

Impressions of the 13th INFANT festival in Novi Sad

- essayistic notes and remarks by a guest -

Cipele. Shoes.

It's always about shoes. Never before I saw so much shoe-shops like in the centre of Novi Sad. Never before I saw so much people so often changing their shoes, in the run of the day, off stage, on stage. As one is going to learn walking again. And looking well with it.

INFANT 2007 was an exceedingly rich and inspiring theatre festival. I had the honour to experience an extraordinary hospitality and care for the artists taking part and for the guest from Germany: accommodation, provisions, translating... I really felt being welcome. And I stepped into a tremendous programme of theatre play and dance performances, street performances, discussions and lectures, excursions and encountering, on a high level of quality.

Though, in the succession of events, times and space are diverging sometimes. The quantity and high density of the options and arrangements made it difficult for the organization from time to time, and for the guest hard to concentrate, to step really in. Maybe less performances would be even better, and in addition more workshops for coming together (provided that they could be organized with more appreciation, which was not much the case, this year).

But these are aspects of the fact that I was a stranger, an interested eye from anywhere, not quite familiar with the language, in words, gestures, meanings... though a spectator in a whole-day-and-night-performance, strange and full of juggling elements, besides of the shoes.

Serbia appeared to me like one big artists family, not only from theatre, but artists of all kinds, producers in art, academics in art... Everyone has already worked in a project together with anyone. Actually projects round the clock, round the year. As in family relations usual, there were a plenty of inner familiar, emotional nuances not to overhear. The "family" has a lot to do about skirmishes for positions, contouring and profiling.

The one, virulent side of artistic being in the contemporary Serbia seems to be: Anything goes, everything is possible, in general. Nothing is forbidden or taboo. While this, on the streets (so in the immense side programme of INFANT), is apparently happening without any rules, determinations, and thereby without concentration on conditions, audience, anyhow settled spaces – in the contemporary stage productions this takes place and goes along with an high claim for quality in design and expression. Obvious is an extraordinary use of body, a care for physical presence. High value is lead on preciseness of expression: This was the case in all Serbian productions, as well as in the performances from Hungary, Croatia and others.

It contradicts fortunately the avant-garde title of INFANT, because this theatre movement of the 60s and 70s was, indeed, affected by an high political claim, but at the same time by lack of aesthetics. Spectators are thankful for the development of finding back to quality.

In contrast, street performances are merely images of situations, rituals of numerous, single artists (or of ones who would like to claim an identity like this for themselves), images and rituals, which actually in particular are exact this: little gaming pieces, not more. Hardly anything really "dispatches". Is merely seeking, circulating around its self. (One title I found, beyond the festival programme, points it: "Solo Me". Also pretended messages are circulating around themselves.)

Different on the theatre stage: What I have seen in the festival programme, contained, in the most cases, artistic claim, and thereby based on the demand, to provide political, social or human contents. (The performances were the better transmitted, the more the artists had cared about their contents *and design and expression*.)

Agreement on this basis the "artists family" doesn't have at all. The symposium on that subject around the contemporary theatre pointed out: The Serbian artists community just arrived in the middle of an intense process of self-finding. Debates, which lead also away from theatre into

different arts and questions of professional identities, were interfered by discussions about organization, of art in general, of theatre in special, but also of the symposium itself. Who is allowed to hold which lecture? Who gains the chance to sell his special pair of shoes? – Rows inside and outside the room, no concentration at all, several disturbs in the lectures, the affliction of translating... pamphlets are presented, engaged, but it's obvious that they will stay only in a small, closed circle. Finally I experienced a complete break-down of the event, in my view and for my taste, but the rest of convinced strugglers for a serious improvement of theatre art didn't give up and talked on... It was like a session of demanding artists, a performance itself. Well, impressions.

The variety of the topics is too wide spread, in a theatre scientific sense as well as variety in artistic contents and forms. There is no point of agreeable concentration. What the request might be, is a higher sense above or behind it. A discussion about the question: Why are we artists at all? And that specially in this specific country? In what kind of shoes do we stand onto this wounded bottom and are stretching ourselves for a maybe higher truth (not the last claim art usually marks to possess)? – For this, it is rarely to consider agreement.

Thus, in the festival, the artists are dealing with a large diversity of themes. They get it from classic (theatre) literature and other arts (painters i.g.). "Big topics" are merely broken down or generalized: Wars. World history. Desire.

Of course there are also misunderstandings, I mean: by the one or other artist.

"Our concept is pure and clean. That's all." Says one. – Form is no content, please. This stimulates development of theatre not at all, but unmasks the seeking puberty of the actor. Borders of the (theatre) possibilities are hardly touched by this, nor crossed. This is only the case (like in more than one performances I saw), if single stage art means are going to be extended in a special consequent way (abstraction, repetition and more).

Let me pose one question: In how fare are the themes of the (special Serbian) themes anchored in the people? Combined with them? – Whereas the performances in the festival were consistently well visited (although often by the same public), people on the street seemed not be interested in what is going on at all. It appeared like an accepted, as far as possible, coexistence. Even a dozen organized photographers and TV cameras, face to face around a single solo-performer, could not change this impress, only strengthen the grotesque effect. Maybe the topics are (still) too less definitive, in consequence they could people (and the "artists family around) not really consider. Form is not all of it. (Of course this is not a Serbian question alone...!).

In my awareness I missed themes as: How could wounds, if not get healed, at least get acclaimed and respected, wounds, which people, living one near the other, had inflicted each other in this country? Or what about the apparent high rate of women between 30 and 40, after this war, in this society, who are confronted with a by far less amount of men?

They are talking about shoes. It really turns to become a metaphor.

By this, the upright countenance is obvious, by with people are walking through the streets of Novi Sad, in beautiful shoes. They are carrying masks of self-confidence, their feature is apparently of value, they prevent any gesture of humility, show up quite easy-going. A lot seems facade. To see behind the curtain, we become aware the prevalent economic poverty and mental disruption, more to perceive than to be seen.

Considerable are peoples, over generations, widespread roots. The rejections of the last one and a half decades have been reinforced this aspect of this mixed society.

Some more about the war and its open wounds (eventhough people seem not very willing to speak about it): "You might yet know, what war and ethnic heritage means", I come to hear, being german, and than they lay, close and in short, two fingers onto the upper lips. - But that's a time ago, I explain. Hitler came when even the yugoslavian kingdom was still young.

And one other little story: The reputed (and false repeated and therefore being misunderstood) announcement, while the performance of the german troupe in the festival the audiance was not allowed to leave the theatre, was openly commented with the term "fashism". Which again was uncomfortable for the hosts. But is yet proving the whole sensibility against social and national identities. – No wonder: The civil war effects intensely, still. And with a kind of sarcastic humor

people in this land ask themselves, which borders their country maybe will have in the next year, or by which name they should call it one week later...

Certitude offers only the region Vojvodina, less a political, more a cultural identity: She is cultivated as defiant attitude against the centralistic Belgrade. Serbian artists themselves are indeed coming right from there: from the capital. Thus, these impressions are only a small extract of Serbian life, anyway, but also because Novi Sad, in a artistic sense, seems to be a suburb of Belgrade.

And who am I to value.

Down here, a german artist gets sometimes flattered, as he went around like a walking lexicon of quotations from Goethe and Schiller via Einstein up to Heiner Müller – like he carryed the cultural world heritage within himself. And sometimes there happens just the opposit: People are presenting how educated they are and international orientated. And that is the case, obviously. But artists stay seeking persons, everywhere. Fortunately. Artists are yearning for contact. They want to be seen, anyway naturally, but also in a special way by people from other countries.

All the virulent festival energy and hostility invited, without a break, to become aware. Become aware their creativity, their cultural history. These people, these artists, in this country. Purposes, a going on staying in contact could also happen in Germany, I hardly heard. More: Come back. To us, to our land.

Yes, I would like to.

Bought a new pair of shoes.