

66th Sterijino Pozorje Festival Selector's Report

IN SPITE OF THESE EVIL TIMES!

Certainly, there have never been so many uncertain situations in the history of the Sterijino Pozorje Festival (formerly known as the Yugoslav Theatre Festival) as in this season. The announcements of the premieres, followed by their cancellations, have become a daily and demoralizing phenomenon. The uncertainty of planning, the obedience, that has sometimes been absurdly adjusted to suit the regulations and measures that protect us against the COVID-19 pandemic, unfavorably affected the Serbian theater, which was already largely disoriented, humiliated, denied.

The pandemic weakened the immunity of the theater's body.

It interfered with the production of theater productions in the most direct way possible, so the repertoire of Serbian theaters favored chamber plays. The pandemic also influenced the artistic process regarding the production of the plays, their direction, and dramaturgy. The virus has also indirectly dictated the dramatic work as well: it instructed the writers which topics they should observe, how to organize the plot, how many characters to introduce to the play. Among those chamber theatrical forms, we have seen several successful plays (*Everything Is OK Right Now*, the author's project by Snežana Trišić and the ensemble of the Kruševac Theater, and even the monodrama *Having Tea with Kublai Khan* by Saša Radonjić and performed by Yugoslav Krajnov).

The general atmosphere in the country and the entire world has also influenced the ideological and thematic structure of the theatre, so the notion of Evil as an ethical category and all the other notions deriving from it (the fear, the anxiety, the wickedness, the corruption), have become the central theme and the keyword of the dramatic works. The case of Evil, the philosophy of Evil, and the study of this notion from various standpoints have become the dominant performance of the plays selected in the Competition Selection, but it also infiltrates the other two selections. This could not have happened without the orders issued by our Times. Because, we have not yet forgotten the previous, war-induced evils of the 1990s, yet the worldwide evil has caught up with us. Thus, Chance "commanded" the playwrights, dramatists, and directors, perhaps unconsciously, to update their performances with a rough layer that associates or refers to the current misfortune of mankind. Several dramatic works that deal with the appearance of the virus and its impact on the spirit and the social organization essentially and deeply are just here to indicate that the effect of the virus will be problematized and artistically processed in the years to come. The artistic answer to how this deadly virus has destroyed us mentally and spiritually is yet to come.

Another important feature of this year's production in Serbian theaters is a certain yet constant dose of self-reflection, not just when speaking of theatrical productions, but when looking at a theater as a whole. All productions seem to scream "In spite of these evil times!" The Serbian theater exists and acts "despite our dark day", to quote Laza Kostić and his immortal poem.

This standpoint is confirmed by the fact that, since the last selection process, forty plays based on the texts written by Serbian playwrights, have been performed in Serbian theaters. Among them are as many as twenty-five first performances, which is a sign of optimism when speaking about domestic dramas. Besides the outstanding performances included in the selection of the Festival, I can firmly confirm that, in terms of significance and aesthetic values, at least three more plays could have been selected, while more than half of all performances meet the standards of artistically valuable achievements that encourage a serious dialogue, and that is a sign of an advanced self-awareness of the administrations in our theaters.

It is obvious that faced with an absence of contemporary dramatic works, the theatres do not look so much for the proven traditional dramatic works, but for adapting novels for the stage. That is why exemplary dramatizations of novels take up half of this year's competition selection. This trend is present in the theatre repertoire both in Serbia and in the countries in the region, so it seems that the current state of the contemporary plays could be described as "the society in a dramatized novel", paraphrasing the famous work by Vladimir Stamenković, *The Theater in Dramatized Society*. We can notice the domination of the author's projects and collaborations. This creates valuable and extravagant productions but also poses the question of the authorship behind the play, the creator who gave a play its final form, firmness, strength, and idea.

Plays that are based on the works by contemporary Serbian playwrights confirm that our theaters can respond to all the challenges of the times they live in. The playwrights searched for the material, and have eventually found it, in the depth and the darkness of the national experience, in the world that surrounds them, in their intimate world, or in the process of studying the world and confronting it, while revealing its secrets.

Without exaggerating, we can say that the general evaluation is that the Serbian theater is, at this moment, heroic. It managed to resist all the factors that hindered it. The theatrical work, the play itself, is fragile, thin, consisting of the most sensitive spiritual tremors, which is why it must be respected – especially the fact that it has survived during emergency circumstances. The reception of the plays, both by the official theater critics and by the audience, is incomplete, and it does not include the element of elation and enthusiasm, as it is not based on the collective experience. The performances are entered straight from the reality, gradually, and the two planes meet in the process of pointing out the value of a special human contact called "the theater", so the deprivation of that vibrant connection has certainly prevented the audience to receive theatrical sensations to the fullest.

When speaking of the presence of the Serbian playwrights abroad, they are less frequently present due to the pandemic (the theaters in Slovenia, Northern Macedonia, and Montenegro did not work at all), so "The Circles" selection is based on the performances from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. By the way, it has been noticed that the theatrical situation in the region, previously described as "Yugo-nostalgic", has been increasingly and openly characterized as "Yugoslav" or "Post-Yugoslav" in spirit. The playwrights, the directors, and the dramaturges have been increasingly working in the countries of the region and participating in joint projects and productions.

A strong desire to work has kept the Serbian theater alive.

A fact that cannot be denied is that the Serbian theater has appeared triumphant in the past year. Despite the disruptive factors, over half of the plays based on the domestic playwrights' work appear to be valuable, attractive, directorially fresh, and provocative. Therefore, I suggest that the 66th Sterijino Pozorje Festival Competition Selection includes ten performances as a sort of encouragement for the Theatre and a way to enrich the Festival, as well as compensate for the lack of theatrical sensations we were exposed to in the previous year.

The Sterijino Pozorje Festival is the biggest theatrical holiday, so this extension would, "in spite of these evil times", make it more luxurious. The proposed festival units give us a chance to notice the tendencies in the state of the domestic drama text (both contemporary and inherited) in Serbian theater and the world at the moment, as well as the position of the Serbian drama and theater in comparison to the national drama in the theaters in the region.

THE 66TH STERIJINO POZORJE FESTIVAL COMPETITION SELECTION

1. THE MINISTER'S WIFE, WRITTEN BY BRANISLAV NUŠIĆ, DIRECTED BY TATJANA MANDIĆ RIGONAT; CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE IVAN PL. ZAJC IN RIJEKA (CROATIA)

Different therapies have been used to treat the moral diseases diagnosed in Nušić's comedy, and the lust for power is one of the most widespread and most destructive for the health of the social organism. Tatjana Mandić Rigonat's directorial approach emphasizes the destructive influence of the greedy subject on the encouragement of the development of the petty bourgeoisie, and thus on the kitsch as the foyer of the Evil. The Rijeka-based production presents that

petty-bourgeois, provincial spirit, tenacious and adaptable to all times, particularly strong and destructive in our times, on a particularly visual and musical level, exposing and defeating it in the lavishing acting performance.

2. DIVISIONS, WRITTEN BY DOBRICA ĆOSIĆ, DRAMATIZATION BY SPASOJE Ž. MILOVANOVIĆ, DIRECTED BY JUG RADIVOJEVIĆ; SERBIAN NATIONAL THEATRE NOVI SAD, NATIONAL THEATRE NIŠ, NATIONAL THEATRE PRIŠTINA, BASED IN GRAČANICA

Starting with the strongest impression: on the visual level, this is a modernized, spectacular, and cathartic theatrical story about the divisions that have lasted, in a manner of speaking, since the very beginning of the Serbian identity. This is also a painful story about the irreconcilable separation of the family. From the psychoanalytic point of view, the play portrays the transformation of something that was our own and intimate into something else and belonging to someone else. This division is historically realized through the differences between the revolution and the crime, the national and the cosmopolite, the Partisans and the Chetniks, the rural and the urban – these differences are in the core of Dobrica Ćosić's novel – and it is suppressed in the dramatic form. What's emphasized is the personal and the family tragedy whose depth is, whether this qualification seems to be too strong or not, still comparable to the power of the ancient tragedy. This great and polyphonic Serbian novel was the base of a spectacular, scenically stylized production, devoid of folklore ornamentation, modern and admonishing, in which the permanent opposites of the dramatic work function on a strong symbolic level: the change of the light and the darkness, the closeness and the distance, the demonstration of the strength and the fragility of the noble.

3. WANTON LADY'S KNIGHTS (AUTHOR'S PROJECT), DIRECTED BY URBÁN ANDRÁS; KOSZTOLÁNYI DEZSŐ THEATRE SUBOTICA

The subtitle "Syndical operetta gala from Subotica" hides an exciting, infinitely witty, satirical, self-ironic, and metatheatrical production, a singing demystification of the theater, analysis, and criticism of the bourgeois operetta theater, simultaneously the fate of the Hungarian theater in Serbia and the engaged and subversive theater, as well as a comment on the use of actors, their physicality, violence, and on the manipulation enabled by the position of power, which is very important today. This author's project witnesses a clash of two already established Urbán's directorial aesthetics: the research, to which Urbán András has been uncompromisingly devoted since his "early works", and the other one, immersed in traditionalism and a not-so-benign conservatism.

4. ROOSTER WITHOUT A TAIL, WRITTEN BY ALEKSANDAR POPOVIĆ, DIRECTED BY MILAN NEŠKOVIĆ; NATIONAL THEATRE SUBOTICA

The farce and skewness of Popović's charming non-traditional drama can be seen in the costume and the lavishing acting performance, while the story of the pursuit of gold, which gives this play the dynamic potential of an action-comedy, in Milan Nešković's directorial approach adopted a realistic character and emphasized the tendency to seek humanity and a pretty human face. The destiny of an ordinary, little man created by Aleksandar Popović, following the laws of the genre in which he is immersed, is to fall into comic and absurd situations, to interfere the History in a delusional and clumsy manner, like a peripheral "rooster without a tail", and to flaunt his views on life, religion, and politics, our constant divisions. A condensed, tight, ironic performance.

5. DEATH AND THE DERVISH, BASED ON THE EPONYMOUS NOVEL BY MEŠA SELIMOVIĆ, DRAMATIZED AND DIRECTED BY DEJAN PROJKOVSKI; NATIONAL THEATER OF THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA IN BANJA LUKA (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, THE REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA)

The universality of statements about love, human passions, the fight between the good and the evil, the humanity and the bestiality, in the novelistic structure of *Death and the Dervish* by Meša Selimović, has always presented a great challenge when it comes to transposing it into the dramatic, and then theatrical form. When it comes to dramatization, Projkovski opted for the totality of the dramatic potential of the novel. While translating the novel into the stage language, the director insisted on every psychological, philosophical, and lyrical detail in acting, which will make the splendor and the depth of the thought of the cult novel credible. On the visual level, the attractive yet metaphorical scenography imitates the atmosphere of the novel, emphasizing the anxiety and constant threat to the heroes' freedom, while on the other hand (by introducing the horses and birds), it evokes the longing for harmony, beauty, and freedom.

6. RADIO ŠABAC, WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY OLGA DIMITRIJEVIĆ; ŠABAC CITY THEATRE

Skillfully using the experiences and procedures of the documentary theater, Olga Dimitrijević analyzes the phenomenon of the local radio station Radio Šabac, which was the loudest and most long-range emanation of the voice of the "socialist working people" in the 1970s, an expression of their naïve and

superficial view of the world, but also the image of the world slowly moving towards the abyss. Realized mostly in choral acting scenes, though based on memories and facts, the play captivates with its humor and irony, but, at the same time, it is a unique sentimental cry and a harsh and political reminder of the twists and turns of the transition and all its consequences. A humble theatrical installation of the history of the radio is set in the second act, right on the stage where the audience is, also offering a view of the empty seats. The stage was possibly deserted in the meantime because it was dominated not by the artistic values, but the lowest passions brought by the new turbo-folk music.

7. WHEN YOU GAZE LONG INTO AN ABYSS, THEATRICAL POEM BASED ON THE EPONYMOUS NOVEL BY ENES HALILOVIĆ, WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY ZLATKO PAKOVIĆ; REGIONAL THEATRE NOVI PAZAR, CULTURAL CENTRE NOVI PAZAR

This is an equally poetic and subversive tragic modern play, inspired by a startling novel by Enes Halilović. Paković's play tells the story of the fate of the poor stratum of society which, together with all the troubles, is also enslaved by the customs in which curses and blasphemies are brought to the level of the fateful, while also made stronger by the religious and secular institutions. This is also a strong and compact story about powerful people who want to organize the world and rule their subordinates, about the manipulations, the transformations, and the world based on the lies that culminate in crimes and cover-ups. The value of this play is in the constant meeting and intertwining the sentiment, the poetry, and the drama, and what is sharply engaged in it in the noblest way possible. Moreover, we witness a strong and credibly expressive acting process and inexplicably touchingly seductive disillusion, probably because it possesses a certain and much-needed dose of the exotic provided by a specific local atmosphere and an authentic linguistic system.

8. GREAT DEPRESSION, WRITTEN BY FILIP GRUJIĆ, DIRECTED BY MARKO ČELEBIĆ; SERBIAN NATIONAL THEATRE NOVI SAD, CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF VISUAL CULTURE NOVI SAD

Originally titled "Eben Byers' Jaw", this play by Filip Grujić, a prominent member of the youngest generation of Serbian playwrights, intertwines a social, philosophical, and poetic layer. The base of the play is a story about real-life characters and phenomena from the beginning of the 20th century, when radium, an extremely toxic element, was used in factories and advertised as a medicine. Going back to the past, Grujić creates a picture of the modern world which is, on the one hand, unscrupulously greedy, sterile, and uninventive, dedicated to the debauched life as the only meaningful form of living, while it is, on the other hand, a choir of humiliated female workers ("Radium Girls"), subjected to cruel capitalist exploitation. In the direction by Marko Čelebić, this becomes a performance of refined stylistic expression, convincing atmosphere, and visual harmony which is imposed as a metaphor of a modern and cruel high-class society as opposed to the dreamers of a fairer, better, and more naïve world.

9. QUIETLY FLOWS THE MISSISSIPPI, BASED ON THE EPONYMOUS NOVEL BY VLADIMIR TABAŠEVIĆ, DRAMATIZED BY IVICA BULJAN AND VLADIMIR TABAŠEVIĆ, DIRECTED BY IVICA BULJAN; BELGRADE DRAMA THEATRE

This is a seductive play constructed on the ruins of the novel *Quietly Flows the Mississippi* by Vladimir Tabašević, who participated in the disintegration and rearrangement of the source text and is also involved "in person" in the play, thus giving, among other things, the legitimacy of the well-known imperfection of the dramatic form for the "theatrical use". Following Ivica Buljan's directorial poetics, the play contains the features of the drama theater, the performance art, and the rock concert, and the stage requires every inch of free space to feature all the symbols of our modern history (SFRY, and then the Serbian transition), the "flea market" we have been occupying for decades. The self-ironic "identity" acting creates a comic effect, together with the elements of the general carnivalization of the directing process. A divided, dramatized, and then re-dramatized novel, together with different types of comedy and humor (from verbal comedy to black and nonsense humor), sentimental passages, parallel dramatic currents, and the process of deceiving the audience with unfinished characters, turn this story of mentality, growing up, and sexual maturing of a young man into an exciting portrait of an era long gone.

10. SCHINDLER'S LIFT, BASED ON THE EPONYMOUS NOVEL BY DARKO CVIJETIĆ, DRAMATIZED AND DIRECTED BY KOKAN MLADENOVIĆ; CHAMBER THEATRE 55 SARAJEVO (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA)

The child's perspective and the children's understanding of the world clashing with the world of the adults create the basis of Kokan Mladenović's directing process that connects to the memory of the life in Prijedor's red high-rise, "the vertical village", in a deathly manner. Compassionately and painfully.

Every sentence of Cvijetić's novel can be used as an active dramaturgical material, an image, an idea, a text. That is how a traumatic story was created, as well as a metaphor of the evil fate of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the whole Yugoslavia, a cemented memory, an intertwining of reality and fiction. A deadly dystopia. The play does not talk so much about the Evil of the past as it looks towards the future, discreetly trying to answer the question: how to live next to each other and with each other.

NON-COMPETITIVE INTERNATIONAL SELECTION "THE CIRCLES"

1. THE HOTEL TITO, AUTHOR'S PROJECT BY ANICA TOMIĆ AND JELENA KOVAČEVIĆ BASED ON THE EPONYMOUS NOVEL BY IVANA BODROŽIĆ; GAVELLA DRAMA THEATRE ZAGREB (CROATIA)

Told from the perspective of a girl born in Vukovar, this is a memory of growing up with pain and the memory of the exile days in the former political school in Kumrovec. It covers traumatic experiences, especially about the dark side of the women's world. This is a production of cathartic action and universal expression.

2. THE BOY WHO TALKED TO GOD, WRITTEN BY DAMIR MAĐARIĆ, DIRECTED BY SAMO M. STRELEC; CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE IN OSIJEK (CROATIA)

A shocking and cathartic play on the rise of fascism, based on the writings of a boy from a Jewish family who dreams of becoming an actor, but his dream is interrupted by Death in the form of a fascist soldier. This is, as the director calls it, "a fantastic play for young people and children", and it is also a sarcastic utopian story of the immeasurable faith in the power of the theatre to oppose every Evil, violence, and destruction.

3. RIBBIT, WRITTEN BY ALMIR BAŠOVIĆ, DIRECTED BY ALEŠ KURT; NATIONAL THEATRE TUZLA (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA)

A debauched, metadramatic comedy based on Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. This is a highly engaged play asked about the fate, the power, and the powerlessness of the Theater.

SECOND STAGE (OFF-PROGRAM)

1. POETICS OF OBSERVATION, DIRECTED AND ENVISIONED BY URBÁN ANDRÁS; KOSZTOLÁNYI DEZSŐ THEATRE SUBOTICA

Gentle images, with no words, but with strong and symbolic messages about the world of nature which has been disturbed by people's crudeness.

2. LIKE THE END ISN'T THAT CLOSE, WRITTEN BY MAJA PELEVIĆ, DIRECTED BY NIKOLA ZAVIŠIĆ; BITEF THEATRE BELGRADE

Created in specific circumstances, this play in seven powerful poetic fragments speaks of the (possible) connection between the man and the machine, connecting virtual reality and audiovisual installations in the search of an uncertain theater of the future.

Selector
Milivoje Mladenović, PhD
Novi Sad, 29th April 2021