

Quo vadis, Europe?

Examining our world in decline

Irina Wolf

First an arm, then a leg pop up from the pile of blue cables covering the floor of the Schauspielhaus theatre in Graz. Three actors emerge from this symbolical Mediterranean Sea. Director Nina Gühlstorff uses such metaphorical images to capture the essence of **Nicoleta Esinencu's** new play. In five stories based on true political events, the Moldovan playwright takes us on a trip through the ***Rest of Europe***. Racism, discrimination, dehumanisation – these are the themes of the play. Time and again, the stories about Roma, refugees and LGBT persons are disrupted by politicians' speeches of the European Parliament in Strasbourg. Finally, all tales converge in London, in the inferno that tore through Grenfell tower in June 2017. Esinencu paints a gloomy picture of today's Europe. But the director counteracts this with humorous exaggeration. Thus, an actress in a SpongeBob costume serves pieces of cheese to the audience – an allusion to Russia's ban on imported foodstuff from the West. The ensemble made up of actors originating from Ukraine, Kenya and Germany reflects European diversity and also allows the usage of several languages. Narrative episodes alternate with musical moments performed by a hip-hop singer from Moldova. "Hip hop perpetuates the idea of a common European future despite present-day nationalistic tendencies", says the director. But in the final scene the actors stumble in the bunch of cables carrying golden stars on various parts of their bodies. This time the blue pile beneath their feet may be associated symbolically with the European flag.

Likewise, **Árpád Schilling** – declared a public enemy in his homeland – shows a critical attitude towards our continent. In his newest project the private is woven together with the political. ***Relief*** is a thrilling family story about a politician, a writer and a dark secret of the past. The inhabitants of an Austrian town wish to build a barrier-free sports centre to ensure gymnastics for all. But the complex is to be erected on the location of a refugee home. Humanity is protected while being rejected somewhere else – a moral contradiction characterizing many "Christian" societies today. Scene of this conflict is a supposedly intact family: the mother is mayor's deputy and initiator of the refugee home, the father has a writer's block, the daughter is a student. In a black box set only a table, a couple of chairs and a few beer crates are used to expose lack of responsibility. Ambiguities characterize this plot with well-drawn characters and intelligent dialogues. Somewhat

irritating at the beginning, the writer speaks with a fictional friend in the auditorium of the Landestheater Niederösterreich in St. Pölten. He turns out to be a young man whose legs have been crippled in an accident. The evening gets more and more grotesque as it proceeds. While in the end the writer has an idea for a novel, the young man commits suicide after having been politely but definitely marginalized. The crux of the matter: the one who caused the hit-and-run accident 23 years ago was the writer himself. In the end everybody is “relieved”.

For Croatian director **Ivica Buljan** Europe is full of pigs, human and real ones. A great admirer of Pasolini's works, Buljan chooses for his first staging at Residenztheater Munich ***Porcile***. The text is updated to reflect the current world situation. “Julian's behaviour is proof of the play's actuality”, says the director, “it resembles the attitude of today's youngsters. Just as Julian refuses to take part in the demonstrations against capitalism and to confront the Nazi past of his parents, nowadays the youth is not able to start a revolution”. Buljan integrates performative elements into traditional spoken theatre. Thus, the text is enriched by a large amount of songs. They represent Pasolini's poems put on musical notes by Mitja Vrhovnik-Smrekar, interpreted both vocally and instrumentally by the actors themselves. Aleksandar Denić's imposing stage design consists of three parts: on the left there is a pig stall, on the right the Klotz family house, while the space in the middle, kept entirely in red, is mostly reserved for the encounters between Ida and Julian or the verbal confrontations between Klotz and Herdhitze. Much of the show's success is due to the cast doing a great job. But the director's emphasis lies more on visual elements than on emotional intensity. Thus, the conversation between Spinoza and Julian which takes place in the pig stall becomes irrelevant due to the presence of three real pigs huddling up against naked Julian crawling on all fours. The image of the curious, well-behaving animals remains the most impressive.

A visual curiosity characterizes also **Johan Simons'** staging of Joseph Roth's novel ***Radetzky March***. About two dozen balloons of all colours and sizes, some larger than life-size, populate the stage of Vienna's Burgtheater. For almost four hours they float through the auditorium, stick to the ceiling, are swept aside by the actors or thrust back onto the stage by the spectators. “They are stars, one is a globe, but actually it is only air”, says the director, “and sometimes they burst, with only a tiny piece of plastic left”. Simons' staging of the Trottas' family portrait spanning over three generations matches the situation of the doomed Habsburg monarchy with the current state of Europe. Like the characters in

Roth's novel, cleverly condensed for the stage by Koen Tachelet, we find ourselves once again at an epochal turn, on the brink of war. The world nowadays is witnessing tendencies of disintegration, nationalism, radicalization. Simons' staging shows no tender melancholy. Katrin Brack's stage design is conceived on maximum simplicity: the 18 performers either sit in the background on benches on the empty stage or act at the ramp. They are dressed in linen underwear, showing bare shins and kneecaps, stockings and lace-up boots. Sometimes they wrap their torsos in old military jackets. But Trotta and his teammates seldom touch each other. This theater evening is dominated by the so-called ball-metaphor: every human remains a planet unto himself. Above all, the balloons demand the spectators' constant attention.

Novel adaptations are very popular in the German theatre scene. It is not surprising that director **Hermann Schmidt-Rahmer** updates George Orwell's famous novel **1984**. At Volkstheater Vienna Big Brother is... the phenomenon of social platforms. As for today, "too many people voluntarily expose their private information without retention on Facebook", says Schmidt-Rahmer. His staging follows accurately the novel structure using Alan Lyddiard's adaptation of 2001. But the action is located in North Korea, "the only totalitarian state of today". Make-up artists play an essential role. During the first part all seven actors wear Kim Jong-Un's haircut and identical khaki tunics. On seven video screens images from Trump's presidential inauguration are shown. The "alternative facts" incident is repeated several times – proof of contemporary manipulation. The parallels to the Orwellian world are obvious. But after intermission the audience needs strong nerves. Bald headed lobotomy experts dressed in white gowns apply to Winston Smith cruel torture methods. His memory is eliminated through real obliteration of both eyes by means of opaque lenses. Additionally, some "culinary methods" are also being applied. The "menu" is the one used for Chinese writer Liao Yiwu, convicted to four years in prison following the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. The show abounds with such original ideas. The staging is based on the political theatrical discourse "to induce viewers to become aware of their handcuffs in the electronic space". Schmidt-Rahmer has a point there, as video cameras of any type are constantly used, mounted either on tables or operated manually, sometimes similar to "weapons".