**The Baltic House Theatre Festival in St Petersburg**

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In October 2015, Baltic House, which has its own repertory company, celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of its Festival, devoted to the theatres of the Baltic region. Its remit includes, of course, Russia, since St Petersburg sits on the rim of the Baltic Sea, facing Helsinki. Sergey Shub, the Baltic House Festival’s founding Director, together with Marina Belyaeva, its Artistic Director, have remained constant in their pursuit of a theatre ‘family’ within the region, united by its love and work for the theatre, not least in developing young audiences. Shub was clear that he wished the Festival to be resistant to the pressures of ideologies and politics.

The latter have reared up their heads in the past few years, but the Festival has been affected far more by rising costs in Russia, as elsewhere, and the fall of the ruble. Economic constraints were especially evident in the smaller number than usual of ambitious and/or large-scale productions in 2015. Shub is said to have lost one third of his annual budget, the drop coming from business rather than public spending.

With its goals of openness, interchange and mutual support in mind, the Festival has showcased a range of productions by remarkable directors and companies. It has promoted the work of Eimuntas Nekrosius and his Meno Fortas Theatre, Rimas Tuminas , and Oskaras Korsunovas, all from Vilnius and all major international figures today. The benchmark 2010 edition, marking twenty years of existence, featured Tuminas’s masterpiece *Masquerade* and Nekrosius’s no less stunning *Othello*, alongside Krystian Lupa’s *Persona. Marilyn*. (I had seen its riveting counterpart, the nine-hour *Factory 2* constructed around another American icon, Andy Warhol, in Krakow in 2009).

Also in the 2010 programme, as in previous years, was Alvis Hermanis from Riga (now a favourite in Paris and Berlin), Ivo van Hove and the Toneelgroup Amsterdam (now favourites in London), and Luk Perceval with the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg. Perceval has been a regular contributor since 2005, coming with Berlin’s Schaubühne and the Municher Kammerspiele before he took up his position as director of the Thalia Theatre.

Other years frequently saw productions directed by Estonia’s Elmo Nuganen and by the Ukranian director Andriy Zholdak , working with various companies, including the Finnish Klockrickteatern (2012). Among younger blazing stars were Kristian Smeds with his widely acclaimed *The Unknown Soldier*, performed by the Finnish National Theatre (2009), and Grzegorz Jarzyna with the TR Warszawa from Poland (2008). Jarzyna’s *Giovanni,* after Mozart’s Opera and Molières’s play *Dom Juan*, was an eye-opening discovery of the 2008 edition. And there were more discoverable works, over the years, from the Baltic sphere ­–­ Sweden, Denmark and Norway – and, occasionally, further afield, like, for example, the Compagnia Pippo Delbono (2012), among several newer groups from Italy.

Russian directors, who have prominently participated in the Festival, were Valery Fokin, Director of the Aleksandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg (notably his production of Gogol’s *Marriage* in 2009; see *NTQ* 97)) and Kama Ginkas, Director of the Theatre of Young Spectators in Moscow (notably his famous *Black Monk*, after Chekhov’s story in 2000). St Petersburg’s younger generation has been represented by Andrey Maguchy (staging, for example, *No Hamlet* after Viktor Sorokin), Igor Kanyaev and Dmitri Volkostrelov, both formerly actors of the Maly Drama Theatre headed by Lev Dodin.

Nekrosius is the only director to have had an entire Baltic House Festival devoted to his work (2007). Perceval, besides bringing his finely structured *Brothers Karamazov* in 2013, performed by the Thalia, staged straight afterwards, in 2014, a highly original, compelling *Macbeth* with the Baltic House Theatre, his first production with Russian actors (*NTQ* 120). Baltic House Theatre subsequently invited Silviu Purcarete to direct *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* with its company to be part of the 2015 edition, casting Leonid Alimov, who had played an astounding, existential Macbeth, to play an innocently hilarious Bottom.

Even this briefest sketch of the Festival’s itinerary in its later years indicates its scope and variety. In addition, there are photography exhibitions, films of productions, workshops, meetings, conferences and, in 2015, a video- installation with shots from preceding festivals: a panoply of events to engage people’s interest and broaden their perspectives.

The Baltic House Festival in 2015 foreground some of its very first collaborators, thus Tuminas, Nekrosius and Nuganen. The programming and my availability were such that I could not see Tuminas’s production of *Minetti* by the German playwright Thomas Bernhard. The renowned, multi-prize-wining Lithuanian actor Vladas Bagdonas played the title role; he was Nekrosius’s seering but all too human Othello. Nuganen’s *I Loved a German,* based on the novel by Estonian Anton Hansen Taamsaare and *Longing*, based on several Chekhov stories were, unfortunately, also out of my grasp. So, too, was Nekrosius’s *Boris Godunov*, the centerpiece, one might say, of the programme, even though it was placed at the end. Nekrosius did not direct *Boris* *Godunov* with his own troupe but with the much larger Lithuanian National Theatre, which gave him the thirty and more actors he required.

Where *Boris* *Godunov* promised symphonic dimension, *A Hunger Artist*, after the short story by Franz Kafka, was a chamber piece for four of the Meno Fortas group. A woman (Viktoria Kuodyte) plays the artist who, in Kafka’s tale, is a man; and this switch is in keeping with Nekrosius’s signature metaphorical structures by which nothing is represented so much as suggested or implied. A woman, then, metaphorically stands for humanity, and her fasting – or, indeed, hunger strike –points to her (humanity’s) disassociation from the ruthlessly exploitative and heartless world that human beings have themselves constructed.

The whole is highly stylized, the hunger artist performing in front of an object that looks like a music stand, while three men, as if a chorus, are soon ostentatiously grouped on a bench behind her. The configuration shifts as design determines spatial rearrangement to accentuate the hunger artist’s ‘solo’, which is a solo not only because she speaks all the time, but also because she gives the impression of being isolated physically, even when the men crowd upon her. This double image, verbal and visual, suggests alienation and loneliness, and more still, the hunger artist’s rejection of the world, which is at the core of Kafka’s allegory. There are no Kafka-absurd details and so no straw on which the hunger artists lies on display, as in a circus or a zoo, or cage enclosing human suffering. Yet, while transposing everything out of a recognizable, daily environment, Nekrosius captures this very suffering, which is hidden, unnoticed, as in Kafka.

Nekrosius’s clean touch for the theme of the outsider, who cannot digest what society feeds him, finds its counterpoint in *The Suicide* directed by Gabriele Tuminaite, also from Lithuania. Nikolay Erdman’s 1928 play has been something of a mystery, lost to the stage when neither Meyerhold nor Stanislavsky could realise it, and it has rarely been staged ever since. Tuminaite has updated this mordant satire-cum-farce, replacing Erdman’s pointed remarks on the new proletarian state, which was proclaimed with such gusto during the Soviet 1920s, with topical twenty-first century references. None, however, has the punch Erdman cunningly slips into his victim-protagonist Semyon Semyonovich’s stream-of-consciousness as when, for instance, he suddenly observes how difficult it is to live in the ideal worker’s world.

Tuminaite settles for the farce side of Erdman’s composition, filling the production with slapstick: an outsize sausage, bigger than the one envisaged by Erdman, for a gun; doors unexpectedly falling on the floor; sharp entrances and exits in vaudeville fashion; exaggerated gestures and movements, as exploited by variety routines and funny silent movies, which, here, are sometimes done in mime; the funeral of Semyon Semyonovich, set to look like a cabaret piece. It is difficult to capture Erdman’s knife-edge amid a montage of short scenes of varying tones, and difficult not to turn *The Suicide* into vintage theatre.

Purcarete did not have to face the problems posed when topicality slips into anachronism. *A Midsummers Night’s Dream* is a freely imaginative approach to Shakespeare’s fantasia, and he frames its winsome tale of mixed-up (and muddled) lovers, in which is embedded another concerning Oberon’s revenge on Titania, by actions , behaviours and images that conjure up a fascist state. A line of what look most like security forces or police enter at a military trot, machine-guns at the ready. Theseus, Duke of Athens is in a suit, scarf, hat, and dark glasses, every inch a ‘boss. This stereotypical image is, at the same time, a parodic reflection on it. Yet this ‘boss is to be feared, as is clear when he drags Hippolyta virtually by her hair out of a box-like enclosure that comes up from the stage trapdoor. Hippolyta’s fear is palpable.

Among the uniformed figures are Lysander and Demetrius, brandishing their weapons. Demetrius will soon mock-shoot Helena down, imitating machine-gun fire – a refrain, in an intriguing sound score, that he repeats and repeats in the forest and which he and Lysander recapitulate at the end of the production when they are dressed in black tie for their nuptials. Their presence at their own wedding celebrations with machine-guns slung across their chests recalls the opening scene, as do such other visual echoes as the dark glasses worn previously. Thus Purcarete frames the end analogously with the beginning, suggesting that the state and status quo have remained unchanged, regardless of the antics – or carnival world upside down – in the forest. The fact that the same actors double as Theseus and Oberon, and as Hippolyta and Titania reinforces the impression that the two seats of power, human and fairy, are versions of one and the same exercise of oppression.

Together with the political implications typical of Purcarete’s direction of Shakespeare is its humour. Comedy is sharper in one of his productions than in another, and in *A Midsummers Night’s Dream* it is closer to burlesque: the delightful short Robin/Puck with tousled blond hair and who performed with brio (Natalia Parshkina)is in stark contrast to a tall, thin and uptight Oberon; the silly wall scene played naively by the workmen whose performance at play’s end is full of gags, not least the large bra Flute reveals when Thisbe mourns her ‘dead’ Pyramus; Lysander carrying a sleeping Hermia on his back, while an enormous Panda bear is tied to her back; Puck who speaks ‘Chinese’ to the Panda (these are made-up, preposterous sounds); Titania’s fairies in lurid pink and red corsets and tights – some are men in drag – have walked straight out of the Moulin Rouge; and so on, including the pink couch on which Bottom succumbs to Titania’s charms and then sleeps the blissfully smiling sleep of an angel. What is not quite in place is the musical theatre dimension of the production with its sudden bursts of song where they seemed the least appropriate.

Beside Purcarete’s free-and-easy creativity, Vladislav Nastavshev’s *The Idiot* after Dostoevsky looked rather too forced. It was performed by the National Theatre of Riga, all of it by actors in cubicles, in communication by telephone while voice-over frequently communicated their conversations to the audience. The cubicles-booths were moved around and fell, constructing a theatre of objects that, alas, lost sight of the human content implicit in the words uttered.

There was much else at the festival that I was unable to see, including Maguchy’s *What is to be Done*? based on Nikolay Chernishevsky’s eponymous novel, and the performance *Behind the Lie* by Theatre♯13 from the Guangzhou province in China.

The Chinese troupe was a guest of honour of Baltic House, and the former had asked the latter to send Alimov, together with a complete production team – stage, light and costume designers as well as technicians of all kinds ­– to Guangzhou’s recently built, expensive multi-venue cultural centre in the heart of an industrial and working-class district. The idea, as Alimov explained it, was to have the Russian team show their Chinese observers how to go about the process, which they would then realize themselves. This request for lessons in theatre making may well appear less strange when the distance between traditional Chinese theatre forms and imported, so-called ‘western’ ones is taken into consideration. It is relevant to take into account, as well, the desire of both Theatre♯13 and the local authorities to ‘modernize’ their ways. (This is Alimov citing his Chinese hosts.)

Furthermore, according to Alimov, the Chinese had set all the conditions for the project, having also requested that he write a play version of a novel of their choice. They were aware of the established Russian practice of devising scripts out of novels and wanted this to be an integral part of their learning. After months of deliberation, Tolstoy won the competition over Dostoevsky. The selected novel was *Resurrection*, chosen not for its moral philosophy, but for its story about a poor girl who was abused by a rich man: a story thought to have special resonance for the population of the district from which the theatre’s spectators were to be drawn. Alimov noted that the spectators who did come to see the show did not conform to expected ‘western’ theatergoing behavior like turning off their mobile phones and not text messaging during performances.

Alimov directed the actors to perform their parts as was appropriate for this type of theatre: narrative, character, social context commensurate with the plot, and plausible action. The Chinese actors even reproduced the bits of dialogue in French by which Tolstoy distinguished the Russian elite of his novel while condemning it for its foreign elitist ways; and they did this faithfully while not understanding why anyone would borrow a foreign tongue, when they had their own.

The production, for all the questions that it might raise about intercultural theatre, was beautifully spatially arranged and lit, elegantly directed, and performed with such focus and integrity that its slightly imitative ‘feel’ did not deter spectators. The applause at the end of the production expressed their immense warmth and respect for the actors’ work, which, they had realized, could not have been easy, most of all when it came to cultural nuances.