

“Regietheater:” two cases

By Ivan Medenica

It is well known that the main characteristic of Middle and East European theatre during the past century has been the so-called “directorial theatre” (the most familiar formulation being in German, “Regietheater”), quite unlike the mainstream of British and American theatre. In this text I review productions of two highly regarded directors from this part of Europe, whose work is clearly in this tradition: Czech director Dušan David Pařízek and his Bulgarian colleague Alexander Morfov.



The Moscoviad. Photo: Patrik Borecký.

The performance *The Moscoviad*, based on Yuri Andrukhovych’s novel and staged by Dušan David Pařízek, was performed within the PQ+, a show-case of contemporary Czech theatre offered as a side program to the 2023 Prague Quadrennial. Andrukhovych is a contemporary Ukrainian writer, and this novel about the collapse of the Soviet Union was written in 1993. Pařízek is one of the foremost Czech directors of the middle generation, mostly working in German speaking countries. Unlike other performances in the PQ+ program, all of which were productions of leading Prague institutional theatres, *The Moscoviad* was produced by an independent platform, Theatre X10, which seeks to create critical thinking that reflects social reality.

Audiences familiar with Pařízek's earlier work will most certainly recognize the main features of his directorial poetics in *The Moscoviad*. In terms of stage design, and in general, in terms of its visual aspects the performance is marked with noticeable minimalism and reduction of stage devices. In the middle of the non-theatre space of TheatreX10 (originally a gallery in the basement of a modernist high-rise built in 1936) Pařízek put a wooden platform resembling a stage on a stage. The actors play around it, on it and, also, with it—transforming it, moving it and rearranging its densely arranged planks which cover and thus bridge the desks. When put together, the desks and the planks form the said platform which is at the same time the functional space of the performance and an independent visual installation (Pařízek himself is credited for the stage design).

Visual, performative, but most of all, metaphorical climax in space utilisation happens when the actors disassemble the platform energetically and vociferously, leaving just separated desks as performance space. They then stab the planks between the desks, amplify them with light, projecting their shadows on the walls, thus creating a stunning abstract installation. However, the installation is not as abstract as it seems at first, because it can be interpreted as a rather direct and blunt metaphor. The collapse of the stage world is equivalent to one of the central topics in Andrukhovych's novel which Pařízek himself dramatized: the equally vociferous and violent collapse of the Soviet Union. Those familiar with his much awarded production of Wolfram Lotz's *The Ridiculous Darkness* at the Burgtheater Vienna will recognize his directorial signature: a wooden wall composed of planks which disintegrates vociferously at the most important moment in the performance and is scattered across the stage.



The Moscoviad. Photo: Patrik Borecký.

The novel *The Moscoviad* seems realistic at first. It is about a day in the life of a young Ukrainian poet Otto von F. who is spending the last weeks of the Union in an “artists’ residence” at the institute of Soviet writers in Moscow. There, he is in the company of equally drunk and disheartened writers from other regions of the dying empire. They spend their time arguing and quarrelling about nationalism, communism, democracy, god and all else that preoccupies Slavs’ poetic souls. The context of the literature institute, vivid descriptions of Moscow and, as we shall later see, certain fantastic elements—all form intertextual links with another novel by another renowned writer also originating from the Ukraine, Mikhail Bulgakov and his famous novel *The Master and Margarita*.

The story is only just realistic. In essence, it is really a foundation for a grotesque, fantastic, macabre parable, including the descent into the underground world, concerning Russia’s profound blindness regarding the direction in which the whole of Europe was heading at the beginning of the 1990s. One of the main topics in both the novel and the performance are Russian political and police elites’ insincere and unsuccessful attempts to adapt to these circumstances, while in reality they continue to fantasize about not only of upholding the Soviet/Russian empire but also of expanding it westwards, to Western Europe. One needs not emphasize how strikingly real and

painful this story is today, even more so at the time of Russian aggression against Ukraine. Yet, in my opinion, the real value of both the novel and the performance lies elsewhere, in something just a shade different.

Despite being uncompromisingly criticizing of Russian imperialism, neither Andrukhovych's novel nor Pařízek's production are mere propaganda. Quite the contrary, they are interwoven with subtle (auto)irony and genuine humanity. The auto-irony stems from, most of all, the text itself. In his letters/dreams the main character, already mentioned (fictional) Ukrainian poet Otto von V., addresses the, also fictional, heir to the throne of what one might call the "Ukrainian world." This, in itself, may not be significant to Anglo-Saxon audiences. Yet, those from Central and East Europe are all too familiar with these national confabulations and cannot but at least smile (if not laugh due to respect for the tragedy happening in Ukraine) upon recognizing them.

This subtle irony is maintained in Pařízek's work with four great actors appearing in different roles: Gabriela Míčová, Stanislav Majer, Václav Marhold and Martin Pechlát. Besides the ironic and grotesque, their amazing performances showcase other registers as well: strong emotionalism, igneous energy, clearly differentiated characters and their relationships, skillful improvisation ... Such an acting approach combined with fitting poetics employed by both the writer and the director result in an artistically relevant and politically balanced performance. In conclusion, I would like to stress that although uncompromisingly critical towards Russian imperialism, the performance of *The Moscoviad* does not fall into the trap of Russophobia, which today is, sadly, often the case even in the matters of arts.

The 70th anniversary of the Montenegrin National Theatre in Podgorica was celebrated with a premiere of *The Visit*, a performance based on a well-known play by Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *The Visit of the Old Lady (Der Besuch der alten Dame)*, written in the 1950s. The performance was directed by one of the foremost Bulgarian, and European directors Alexander Morfov.



The Visit. Photo: Dusko Milhanic.

Although it belongs to what one might call “contemporary classics,” Dürrenmatt’s play is not so well known today, thus requiring further illumination before proceeding to the analysis of the performance itself. The play may be classified as “theatre of the absurd,” “tragic farce” or any similar genre in which, as Dürrenmatt himself points out, the tragic stems from the comic, surfacing as “a moment of utter despair, a gaping abyss.” The story is comical in the sense that one economically and in every other way devastated town is expecting a visit from its most affluent citizen ever, and in doing so they perceive her visit as their last chance of salvation. Clara Zachanassian, living abroad for decades and changing husbands (at the beginning of the play she has seven ex-husbands, but as the play progresses the number increases) has become a billionaire. Her appearance is comical, with her entourage of bizarre servants, a litter, a panther, ever new husbands, cynical and eccentric behavior, but also comical are the citizens of Gullen in their cowardice, servility and readiness to do anything to improve their conditions.

The tragic begins to surface with her request that in view of her willingness to donate a billion to her hometown, she wants “one head” to be delivered to her: she wants her once lover, grocer Alfred, to be killed because after he had impregnated her and ascribed his responsibility to others, he forced her into a vagabond lifestyle which started with prostitution. The feeling of the tragic is crystalized in the theme of “buying justice,” and in succumbing to the criminal demands of big capital. Although the offer is at first rejected with strong moral indignation, the citizens of Gullen, including Alfred’s own family, will, quite expectedly, finally accept paying for a higher standard of existence (loans are being taken before the billion is deposited) with somebody’s life.

When writing about two performances in one review, points of comparison impose themselves as a sort of tedious itching even if, as is the case here, there are no real grounds for them. In that respect, while Pařízek’s production features strong visual symbolism, minimalist staging and is charged with energy, Morfov’s is visually decorative, marked with lushness of stage and energetically diluted.

Without radical adaptation, Dürrenmatt’s text requires the presence of a large number of actors and stand-ins on stage. Morfov skilfully groups, moves, and rearranges numerous actors, as if making a composition for a painting or a film shot. His “stage stills” are based upon actors’ playing in several planes and levels for which effect he uses stage technology (stage podium drops), elements of stage design (the balcony of Clara’s hotel room), separating close-ups from wide-shots by light, and shaping choreographically particular scenes (Alfred’s murder, for example). Such combining of stage elements creates the association—maybe because we know subconsciously that *The Visit of the Old Lady* has been turned into a musical—that we are watching a Broadway spectacle that requires skillful technical and artistic orchestration of a large number of actors, dancers and singers. Just to make things clear: from my aesthetic perspective, this Broadway association--and which is highly conditional—is not a compliment.

Still, as if all of that were not enough for Morfov, to this densely packed stage he adds full-size mannequins that sometimes appear in isolation or are scattered, and at times are densely grouped. The use of mannequins representing citizens of this small town is both redundant and unjustified simply because there already is a large enough number of live performers. In terms of their symbolic meaning, it is superficial if the objective was to signify loss of individuality, transformation of people into big capital’s marionettes or anything similar. That said, I do not reject the possibility that the use of mannequins is purely decorative in purpose and holds no special meaning. Considering all of the above, one gets the impression of an old-fashioned and somewhat conventional theatrical style, and not just a self-complacent one.

Scenes with mannequins are a good illustration of the performance's central feature: stage attractiveness overshadows dramatic action, thereby glossing over feelings and meanings that this action should incite. In addition, one of the consequences of the underdeveloped dramatic action is the overwhelming feeling of boredom. All of this is the result, at least one gets such an impression, of the director's greater focus on stage stills instead of on his work with actors who seemed as if left to themselves. For this reason, Clara, played by a leading Montenegrin actress, Varja Djukić, lacks that sharp transformation of a comic, grotesque character into a mythical revengeful figure that looks as if she is appearing out of a tragedy. Throughout her performance the actress is shaping and developing her character, emphasizing psychological motifs and thus totally missing the point of both the play and her character.

Such an approach dilutes the very comicality of the first part of the play, but also the anxiety and tragic perception of the world when Clara asks the citizens to sell her justice which, she believes, belongs undisputedly to her. The comic effect is subdued further by the fact that the actors, it seems, have either failed to recognize the very lucid and bitter humor of the play or they just lacked confidence in it. Because of this they "covered" it with their own forced, and thereby, unconvincing comical skills. However, the tragic and critical view of the world ensuing from the awareness that money is the absolute ruler of our lives—which is the point that makes this 1956 play relevant today and the reason why it is still played—is clearly delivered at the end of the performance. The performance ends with a bleak song that through association links the citizens of Güllen with today's populist and right-oriented forces.



The Visit. Photo: Dusko Milhanic.

It is a pity that this disquieting, critical attitude is just “glued on” at the very end of the performance by a directorial intervention. Pity, because this attitude should have been present and readable throughout the entire performance, and especially throughout its second half. Yet, in terms of production and artistic choice, including the financial investment, this project of Montenegrin National Theatre in Podgorica deserves to be supported. It suggests that in the seasons to come this theatre will try to raise its artistic ambitions and step out of its local context.

Ivan Medenica is a native of Belgrade, Ivan Medenica studied at the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade, where he completed his PhD thesis entitled “Actualization and Deconstruction as Models of Directing Drama Classics.” He is an associate professor at the FDA,

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