

More Good Than...

For the past couple of years, the international theatre festival Divadelná Nitra has been said to have been losing appeal. This recently finished 26th festival year, whose title #FUNDAMENTALS indicated “a search for basic values”, was in many respects a pleasant surprise. Divadelná Nitra offered a modest but masterful foreign programme, in which it presented a wide variety of experimental contemporary theatrical strategies. Despite this success, the festival continues to battle many a problem.

That crisis at Divadelná Nitra had not been overcome was clear immediately after this year’s programme was published. With the lowest budget in history, the festival was once again cut in length from six days to five. Its Slovak section, which usually lagged behind foreign productions in terms of quality (with some exceptions), was supposed this year to make for half of the whole programme. Whereas in the past, this was a marginal aspect of the event, and the programme structure was predominated by guests from abroad. Thus it was somewhat unlikely from the very beginning that Divadelná Nitra should be able to solve its crisis of identity that spans the last couple of years and to an ever greater degree questions the reputation of the event as an important international exhibit.

All the more of a pleasant surprise was this year’s strong foreign programme. The Artistic Board, consisting of Dáša Čiripová, Ján Balaj, Martina Vannayová and Ján Šimko, made a selection that came off much more consistent this time around and that did without awkward titles such as would commonly crop up in the programme in the past. The festival is clearly focusing on smaller productions, as most of the programme consisted of intimate pieces, however, that certainly did not deprive the exhibit of a distinctive character. To the contrary, it achieved a sort of peculiar profile. And while Eurokontext.sk, another large Slovak international festival, focuses exclusively on national theatres, Divadelná Nitra rather looks to aesthetically more distinctive, more radical titles from the independent scene.

One would have to look hard to find traditional drama in this year’s foreign programme. Nitra mostly covered authorial pieces and various hybrid theatrical forms: a piece on the boundary of drama and dance (*Pursuit of Happiness*), a minimalist monodrama (*Actor and Carpenter Majer Talks Of the State Of His Homeland*), a five-hour contemplative performance-saga (*Black Black Woods*), a play with a deaf cast (*One Gesture*) or a film-theatrical performance without actors (*Zvizdal*). Each of the titles in addition addressed powerful themes, which in the course of the festival elaborated on the broad motto of so-called basic values. The foreign programme delivered sophisticated theatre with relevant content, all the while presenting guiding tendencies in contemporary production: towards authorial drama, towards blending theatrical and artistic disciplines, towards international collaboration, towards social projects with non-actors and towards collective creation.

Actor and carpenter

One such example is *Actor and Carpenter Majer Talks Of the State Of His Homeland*, which could already be called one of the most original Czech theatrical accomplishments in the recent years. Prague-based theatre Studio Hrdinů commissioned the script from journalist David Zábranský for director Kamila Polívková and actor Stanislav Majer. This assemblage of creators proved key to the text and its interpretation on stage. Zábranský wrote the so-

called 'Majer monodrama' not from the perspective of Majer, as the title might have had us mistakenly assume. The situation is, in fact, inverted. The play is Zábanský's internal monologue, the object of his meandering critical litanies (greetings from Thomas Bernhard) being the so-called Prague café society. In the text, these are exemplified by interpreter Majer, director Polívková, Studio Hrdinů and basically the entire quarter of Letná where the theatre is located. So Majer, as the author's alter ego, comments on himself, the director, the theatre in which the piece was produced and where it is usually staged. The result is a peculiar schizophrenic play that indulges in shifting perspectives and reflection on one's own position, in which the identities of the author, actor and character irritatingly merge.

'The director mistakenly saw a common type in Majer and me,' Zábanský wrote in the script. In the play, the author – a well-known Czech left intellectual – feigns sympathy with the politics of Miloš Zeman, which in the circles of the Prague alternative scene is usually met with nothing but contempt. Surprisingly, Zábanský takes aim at the director, the lead character and in general every single adherent of the liberal cosmopolitan worldview. The text often mockingly invokes the latter as 'Majer and his like', or as those who think that 'there is more filth than good in the homeland'. The script systematically crosses swords with its interpreters. This produces a remarkably exciting dialectic constellation, where the poles of individual opinions blend in the split personality of the Majer-Zábanský character. No, it is not just the author who stands in front of the audience. It is impossible that Majer should merge completely with the author's mask. To the contrary, his personality constantly tries to force its way through and even boosts the ambivalence of the character.

In fact, even Majer the man relativizes the distinctiveness of each of the opposing – nationalist and cosmopolitan – camps in the dispute. He is just as well torn between life 'abroad' and 'at home', between performing at alternative theatres and jobs for TV series. Depending on what is needed, he is once alternative hipster and at another time the public's favourite heartthrob. Majer is a crossing point of both worlds, and the play deliberately works with this. Suffice it to mention the scenography. For nearly the whole time, Majer performs in a narrow space confined between a shiny suitcase and a pair of hanging bagpipes, while slowly changing his fashionable slim jeans for traditional attire. In the end he takes the bagpipes off the wall and plays a clumsy version of the Czech anthem *Kde domov můj*. The piece brilliantly conveys the present state of the age, which has reached an inevitable crossroads.

Actor and Carpenter served as a key to this year's Divadelná Nitra. With its title #FUNDAMENTALS, the festival diagnosed the conflict of an age in which basic socio-political concepts are being revised. After a culture of open borders and internationalisation, for the first time since the fall of the Iron Curtain, voices are heard in the Western world that demand building walls and reinvigorate the idea of nation states. The absurd campaign of the current US president Donald Trump and his famous slogan "I will build a great, great wall on our southern border, and I will make Mexico pay for that wall" symbolised this social dynamic. It is not incidentally that Majer-Zábanský stands in front of a six-foot white wall in Polívková's production. That is no mere self-reference to the 'clean lines' of the aesthetic of Studio Hrdinů, whom the script often alludes to, but is also an embodiment of the totalitarianism of impermeable borders. And on top of all that, the piece is an energetic,

hilarious and in the best sense audience-oriented play, which nonetheless makes no concessions in keeping with a reduced aesthetic and minimum action on stage.

#Globalisation, or Once Upon a Time in the Middle East

The topic of home versus abroad also made a distinctive appearance with the play *Pursuit of Happiness*, created by Nature Theater of Oklahoma in collaboration with the EnKnapGroup dance troupe from Ljubljana. At the head of this prominent independent company from the United States is Slovak Pavol Liška. A native of Skalica with a typically curled moustache, he left Slovakia upon graduating from high school. It was shortly after the Velvet Revolution and he wanted to set off and see the world. Since then, he has mainly lived and worked in New York, where he is part of an authors-directors duo with his wife Kelly Copper since the 1990s.

Every year, Divadelná Nitra brings at least one internationally acclaimed director and introduces him or her to the Slovak audience. In the recent years, these were most often stars of German-speaking theatre such as Herbert Fritsch, Milo Rau and Susanne Kennedy. This time around, for the first time in history perhaps, the implied headliner was a company that is led by a theatre-maker from Slovakia. The Nitra festival arranged the first ever guest appearance of Pavol Liška in Slovakia in the entire history of Nature Theater of Oklahoma. On the part of the festival, this was a curatorial bullseye. A year titled #FUNDAMENTALS is ideally suited for back-to-the-roots returns of this sort.

A theatre company from the Off-Off-Broadway scene whose name was inspired by a magical company from Kafka's novel *America*, they have made themselves a name in the USA about a decade ago. Their authorial work gained an audience thanks to an original blend of conceptual theatre and ironic hyperbole. The mixing of high and low culture, the connection of professionalism with dilettantism, crazy costumes and bizarre choreographies, all of these are part and parcel of this theatre company's aesthetic. Liška and Copper even used to serve peanut butter sandwiches to their audiences after every performance. They roused international attention chiefly by their ambitious theatre series *Life and Times*, a multi-genre epic produced between 2009 and 2016, including at places like the Viennese Burgtheater. In blocs of successive episodes, the group staged a sixteen hour-long phone conversation with performer Kristin Worrall, who in her musings reconstructed her whole life from the first memory she could recall. Unconventional combinations permeate all of the company's work. *Pursuit of Happiness*, which the Nitra festival chose as its opening piece, is no exception in this regard.

At first, everything seems all too familiar. A group of cowboys and cowgirls hang around at a typical saloon somewhere in the Wild West. A swinging door flies in the wooden interior; at the counter, and a sombrero-clad bartender quietly wipes his glasses. On the wall hangs a rifle, posters showing wanted criminals and a bookshelf with a slanting and misspelled sign 'Libary'. A spittoon, into which the toothless guests empty the contents of their mouths every other while, dominates the front of the stage (– and by the way, it was the only, mischievous-looking decoration that adorned the stage before the curtain opened, while speeches were delivered by regional politicians, who, traditionally and unfortunately, politicised the festival's opening ceremony).

Pursuit of Happiness also rigorously abides by another western movie cliché. Seemingly unwelcome guests enter the saloon and the atmosphere can suddenly be cut with a knife. The characters soon start swinging their fists in choreographed arrangements, their fake punches accompanied by hidden camera show-style sounds of blows. The fight later escalates, characters eventually begin pulling off their wigs and cowboys fall in each other's arms in short rounds of smooch.

The play, however, is no mere parody of the western movie cliché, as it might seem at first blush. Everything becomes more complicated once the barflies start narrating their personal histories in between the brawls. Their rough diction and heavy southern accent fit perfectly with the western image. But the phenomena they grapple with are recognisably twenty-first century 'Western' problems. They speak of divorces, biological families, e-mails, manipulative parental strategies and humane animal slaughter. The characters also engage in intellectual self-reflective analyses and even address one another by their own names, such as Luke, Lada, Ida and Jeffrey. In writing the script, Copper and Liška relied on the real biographies of the dancers, who in *Pursuit of Happiness* speak much more than they dance. After all, that is one of their favoured theatrical strategies.

When the Slovenian dance company approached them to collaborate, the first thing that interested Copper and Liška were the group's weak points – in the case of EnKnapGroup, this was language. "So Kelly and I wrote a complicated text in verse, in iambic pentameter, the best we could. We had never done it before either." Nature Theater of Oklahoma views such challenges as more than just an engine that provides forward movement. They are interested precisely in coming to terms with amateurism, which in their opinion lends the play a human element.

The topic of *Pursuit of Happiness* is also eminently human – the problematic of a search for happiness, to which the US Constitution declares its citizens naturally entitled. But it seems as though someone has sucked all happiness out of this theatrical saloon and that every member of the group is, to a greater or lesser degree, undergoing personal crisis. The American dream is not happening. The Western genre frame, which in combination with the text feels entirely unbecoming, serves as an interesting atmospheric metaphor. The heroes in western shootout movies are, after all, often exactly frustrated, stubborn and burnt-out. By parodically stylising as a well-known movie genre, the play creates an anti-sentimental distance. Its tragicomic mood offers an alternative to the typically American philosophy of 'keep smiling': when one can no longer smile, one can at least laugh everyday hardship in the face.

As if the hybrid combination of a Western and contemporary realities were not enough, the play gradually develops into increasingly bizarre situations. In the second act, existential reflection shifts to reflection on the meaning of art as such, and the characters suddenly become part of a story told by bartender Bence. The energetic little young man with a massive moustache (Liška's alter ego?) remained in the background by the counter in the first part of the play and worked on his script as an observer. Suddenly, he takes on the weight of the entire performance and in an incredible hour-long monologue invites the audience to a fantastical adventure to war-torn Iraq. It is here that humour provocatively hovers on the edge of indecency. Irony, however, is in the first instance directed at the artists themselves. Bence, the principal of a dance company, wants to overcome creative crisis. To accomplish this, he

decides to schlep his dancers to the Middle Eastern front and invest his art with a higher purpose. The goal is to sweeten the lives of local soldiers with a little ‘contemporary dance’, and in the ideal case, to achieve ceasefire.

Bence’s troupe is a bizarre (pseudo-)engaged version of USO dancers, whose shows the American army organised as ‘cultural program’ for its men, for instance during the Vietnam War. But they clumsily begin their performance right in the middle of the battlefield, which of course cannot but end in consummate fiasco. The brilliant, incredibly funny narrative of the course and gradual failure of the expedition is complemented by crazy-coloured fluffy costumes, country dance choreography, bouncing to hip hop rhythms, gallons of Red Bull and other bizarre cultural references besides. Yes, all this on the background of a Western stage set. This is intellectual theatre show à la Nature Theater of Oklahoma!

Bence and Co.’s suicide mission also has political connotations. The struggle for the position of art has been a persistent issue in the United States, and its structural solution has likely been postponed indefinitely with the entry of President Trump into office. In contrast to many countries in Europe, theatre receives no systematic financial support from the state and depends mainly on private sponsors. The worsening situation on the local scene was already adverted to last year at the Nitra festival, by the Polish play *Kantor Downtown*. Still, this is not an exclusively American problem. In Europe, too, we see an ever weaker interest in arts support, which is falling prey to capitalist interests. One need only think of the struggle for financing at Divadelná Nitra itself. Nature Theater of Oklahoma symbolised this problem with a tragically hazardous effort of Bence and Co. to ‘dance’ their way to relevance by intervening in the military intervention in Iraq. They are clowns, who (as is often the case with good art) channel nonsense to disrupt the status quo.

Cuts in wrong places?

Much more good could be written about this year’s Divadelná Nitra. For example, about Wojtek Ziemilski’s authorial piece *One Gesture* produced by the Warsaw-based Nowy Teatr. This prominent Polish theatre company followed up on the play *Apocalypse* (2015), returning to Nitra with unusually subtle but nonetheless top quality theatre. *One Gesture* made use of ingenious dramatic means to reveal the world of the deaf (the theme centres largely on language) and to show how little society is aware of the problems deaf people face on a daily basis. Such as when the theatre hall echoes an unpleasant, loud buzzing sound that imitates a shortage of hearing aids for patients with auditory impediments. Life in such conditions is hard to imagine. Besides exposing problems, *One Gesture* was also a celebration of deaf culture, with its various national languages, international communication systems, slang (including a dozen gestures for the word sex) and its own poetry. At the end, the performers even gestured an anthem for the deaf, which they composed specially for the play as a sign of solidarity with their own community. The whole audience spontaneously applauded in sign language, which is something the play saw for the first time since it premiered.

In turn, director Rastislav Ballek produced *Jánošík* for the Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra, a precise, multi-layered study of European rank that interrogates the cult of Jánošík in a post-dramatic theatrical language. Among this year’s Slovak programme, curated by József Czajlik and Miklós Forgács, the work shined like a little gem.

An excellent new feature at the festival was the introduction of post-performance discussions. At last it were not just professional festival guests who had the opportunity to meet creators. The festival continues with a track of generous educational programmes for young critics (V4@Theatre Critics Residency), drama school students (How To Understand Theatre) and a slew of social projects as part of the accompanying programme. This year's visual and poster design was traditionally inventive, giving the visitors word search puzzles to solve in the foyer before performances. And of course, one must not forget to mention the helpful, cheerful volunteers who do a great deal of work at the festival.

Still, Divadelná Nitra is not as lively as it used to be, which is a pity. As far as the popular accompanying events were concerned, this year did without an opening concert at the Andrej Bagar Theatre Studio and without a public debate (paradoxically, during a year when a crisis of democracy has been noted across the world). The Bavarian-style pub with local DJs, where one could spend the evening after their fill of theatre, could also hardly be called a solid party programme. All of these were ways of economising that will turn out not have been worth it in the end. Why do many young visitors like to come to the Kiosk in Žilina? Because they have a chance to experience fabled gigs and parties, unique, creatively designed venues, markets, enjoy food and many other little festival treats. In Nitra, an atmosphere of crisis prevails irrespective of how good the theatre inside the halls is. It is radiated by the half-empty square and theatre foyer and often, we regret to say, also the festival team. It is high time to make Divadelná Nitra into the welcome place it once used to be. Atmosphere should be a matter of fundamental importance for an international theatre festival.