

## THE 70<sup>TH</sup> STERIJINO POZORJE FESTIVAL 2025 (May 26<sup>th</sup> – June 3<sup>rd</sup>)

### Selector's Report

#### Creating History/Changing the Future

Despite deep social crises and dramatic upheavals that have fundamentally shaken and are continuing to shake our social stage – or perhaps precisely because of them – the selection of performances for this festival has been more artistically challenging than the previous year. In other words, it was easier to select nine performances for the Competition Selection and three for the “Circles” Selection, even though the overall production was not more prosperous.

Since March, I have watched seventy-five performances as this festival's selector – fifty-five for the Competition Selection and twenty for the “Circles” Selection. Based on this, the selection was made, consisting of nine performances in the Competition Selection and three in the international “Circles” Selection.

Over the past year, around ten performances based on domestic plays were staged outside of Serbia, confirming our previous thesis of a shared regional cultural space. The thematic orientations of our writers' plays are closely related to works created in other countries in the region. Furthermore, the Sterijino Pozorje Festival significantly contributes to the promotion of Serbian plays beyond Serbia, partly because theaters in the region value participation in this festival.

The Competition Selection of the 70<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje Festival includes four performances from the former Yugoslav region – three premieres of works by our authors: *Football Boot Tongue* by Filip Grujić and Ivan Ergić from the Zagreb Youth Theater, *Back* by Boris Liješević from the Montenegrin National Theatre, and *The Belgrade Trio* by Goran Marković from the theater in Novo Mesto. Additionally, it features a new interpretation of a classic by Branislav Nušić, *People's Deputy*, performed by the Macedonian National Theater in Skopje.

In addition to these international productions, the Competition Selection includes five performances from Serbia – premieres from Sombor (*The Excluded*, based on a play by Đorđe Petrović, directed by Mia Knežević), Lazarevac (*Dimitrije Tucović Addressing the Serbian Youth*, written and directed by Zlatko Paković), Novi Sad (*Atonement*, based on the novel by Branimir Šćepanović, directed by Veljko Mićunović), and Belgrade (*Nobody Is Forgotten and Nothing Is Remembered*, based on the novel by Mirjana Drljević, directed by Bojana Lazić, produced by Atelje 212). It also includes a new interpretation of a contemporary classic, *St. George Slays the Dragon* by Dušan Kovačević, directed by Milan Nešković and performed by the Yugoslav Drama Theater ensemble.

From the nine selected performances, critical meanings stand out vividly – or, to put it more precisely and expressively, they *surge* forth – depicting the unwavering and intense struggles of characters wanting social justice, the eradication of corruption, the deep-seated systemic decay, and the cleansing of criminal structures from society (*Back*, *The Excluded*, *Dimitrije Tucović Addressing the Serbian Youth*, *Nobody Is Forgotten and Nothing Is Remembered*, *Atonement*, *St. George Slays the Dragon*, *People's Deputy*, *The Belgrade Trio*). Additionally, a common characteristic of the program as a whole is the presence of thriller elements, as narratives often unfold through investigations, characters' efforts to uncover truths about crimes, unearth long-hidden secrets and mysteries, or defend their honor and dignity (*Back*, *The Excluded*, *Nobody Is*

*Forgotten and Nothing Is Remembered, Atonement, The Belgrade Trio*). Given these thematic elements, it can be said that theater has once again taken a step forward, anticipating reality or even foreseeing our dramatic sociopolitical events – the surge of struggles against injustice and corruption (most of the selected plays were created just before the tragedy in Novi Sad and the unprecedented nation-wide protests that followed). The subtitle of the 70<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje Festival, “**Creating History/Changing the Future**”, reflects these thematic directions in the performances, as well as the social circumstances mirroring the intense battles for truth and justice. In times of sociopolitical crises, the role of theater is unique. As the sociologist Jean Duvignaud wrote, theater is the art form that, more than other forms, senses the tremors that shake society – the difficult, gradual struggle for freedom, from its slow and arduous progress, through various constraints, to its sudden, forceful manifestation. Theater is art deeply woven into the living fabric of collective experience, and throughout history, it has consistently represented rebellion against injustice and the grotesque nature of power, guiding us toward the future, toward what has yet to be realized.

The plays in the Competition Selection are thematically connected in their confrontation with systemic corruption. However, their directorial approaches and stage poetics vary, from the restrained, psychologically delicate realism of Egon Savin (*People’s Deputy*), Boris Liješević (*Back*), and Mia Knežević (*The Excluded*), through the subtle stylization of Bojana Lazić (*Nobody Is Forgotten and Nothing Is Remembered*), Veljko Mićunović (*Atonement*), and Milan Nešković (*St. George Slays the Dragon*), to the Brechtian political theater of Zlatko Paković (*Dimitrije Tucović Addressing the Serbian Youth*) and the more complex multimedia expressions of Matjaž Berger (*The Belgrade Trio*) and Borut Šeparović (*Football Boot Tongue*).

Besides the selected performances, two other choices were shortlisted, with only the finest nuances determining the final choice – either the overall strength of the stage expression or the superior aesthetic value of the selected productions. These were *Death Is Not a Bicycle (to Be Stolen from You)* by the National Theater in Belgrade and *The Widow of a Living Man* by Zvezdara Theater.

The “Circles” Selection includes three performances that thematically and stylistically mirror aspects of the Competition Selection: *The Father, the Daughter, and the Holy Spirit*, based on a play by Mate Matišić and directed by Janusz Kica; *Wooden Birds* by Lidija Deduš, directed by Ivan Plazibat; and *Struggle at the Sinkhole*, based on a novella by Prežihov Voranc and directed by Jernej Lorenci. These plays also contain significant thriller elements, introduced as a means of confronting ontological evil (*The Father, the Daughter, and the Holy Spirit, Wooden Birds*). All three subtly explore the relationship between nature and civilization, searching for ways to preserve the essence of life amid the brutal challenges of society, where human actions are often driven by vanity, envy, and greed. The performances also feature intricate, carefully crafted stage expression, striking visual richness, and powerful symbolic directorial techniques, collectively fostering a fertile ground for genuine aesthetic excitement.

## THE 70<sup>TH</sup> STERIJINO POZORJE FESTIVAL COMPETITION SELECTION

***Football Boot Tongue*, written by Filip Grujić and Ivan Ergić, directed by Borut Šeparović, Zagreb Youth Theater (Croatia)**

Based on a play written by Filip Grujić and Ivan Ergić, a former football player and a writer whose unusual, borderline life experiences form the foundation of this unconventional and authentic stage play, *Football Boot Tongue* follows the professional journey of young footballer David Polovina (Bernard Tomić). Coming from a small town and club, he starts playing in the German Bundesliga, facing the pressures of physically exhausting training and bodily discipline, as well as the allure of fame and success. Director Borut Šeparović, whose work is well-known in Serbia due to the Bitef Festival and Desiré Central Station Festival, and who directed the acclaimed performances such as *55+* and *Where's the Revolution, Scum?*, continues to explore and perpetuate the specific themes of his work. The play consists of two parts, each reflecting different emotional tones – the contrast between life under the spotlight and life in the shadow of fame. The exceptional actors of the Zagreb Youth Theater deliver a psychologically precise, convincing, and deeply moving performance. The first part is charged with intense energy, capturing the young players' expectations of a life full of boundless opportunities, promises of wealth, and nights spent in glamorous clubs alongside the taut bodies of gold diggers. The second part unfolds in silence, where an overwhelming optimism is replaced by helplessness – the mute despair of confronting physical injury and a broken spirit. The production is staged in a multimedia format, occupying a space between theater and film, consistently and intricately questioning the relationship between the mass and elitist culture. It raises important issues such as the influence of media, the market-driven exploitation of fame, and the creation and exploitation of star cults. Video projections offer ironic reflections on our hyper-mediated reality, which, in a Baudrillardian sense, has become *more real* than reality itself. The protagonist's failure to grasp the *true* nature of reality – the fleeting and hollow essence of fame – leads to his breakdown under the glare of the spotlight, plunging him to rock bottom, which ultimately sparks the beginning of his transformation.

### ***Back, authorial project by Boris Liješević, Montenegrin National Theatre (Montenegro)***

This play was developed during rehearsals, drawing from the personal stories and experiences of the authors and actors. It emerged from a need to expose the burning sociopolitical issues in Montenegro, though in reality, it extends beyond to the entire region. The mechanisms of power – built on lies, manipulations, and the destruction of previous value systems – are strikingly similar across the former Yugoslavia, almost as if they were designed collectively. These sociopolitical metastases, the deep-rooted decay of a system largely entangled with crime, form the foundation of the play's fragmented narrative. Through multiple narrative threads, the play unveils the accumulated filth across different spheres of society – from the judiciary to education and healthcare. It highlights the dramatic expansion of cocaine trafficking, bribery, blackmail, and the inextricable links between shady business dealings, unchecked construction booms, and political corruption. Simultaneously, it illustrates the personal consequences of deep societal corruption – the breaking of individuals, the collapse of stability – because the essence of theater lies in giving an emotional, human form to political tragedies, reflecting macro-level issues on a micro-level. An integral part of the play is the interplay between this palpable bleak reality and darkly humorous scenes, where subtle comedy emerges from tragic situations. This aligns with the Balkan mentality, where grotesque laughter often serves as a companion in the daily struggle against adversity. Boris Liješević skillfully directs the large ensemble on a characteristically minimalist set, whose dynamics occasionally shift as the plot intensifies. Certain set pieces, resembling a warehouse, are moved with both concrete and symbolic significance. The actors perform with tangible passion

and energy, proving their deep, intrinsic need to address these themes on stage, bringing psychological depth to their roles and vividly portraying these theatrical counterparts of our dark reality.

***The Belgrade Trio*, based on the novel by Goran Marković, dramatized and directed by Matjaž Berger, Anton Podbevšek Teater, Novo Mesto, and Cankarjev dom, Ljubljana (Slovenia)**

Given the highly unconventional and hybrid literary form of *The Belgrade Trio* by Goran Marković – it is a fragmentary, epistolary novel composed of archival material as well as a fictional reimagining of certain events – its stage adaptation in Novo Mesto was particularly challenging. Despite its complex structure, the novel is grounded in strong genre foundations, appealing to readers who are especially drawn to melodramatic and thriller narratives. The plot is driven by the arrival of writer Lawrence Durrell to Belgrade, where he takes up the position of press attaché at the British Embassy during the dramatic period of the 1948 Informbiro Resolution and the intensification of political violence. This multi-layered and gripping story is a starting point for the exploration of timeless questions of political repression, blackmail, manipulation, censorship, and the suppression of freedoms. It also delves into the relationship between art and politics, as well as themes of love, passion, and marital obligations. Berger's stage interpretation of Marković's novel establishes a precise and ceremonial tone, marked by Brechtian detachment and alienation intended to provoke critical thought. At the same time, the suffering of prisoners on Goli Otok and Sveti Grgur – the island that housed a women's prison camp – is depicted with subtle emotional depth. The stage design is minimalist, elegant, and layered with meaning. It evokes a courtroom where Durrell's entanglement in a political scandal is examined, while simultaneously representing the camp, highlighted on a narrow proscenium strewn with stones, symbolizing both Goli Otok and the Sisyphean struggle, at the same time serving as a symbolic representation of the underworld. The play's soundscape is particularly striking, significantly enhancing its dramatic expression. It intensifies the sense of unease through the contrast between the relentless flow of nature and the horrors of violence in so-called civilization. This brutality of power – legalized savagery in post-war Yugoslavia – is not merely a historical document but a reflection of timeless mechanisms of governance, both on macro and micro levels. The exploitation of political circumstances and positions for personal gain, along with the imposition of hollow slogans to justify violence, remains a persistent feature of our social landscape to this day.

***People's Deputy*, written by Branislav Nušić, directed by Egon Savin, Macedonian National Theater, Skopje (North Macedonia)**

Starting from the first comedy by Branislav Nušić – a politically subversive work by a young satirist rebellious against a system built on lies, corruption, and manipulation – the creators of the play subtly demonstrate that the nature of that (our) system has not improved at all. The mechanisms of governance that Nušić criticized remain the foundation of societal structures in the largely faltering Balkan states. Director Egon Savin constructs a compact, gripping, and precise production, choosing not to drastically modernize the text but rather to subtly highlight the timeless, tragic, and tragicomic truth of Nušić's revelations about deep-seated political decay. However, the

play does diverge from the original text in its dramaturgical approach. The stage action, condensed into a swift 75-minute runtime, is intense and dynamic; numerous characters from the original, such as Jevrem's wife Pavka, Sima, Ivković, his aunt, Sekulić, and others, have been removed, eliminating unnecessary narrative threads. The resolution is also significantly altered – unlike Nušić's lighter ending, this adaptation is sharper and darker, aligning more closely with the spirit of our times. Directorially, the strongest element is the work with the actors, with each character being precisely, passionately, and insightfully shaped. This stands out as the greatest strength of the production, alongside Nušić's vividly chaotic plotlines, which expose brutal truths about a distorted value system and the (indestructible) deceitfulness and opportunism of politicians. This adaptation of *People's Deputy* authentically and meaningfully revives the world of our brilliant, sharp-witted playwright, who, even in his youth, grasped the bitter truths of small-town mentality, primitive parliamentary practices, and a society steeped in various frauds, blackmail, and bribery. His Gogol-like critique of pervasive corruption and inverted values painfully mirrors our present, where politics remains a means of personal enrichment rather than a platform for establishing a system of *common good*. That ideal becomes either unattainable or merely an empty phrase politicians flaunt during election campaigns.

***The Excluded*, written by Đorđe Petrović, directed by Mia Knežević, National Theatre in Sombor (Serbia)**

Đorđe Petrović's *The Excluded* is a contemporary drama with a fragmented structure, where storylines from different periods intertwine in an exciting, mosaic-like narrative filled with intense emotional and political power. The connections between characters and events gradually unfold in a thriller-like manner, spanning from the mid-1990s to just a few years ago. Director Mia Knežević has subtly staged this drama in the intimate setting of the chamber stage in the Sombor theatre, adopting a predominantly realistic, almost documentary-like style – especially in the monologues – while placing the audience close to the actors, significantly enhancing the experience of the performance. The actors deliver psychologically authentic performances, creating a cohesive whole – a dark reflection of human and systemic decay, where abuse of power and the imposition of lies as truth thrive on the soil of greed, ruthlessly trampling any sense of compassion. *The Excluded* discreetly highlights the need to break the conspiracy of silence in a society that almost completely disregards the individual. Blinded by profit, interconnected people in positions of power trample over others, reducing them to disturbingly insignificant collateral damage – briefly discussed for a few days before being largely forgotten. Performances like this loudly emphasize what must never be forgotten because forgetting is a form of surrender to the pandemic of dishonor.

***Dimitrije Tucović Addressing the Serbian Youth*, written and directed by Zlatko Paković, Puls Theater, Lazarevac (Serbia)**

The stage play *Dimitrije Tucović Addressing the Serbian Youth*, written by Zlatko Paković, has a fragmented structure, combining dramatic scenes and songs that serve a Brechtian function as ironic political commentaries. These elements *disrupt* the narrative to awaken the audience's critical awareness, which is particularly significant given the pressing relevance of the themes the play addresses. The storyline incorporates elements of metatheater and fantasy, as the dead and the

living, past and present, reality and theater intersect on stage. The characters – ghosts from the past, including Dimitrije Tucović and Spasenija Cana Babović, a communist from Lazarevac – confront the realities of our time, where brutal capitalism has deepened social inequality indefinitely, which is the very injustice these people once fought against in their pursuit of justice and humanity. Drawing from historical contexts, Paković tackles contemporary sociopolitical issues in a raw and explosive manner, addressing violence, corruption, manipulation, and blackmail, while also questioning individual responsibility and the fundamental human right to protest. These themes are presented in an explicit, almost pamphlet-like manner, reminiscent of the theatrical styles of directors Oliver Frijić and Kokan Mladenović. However, the pamphlet as an artistic device is not particularly valuable on its own, which is why it is integrated into a multi-layered whole. It is accompanied by visually thoughtful and symbolically powerful staging solutions, as well as sharp Brechtian songs whose devastating irony tears down masks and exposes the lies that are presented as truth.

***Nobody Is Forgotten and Nothing Is Remembered*, based on the novel by Mirjana Drljević, dramatized by Slobodan Obradović, directed by Bojana Lazić, Atelje 212 (Serbia)**

An adaptation of Mirjana Drljević's eponymous novel, the play *Nobody Is Forgotten and Nothing Is Remembered* presents a thriller-like narrative about the search for three missing girls, the daughters of mothers whose pasts gradually unravel, revealing themselves as the reason for their children's disappearance. Narratively, the present and the process of solving the mystery intertwine with past events, which mosaic-like reveal the complex relationships between the characters, while also addressing post-war traumas from the 1990s, crimes committed in Bosnia, patriarchal upbringing, inherited guilt, and more. Under the direction of Bojana Lazić, the stage action follows the conventions of the thriller genre while also reflecting the nightmarish circumstances of life in the Balkans – alienated, stylized, and marked by a subdued internal tension among the characters, particularly the mothers, who are on the verge of an emotional explosion (set design by Zoran Petrov). Actresses Borjanka Ljumović, Radmila Tomović, Aleksandra Janković, and Snežana Savić act in a restrained and uniform style, aligning with the overall directorial vision. They act with consistency, coldness, and an almost mechanical precision, sometimes using microphones to mediate their delivery, controlling emotional outbursts. They take on multiple roles – playing not only the mothers of the missing girls but also their own mothers and even male characters. This approach, combined with theatrical distancing, occasionally merges them into a collective embodiment of a single character (Saša), creating an intense stage experience that conveys shared memories and trauma. As the search progresses and the mothers' impatience grows, subtle yet expressive shifts occur on both visual and auditory levels. A dark, multi-layered wall at the center of the stage gradually develops holes, symbolizing the scars on the mothers' souls – tears caused by suppressed emotions, fears, and the desperation to find their children. The sound design by composer Vladimir Pejković, minimalist and cold, amplifies the dark atmosphere of looming threats, while sung verses introduce striking poetic meanings, subtly emphasizing the social roles of women and mothers.

***St. George Slays the Dragon*, written by Dušan Kovačević, directed by Milan Nešković, Yugoslav Drama Theater (Serbia)**

*St. George Slays the Dragon* is a unique drama within Dušan Kovačević's oeuvre, as it is not characterized by the wildly absurd and disarmingly dark humor typical of his work. Instead, it presents a predominantly realistic, epic narrative. This historical tale is set at the outbreak of World War I, intertwining melodramatic and war-political plotlines while incorporating Kovačević's signature reflections on our national mentality, the destructive nature of patriarchy, systemic corruption and violence, and the erosion of tenderness, love, and honesty. Director Milan Nešković stages Kovačević's play in an ambitious, captivating, and visually lavish manner that immediately draws in the audience. The set represents a rural environment in multiple ways: on one side, an indicative sloping landscape with a row of trees in the background, and on the other, a tavern space. As the story unfolds, these elements shift effectively, acquiring symbolic depth. Music is also a key component of this theatrical interpretation, mesmerizing the audience from the start. The lyrics of the songs were written by Duda Buržujka, with music composed by Vladimir Pejković. Together, their songs provide poignant, contemporary, and sobering poetic commentary on the storyline, touching on themes of patriarchal oppression and the perpetual cycle of war: both internal and external. The outstanding ensemble of the Yugoslav Drama Theatre brings the intense historical events to life with great psychological depth, particularly highlighting the melodramatic thread of the narrative. The play explores the complexities of a love triangle, infused with palpable passion, sensuality, the destructive force of Eros, and the accompanying tragedy of Thanatos. Milan Marić delivers a delicate performance as Gavriilo Vuković, a disabled veteran who sees himself as useless and a loser after losing his arm in the previous war. He is driven by his sincere, long-standing love for Katarina Džandar, portrayed by Jovana Belović in an inspired and fiery performance. She presents Katarina as a strong-willed, independent woman who defies the opinions of her conservative surroundings and challenges the calculated nature of marriage, conformism, and the widespread neglect and mistreatment of love. Katarina is the wife of Đorđe Džandar, played with remarkable intensity by Nikola Rakočević. His portrayal renders Đorđe a truly tragic figure – a righteous man who carries himself with dignity despite knowing that his wife is in another man's arms, believing that the interests of the state and the nation must come before his heartbreak.

***Atonement*, based on the novel by Branimir Šćepanović, dramatized by Slobodan Obradović, directed by Veljko Mićunović, Serbian National Theatre, Novi Sad (Serbia)**

Based on the exceptional eponymous novel by Branimir Šćepanović, which explores the truth about its protagonist, Grigorije Zidar, in a strikingly poetic, philosophical, and thriller-like manner, the play delves into the conflict between the individual and society. The narrative unfolds in a fragmented form, following Grigorije, a truck driver who returns to his homeland after a long post-war exile in Norway. Upon his arrival, he discovers that a monument has been erected in his honor for a heroic act during World War II, under the belief that he had died. However, when he appears alive, he becomes a threat to a community that used his supposed death to conceal numerous lies. This powerful production reveals the unsettling notion that heroes are often more useful to society dead than alive. It gradually exposes systemic hypocrisy, greed, war profiteering, scheming, and blackmail – tools used to maintain the illusion of order. In a gripping and intense performance by Boris Isaković, Grigorije is portrayed as a tormented figure, reminiscent of Woyzeck, surrounded and pressured from all sides to the point of questioning his own identity, no longer certain of who he is. Veljko Mićunović's direction is precise and stylistically realistic, blending ceremonial and

metaphorical elements to create a timeless reflection of deep political corruption and a society built on falsehoods. The minimalist stage design, covered in dirt and furnished with benches symbolizing a courtroom, serves as the setting where hypocritical representatives of the system attack the already condemned Grigorije. Particularly striking are the scenes of their choral assaults – an inescapable web of voices weaving a nightmarish trap around the protagonist. Their faces are shaded with grotesque tones, carrying a distorted humor that adds layers of absurdity. A standout is the character of Manojlo, portrayed by Marko Marković, whose performance occasionally transcends realism. He plays with his character, distorting him in a mannerist fashion, subtly hinting at the idea that the arrogance of power is nothing more than a circus – a grotesque reflection of darkness. Both Branimir Šćepanović's novel and this stage adaptation cast a harsh and illuminating critique on systemic corruption – perhaps, one day, capable of sparking change.

### **NON-COMPETITIVE INTERNATIONAL SELECTION “THE CIRCLES”**

***The Father, the Daughter, and the Holy Spirit*, written by Mate Matišić, directed by Janusz Kica, Satirical Theatre Kerempuh, Zagreb (Croatia)**

Based on the latest drama by Mate Matišić, the epic, three-and-a-half-hour play *The Father, the Daughter, and the Holy Spirit* consists of two separate parts, subtly connected by common themes, characters who are suicides, their psychoses, and both concrete and metaphorical violence. The storytelling style is characteristic of this writer – hilarious, unexpected, surreal, and absurd developments are accompanied by bitter humor and a tragicomic tone reminiscent of our own Dušan Kovačević. Additionally, the play is deeply infused with self-irony, Pirandellian playfulness with the author's position, as well as with the nature of theatricality and the relationship between reality and theater. Director Janusz Kica leads the action patiently and delicately, paying special attention to the characters and their relationships, which are significantly shaped by absurdity – especially in the second part, where the plot's dynamics intensify, and relationships become more complex. The atmosphere is carefully and consistently built through precise work with actors, subtly enriched with oppressive sounds, the expansion or contraction of the playing space, which, when necessary, intensifies a claustrophobic feeling. The play opens with the character of a priest who also serves as the narrator and commentator, firmly establishing the religious context, questioning the meaning and significance of faith in contemporary society, the possibilities of miracles, and salvation. The plot is also filled with mysterious meanings and motifs, including the issue of femicide, addressed by *Wooden Birds*, as well as *Nobody Is Forgotten and Nothing Is Remembered*. Matišić's latest dramatic work once again raises the issue of post-war traumas and the deep disturbances in consciousness caused by an individual's confrontation with eruptions of evil, which have set off an (un)ending chain of both concrete and symbolic crimes.

***Struggle at the Sinkhole*, based on the novella by Prežihov Voranc, directed by Jernej Lorenci, Prešeren Theatre Kranj and City Theatre Ptuj (Slovenia)**

Based on the novella “Struggle at the Sinkhole” by Prežihov Voranc (who wrote this work under the pseudonym Lovro Kuhar), the play explores the foundations of human existence, the



relationship between man and nature, and the struggle for survival. It depicts the fight for basic sustenance – potatoes, which become as precious as gold – along with the immense hunger and physical suffering required to obtain food. The term “sinkhole” refers to pools of water in the soil that destroy crops and threaten future sustenance. Lorenci, through subtle, imaginative, minimalist yet dramatically dynamic storytelling, tells the story of peasants battling water for fertile land and struggling against the forces of nature. At the same time, the play raises questions about unjust social conditions, violence, and class differences, which have pushed the disenfranchised and impoverished into a brutal and unequal fight for bare survival, dignity, and perhaps even happiness. In Lorenci’s production, these struggles take on a timeless, mythical, and ritualistic quality, thanks to visually striking, symbolically expressive directorial choices and the actors’ exceptionally dedicated performances. Their acting is physically demanding, as they engage in precise and sophisticated storytelling about different generations of one family, life and death, the eternal cycles of existence, the meaning of suffering, and the limits and possibilities of justice, salvation, and eternal life – the indestructible core of human existence.

***Wooden Birds*, written by Lidija Deduš, directed by Ivan Plazibat, Croatian National Theatre Varaždin and Croatian National Theatre Zagreb (Croatia)**

Based on the drama by Lidija Deduš, which won the Croatian National Theatre Zagreb’s prize for the best contemporary drama in 2022, this play explores the roots of violence – its causes, nature, and consequences – as well as issues of societal primitivism, the relationship between rural and urban life, the desire for change, and the struggle to escape both literal and symbolic provincial poverty. It also delves into the nature of love and marriage. The story is set in a rural environment in Croatia during the 1980s and follows the coming-of-age journey of a teenage girl, Nada. She struggles with the pervasive bleakness, roughness, envy, alcoholism, and domestic violence in her surroundings, as well as with both overt and concealed evil. The narration is tinged with Chekhovian and Ibsenian tones, gently and poetically portraying family and friendship dynamics, while also incorporating elements of a thriller and a sense of mystery, hinting at the presence of a primordial darkness within the human soul, an evil that defies rational understanding. Ivan Plazibat’s direction is carefully crafted in every aspect of the performance, creating a uniquely somber and oppressive atmosphere while also leaving traces of an attempt to dispel that darkness through poetry, innocence, and hope. The visual aspect of the play is particularly striking, juxtaposing the realism of the characters’ everyday lives with a poetic, melancholic depiction of nature – rural landscapes, land, and withered trees. Video projections are occasionally incorporated, subtly intensifying the emotional impact and deepening the sense of mystery. Music plays a crucial role in enhancing the overall emotional tone of the performance. Live accordion melodies emphasize sorrow, while innocent love songs played over the speakers establish a poignant contrast. Finally, the expressive performances of the actors, filled with clear inspiration, bring these characters to life in a deeply moving way. They embody the manifestations of demonic evil – whether through direct action or silent complicity, turning a blind eye to violence, allowing it to keep on thriving.

Ana Tasić, PhD  
Theatre critic and researcher