text as a reflection of the pain of the shocked Ms. Zittel: she repeatedly expresses her memories, dominated by nostalgia, at the edge of madness, imposing her point of view over Herta's, who seems unavoidably attracted to the window from which she saw the professor jump, but the production also suggests other aspects such as her erotic dreams concerning the professor. In the first scene of *Ritter, Dene, Voss*, the elliptic transitions between the lines of the play make perfect sense in this production, reflecting the slow reconsideration of memories, words and situations, interrupted by hesitations.

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