

I Think of Curatorial Work in Scholarly Terms: An Interview with Ivan Medenica

By Ognjen Obradovi

Since its foundation in 1967, Bitef (Belgrade International Theatre Festival) has been associated with new theatre trends. Owing to a continuous transformation of performing arts, theatrical production has been in constant change; however, Bitef has managed to keep in pace with this dynamic, thus becoming one of the biggest and most prominent European festivals. Through the decades, Bitef ' s audience has been able to see some radical stage experiments that turned away from the conventional dramatic forms, performances of post-dramatic, nonverbal expression, and, lately, those based on new digital technologies. At the same time, alongside its radical tendencies, Bitef has presented significant and inventive readings of classical plays, as well as examples of non-European theatre traditions.



Ivan Medenica. Photo: Diplomacy and Progress

On the occasion of the 56th Bitef, I spoke with Ivan Medenica, artistic director of the festival, about this year ' s program, its thematic and aesthetic axes, the challenges that the festival faces in times of crisis, but also about the intersections of his vocations as a curator, professor,

theoretician, and a theatre critic. Ivan Medenica works at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts as a professor of The History of World Drama and Theatre. He regularly publishes articles in both national and international journals. He was the Chairman or Co-Chairman of five international symposiums of theatre critics and scholars organized by Sterijino Pozorje Festival in Novi Sad and the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC). Medenica has participated in a number of international conferences and given guest lectures at Humboldt University (Berlin), Yale School of Drama, and University of Cluj (Romania). Medenica is an active theatre critic and has received six times the national award for best theatre criticism. His book *The Tragedy of Initiation or the Inconstant Prince* was also awarded as the best book on theatre published in Serbia (2017) and was translated into Slovenian and Macedonian. He was the Artistic Director of Sterijino Pozorje in Novi Sad, the leading national theatre festival in Serbia (2003-2007), to which he brought some important structural changes. From 2001 to 2012, Medenica was one of the main editors of the journal *Teatron*, a prestigious theatre publication in Serbia that was awarded an international prize. He was a fellow at the International Research Center “Interweaving Performance Cultures” at the Freie Universität in Berlin (2011-2013). He is a member of the International Association of Theatre Critics’ Executive Committee and the Director of its international conferences. He is also a member of the editorial board of *Critical Stages*, the web journal of the Association.

If someone asked you to introduce yourself with a line or two from a classic or contemporary play, what would it be?

„The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right “ (Hamlet)

„No! I fight on! I fight on! I fight on! ” (Cyrano de Bergerac)

„The readiness is all “ (Hamlet)

What do you say? I would say – a strong sense of duty, combativeness, megalomania, and no sense of self-irony. (laugh)

What is the focus of the 56th Bitef, speaking both thematically and aesthetically?

I introduced the concept that each edition of Bitef should have two axes: the aesthetic and the thematic one. The first axis comes from the fact that Bitef was founded in 1967 as a festival of "new theatre tendencies." This notion is obviously a modernistic one as the concept of "newness," as Adorno puts it, is the very essence of modernism. Nowadays we live in post-postmodern times, which means that one cannot deal with the notion of newness in a direct, innocent, and self-evident way. We have to question it on a regular basis. That is why each edition of Bitef focuses on a different practice and/or form of contemporary theatre and performing arts in general which is, if not now then still daring, radical, different, provocative... This is the aesthetic axis.

This year it will be „the devised theatre: “ the one in which all its participants are co-creators, where the working hierarchies are deconstructed and the processes of creating are democratized. It goes hand in hand with the thematic axis of the 56th Bitef which is – labor. The

big majority of performances in the main program deals with the challenges that people are facing regarding their working opportunities and rights nowadays, in time of crises. These problems are consequences of both the pandemic and the war in Ukraine, but they are also strongly linked with neoliberal capitalism as such which is in its empowered, „neofeudalistic “ stage.

The slogan of the 56th edition "We – the Heroes of Our Own Work" stresses these topics on a symbolic level and it comes from a Yugoslav working-class song. The performances tackle issues such as the misery of Mexican workers who struggle to survive with the minimum wage (Tijuana by the Mexican artist Lazaro Gabino Rodriguez); lack of professional perspective for Serbian doctors and other medical staff who leave for Germany in large numbers (Dr. Ausländer/ Made for Germany by the Serbian director Bojan Djordjev); the destiny of museum guards all around the world, these invisible people who very often happen to be overqualified for their work (Gardien Party by French authors Mohamed El Khatib and Valérie Mréjen); life in a British homeless shelter (Love, directed by the English director Alexander Zeldin), etc. The special subgroup of performances are those that tackle the working processes, conditions, and rights, especially those of female artists, in performing arts themselves (any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones by the Belgian choreographer Jan Martens, Solo by the Slovenian director Nina Raji Kranjc and A World without Women by Serbian authors Maja Pelevi and Olga Dimitrijevi).

How do your vocations as a professor, theoretician, and theatre critic relate to your job at Bitef?

Thank you for this question. I think that all my jobs, or the ways in which I execute them, are strongly interconnected. Already this concept with two axes, the thematic and the aesthetic one (like a cross) shows that I think of curatorial work in scholarly terms, as a theoretician. With theoretical debates that contextualize each of these aesthetic frames of the main program of Bitef, you get a kind of “ lecture ” about a particular practice or form of contemporary theatre. As I have already stressed, this year this is devised theatre. In previous years we had an immersive theatre, durational performances, digital performing bodies, installation art, etc. I think that one can easily see that the actual curator of Bitef is neither an artist nor a manager, but a professor.

What inspires you as a theoretician lately? Are you currently working on a particular topic?

My current scientific work is also connected to Bitef. In the last period, I ’ ve been publishing articles both in national and international journals that tackled Bitef in its different aspects. The aim is to make a kind of map of some of the main tendencies, forms, poetics, and artists in contemporary world theatre in the last fifty years through the history of Bitef. I am also interested in Bitef both as a representation of Yugoslav cultural politics in Tito ’ s times and a subversion of the dominant discourses in contemporary Serbian society and culture. Bitef has always been a progressive, leftist platform, both in artistic and political terms, and it still is, while the Serbian society became, after the collapse of Yugoslavia, conservative in every sense. I think that this Bitef-paradox is clearly indicated in the title of my article that was published in New Theatre Quarterly: „BITEF Before and After 1989: Representation to Deconstruction of Social and Cultural Paradigms. “

How has Bitez been coping with the pandemic and its consequences? Besides the obvious negative aspects, can it be argued that times of crisis encourage critical thinking and innovation in the field of theatre?

In the first year of the pandemic, we had to cancel the regular edition of the festival. Instead of it, we organized a three-day-long preview of what Bitez 2020 was supposed to be, with only two performances and a few side programs. One performance was a solo, the other one with a robot as the only protagonist and we have been executing all the anti-pandemic measures, so neither the artists/technicians nor the spectators were at risk. All the side programs, debates, first of all, happened on an open-air stage in front of the Bitez theatre. Last year we had, more or less, a regular program (with two performances cancelled at the very last moment due to an unexpected and sudden outburst of the pandemic in Serbia). We had the bodily distance in auditoriums and fulfilled other anti-pandemic restrictions. As a whole, these were two very difficult years for organizing a live event such as a theatre festival. Speaking of consequences, the only one we noticed last year was a slightly reduced number of spectators (and I don't think of the reduction caused by bodily distancing). Some people didn't feel comfortable to go into a "crowd," and I think that theatre and live art, in general, will have to cope up with this problem for a while. On the other hand, I realized between the last Bitez and nowadays that people became more relaxed, at least in Serbia: even too relaxed. Strange situation.

I am afraid I don't fully agree with the thesis that times of crisis encourage innovation in the field of theatre. History teaches us that the periods of theatre excellency were at the same time the periods of economical and political prosperity: Greek theatre in the 5th century BC, Shakespeare and the Elizabethan period, Molière and French classicists during the reign of Louis XIV, etc... If I would be „forced“ to stress one phenomenon of contemporary performing arts that I find really innovative and important (not only from the artistic point of view), my choice will be the „ecological theatre“ of the kind that the British director Katie Mitchell is doing nowadays. It doesn't mean only developing topics in a theatre piece such as global warming, climate change, and other that are ecological challenges and troubles. It means to conceive and develop ecologically sustainable production conditions as well.

Each year we have a Prologue Day, which is the first day of Bitez (before the „grand opening“). It introduces the thematic and/or artistic frame of that year's edition and, sometimes, makes a bridge with the concept of the previous edition. This is exactly the case this year. As our focus on the previous Bitez was the ecological crisis, we will start this one, on Prologue Day, by the piece *Not the end of the world* written by Chris Bush, directed by Katie Mitchell, and produced by Schaubühne theatre Berlin. This show is the best example of „ecological theatre:“ not only does it have adequate topics, but its set was made of recycled material, costumes and props are taken from some old productions, and the electricity for the performance is produced by itself, on the stage by pedalling special bikes.

It's not difficult to assume a pessimistic point of view on the contemporary world. Is there something that brings you optimism and hope?

I will continue in the same direction. I've recently started following and supporting the ecological movement as these problems are the biggest ones that our civilization is facing. But I think this

movement should leave the frame of pure activism and become a real, developed ideological force; one that can provide not only the answers to ecological issues but to the geostrategic, economic, social and others. Some answers to these challenges that the world ecological movement is facing one can find in the new book by Bruno Latour and Nikolaj Schultz: A Note on the New Ecological Class (Mémo sur la nouvelle classe écologique). I am reading it now and translating it from French into Serbian. That ' s how I relax from theatre, academia, Bitez and anxiety in general... Hmmm. Isn ' t it better to do some sport? (laugh)

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