

# 67<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje Festival Selector's Report

## THE TIMES OF ANXIETY

The Sterijino Pozorje Festival is not, it has never been, nor will it ever be, a cross selection, or an average look at the theatre spirit or the state of theaters in Serbia. This manifestation was – or at least this is how most theatre professionals see it – the vision of vitality, capacity, and potential of theatric values reflected through the production of domestic dramas.

The most important achievement of the Sterijino Pozorje Festival is the fact that it describes the model of the world we live in today and determines the dramatic expression of that model, and then values theatric production following that model.

Just a few words about the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected the theatre life: it wore us down, drained us, emptied us, and made us lose our balance, both emotionally and mentally. That can be easily determined in many recent accomplishments. Lots of things that are important for the theatre were affected on a structural, semantic, and perceptive level. That lead to the feelings of anxiety, fear, depression, exhaustion, and disappointment growing into a general state of mind that took over our theatric space as well. And when we add the possibility that our culture is going to be overtaken by an omnipresent non-culture, the view of the future is even gloomier. All we have is to fight for the rehabilitation and growth of the theatric system.

During the past year, I have seen fifty-one plays in theatres in Serbia and the region in person, as well as seven plays on video. Twenty-one of these plays have been performed for the first time based on domestic playwrights' dramas, including three author's projects and four dramatizations of prose works.

Between two Festivals, many classic adaptations – thirteen of them altogether – have been noticed. Among these, the most popular writer was Branislav Nušić with six adaptations (two adaptations of *A Suspicious Person* and adaptations of *Favoritism*, *Authority*, *A Member of the Parliament*, and *Don't Ever Despair*, his less-known piece). Jovan Sterija Popović's work was adapted three times, including a very rarely adapted drama *Haidouks*. Interestingly, Kosta Trifković's *The Choosy Bride-to-Be* was adapted twice, in two different theatres. One of the valuable and rare explorations of the dramatic heritage is the production of Momčilo Nastasijević's expressionistic drama *At the Eternal Tap*. The directorial approach of these drama classics went from the simple reconstruction of the connections brought by the conversational drama and the modern versions of a more intricate structure to a grotesque stylization and *mise-en-scène* with dramatically complex characters. There were also plays in which the obsolete, overused, and undistinguishable elements threatened to put the play in danger. When speaking about contemporary works and those written by "modern classics", these were adapted into ten plays. Most of them included playwrights that were already featured at the Sterijino Pozorje Festival, including Ljubomir Simović whose dramas were adapted by three theatres. I should also point out the production of *Sea of Stones* by Velimir Lukić in the Bora Stanović Theatre in Vranje. Another thing we can notice is that the number of plays by Serbian playwrights in the region and the entire world has fallen since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the past year, we can see only three productions in the region: Nušić's *Favoritism* in The National Theatre Sarajevo and *A Suspicious Person* in the National Theatre Bitola (the Republic of North Macedonia), as well as Simović's *Travelling Troupe Šopalović* in the same theatre. The data concerning the adaptations of our drama abroad clearly indicate the need for more meaningful investment in the promotion of domestic drama in the region and the world.

For the past couple of years, the theatric repertoires – not just in Serbia – are dominated by the theme of female creation and suffering, and the role of women in a society ruled by men. That was the case this year as well. Even a glance at the titles of the staged plays proves this to be true: *This Will Be*

*the Same, Suffered, The Last Little Girls, I'm That I'm Not*, etc. The presence of these motifs points out that the sensitive issue of the position of a woman and her search for identity in the world of men is always present. The world, i.e. the dramaturgy, relies on the history of the relationships between men and women, i.e. women and men, in a constant vortex of the most important existential issues of the family and the relationships in it, the process of growing up and maturing, the political engagement, the tyranny of the capitalism, etc. In our theatric circles of the peripheral regions, the word is that it would be fair to consider certain marginal and non-aesthetic factors when making this selection, to value the artistic results according to the artistic resources, financial means, and production capabilities. It seems, though, that the Sterijino Pozorje Festival must remain a festival and a representation of the greatest productions as a whole, and not certain artistic intentions and goals that have not been fulfilled, no matter how valuable those projects are. This festival must remain the goal and the peak point of the Serbian theatre, and this position is to be achieved without compromises.

The process of quoting certain works has, as a layer of postmodernism, been a common occurrence in building dramas for a while. Together with this practice, as its upgrade, our theatres often use the process of constructing a play based on certain motifs. In the past, when we had no original domestic plays, the repertoires of Serbian theatres were occupied by foreign adaptations into the local setting, but today we have a lot of adaptations, dramatizations, and dramas inspired by famous novels or movies. Here we can talk about the originality of the dramatic expression, especially in cases of foreign work. The authorship of the new form is unquestionable, but the question of the original approach to the original work becomes very complex. This is even more true in the light of the original mission of the Sterijino Pozorje Festival, which is the idea to use this platform as a way to encourage, develop, and update the contemporary dramatic expression in Serbia.

Contemporary Serbian playwrights are focused on the problems of their age, pointing out how contradictory, out of joint, broken, and shocked it is. These playwrights (both the young ones, whose poetics are still being formed, and those who have been a part of the canon) search for the answer to some of the most important social questions, wars, and their traumatic consequences. Recently, we have noticed dramas that depict the migrant crisis, the economic crisis, the questions of gender and sexual orientation, dystopia, and globalization. When talking about the formation of these dramas, different approaches are present: "breaking it apart", montage, segmentation, de-dramatization of the drama, etc. Concerning the technique of the dramatic expression, a more and more noticeable poetic formation of the dramatic work must be pointed out.

It can be noticed that the literary theatre, despite its opponents, is still vital and alive. The traditional dramatic form of Aristotle's and Hegel's structure has been opened, but not fully consumed. It is true that his form slowly takes a step back before the fragmentary and collage form, but large productions that depict an entire life still persevere.

The classic Serbian dramas have been frequently produced this season in our theatres, often radically innovated, reconstructed, or deconstructed, seen in a new light, innovated, modernized.

It makes us happy to see that there are more and more female authors among playwrights, directors, and crew members (four out of nine selected plays were directed by women).

Something that brings joy to our theatric reality is the fact that the authors of the selected plays for this year's Festival (or those plays that were deemed worthy) were also identified as successful on the open call of the Sterijino Pozorje Festival for contemporary drama piece.

However, what does not make us happy is the fact that this season has featured a considerably small number of plays of our contemporary playwrights, established, respected, and awarded, and there are no first performances of their plays.

In the end, I need to point out the most important feature of this year's competition selection that is derived from the original mission of the Sterijino Pozorje Festival, which is the presence of premiere, original, dramas: five of the nine selected plays are first performances, four of which are based on original dramas, while the fifth is a dramatization of a novel. When you add that the opening and closing performances of the Festival are going to be the first performances as well, we can point out an optimistic result of the Sterijino Pozorje's mission.

## THE 67<sup>TH</sup> STERIJINO POZORJE FESTIVAL COMPETITION SELECTION

### **THE CHOOSY BRIDE-TO-BE**, WRITTEN BY KOSTA TRIFKOVIĆ, DIRECTED BY IVA MILOŠEVIĆ; NATIONAL THEATRE SUBOTICA

Out of the vaudeville structure of Kosta Trifković's *The Choosy Bride-to-Be*, the director Iva Milošević accentuates the critical attitude towards the issue of freedom and free speech and ignores the obsolete clash of the comic poets that concerns the troubles of the society in Vojvodina in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the characters from the impeccably reconstructed Biedermeier period act from the perspective of the modern spectator as characters of the theater of the absurd, or look like puppets manipulated by a powerful master of ceremony, following the rules of the Biedermeier period, which often includes the renunciation of self, intimate position, and denial of self and identity. In other words, the play depicts a sophisticated form of oppression and tyranny.

### **FAVORITISM**, WRITTEN BY BRANISLAV NUŠIĆ, DIRECTED BY KOKAN MLADENOVIĆ; NATIONAL THEATER SARAJEVO (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA)

In *Favoritism*, Kokan Mladenović depicts a theatric version of a society deeply embedded in corruption and nepotism, a society of bureaucracy and political charades. The National Theatre Sarajevo opened with a production of Nušić's *Favoritism* a hundred years ago. Kokan Mladenović wisely and wittily creates an effective concept of the play and unites two worlds: the past and the present, the vaudeville and engaged, the classical and the contemporary. As the author of the adaptation, Milena Bogavac adds socially engaged songs, actualizes and modernizes the dialogue, and, most importantly, connects the fate of the protagonist with the fate of Branislav Nušić himself. That is how Mladenović turns Nušić's benevolent laughter into a devastatingly cruel comedy and satire.

### **AT THE ETERNAL TAP**, WRITTEN BY MOMČILO NASTASIJEVIĆ, DIRECTED BY SONJA PETROVIĆ; SERBIAN NATIONAL THEATRE NOVI SAD, CENTRE FOR DEVELOPMENT OF VISUAL CULTURE NOVI SAD

A poetic and musical drama about fatality, in which the topos of incest and passion ends in anguish, madness, curse, and crime, was transformed into a strong, expressionistic, passionately portrayed play about the infinity of love, suffering, and repentance. Sonja Petrović managed to translate Nastasijević's parable about the indestructibility of bodily desire – which leads the characters to crime and death – into the articulate speech on the stage and to involve clever speech expressions in all parts of the work that are clear and clarified. Her direction contains elements of a true theatrical ritual to which the acting ensemble wholeheartedly surrenders.

### **THE MIRACLE IN ŠARGAN**, WRITTEN BY LJUBOMIR SIMOVIĆ, DIRECTED BY JAGOŠ MARKOVIĆ; YUGOSLAV DRAMA THEATRE BELGRADE

This seemingly naturalistic, absolutely miraculous dramatic story of identity consists of different pieces, from unusual and unhappy life stories to the central idea of the miracles of a man who embraces the sins of a group of martyrs lost in time and space. The director Jagoš Marković virtuously harmonized the rhythm of the events with the refined tonality of Simović's dramatic poetry woven from the language of everyday life, drowning it in continuous rain, a symbolic pre-apocalyptic warning.

### **THE YEARS OF CROWS**, WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY SINIŠA KOVAČEVIĆ; NATIONAL THEATRE BELGRADE

The bases of Siniša Kovačević's play are the historical events in Belgrade during those "two icy war winters" of the First World War. Despite that, love, sentimentality, and passion are the dominant features of *The Years of Crows*. In the stage realization, the director Kovačević skillfully uses the space from different plans and perspectives, both in height and depth (ice wasteland and gray lead threatening clouds). Stylized, choreographed flights of crows in combination with the objects, music, and silence, as well as with the cries and rhythms, go beyond their original metaphor, leading to the deepest and

most hidden emotions – sadness, anger, fear, and anxiety – causing a strong effect in the audience longing for immediate images. The sinister, threatening crows over Serbia, also successfully act as a connective tissue of different stage images.

**ROLLER COASTER, WRITTEN BY JELENA KAJGO, DIRECTED BY MILICA KRALJ; ATELJE 212 BELGRADE**

The comedy *Roller coaster* speaks of many important areas of our time: religion, identity, technological and informational progress, as well as the mental and spiritual structure of the human being. Based on this dramatic text, the director Milica Kralj confronts two worlds (the old, naïve, and benevolent, with the new, bizarre, and dehumanized) and builds a hilarious comedy with elements of the theater of the absurd and grotesque.

**THE LAST LITTLE GIRLS, WRITTEN BY MAJA PELEVIĆ, DIRECTED BY KOKAN MLADENOVIĆ; KOSZTOLÁNYI DEZSŐ THEATRE SUBOTICA**

Based on the play written by Maja Pelević, the director Kokan Mladenović creates a strong, intelligent, well-rounded, and poetically intoned play about the first (the birth) and last (the death) things in this hopeless world of ours. This deeply intimate dramatic story also reflects on the global picture of the twilight of our civilization, in which everything, including the most innocent beings – the human offspring – is subjected to the laws of the market. To the spectators' senses, this monolithic theatrical structure, performed in the enchanting play and songs by the acting ensemble of the Kosztolányi Dezső Theatre Subotica, acts as a dramatic symphony, as an authentic howl, a cry, or the last warning to the humanity.

**STAINS, WRITTEN BY TIJANA GRUMIĆ, DIRECTED BY JUG ĐORĐEVIĆ; KRALJEVO THEATER**

Written from the child's point of view, Tijana Grumić's drama *Stains* has a special, poetic value. The notion of a girl growing up in the milieu of clearly polarized gender roles and surrounded by a permanent presence of death, retains that lyricism, despite the cruel paradox on which it relies. The atmosphere of the play is sentimental, defined by the feeling of longing and dreaming, but constantly shaded by a stain, i.e. the presence of death. Jug Đorđević's directing process is characterized by a careful approach to the lyrical texture of the play and he emphasizes theatrically attractive, cheerful, and associative sequences, as well as consciously builds a contrast to the constant presence of the atmosphere of sadness and sorrow. This creates a completely miraculous carousel of unfulfilled dreams.

**THE LUSTFUL DAYS OF HUNG JOHNNY, BASED ON THE EPONYMOUS NOVEL BY FILIP GRUJIĆ, DRAMATIZED BY DIMITRIJE KOKANOV, DIRECTED BY JOVANA TOMIĆ; ÚJVÍDEKI SZÍNHÁZ NOVI SAD AND THE STERIJINO POZORJE**

This is one of the modern versions of the Parable of the "Prodigal Son". Johnny, while searching for his father – and at the same time opposing his "female" principle – tries to find himself as well. This is another dramatic story about growing up because the hero does not even know who he is. Johnny is adventurous, brave, strong, seductive, narcissistic, witty, spoiled, and vulnerable. Indeed, he is "eager for the love and attention of one person he seeks on his journey". He is both a hero and an antihero. Lyrical polyvalence is the basis for Jovana Tomić's directorial approach. She carefully and impressively – using irony from time to time – develops a sequence of genre variations found in the condensed dramatization by Dimitrije Kokanov.

## **NON-COMPETITIVE INTERNATIONAL SELECTION "THE CIRCLES"**

The selection "The Circles" also follows the concept of the Competition selection, selecting the plays from the corpus of the national dramaturgy. This way, the Sterijino Pozorje Festival once again tries to emphasize its consistency regarding the fulfillment of its main mission. Based on that, I suggest these plays for the 67<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje Festival:

**I'M THAT I'M NOT**, WRITTEN BY MATE MATIŠIĆ, DIRECTED BY PAOLO MAGELLI; ZAGREB YOUTH THEATRE (CROATIA)

The first performance of Mate Matišić's *I'm That I'm Not*, directed by Paolo Magelli, is a dramatic tryptic consisting of three one-act plays – *Croatian Lolita*, *Pornographic Film*, and *Girl Woman* – loosely connected by the appearance of the same characters. In each of these three plays, the author thematizes the types of women's submission and oppression. The director Magelli creates three parodies of all of us, our fake morale, and how the so-called upper-class functions in those lies, including the intellectuals and the society as a whole. Combining the elements of spectacle, melodrama, satire, comedy, tragedy, and grotesque, Magelli enhances the grotesque and comes up with a social fresco.

**THE ANCHORED**, WRITTEN BY ELVIS BOŠNJAK, DIRECTED BY ANASTASIJA JANKOVSKA; CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE SPLIT, DRAMA THEATRE GAVELLA, CROATIAN NATIONAL THEATRE ZADAR (CROATIA)

Bošnjak's drama looks like Chekhov's dramaturgy applied to the Dalmatian ambiance and temper. The central theme is the family as the main source of alienation. Bošnjak is a writer of soft irony and subtle grotesque. In the center of the play is the destiny of a woman who is, just like numerous women on the island, waiting for her husband to come back home from his transoceanic travels. The numerous questions, the wait, and the decision to accept destiny are vital in this exciting, linguistically exotic drama.

**MY NAME IS GORAN STEFANOVSKI**, DRAMATIZED BY BRANISLAVA ILIĆ, DIRECTED BY BRANISLAV MIĆUNOVIĆ; DRAMA THEATRE SKOPJE (THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA)

Goran Stefanovski was one of the biggest playwrights in Macedonia and the region. His plays are timeless, universal, and always relevant. Based on Branislava Ilić's authorial adaptations that include the montage of scenes from seven dramas written by Stefanovski (*The Black Hole*, *Long Play*, *Sarajevo*, *Casabalkan*, *Hotel Europa*, *Euralien*, and *Odysseus*), Branislav Mićunović created a unique, intimate, exciting, and subtle, lavish dedication to the great playwright, the three-time winner of the Sterijino Pozorje Festival awards.

## PERFORMANCE IN HONOR OF THE AWARD WINNERS

**SNORERS**, WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY NIKOLA PEJAKOVIĆ; NATIONAL THEATER OF THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA BANJA LUKA (BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA, THE REPUBLIKA SRPSKA)

This is a hilarious play, with the elements of the theater of the absurd, a comedy about the COVID-19 pandemic, but also "about us and our diseases that attack the soul; about the demonic ego, the passions, and the moral collapse of modern society and our civilization". In the year of great anguish, Nikola Pejaković's comedy is the perfect stage form for the much-needed relief and the spiritual relaxation of the audience.

Selector  
Milivoje Mladenović, PhD  
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