

# PORTRAITS OF A [EUROPEAN] 'CRITIC'

## A PUZZLING PORTRAIT

The archetypal European critic doesn't exist. This was the most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the two seminars attended by 20 young European critics in January and June 2011: Writers on the Move, organised at the behest of, and on occasion of the SPACE project, under the aegis of the TEAM network of transdisciplinary art magazines. This inference might well be explained by the fact that criticism calls for independence. Taking a critical stance in the performing arts, as in other domains, entails distancing oneself from hackneyed responses and platitudes, and bringing a fresh perspective to the work or event under review. Aside, however, from confirming the deep-rooted and ideal nature of the critic's independence, these seminars also brought to light the wide diversity of circumstances faced by these twenty young writers: all review the performing arts on a

*It is indeed exceptional that critics put themselves under the magnifying glass.*

regular basis, work in seventeen countries embracing Europe's four cardinal points, and as such stem from widely divergent backgrounds in terms of training, professional and financial opportunities, along with contacts with a variety of publications. Moreover, not only have they to deal with underhand censorship, in all its guises, but also political pressures and ethical strictures, commercial imperatives and dominant aesthetics. And, not forgetting the issue of the variance in their given professional status, which naturally differs from region to region.

In addition to a shared critical spirit – which facilitated outstanding exchanges between participants – another common trait emerged, namely, all the critics were hampered by the fact that mobility is not factored into their professional remit. This contrasts substantially with the working conditions of those involved in European cultural programmes and performing arts projects where for quite some time travel costs for both the organisers and works have been underwritten – whether as a corollary of pro-active public policies or initiated by those in the sector itself. A more recent example of such a support system in operation is the emergence of artist-in-residency programmes actively promoting the international movement of artists, along with initiatives that nurture a more mobile general public, as in the case of cross-border projects. The mobility of those, however, from whose writings we most expect a frame of reference and the keys for a better understanding, has to date been given scant consideration. And yet, without proper exposure to and debate concerning the creation of artworks, we face the risk of an increase in misunderstandings and erroneous judgements, which will eventually result in the public merely tasting, as it were, a pan-European fare, as insipid as global wines or international hamburgers. The preservation and fostering of Europe's exceptional cultural diversity can only be ensured through an in-depth understanding of our differences. Without the implementation of necessary measures against further erosion, we will end up with a dumbed-down and homogenised form of culture. Informed criticism plays a fundamental role in combatting this tendency.

What clearly emerged at the close of the seminars, – and a phenomenon in all probability witnessed beyond Europe's boundaries – was the extent to which this 'craft' has mutated. While modern day critics bear scant resemblance to their 19th century counterparts, that out-dated model nonetheless remains germane to current thinking on the subject. Whoever reviews or analyses the performing arts in this day and age hardly does so from an ivory tower. Changes in the various media and in the form of contemporary creation have profoundly transformed their position, or more precisely their positions, and besides, the increasingly precarious economic situation in the cultural realm now obliges the critic to have more than one string to his or her bow.

The present publication seeks to take into consideration three specific aspects of this multi-dimensional issue: Diversity of contexts and experiences, through the viewpoint of a particular aspect, or in terms of comparative approaches. Mobility issues, whether physical or intellectual – with regard to the critic fully exercising his or her profession. And finally, a number of articles attempting to analyse the manner in which the profession as a whole is currently adapting itself. All told, we have a rare example of auto-criticism, for it is indeed exceptional that critics put themselves under the magnifying glass. In doing so here, they offer us an insight into the realities and dreams of those profoundly connected with culture, for whom passion and reflection still remain vital constituents in the arts, if we don't wish that art itself succumbs to a form of isolation. We hope that this 'portrait', of the modern-day European critic, at once puzzling, kaleidoscopic and invariably diverse, will better enable our readers to comprehend the true complexity of their role, and go beyond the caricatures to which it is often reduced.

Antoine PICKELS.

Translated (French) by John Barrett.

## NEW FORUM

SPACE is a platform dedicated to the support and better circulation of performing arts activities across Europe. The ten members of the platform have quite different profiles and missions, but all have policies and programmes in place to support the development of networking and collaboration at an international level. The members' reflections and discussions on these matters helped to define the term 'support' in the context of SPACE as an improvement both in the quality of the productions being created and the touring being undertaken by artists, before considerations about a specific or significant numeric increase in terms of 'product'. In relation to the term quality we include those actions that help to create conditions which enrich the presence of artists in the cities (and other communities) where they perform; as well as facilitating a more balanced distribution of performances across Europe, both in terms of geographical distribution and opportunities for professionals, who meet very different funding and financial conditions in their respective countries.

The opportunity provided to SPACE via the framework of the EC's mobility pilot projects (2008-2011), allowed us to investigate the processes necessary to encourage more quality and more balance in the circulation of performances. The activities mounted as part of the SPACE-pilot project were designed to improve each individual participant's knowledge and experience, both as a continuity of learning and communication, and as reflection on the art itself. The high number of applications received for the training sessions we mounted over the three years pilot, was a clear indication of a need shared by many professionals and a reflection of our ambitions for the project.

Addressing those sessions to art managers and programmers, all directly involved in the practice of production and presentation, was a very obvious option. Less obvious was the choice to work with a group of writers (including journalists, critics and theoreticians), not on the technical skills of writing, but on the purpose and informed application of constructive criticism across the whole performing arts sector.

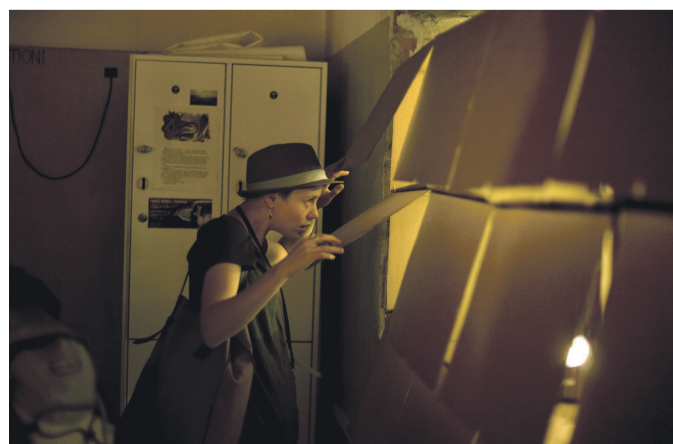
We believe that the role journalists and critics play, despite the increasing lack of space in the traditional media for debate around the performing arts, is and will become ever more crucial in the future. We need to respond to the simplification and trivialization of the performing arts through poor media communication; to the growing lack of reflection on the sector's contribution to society (which may in the longer term prove to be even worse than the financial cuts it faces now). We felt it was worth creating a

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new forum where shared reflections and experiences among journalists and critics, and more effective networking could offer new opportunities in that direction. Trying to minimise the 'isolation of the writer' doesn't affect an individual's critical skills but instead multiplies the sources and the capacity of those individuals to get closer to their audiences, wherever in Europe they may be.

Antoine Pickels, in preparation for the two Writers on the Move sessions he designed for SPACE on behalf of the TEAM Network in London and Prague, investigated many different critical themes and problems. The results contained within these pages and the active participation of the twenty participating writers in the SPACE conference in Krakow (5-6 October 2011) are testimonies that it has been a step in a positive direction. Along with those new initiatives generated by the arts managers and programmers involved in the other training programmes, this document is a significant and concrete output of the project: spontaneous young networks growing together through shared reflections and experiences.

The members of SPACE.



jp.co.de, production by Árpád Schilling staged during Prague Quadriennale, photo by Máté Tóth Ridovics © Kretakör

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## Journey I

# A SMALL ODYSSEY

I *Mette Garfield*

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION, AN EXPLORATION OF THE CREATIVE PATH TOWARDS AN OPERA... AND PERHAPS, AN ALLEGORY ON THE ROLE OF CRITICISM.

Who are the current critics in Europe? Whilst travelling the Prague underground in order to see the Philip Glass opera *Les Enfants terribles* this query is not foremost in my mind. More urgent is the question: Why do we do it? Our group consists of three people: A curator/critic from Hamburg, a French curator/blogger/editor and critic from Paris, and myself – a journalist/editor from Denmark.

### *The question: Why do we do it?*

After a long day at a seminar with heated discussions, we are taking a second trip to the psychiatric hospital, Bohnice, situated on the outskirts of Prague, where the Glass opera unconventionally, yet understandably, takes place. Due to a misprint in the advertising we had already taken this journey fruitlessly the previous night. In addition we had no tickets for the performance that was sold out. Nevertheless we are taking the same trip in the anticipation of getting seats.

We didn't have dinner before leaving and our spirits are lowered when we are obliged to change trams on the final stretch to the hospital. The light suddenly changes and transforms our surroundings into a magical, almost surreal, place, as we step off the tram – a sensation that is enhanced on entering the gate into the park that encloses the psychiatric institution. In the vast park hardly a soul can be seen and we discover large puddles reflecting the pink and orange colours of the sunset and long shadows cast by tall trees. The buildings are situated far apart and I get an eerie awareness that we are on premises intended for psychiatric patients. Images from the macabre closing scene of the movie *The Shining* overwhelm me and interrupt my thoughts. But it is beautiful here, incredibly beautiful. And a little strange.

Fortunately this is our second visit and we are spared the previous night's difficulties in locating the pavilion that constitutes the hospital's former main kitchen. There are hardly any people outside the makeshift barracks and our prospects of getting tickets soar. We almost dance up the steps only to discover the queue inside. It is ever so long and the Czech ushers at the doors are merciless. They ruthlessly separate the 'wheat from the chaff' just like bouncers in most European discos do every weekend. Invited audiences are permitted to enter, whilst we ticketless souls merely hang around peeking into the auditorium, that slowly fills with people of all ages and social standings. The ushers couldn't care less about our press badges and move us to one side, as they loudly proclaim what we already know: the performance is completely sold out and the waiting list for unclaimed tickets is very long.

I have no idea why we stay but as we've come so far we can just as well wait until the bitter end. Then the ushers pull out the waiting list. They only read out Czech names. And one well-dressed couple after another are guided to their

seats inside the small theatre. Now and then a little child dressed in pyjamas pops up in the doorway. They are obviously singers/actors. Their friends are waiting in the queue and are granted access. We still wait and send longing messages with our gaze into the theatre.

Slowly the group of ticketless people diminishes as they get ushered into the auditorium. And my hope for a seat has disappeared into thin air. All of a sudden the ushers start to count the group. One of them spots us and we wave our press badges about again. We smile until our faces ache. She doesn't smile back but points to us with a grey finger. One of the pyjama-clad children escorts us to our seats. There is not an empty chair in sight. The auditorium is stuffed to the brim and I imagine that I have to stand somewhere at the back.

Then I am directed to the stage. I have to sit against a bed, that is part of the set, close to the conductor. My belly feels just like it did when I was six years old and I was given my first bicycle on my birthday.

And as opera's dreamy, cyclic overture begins I forget all our struggles and become absorbed by the music and what is happening on the stage.

On the way home the musical themes, images of snow, the bedrail, Matěj Cibulka's amazing underwater spots, the psychiatric hospital's lonesome buildings and Jan Mikusek's eerie castrato-like voice vividly fills my body and I have a very clear notion of why we do it after all. But the question of who actually are the current critics in Europe remains completely open.

*Translated (Danish) by Nina Larissa Bassett.*



Caption from the film of *Les Enfants terribles*, opera by Philip Glass staged during Prague Quadriennale at the Bohnice Psychiatric Hospital, film by Matěj Cibulka © The National Theatre / Opera, Prague



# WHAT A THEATRE CRITIC SHOULD NOT BE

*Vladimír Mikulka I*

IT IS PATENTLY CLEAR FOR THE AUTHOR, IN DEPICTING THE PORTRAIT OF AN IDEAL CRITIC, ALBEIT IN INVERSE TERMS, THAT WERE A THEATRE CRITIC TO REMAIN UNINTELLIGIBLE FOR THE MAJORITY – WHICH HE OR SHE SHOULD NOT BE – NOR PUBLICLY VISIBLE, NOR ON THE SIDE OF THE ARTISTS, NOR SWAYED BY THEIR COLLEAGUES' JUDGEMENTS...

In the Czech Republic it is not quite so easy to make one's living as a theatre critic, so I supplement my income traveling around the world as a tourist guide. And during these travels I am often asked what I do when I'm not guiding tourists. I proudly answer "I am a theatre critic." Invariably one of three reactions follows. Optimists answer with a hint of jealousy: "Lucky you, that you can go to the theatre for free." Pragmatists respond with a variation on the question "Could you recommend a nice performance?" But the majority of my travel-loving questioners asks "So what, in fact, are you doing?"

I always keep theatre tips at the ready, as well as funny comebacks to all three responses. "I go to the theatre and instead of telling my friends what it was like I simply write it down. And on top of that I get paid for it. Unfortunately rather badly. Luckily I enjoy doing it." Important is to add this warning, that the fact that I enjoy a play doesn't mean that everybody has to like it – actually it doesn't mean anything except that I enjoyed the play. And I say it a little bit with a sense of tip-toeing around one of the most important points of the work of every theatre critic: to inform about what is going on in theatres, and to explain in an intelligible manner what he thinks about it. And to do this regularly and consistently, to such a degree that his message becomes trustworthy to the reader.

But all that applies to the evident aspects of theatre critique – what a critic is, what he should be and why he actually engages in such a suspicious activity. Much less common, though more interesting, appears to me to be the question of what a theatre critic shouldn't be. Or what he cannot be if he wants to be a critic.

Over time I began to notice, not without some surprise, that among tourists I proudly admit to being a theatre critic; while in a theatre environment, I try whenever possible to hide my occupation. It has its logic. A critic is not someone in the centre of attention, that is the actor's job. It's great if a critic is known for what he writes; but as an individual it would probably be better to go to the theatre incognito. There is nothing worse than the habit, in some theatres and festivals, to seat all critics in one place or to designate a special row. There is nothing worse, that is provided we don't count the choreographed – or accidental – encounter with the authors after the performance, complete with the obligatory "So, how did you like it?" A critic, for one thing, shouldn't be a liar.

It is a widely shared conviction that critics and theatre people are in the same boat and should therefore combine efforts for their beloved art to flourish. That is a mistaken assumption, although an understandable one. A critic is not in the same boat as the artist; he is with the audience – and it is to the audience that he is liable. One of the most common rebukes of artists towards critique is the

proclamation "Your review was useless to me, it wasn't helpful at all." And why should it be? A review is written not to enlighten actors, but for its readers. Beyond that, one can plausibly imagine an excellent critic who actually hates theatre. This might border on masochism, indeed; in fact the only substantial criteria is whether the critic can see well, feel well and formulate well. It doesn't matter if he does so out of love for the theatre, out of obligation or perhaps – in some alternate reality – for money. A critic is neither an acolyte of theatre folk, nor, necessarily, a friend of the theatre.

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A regular occurrence at Czech theatre premieres is something we could call 'the huddle.' Either during the intermission or after the performance, critics gather at the theatre club to discuss the performance. A particularly dangerous variation of 'the huddle' is the 'highway-huddle' – in which several critics share a ride home from the theatre. Both the huddle and the motorized highway-huddle are phenomena as natural as they are dangerous. Although opinions can differ significantly, as with *any* discussion sharp edges tend to be imperceptibly blunted, 'obvious' interpretations given weight while more 'extravagant' views are suppressed. Of course, this is (at least in most cases) neither the intention nor a deliberate avoidance tactic. A famous psychological text shows that when nine people in front of you publically make with conviction an obviously incorrect statement, it is very difficult to claim the opposite. And in theatre, moreover, most things are ambiguous. Ultimately, extravagant or even dubious opinions are on the whole more interesting than a series of 'huddle' reviews published two days later, at best the individual expressions of collective thinking and at worst an outright collaboration. Solitude is not always pleasant; but the critic cannot function in a collective – at least not while writing a review.

Regardless, the most important rule to remember is the one mentioned in all Bridge handbooks: every rule is valid only until a more valid one supersedes it.

*Translated (Czech) by Tatjana Marčič.*

## Tasks I

## THE DANCING CRITIC

I Inga Fridrihsone

MOBILITY AND THE ABILITY TO MASTER MULTIPLE TASKS ARE REGARDED AS INDISPENSABLE QUALITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY. BUT, DON'T THESE VERY QUALITIES RUN AGAINST THE GRAIN OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION NECESSARY IN CRITICISM?

*The Dancing Critic should have:  
a keen ear,  
great piety,  
and be reasonably idle*

This summer I went on an expedition to the Latvian and Belarusian border regions together with a group of folklorists and anthropologists in order to collect life stories. This Eastern region of Latvia, the so-called 'Land of Blue Lakes' Latgale, is one of the richest in traditions, yet economically poorest regions of the European Union. Neat countryside alternates with forsaken and half-ruined farmyards. The area is testimony to the 'glory' of the *kolkhoz* times, or at least to the density of population and demographics in the countryside in the 1930s. It differs remarkably from the present where Latvia's villages are being wiped off the map. In our wanderings we come across hamlets where nobody lives anymore. In existing settlements we searched out houses inhabited by elderly and friendly villagers. In order to find such villages, we often had no landmarks other than pine trees and footpaths through rye meadows. When we finally reached the kind of household we had been looking for, we spent time with 80 years old Latvians, Belarusians, Russians, and Poles exploring long-lost customs, discussing dieting methods from the 19th century (repeat under the waning moon: "Moon, oh, Moon, I want to shrink like you!"), singing long-forgotten songs and drinking teas from every possible meadow herb. We talked about those Belarusians burnt alive during the German occupation in World War Two, about famine, deportation... The lives they have lived breathe through their life stories in all their diversity and splendour, in deep inhalations and long, shallow exhalations. When listening to them, we had to adjust and breathe just as deeply, and as slowly as our storytellers. Their utterances were rare interruptions of that prevailing silence, as we sat together under the birch tree and listened to the sap running through its stem.

While the success of such expeditions is measured in the diversity of the stories collected, it often depends on the listener's ability to be silent and to simultaneously grasp the rhythm of time in which the storyteller lives. Perceiving time in a similar manner – life, death, bygone times – is likewise a precondition for a speaker and listener, or a performer and a spectator to 'meet'. When Latvian director Alvis Hermanis staged Ivan Goncharov's novel *Oblomov* in Cologne's State Theatre in February 2011, and in August 2011 in Riga, he rehabilitated the 'most famous idler' in Russian literature, presenting him as a dreamer who couldn't accept the vast difference between fantasy and the everyday. Oblomov seems to associate running a household with being under pressure. That's why he consistently chooses to ignore his domestic situation and falls into an apathetic daze, leading his life between the bed and the table, between the delights of sleep and the delights of the stomach. The play lasts nearly four hours, each action takes minutes, at times nothing happens onstage aside from the clicking of a clock, Oblomov's snoring and dust whiffing in a dusky background. The following day the reviews were harsh, describing the play as a 'senile' and 'somniferous'. So immense was the time-lag between the Oblomov and his play on the one hand, and the critic's and judge's on the other. The critic is like Oblomov's antagonist Stolz, or perhaps even an embodiment of Angela Merkel's perfect citizen who wakes up early, works a lot and is pro-active (as envisioned in the German Chancellor's address to her compatriots in her New Year's speech). Besides Stolz is mobile, a European citizen at the dawn of a contemporary and restless society; and an all-rounder – photographer, merchant, traveller.

*Multitasking is not consistent with progress in civilization.*

*It is a quality characteristic of forest animals;*

*it is an instinct needed for survival.*

'Stolzism' is a common trait among European critics. It is required by the ramification of professional responsibilities and tasks. The experiences of the participants at the Writers on the Move seminars demonstrate that the critic is often an executor of culture-political decisions, a moderator, a counsellor at festivals and shows, an organizer, a mediator and so on. His lifestyle and tasks

remind me of Heidegger's description of a modern researcher at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: "The scholar disappears and is replaced by the researcher engaged in research programs. These, and not the cultivation of scholarship, are what place his work at the cutting edge. The researcher no longer needs a library at home. He is, moreover, constantly on the move. He negotiates at conferences and collects information at congresses. He commits himself to publishers' commissions. It is the publisher who now determines which books need to be written." The networked European theatrical and festival institutions are 'entities' for the mobile critic; those academics and critics attached to such organizations intensely engage with them, thereby favouring the process through which a particular phenomena becomes a trend throughout Europe. Festivals are his congresses, plays performed there – his new home 'library'. Multitasking and mobility are considered as positive achievements to which art critics should aspire so to so as to keep in step with their 'clients' (*Auftraggeber*). However, as the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han in his essay *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft* (Burnout Society) accurately observed, multitasking is not consistent with progress in civilization. It is a quality characteristic of forest animals; it is an instinct needed for survival. What distinguishes man from an animal is his ability to immerse himself in contemplation – into a cradle of creativity – and yet it is not possible to immerse oneself physically and psychologically while multitasking or running. This is why mobility – motion and movement – can not be the goal for a European art critic's creative development. It can only be an instrument to avail of on such occasions that present opportunities to become mutually aware of time, to inhale and exhale as one. And as such, it becomes an instrument for action to confront this out and out 'Stolzig' 140-symbol society with the day-dreamer Oblomov. In a word, for those who support the growth of dance, and not European critics running.

*For walking is the basic form of movement.  
Running is accelerated walking.  
But dancing – it is a creative and uplifting form of motion.*

Translated (Latvian) by Laura Freidenfelde.



# NON-CRITIC

## Anna Róża Burzyńska I

FROM A POLISH PERSPECTIVE, THE THEATRE CRITIC'S STATUS EVOLVED WITH THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY. AN ANALYSIS OF ITS CONTEMPORARY AVATARS – WHOM ARE INSTANTLY RECOGNISABLE, FOR THEY CLOSELY RESEMBLE THOSE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES.

Critic – till recently in Poland this word sounded proud. Today many of those who by virtue of their profession were entitled to apply this term to themselves, now use quite different words: theatre reporter, theatre journalist, theatre essayist, and even theatre writer. Alternative designations are not only eye-catching terms meant to differentiate an author from a throng of other published writers, but also reflect the changing style of writing about theatre.

### Theatre Reporter

For years in Poland the chasm between reviews in newspapers and those appearing in specialist journals has been widening. Certainly, we still have respected critics whose writing appears in both types of publication, however, it is increasingly difficult for them to retain some cohesion of expression. In the course of the last decade, after all, huge changes in the profile of the daily press have greatly modified the conventional models for writing about culture.

Editorial strategies follow two directions: limiting space for pieces related to theatre, and making them possibly more attractive to the potential reader. However, there are limits to how much a text's length can be reduced. Notes of a few lines accompanied by an assessment in the form of stars have not been well received in theatre criticism. Similarly unsuccessful was the idea that critics should stop writing reviews but, instead, just before the opening night, prepare announcements made up of interviews with the producers and a colourful account of the rehearsals. Actors refused outright to allow 'civilians' to attend rehearsals and opposed anyone writing about shows which were not yet ready. So editors now often expect a combination of short review plus long interview with the star of the show. Another desirable pseudo critical form are profiles: actors' biographies or, in place of several separate reviews, a wholesale account of current theatrical events complete with a strained thesis on the subject of today's trends in stage art.

### Theatre Journalist

Another issue, which has recently grown in importance, concerns the politicisation and topicality of theatre criticism. The theatre critic should be aware of who he is writing for. Polish theatre in the new millenium has returned to recently discarded social questions: settling accounts with history, asserting the right of the excluded to vote, judging those who rule, and finally, undermining the obligatory discourse of talking about the world. The aesthetic has become political, and 'citizen audience' has started to demand a partner in conversation about the world by means of theatre. 'Critical' is becoming a synonym for 'politically and socially engaged'. The positive consequences of politicising theatre criticism and bringing it closer to journalism bring with them certain negative consequences. Occasionally, political issues dominate over the aesthetic and distort the judgement criteria. The 'wars of old theatre and the new'

*'Critical' is becoming a synonym for  
'politically and socially engaged'.*

which have been declared time and again turn out actually to be wars between the respective camps of critics who hold different opinions, where the artists and their works are used as a ram with which to batter the other side. At the same time the reviewers' game is played not only for money, paid per line of text, but for the ideas the critic has decided to represent.

### Theatre Essayist

In his *Diaries*, Witold Gombrowicz postulated that the reviewer should not try to persuade his readers that he knows what the actor in question is thinking, but should express his own feelings and thoughts about the work in question, in order for a dialogue between two personalities to develop, between the author and the critic. This idea has made a deep impression on Polish theatre criticism.

Paradoxically, the value of reviews is rising just as the 'literary nature' of theatre is declining. Today's critic, writing at a time of postdramatic theatre, is obliged to find a verbal equivalent for a spectacle comprised above all of non-verbal elements: movement, music, rhythm, images, variously engaged human bodies, and virtual media. Every attempt at describing the spectacle will

really be a process of translating the theatrical work into quite a different system of symbols, whereby what is most significant in theatre is lost: the importance of time, rhythm, three-dimensional space, above all, chance, openness, and the unique nature of the theatrical work. It may be that placing oneself in the position of someone who will be writing not so much about the work itself but their own feelings, associations and reflections elicited by the work, is not so much an expression of authorial megalomania but, rather, honest conduct.

### Theatre Writer

With the appearance of new professions, carried out by people with the right education for theatre critics but included in the general field of theatre practice, especially the playwright or curator, the dividing line between the practice of theatre and criticism or theory gets blurred. The as yet unwritten restrictions regulating the way those on either side of the footlights function have been questioned: the critic who undertook work for the theatre automatically lost the right to be a reviewer.

The manner of writing about theatre of those who have entered the sphere of theatre practice must differ from traditional evaluative criticism. It often appears rather to be a form of creative dialogue with the actors, a dialectical splitting into voices of their discourse (the texts of Ludwik Flaszen, as Jerzy Grotowski's co-worker, performed this function), or effectively becomes a conduit between the stage and the audience (texts published in the programmes by literary directors).

In some respects, today more than ever, theatre needs people who will write about it. The avant-garde paradigm of the artist-theoretician, who formulates his own creativity in manifestos and designs its reception, is fading away before our eyes. Critics who are valued by creative artists are thus often won over to theatre practice. Then the critic becomes a theatre writer, to use the term the distinguished Polish critic and director Małgorzata Dziewulska uses to describe her own work. That is, someone whose knowledge, literary taste and talent are in the service of theatre. It would appear that more and more writers will opt for this route. Will this development bring theatre measurable benefits? Time will tell.

*Translated (Polish) by Barbara Koscia.*

## Case Study I

## CRITIC

IN THIS CONVERSATION ON CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM IN BULGARIA AND BEYOND, TWO CRITICS COMPARE THEIR EXPERIENCES IN BULGARIA AND ELSEWHERE, THE VARIOUS LABELS 'ACADEMIC' ANALYSIS AND JOURNALISM CAN ASSUME, AND THE DANGERS POSED BY CRITICISM, IF DEVOID OF ALL CRITERIA.

The deadline for suggesting a topic for this publication was drawing close and eventually I e-mailed to my colleague Mira, with whom we jointly took part in the Writers on the Move sessions, a letter reading in general like this:

Mira,

*What would you say that we make use of the fact that the two of us took part in the SPACE project and prepare jointly something for the publication? We might do an interview as a situation for creating a short break for (self) reflection, since in the course of the Writers on the Move sessions the figure of the critic was subjected to an anatomical examination in an international context and forms of cooperation are being feverishly sought. Ourselves as individual sparring partners, look at ourselves as a case study and try to consider together where we are standing now? The format of the interview might allow us to generate questions upon our own attitudes and practice, their realization, transformations, visions etc. To begin with I can mail you a few questions, you will reply and ask in turn other questions. What about it? A.*

Fortunately, Mira agreed and our e-mail exchange took along its own course...

AG — *How would you define your stand on critical writing on theatre?*

MM — I think I am approaching the topic from a rather privileged position, which makes it possible for me to explore in depth and to undertake analytical journeys into the handling of the theatrical fact without making allowances for the usual tempo of operative criticism or the publication's engagements. What interests me is analyzing the artistic event in its own context within the context of the local and the international stage, as well as within its historical and culturological milieu. Such writing would benefit mostly the authors of the work or specialists in history and theory rather than the spectators. That is why I am not fulfilling certain basic functions of the critical stand known for example to British media - namely to assert or denounce the artistic intent, to guide the spectators' interest in accordance with its subjective and at the same time most authoritative opinion, which has become an institution; in this case the personal predilection or even emotion are as valid as expertise and knowledge. I maintain to a large extent an objective rational discourse, characteristic of scientific research and dramaturgical work on a specific performance, devoid of nuances of judgment, which the audience easily relates to. It is rather a discourse that tries to fit separate facts and intents into more general cultural and theatrical trends and to correlate them to existing concepts in order to produce a larger cultural map devoid of personal sentiment or subjectivism. *Do you think this critical stand has its place in the overall theatrical situation in Bulgaria or you rather think that this is my personal choice?*

AG — It is complex; I can try to speculate on the grounds of your position. The differentiations you draw remind me how it was pointed out to me recently at the university I attended in Berlin that 'theatre criticism' and 'performance analysis' are two different endeavors. Within the German context (and pretty much in general) they are regarded as separate fields with perfectly differentiated means and aims: the criticism belongs clearly to the system of journalism and is therefore part of the public debate on culture aimed at the general public. Its place in the media has been defined in a lasting manner. Whereas the so-called 'performance analysis' serves the purpose of the scientific research of historiography and theory in academic discourses and publications. In Bulgaria this differentiation does not work practically because of the different structure and functioning of the media ambiance and because of the specific features Theatre Criticism has acquired as an academic subject. After the democratic changes in 1989 and after theatre criticism rid itself of the ideological imperative, this median echelon of 'operative' or 'theatre criticism' did not manage to really transform itself and as a result two opposite flanks appeared: the first one a predominantly tabloid, in the best case 'reporter' writing on theatre in the broad media and the second one a quasi scholarly analysis in the cultural periodicals that cover also theatre and in the specialized magazines (a total of 4 to 5). This might be to some extent a reflection of society's stratification during this transition period. Now talking about theatre in the press serves mostly to a PR logic or to some lifestyle imagery. This resulted in specialized circles in a derogatory attitude towards the journalistic criticism. Even in Theatre Studies, considered as THE specialty which breed theatre critics, criticism is being situated not so much in the field of journalism but in academic discourse and in exercising a mostly hermeneutic analysis.

MM — However specialized cultural publications, which maintain an elitist discourse of analytical academic writing, also stimulate this type of critical attitude, which to a large extent is due to underestimating the possibilities for operative critical writing in the media.

AG — Indeed, a situation occurs when what is considered in, for example, the German context as 'performance analysis' means in Bulgaria 'theatre criticism'. Its social dimension remains to a large extent sealed and is confined to this particular choice of writer's behavior. The problem is that it does not create its own context and publicity. To answer your question, I understand your choice as: searching for the - probably for now - only opportunity for professional development and realization within the framework of the existing situation. *If we look at criticism as interconnected with performing arts practice and system, do you think that the latter shape their critics?*

MM — Theatrical practice in Bulgaria continues to be confined to the system of state-owned repertoire theatres.

Their financial backing has nothing to do with aesthetic quality or the audience they attract...

AG — This is already being changed. A new regulation issued by the Ministry of Culture will allot subsidies according to the number of tickets sold, which is a great prerequisite for turbo-capitalizing theatre...

## Miroslava Marianova & Angelina Georgieva

MM — Yes, attempts to reform are in progress, but the retrogressive system of organization is still active and it moulds the ambient. Operative criticism – namely a criticism functioning as a turnsole for quality and thence as a lever for positioning the event within the field of vision of the audience, the specialists and the financing institutions – would be impossible in the existing conditions. In this environment the legislative role of criticism, which is playing the role of curator in the art milieu, becomes impossible. It becomes rather a rare, decorative (in terms of superfluous) broach on the lapel of cultural processes doing very little practical work and having no direct bearing on the audience or financial context of the work. That is why it can afford to be elitist without condescending to the real processes of the creation and living of a performance, which however means that it deprives itself of real influence and therefore receives low social and economic recognition. *You dwell simultaneously in two theatrical systems – Bulgarian and German. What are in your opinion the differences in the function of criticism in the two countries?*

AG — I guess I already gave you a general idea. For me personally it is a challenge to find a place within the German cultural milieu. To write in it means to take part in it, although I am still not sure who I am speaking to and along with. It is interesting to track down how vigorously the meaning of terms and notions is shifting between the languages. I have to say that I become more aware how performing arts practices here change my personal requirements to and modus of critical writing and positioning. A simple case in point: the multiple forms of post-dramatic theatre, participatory theatre, performance- installations or contemporary dance etc, which are not present in the

*It is interesting to track down how vigorously the meaning of terms and notions is shifting between the languages.*

Bulgarian context but I follow in Berlin, completely go beyond the tools of hermeneutic analysis which is dominant where I come from because of the predominance of directors' dramatic theatre which demands its interpretative 'closed' reading. *In view of the internationalization of theatre production how do you relate to the mode 'Writers on the Move'?*

MM — I think that critical writing is at the same time national, international and transnational. Even within globalization, which is an indisputable fact, criticism is always formed within some sort of national milieu with its peculiarities, influences, social and media surroundings, its historical and aesthetic biography (which, of course, did not take place in the hermetically closed national cultures but rather in interaction with other cultures. An interaction which for some time has been evolving as an increasingly visible and constitutive.) However theatre discourse is international in its nature, even national theatre landscapes take shape within the process of incessant interchange, mutual influence, cross-checking with European and world trends, exchange of drama, directors and performing practices which are not purely national inventions. Critical perspective cannot be purely national. Even when you write about the national reception of a certain author or local manifestations of world trends you always step on the crosspoint of at least two cultures. And after all having in mind that the subject of humanitarian studies is the human as an universal matter in principle that makes theatre and writing about it supranational. If we narrow down the general speculations to the specific situation 'a Bulgarian critic is writing on the performance of an international company for a German magazine', the question facing me is which one of the three sides outweighs the other two... I think it is the context for which the criticism is being written. And although it happens again at the crosspoint of several cultures it seems to be engaged mostly with the socio-cultural milieu for which it is meant. *Do you agree with such an argument and in this sense what do you think is the role of criticism in contemporary society?*

AG — 'Engagement' I think is the key word. For me it signifies criticism does not exist independently but only in correlation with something with a certain context. It is difficult to speak in general terms; I can only speak of my personal engagement. It means exercising a civic and professional right to take part in discussing and in producing of cultural and symbolic capital in the performing arts field in reference to the values I stand for. It is also a very operative, technical understanding and writing is only one of its manifestations. That is why the need arose for establishing a NGO and in my activities as a 'cultural operator' with initiatives for educational projects and online platforms I also proceed from the position of a critic and from the understanding of criticism as an instrument to challenge things the way they exist at a given moment. For me the very exercise of a critical agency as a form of participation is increasingly important, with its attempts to carry out changes through different strategies of integration of the milieu, which go beyond the traditional media and formats (either through acquiring performative characteristics, curator functions or through mediator strategies for developing audiences, i.e. making forays into cultural-political tasks). *Do you have a vision of the role of criticism in the present-day situation?*

MM — I am mostly impressed by the fact that for some time now in the contemporary culture any writing which considers itself critical became possible. There are no criteria, norms or absolute truths. As a result of this, any act that deems itself art actually becomes art and any critical interaction with it acquired the right to exist. Thus criticism becomes situational, frivolous, not evaluative enough (because it has nothing to correlate to), essayist, deprofessionalized, because anybody can state an opinion with the pretention of criticizing. It seems to me that in the conditions of a financial crisis following a hedonistic lifestyle on credit and financial, ethical and aesthetic relativism, the pendulum is swinging back and people need more certain and 'reliable' things. Within the context of vital economic and social problems in this dynamic world of quick moves, quick choices and quick changes no one can allot redundant financial, emotional, intellectual or time resources to listen to various interpretations and personal contentions which shamelessly encumber the public space. Therefore criticism should undertake certain commitments, should become more effective and socially engaged, should go back to its professional more objective basis, should commit to a stand in order to be able to inform, educate and orientate people in the huge space of cultural events...

AG — I liked the degree of unpredictability in this Q&A session and the fact that at the end some categorical stands delineating trajectories of thought around criticism came out. Thank you for that, to be continued... :)

MM — I thank you for the invitation to have this talk. It was both useful and pleasant. :)

Translated (Bulgarian) by Jechka Georgieva.



## Human Resources I

# PORTRAIT OF THE YOUNG CRITIC

I Andreea Chindriș

BEING A CRITIC IS TRYING, BUT BEING A YOUNG CRITIC IS WORSE. A SURVEY OF EXISTING CONDITIONS AND QUESTIONS REGARDING THIS NEWLY EMERGING SPECIES.

How often do you hear children answer the question: “What do you want to do when you grow up?” with “Theatre critic”? Still, we should try to think about the fact that the job of theatre critic is a normal one. If we do so, we should take a look at the ‘rules’ of human resources, where people talk about the positive effects of employing young people.

*Postulate: Young people are ambitious, enthusiastic and hard-working. They do not refuse to take on huge workloads and take difficult work to be a challenge. They are very creative and can invent new ideas or easier ways to do their jobs.<sup>1</sup>*

To begin with, they are thrilled to work more than the amount given and a difficult task puts them to work, rather than scaring them. Enthusiasm is also an important feature of youth, and young critics are eager to see more and to acknowledge information. Unlike experienced critics, they also have more patience when it comes to performance. Moreover, they are acutely receptive and open to learning from any occasion. The passing of time brings experience tempered with a certain distance, while young critics still have the energy and openness to consider a bad performance to be a good way to learn more about doing theatre.

*Young critics still have the energy and openness to consider a bad performance to be a good way to learn more about doing theatre.*

*Postulate: Young people can cope easily with any new technological innovation, any new dramatic changes in an organization’s strategy.<sup>2</sup>*

Being raised in a world where drinking coffee in the morning takes place while surfing the Internet, it is normal for them to also spread information through this medium, since blogs, Internet sites and online platforms offer visibility and real, immediate contact with their readers. We should also mention the fact that many young critics are also freelancers and write once in a while for different publications, since getting a full-time steady job with one publication is rather difficult.

Further on, we shall try to answer some questions in respect of young critics that constantly crop up when it comes to theatre criticism. The explanations are not final, so feel free to disagree.

*For whom is the critic responsible?*

- a) Himself
- b) The performance and the artists
- c) The reader
- d) The editor

The above question is one that concerns more the critic her/himself, not the reader in particular. The presence of different mediators will make the job more difficult, since the message must be understood by them all without altering its content and form. One needs to practice a lot to acquire the proper skills to do this. The young critic might see them as levels s/he should get through separately, but as time passes will have a more organic view about this issue, in the sense that s/he will find her/his own voice.

*Does the critic have to think about the reader?*

- a) Yes
- b) No.

When the critic sits in the darkness of the theatre, s/he does so next to spectators who may not be specialists in this domain. Accordingly, when s/he gets home s/he should keep the same public in mind, despite sitting alone in front of the computer. Theatre itself is related to people and criticism should do the same.

*Should the critic be a solitary person?*

- a) Yes, that way s/he will keep her/his distance from artists
- b) No, s/he should also know the artists personally.

The above question refers to the relationship between friendship and work. As the critic gets closer to this medium, s/he will get to know the artists and lose ‘objectivity’ (by this we mean the safe distance between stage and theatre seats). On the other hand, this gives the young critic the chance to see things on the other side: the starting point of a performance (not only the result), the hard work, and the importance of a team. It might be a good exercise, especially for those who do not come from theatre studies and haven’t the proper inside perspective. If this happens, writing a review about that performance becomes a thing one should consider before doing it.

*Should the critic talk about the context in which the performance takes place?*

- a) Yes, I find that helpful;
- b) No, I am interested only in the performance.

A young theatre critic grows at the same time as a generation of young artists that s/he can closely observe. In this case, the critic grows within this context and sees the medium in which the artists evolve, their trajectories, and the changes that they go through. At the same time as s/he tries to put her/his knowledge into an article, the critic should make it sound friendly, without altering the quality of what s/he has to say. Writing reviews that are appealing to readers will keep them interested and curious. Once they have the basic information given in a pleasant way, it is possible that the readers will continue to be interested in that particular subject.

The contemporary young theatre critic mirrors the state of theatre. Accordingly, the way these young critics are treated by publications, festivals and theatres shows how open these media are to change and new voices. This is another reason why words such as interdisciplinary, freedom of speech, community, social projects, and political context are constantly present in their vocabulary, as these young critics try to integrate them in the critical discourse, and, conversely, put theatre performances in a larger context.

1. *Employing Old vs. Young*, <http://goo.gl/xIFek>

2. *Ibid.*

# A CRITICAL MIND IN THE TIME OF THE TABLOID

Anette Therese Pettersen I



jp.co.de, production by Árpád Schilling staged during Prague Quadriennale, photo by Máté Tóth Ridovics © Kretakör

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A CRITIC TODAY? HOW CAN ONE ESCAPE THE TIME PRESSURE, DEVELOP A SINGULARITY, BE CRITICAL BUT NOT CYNICAL, AND REMAIN A WRITER WHEN THE PROFESSION HAS EVOLVED?

As a critic working for a daily paper, one always works to a strict deadline. Some critics have to finish their text within an hour – sometimes even less – after the performance has ended. Others have the luxury of handing in the text the next day, or maybe even as much as two days later. Time and space are becoming more and more of a luxury in this profession. The economic side of this profession is of course rather challenging as well, but as both deadlines and space grow shorter, time becomes something of the essence: time to research, think and write for the critic, and time to read and digest for the reader. Both parties can be said to be critical minds, and what is becoming more and more important is the time to think, rethink and rethink yet again. The American playwright Gary Indiana once said in an interview, “If you make a play about human nature you have to deal with everyone’s human nature, rather than just the villains or the good guys.”<sup>1</sup> What Indiana is talking about here in part is the need to stay clear of tabloid thinking rather than the tabloid format.

## Difference and Diversity

We, the diverse assembly of critics, work under very different conditions. We tend to have different backgrounds and different preferences when it comes to themes, aesthetics and form. We see the same performances but still write totally different texts about them afterwards. We judge them differently and retell them differently. The performances trigger us in different ways. Still, we are all critics within the same field, and the multitude of our voices is what makes it interesting not only to see a performance, but also to read how someone else experienced it, what sort of conversations they launch on behalf of the performance.

A portrait of a critic includes a person who has a critical attitude towards him- or herself as well as to the arts. Being a critic isn’t just about being critical.

*Very few things, including art, are just ‘good’ or ‘bad’.*

I find it even more important to be open, and generous. It’s about avoiding the tabloid, the black and white of the pro’s and con’s. Very few things, including art, are just ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

## Critical, but not cynical

How to be critical without being cynical and open without being naïve? Those are among the critic’s challenges. Being critical doesn’t mean being cynical or negative, it’s about asking questions and at the same time keeping an open mind. The critic can be the link that connects the performance with its audience. This means first and foremost not judging a performance or retelling a plot, but trying to shed some light on it, analysing and opening up a performance, or any other work of art, and in so doing giving room for several interpretations.

Sometimes one has to force oneself to be critical, not just of the artwork itself, but of one’s ways of thinking. What is it that makes us like or not like something? Why does Nora appear ‘stupid’? What are the elements that make a particular dance performance strike one as somewhat clichéd? What is it in a performance that makes one crave for more or, quite the opposite, long for the end?

## The Critic’s expanding Role

Traditionally, there have been two main groups of critics: the academic critic and the tabloid critic. Today most critics have an additional income of some sort. And as the spaces/sources/means of publication of reviews increase, so does the role of the critic – as well as the way we write. There’s the artist-gone-critic, the academic critic writing within the more tabloid setting, the curator-slash-critic, and many more. This means that critics and their different takes on both artwork and the world are becoming more diverse, as are the different formats of their critiques.

## Rancière

As implied in the title of this text, I see a need for a critical mind and a critical way of thinking regarding not only the arts, but several aspects of daily life as well.

Some weeks after returning from the gathering in Prague I attended a series of lectures at an art space in Oslo (Kunsthall Oslo). Four visual artists had organized a summer school for a group of young people for the second year in a row. Last summer it was held in the woods, and this summer coastal life was the theme. The name of the project is *Parallel Action* and its organizers describe their project as investigating “institutional critique as a genre and combin[ing] performative strategies with anti movement history to create a platform for counter strategy within the closed perimetry of participants.”<sup>2</sup> A practice much like that of the critic. And just like the gathering of critics in Prague, these artists had Jacques Rancière as their inspiration and starting point. Not *The Emancipated Spectator*, but rather *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. They discussed questions such as how to organize a learning situation in a different, less hierarchical, way than we do in our contemporary education system. The project has some aspects that overlap with the performance shown at PQ this year, namely, the first part of Kretakör’s *Crisis Trilogy*. Both projects show a will to explore and test boundaries and a will to be open, to question given structures, and to search for alternative options. Such art projects run the same risks of becoming introverted as the critic does in his/her job, but the will to go beyond the tabloid way of thinking is at least there.

1. INDIANA Gary, ‘Interview with Gary Indiana by Betsy Sussler’ (*Bomb Magazine Interview*), in *Last seen entering the Biltmore*, *Semiotext(e)*, 2010, p. 188

2. <http://goo.gl/qWAlf> (last read on 22.08.2011)

## Statement I

## ON THE INDEPENDENCE OF THEATRE

*Paradoxes of the emancipated critic*

THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE THEATRE CRITIC IS FRAUGHT WITH UNEASE... MOREOVER, IS IT IN ITSELF EVEN DESIRABLE? TRAPPED BETWEEN THE INCREASING DIVERSIFICATION OF ITS MISSION, MAINTAINING CONTACT WITH THEATRICAL CIRCLES AND A NEED FOR OBJECTIVITY, THE CRITIC'S ROOM FOR MANOEUVRE IS CURTAILED.

Inspired by the thoughts of Jacques Rancière about the emancipated spectator, I will endeavor to elaborate on the idea of the emancipated critic, i.e. the idea of a desirable twofold emancipation of the theatre critic. Rancière's discussions on the emancipated spectator are based on the thesis that pure viewing is a bad thing because viewing is the opposite of knowing, the opposite of doing – the one who views remains motionless in his seat, he doesn't intervene. Departing from this thought, Rancière, at first glance paradoxically, advocates a theatre without spectators – a theatre where the spectator ceases to be a viewer, where he (the former onlooker) becomes a participant and not only a passive viewer. Thereupon he hypothesizes a concept of the emancipated spectator, which alludes to a transformation of the understanding of the word 'viewing', during which passivity becomes activity: "It is not necessary to transform the viewer into an actor. We only need to admit that every viewer is also an actor." Analogously to Rancière's thoughts I will elaborate the idea of an emancipated critic, a critic who is not fully isolated from making theatre, who is neither an outsider nor a loner, but rather an active interpreter and a living participant in the process of the advancement of a particular theatre environment.

The respected Serbian theatrologist and theatre critic Jovan Hristić based his definition of a theatre critic on the critic's act of viewing: "A theatre critic is one who, on the stage of life, plays the spectator whose main role is to view." A critic is, to begin with, an (emancipated) spectator for whom active viewing is a way of being. Furthermore I believe that a critic has to undergo another level of emancipation to become an emancipated critic. This means he must be freed from the role that is generally assigned to him, of *objective viewer*, a viewer who evaluates theatre from the outside, as an outsider, not getting involved in the process

*When a critic comes into direct communication with authors who are the subject of his/her critique, he is on a sure way of losing his objectivity.*

of creating theatre. I consider utopian such claims to a critic's absolute objectivity and independence. No matter how much the critic is trying to stay apart, it is unavoidable that at least some contact with the authors applies to him, through some kind of inclusion in the theatre environment – critics and authors live in the same world, after all. When a critic comes into direct communication with authors who are the subject of his/her critique, he is on a sure way of losing his objectivity. And if the bond between the critic and author becomes deeper, more intimate, it is obvious what terrible fate will befall the requisite independence and objectivity.

This questioning of the critic's common claim to independence should not be understood to imply that a critic should become a part of the centre of power, nor should it be inferred that I am against the idea of independence of critique. On the contrary, I deem this independence to be most desirable, and I believe that one should strive for it; but I consider it to be a romanticized and improbable claim. Therefore I believe it is important to pursue the critic's emancipation, despite the implied paradox, that an emancipated critic is one who is at the same time objective and subjective, dependent and independent, an insider and an outsider, a spectator and an actor. An appropriate analogy would be the lotus blossom – a symbol of spiritual perfection in the East – , which is simultaneously a metaphor of presence and absence, of life *in* the world but at the same time detachment *from* it.

Many believe that a critic should not – can not – be engaged in the process of creation to remain objective. But my questions are: how can one be objective *from the outside*? How can one understand substantially, deeply, an artwork without accessing it, without approaching it, that is to say, from a distance?

I agree with the Croatian theatre critic Dubravka Vrgoč who wrote: "Critics and artists together have to find ways to redefine theatre in our difficult times..."

Because theatre is neither a matter of the past nor an empty space waiting to be filled, critics and artists are responsible for both the successes and failures of theatre... Theatre critique has to be more than a game in which the critic distinguishes the 'good' from the 'bad.' Accordingly, I am convinced that for a critic to truly influence theatre production, which is in essence one of the more important functions of theatre critique – its involvement in *shaping* theatre – he needs to directly *act*, to *participate* in the production, to try to change its circumstances. By this I mean that a critic should be a dramaturge, an advisor in shaping the repertoire of a theatre, a selector of festivals, curator of exhibitions etc. – because he is, by definition, a connoisseur of the circumstances of theatre-making and possesses a subtle appreciation of the needs of a certain culture. From that vantage point it is possible to understand an emancipated critic as an author, analogously to Rancière's idea of the spectator – namely that, in the same way that every viewer is at the same time also an actor, so is every (emancipated) critic also an author. But this also entails the inevitable loss of independence – which is fundamental for the critic. This, again, is the critic's great paradox.

If a critic decides to stand apart after all – to not get involved in the creation of theatre – if he tries to be an objective observer of art, his function, with regard to his influence on theatre, cannot be significant – not only because of the absence of concrete decisions, which an engaged critic would otherwise make, but also because of a narrowing of reach and 'visibility' in society, limiting possibilities for the growth of prestige and influence. I affirm this on the basis of my own experience as a critic in a daily, who, after several years of 'pure' writing, started to engage in secondary critique work – e.g. selection of theatre festivals, membership in juries, moderation of round tables, panel discussions, etc. It is clear that, for the impact of his written word to grow, the critic should be more present for his public, more visible through the pursuit of other public jobs, similar to the 'secondary' occupations just mentioned, occupations which, no doubt, influence the enrichment of his notion of theatre and therefore also deepen the value of his writing. On the other hand, the more a critic takes part in public life, becoming more influential, visible, moving around theatre people (becoming one of them), the more he is becoming a part of the system, the more his independence is weakened. Hence, the paradox of the critic – to be objective, he needs to be an outsider, to stay apart, to avoid mingling with creators; but to fulfil the critic's function of influencing the formation of theatre life he also needs to be an insider. Our critic needs to be the most dexterous of dancers, a tight ropewalker.

And there is also the problem of the material aspect of the critic's profession. To stay



# THE CRITIQUE

| Ana Tasić

independent while making judgments, the critic has to be economically self-sufficient, he has to make his living from something. And in these times of trivialization of public discourse, spectacularization and banalization of media space, it is not easy to live from writing serious, critical, analytical texts. We live in a time where media survival depends on its success in the market. What doesn't sell is soon discontinued, in most cases. And sales are undoubtedly not boosted by the seriousness of critical texts (at least not in Serbia) – unlike more comestible news with their glossy colour pages, and texts whose flavour lies in the vulgar belabouring of details from public life. In that sense, to the editors who are forced to prioritize sales and market success, critique is not exactly an attractive commodity. In other words, one cannot survive by writing only critiques – a quandary which, by necessity, obliges the critic to take secondary jobs to secure their livelihood. As a critic gains prestige, various theatre institutions may invite him/her to cooperate with them – on festival programmes, or to edit bulletins and catalogues, to moderate round tables, to sit on juries at festivals or for private institutions, etc. In order to survive, the critic is more or less forced to accept such jobs; and when he does he is on an even surer road to losing his independence.

The purpose of this text is not to lessen doubts or ease the conscience of critics who undertake secondary jobs in the milieu of Serbian theatre life, or who occasionally communicate with artists; who are constantly reassessing their position as objective/subjective spectators and quietly mourning the independence which they enjoyed as rookies of the profession. I reiterate that I don't believe independence to be undesirable; nor is it my intent to raise doubts as to the independence of the critic. On the contrary, independence outsider ethos are particularly desirable conditions which the critic should aim for. But I believe that they are simply not possible in reality. That is why I advocate the concept of an emancipated critic, a critic who functions in the real world, a critic-acrobat who lives and works in an ambiguous and precarious balance.

*Translated (Serbian) by Tatjana Marčić.*

| Commitment

# THE CRITICAL SPIRIT: A STANCE TO DEVELOP

*Olivier Hespel* |

WHAT IS THE CRITIC'S PLACE? WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE CRITIC TODAY, AT THE INTERSECTION OF AUDIENCES, ARTISTS/PERFORMERS, AND CULTURAL ORGANIZERS? TAKING A STAND...

I've never believed in the 'superior' critic, the privileged, because knowledgeable, interpreter of a work, the interpreter above all others because s/he judges from the heights of her/his 'expert' status. Nor have I believed in the 'pure' critic, a judge who is honest and uninfluenced because s/he does not hobnob with artists in order to be able to gauge their work more 'freely'. I have never believed in this elitist, if not 'aristocratic', dual image. I believe more in the critic as an attitude, that of being critical. I believe more in the critic as a means of perceiving, thinking about, and transmitting a certain reality, the reality that this person perceives.

All in all, it is not so much the art critic as her/his critical mind that interests me, a critical spirit that makes her/him a committed player in the art world and society alike: committed to the readability/traceability, according to her/his own viewpoints, of contemporary creation; committed as well to defending a certain way of thinking, of challenging the meaning and essence of things.

This twofold commitment, I believe, is what enables this trade to continue to play a role today, to recover importance, for the 'traditional' places in which critics can express themselves are becoming increasingly narrow. The media largely prefer interviews and announcements, when they haven't given up speaking about certain sectors altogether: The performing arts have practically disappeared from many publications and audiovisual programmes catering to broad audiences. What remains outside the ghetto of specialized magazines, personal blogs, and other niches?

*What remains outside the ghetto of specialized magazines, personal blogs, and other niches?*

This performing arts desertification in the media must be turned into a driving force. We must reach out to the three pillars of this sector, i.e., artists/performers, programmers, and audiences. We must come up with a new equation, for the good of the whole, to put the performing arts back on centre stage, more in the middle of the cultural village.

An e-critic might be essential for this approach as a possible way to link these three pillars. An e-critic has an ability, that of knowing how to put discourse (with a slightly personal slant) together from critical thinking. S/he has the true power of speech and criticism, a power that can be shared. A power to share with the performers themselves, to bolster their ability to talk about their approaches, their work, even, in so doing, to bolster their creativity. A power to share with programmers, to support their awareness-raising and mediation work, even to advise or reassure them as to their programming choices. A power to share with the audiences, to let them give free rein to their curiosity about contemporary creation; to hone their ability to look at, criticize, and adopt this same creation. Even to develop their critical spirit (a 'citizen's tool' if there ever was one)!

Sharing... but how? It is up to each of us to be inventive, to build with the companies, venues, and associations according to their desires, needs, and possible lacks.

Such an approach does not take away from the critic's critical role *per se* at all. It even enriches it, by broadening the e-critic's viewpoints. It lets the e-critic see the sector more fully; it gives the e-critic a more tangible grasp of the reality specific to each of these three pillars. Such an approach is also compatible with media commitment. Ethics, integrity, and honesty are linked to the person and are not measured by the possibly plural number of fields in which this person is active. Finally, it seems to me that such an approach puts criticism back at the heart of what gives it life, i.e., the performing arts and, more broadly, society; thankfully destroys any claims it might have to be a 'master of (right) thinking'; and positions it where it is aptly suited for use as a tool or stimulus of thought and expression for each person and by oneself.

*Translated (French) by Gabrielle Leyden.*

## Statistics I

# A GROUP I

THE GROUP OF WRITERS THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE PRESENT PUBLICATION COULD BE CONSIDERED AS A REPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF THE EUROPEAN CRITIC'S AVERAGE CONDITION. THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONNAIRE IS A WAY TO EXPLORE THE IDENTITY OF THIS 'EXEMPLARY' GROUP, FROM DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW: STATISTICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, ECONOMICAL, SOCIAL, MORAL... ENLIGHTENING.

1) Are you F or M?

F : 80% M : 20%

2) Are you over 30?

YES : 85% NO : 15%

3) Do you have children?

YES : 25% NO : 75%

4) What did you study?

Theatre studies literature performance studies history journalism languages  
philosophy psychology dance studies political sciences pedagogy art history  
microelectronics

5) Are you politically engaged?

YES : 35% NO : 65%

6) Where do you stand politically?

LEFT : 70% RIGHT : 5% IN BETWEEN : 10% OTHER : 15%

7) Do you understand how the global economy works?

YES : 15% NO : 55% IN PROGRESS : 30%

8) Are you religious?

YES : 20% NO : 60% A KIND OF : 20%

9) Are you a smoker?

YES : 40% NO : 60%

10) Are you a drinker?

YES : 90% NO : 10%

11) Do you live in a big city?

YES : 90% NO : 10%

12) Do you know your neighbours?

YES : 45% NO/NOT SO WELL : 65%

13) Do you make friends on Facebook?

YES : 50% NO : 50%

14) What is the last book that you read/you are reading?

Satanic verses Des accessoires pour le paradis Veké 53 Ways of world making On violence  
Fernando Pessoa's poems Freedom la nascita della tragedia the fall of Constantinople  
Stanislovsky Map and territory Tokio cancelled Der Alte König in seinem Exil  
Contes merveilleux Desolation angel Elementary particles Hall: the raw shark texts  
Changes dynamics in Slovene theatre of the 20th century Fowler's the Magician and Digital Performance  
Anthology of texts about contemporary German music

15) What was the last critique you wrote about?

About a very lousy theatre festival in Belgrade, Theatre festival Jiraskov Hronav, Robert Wilson's Katya Kabanova, Impulse theatre festival, A silent shot, Bo Cerpelovs Garmina, Prague Quadriennial, Festival Sterijino pozarje in Novi Sad, Jean Francois Peyret: Re:Walden, Toutes nos meries sont depressives (Cie Chai Chai), Pablo Bronstein's Fountain piece, Space Workshop, the Frankenstein project by Konrad Mundrucor, A festival of Arab art in London, the Finnish performance group Oblivio

16) At what age did you write your first review?

Average age : 21 years old

17) Who is your favourite theatre director/choreographer?

Miroslav Krobet, Marina Abramovic, Silvio Purovate, Peter Brook, Rodrigo Garcia, C. Marthaler, Peter Selvar, Tim Etchell, Tim Crouch, Felix Bonetti, Gadin Stoev, Pino Borch, Jan Klatz, Barbara Wysocka, Jerty Janocki, Heiner Goebbels, Frank Castorf, Nicolas Stemmann, R. Pollesch, Jan Lauwers, Andras Urban.

18) How often do you go to the theatre?

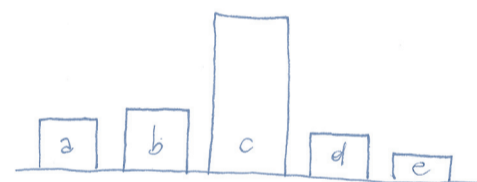
Average : 10 times a month

19) Are you a freelancer?

YES : 85% NO : 15%

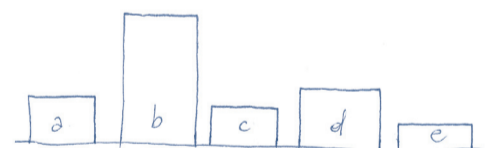
20) Do you mostly write for:

- Prestige, reputation
- Free tickets
- Passion
- Money
- Other



21) As a critic do you consider yourself as a:

- Interpreter
- Emancipated spectator
- Judge
- Storyteller
- Other



22) Why is a critic still important in your opinion?

Please use keywords.

IMAGINATION freedom of speech FEEDBACK FOR THE ARTIST reflection  
memory to mediate art and audiences curiosity  
CRITICAL THINKING STANDS FOR A STILL-ALIVE INTELLECTUAL ATTITUDE  
to facilitate an active relationship between the theatre  
institution, artist and audiences TO MAKE PUBLIC  
TO MAKE OPINIONS to inform A CRITIC CREATES TIME AND  
TIME IS IMPORTANT

23) While writing do you think about the reader?

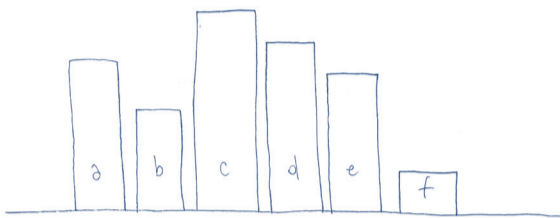
YES : 80% NO : 5% IN BETWEEN : 15%

# PORTRAIT

## I Elena Basteri

24) The reader you most care for is:

- a) Director/Artists
- b) Editor
- c) The average reader
- d) Your colleagues
- e) Yourself
- f) Other



25) Did you ever feel bored by the language of the critique?

YES: 70% NO: 30%

26) Have you ever fallen in love with an actor/actress?

YES: 80% NO: 20%

27) Have you ever felt alone in the theatre?

YES: 85% NO: 15%

28) Have you ever been (violently) attacked for something you wrote?

YES: 65% NO: 35%

29) Has anybody ever tried to bribe you to write a favorable review?

YES: 50% NO: 50%

30) Do you consider yourself free in your practice of writing?

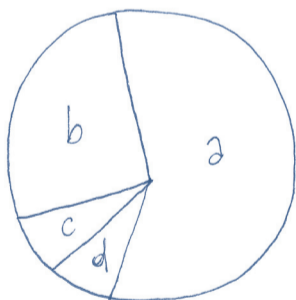
YES: 70% NO: 30%

31) Do you believe in the possibility of writing collectively?

YES: 55% NO: 45%

32) In an average month how many euros would you earn from your writings and reviews?

- a) from 0 to 100
- b) from 100 to 300
- c) from 300 to 600
- d) from 600 to 1000



33) Which other activities do you practice in order to earn your living?

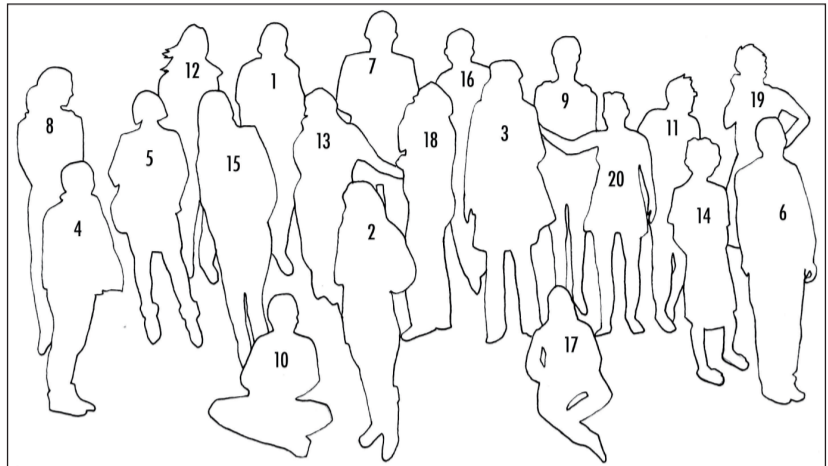
Editor Teaching Phd Scholarship Curator Translation Dramaturg others...

34) Have you ever thought to stop writing reviews?

YES: 50% NO: 50%

35) How do you evaluate the situation of critique in your country in a scale from 1 (very bad) to ten (excellent)?

EUROPEAN AVERAGE: 4,5



- ① PRIMOZ JESENKO ② METTE GARFIELD MORTENJEN ③ ANNA BURZEJSKA
- ④ ANETTE PETERSEN ⑤ ELENA BASTERI ⑥ VLADIMIR MIKULKA ⑦ KARL SVANTESSON
- ⑧ PAULINE DE LA BOULAYE ⑨ ANDREEA CHINDRI ⑩ SERGIO LO GATTO
- ⑪ CYRIL THOMAS ⑫ MIROSLAVA MARIYANOVA ⑬ PILVI PORKKOLA
- ⑭ ANDREA RÁDAI ⑮ INGA FRIDRIHSONE ⑯ OLIVIER HESPEL
- ⑰ ANA TASIĆ ⑱ ANGELINA GEORGIEVA ⑲ ANNA TEUWEN
- ⑳ DIANA DAMIAN

36) Does your work involve travel?

YES: 60% NO: 40%

37) What would be the positive effects of travelling as a critic?

Please use keywords.

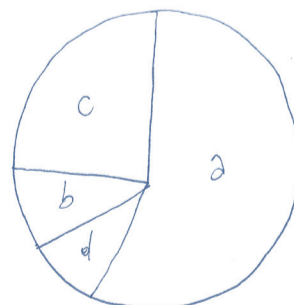
STRANGERS MEET STRANGERS enriching the experience MAKING CONNECTIONS AND BE LESS ALONE cultural shock POSSIBILITY OF A DISTANCE (PSYCHOLOGICAL, GEOGRAPHIC, INTELLECTUAL) to refresh the mind TO QUESTION YOUR REFERENTIAL FRAME Discover new artists WRITING DIFFERENTLY to be closer to the real theatre life than to your own library and imagination to challenge global issues COMPETENCES

38) Do you think your life is stressful?

YES: 75% NO: 25%

39) For the future you like more:

- a) Money
- b) Visibility
- c) Mobility
- d) Other



40) Do you generally consider yourself to be a happy person?

YES: 70% UP AND DOWN: 30%

Graphics: Concetta Gentile.



## Methodology I

## THE CRITIC AS WITNESSING EYE

*Mobility as an opportunity for a useful and independent testimony*

I Sergio Lo Gatto

SERGIO LO GATTO ADVOCATES THAT IN THIS DAY AND AGE A CRITIC'S MOBILITY ISN'T MERELY A MATTER OF COMFORT, BUT ONE, WHICH RENDERS THEIR ACCOUNT RELEVANT.

The 'New History' movement, drawing from the scientific method, steps beyond preconceived ideological notions in the search for an independent objectivity. The new historian analyses the conditions in which the recording of facts can become a science, scouring the documents themselves for proof of their authenticity and acquiring a fundamental autonomy to capture a moment, a flow, a phenomenon. Thus an additional responsibility enters into play, along with a capacity for discernment which easily could be called the *critical mind or spirit*, an element which could be isolated thanks to the intensely scientific opportunity offered by the Writers on the Move experience.

The analyses of economic and political conditions of different geographical areas involved in the project highlighted the broad variety of roles filled by criticism from one country to another. In some cases the theatre system maintains a market structure where the contact between an artistic product and its consumers requires validation by a professional, namely the critic. The idea of assigning to the critic the supplementary function as witness arises from the fact that critics in Italy have almost completely lost their role in the appraisal of theatre system products. Italy's contemporary system is a highly bulimic production and distribution scheme whereby the only way to hold the interest of the public and institutions is to continually offer *new* material. If the impossibility of evolution and the tendency to be crushed by tradition are highly delicate elements for a theatre system, then the model that instantly devours all that is *new* is equally harmful, for it ends up weakening the power of expression. In the case of Italy, the urge to continually create and present new proposals runs up against the lack of room for production and dissemination needed for an experiment to become truly free and affirm itself as a work of research – thus making a distinction between two notions: between *new* and *culturally relevant*. Today's criticism has had to conjoin this distinction with a pure aesthetic judgement in order to find its way in an artistic panorama which is the mirror of a contemporary world in continuous change. When theatre becomes discourse – interrogating its own means of expression beyond all self-referencing, it gives space to launch a dialogue as a social fact and thus move one step closer to understanding it. In this sense theatre becomes both a document produced by a society undergoing change and an element that influences this very change.

The historian applies a critical lens to observe documents of the past and facts of the present, a lens that serves to recognize the value of scientific elements. Likewise, the critic is able to observe, witness and interrogate the theatrical event as an organic element of a society's cultural discourse. Nonetheless,

*The activity of theatre critic cannot be divorced from the confrontation with his/her own counterparts and with the artists.*

the function of this similarity is primarily rhetorical because the historian analyses elements that are the direct products of life experienced, whereas critics apply their reasoning to elements that are of an aesthetic nature, which by definition require criteria that are relative, closely linked to various cultural contexts. Since the critic as eyewitness constitutes a true professionalism, the critic's area of research must be redefined. Freedom of expression undoubtedly renders the *critical form of testimony* independent and objective. However it is the maturity and experience of the critic directly on site that guarantees its value and authenticity. The activity of theatre critic cannot be divorced from the confrontation with his/her own counterparts and with the artists. For without this confrontation it runs the risk of distorting the act of observation and reasoning, becoming guilty of the same ingenuity that many critics decry in the work of certain artists. And here is where mobility becomes particularly useful. Many countries, and Italy is a glaring example, present an extremely fragmented cultural picture. The particularities of the different territories become entrenched

and make it hard to achieve a broad overview. Talking or writing about the theatre thus calls for an extended enquiry that transcends territorial limits, moves along a network of collaboration and dialogue which guarantee that the critic can rely on efficient tools. The need for true mobility becomes even more obvious in the European context: just as there is not just one theatre, in the same way there is not just one Europe. Faced with profound contradictions and distances in the economic, social and political realms, the role of the critic-eyewitness borrows from anthropology's need to navigate, in first person, through the environment in which s/he works. From the historian it borrows the scientific method which adopts precisely this analysis in the field to confirm the validity of certain data, an incontrovertible characteristic because it makes it possible to articulate a vision.<sup>1</sup>

A constant and ongoing contact between professionals from different countries energizes the process, counterbalancing the relation with the territory: no longer limited to mere observation but progressing towards argumentation and questioning, in a word moving towards criticism. Mobility thus becomes the opportunity to produce true documents, genuine testimonies that are able to build a panorama of themes and expressive modes which will come to define the general context precisely because of their particularity.

A way of seeing that is emancipated and open does not erase territoriality, but sees it in the light of concrete elements that guarantee a cognitive valence, a key step by which a testimony brings to light and discusses the cultural relevance of an artistic product. And herein lies the essence of the critic's work.

Translated (Italian) by Gail Fagen.

1. The book *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion*, (KELLEHER J., RIDOUT N., Routledge, 2006) is an editorial project that explores this potential. Six critics, each coming from a different area of Europe, discuss the possibility to sketch a profile of contemporary European 'theatres' based on experience 'in the field' with forms of performance outside their own culture.

# THE LANGUAGE OF FAITH?

*From Sub Rosa through Smoke to Untitled:  
an idiosyncratic journey via dance towards self-criticism.*

Karl Svantasson I

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF DANCE? KARL SVANTESSON REFLECTS UPON BEING SPIRITED DOWN MEMORY LANE THANKS TO A PERFORMANCE BY JOSEF NADJ, AND ENDING UP ON A VOYAGE THAT LITERALLY CAUSED HIM TO BLACKOUT.

And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
And what you own is what you do not own  
And where you are is where you are not

T. S. Eliot, *East Coker III, Four Quartets*

I'm standing in the hot closed box 15 in front of a window at the Intersection, part of the Prague Quadriennale 2011. Or is it just fog? My rucksack is getting heavy. Pressing me down. Am I alone? Hard heartbeat. The sound of AC. No, there are other people around. But do I feel forlorn? My eyes stir through the dark on something big headless, black, moving silently and threatening from one corner to the other. What is faith and how does it emerge? Do we know what overcame us?

*What is faith and how does it emerge?*

*Do we know what overcame us?*

It was 1995 and I had finally learned what Einstein meant in practise. There was a fire on stage, lit by the poet, danced by Yvan Auzoley, who was standing next to his bench quoting Neruda and pointing directions with his huge fingers, moving nowhere. The fire was enigmatic, Rene Aubrys guitar echoed in the back and something, suddenly got to me from within, a strange feeling of transcending meanings and platforms of ethics not yet to come. I was awarded time and had to do something. I was awarded languages I did not speak and then the poet started dancing away, acting a bird, flawless, white. Music. Shifting. Me in Naos. Leafing cells of the soul. Now 14 Cullberg ballet dancers were becoming birds.

Carolyn Carlson's *Sub Rosa*<sup>1</sup> developed into the point of departure for my optimism on arbitrariness. *Sub Rosa* taught me how we have to invoke ourselves with the poetry of nature every day, so well expressed in the creative relationship between improvisation and method, not to get stuck in fixed positions, lured prejudices and the malice of vanity. But this piece, by focusing on the complex individuality of the dancers, also made me aware of how different the interpretation of life could and should be, for everyone involved with themselves and others. For everyone involved.

I then stumble upon how Niklas Ek left Sylvie Guillem in Mats Ek's dance-video *Smoke*<sup>2</sup> (1995). He got angry, started spinning and went through the wall. Disappeared. I just sat there, in front of the little TV-set at the university library and felt that he was truly gone, looking around, worried. And then Guillem started dancing her bright, painful longing *rite de passage* with hands and feet



Photo by Karin Blomquist.

always shaping, sweeping, asking: where are you, when do you come home, why did you go? Questions that then change into anger, maturity and pregnancy. Later that night I wrote my first stumbling try-out on dance and how its universal language, if there is one, could change our attitudes towards life and make us more aware of ourselves.

When Nikolas Eke enters the room again, the world has changed. A child has been born. Guillem says hello by taking of Eks hat. It's filled with smoke. The fire erased. Peace?

In the box it's getting hard and heavy to breathe. The window, that separated me from them in there, is gone. I'm standing inside a small room with Paul Celan (Josef Nadj) and Ilana Shmueli (Anne-Sophie Lancelin). No one else is there and I'm thinking about all the people I know that love each other. She has been sweeping the floor just as my grandmother performed, slowly, concentrated while he has been trying to scrape a house on the wall with a huge yellow pen, or was it a knife? Then comes the lion in the wall, an open hatch. Light from behind, a magical glance on something truly personal and yet universal. My grandfather collected those out of wood and my favourite was the lion and now it's here. Nadj's pieces all seem to arise from a notion of something broken, needing completeness and *Untitled*<sup>3</sup> is very intimate but also very violent in the collected energy that arises from the simplification of acting rites. My heart is now outside my body and for the first time I dare to ask myself the question that has been there the whole time, is this death? When I do not feel my legs anymore a wax candle is lit and starts to drip on itself, a kind of creating circle, a closed gate. I immediately then start to think that I'm about to lose my mind, there is a tunnel of darkness between the light and me, the sound of hot wax dripping while the box becomes a box in another box and that box becomes a box in another box. Then it's all fog.

Josef Nadj has been creating his own cosmology for over 20 years now. As has Carlson and Ek. But Nadj is digging another soil, in a sense a much darker one and *Untitled* is untitled because there is no name for the nameless and this is what Nadj is digging in. The core and its earthly surroundings. Life lights towards death's doors. From childhood drawings to old aged stone. An idiosyncratic journey via dance towards self-criticism.

Is there a meta-poetical context in Carlson, Ek and Nadj's pieces that could tie them together? Are the movements, attached through this context, speaking about the same thing though rendered through different topics? Is there, in dance, a universal and archaic, timeless meaning as in music? Could I call this the language of faith?

1. *Sub Rosa*, Carolyn Carlson, 1995.

2. *Smoke*, Mats Ek, 1995.

3. *Untitled*, Josef Nadj, 2011.



## Survey I

# ONE CANNOT GET ENOUGH FREEDOM AND DIVERSITY

THE SAME (AND INTRIGUING) WORK – KRETAKOR'S FIRST PART OF THE CRISIS TRILOGY, SHOWN IN JUNE 2011 DURING THE PRAGUE QUADRIENNALE – IS HERE USED AS A TOOL TO DEMONSTRATE THE DIVERSITY OF CRITICAL APPROACHES.

This 'survey' about *jp.co.de*, the first part of Krétakör's *Crisis Trilogy*, a piece seen by the participants at the Writers on the Move seminars, started off as an experiment: Being Hungarian, as is Árpád Schilling, I am perplexed by his company's transformation and curious about the attitudes and strategies other critics might dare to use in covering this untouchable giant of the European theatre scene. The result, i.e., better understanding of the processes at *jp.co.de*, is further proof of the banal and reassuring fact that truth is contained in discussion; it arises out of raising questions and listening to the answers.

Andrea Rádai

### How would you describe the piece briefly?

- Andreea Chindriș: An unfinished experiment in a beautiful setting. It was more about the documentation of the group and the building. It only presented the tip of the iceberg to the audience and as such it was simply difficult to get what happened.
- Diana Damian: It explores curated micro-societies, the creation of individual belief systems and the processes through which these can be changed. It starts off with a film, which is then developed into a lecture, performance and exhibition, expanding on its aesthetics and thematics, from family dynamics to socio-political pressures, responding to the potential power of community engagement.
- Primož Jesenko: It focuses on the atomised state of youth in the current globalized context and its affinities for living in parallel reality worlds. Only fictitious reality worlds are left for younger generations (guinea pigs for contemporary use), who make sense of nothing other than games, since in their realms, fake is completely legitimate. The narrative of *jp.co.de* presents these youngsters as the only genuine protagonists who need to take themselves seriously, because the rest of the world is a bad imitation of what was once understood as sincere and true.
- Karl Svantesson: Young. Expensive. Aware.
- Anna Teuwen: The specific site adds an undefined but palpable political and historical level to the piece in a somewhat degrading way. Being quite unwieldy in its formats, the mixture of genres, it inconveniently questions and perforates the position of the spectator and the border between art and reality.
- Anna Burzyńska: A sociological experiment extending beyond what we call a theatre piece. A brave attempt to mix very different media: acting, installation, faked lecture, happening, and video (movie- and reality-show-like). Depressing depiction of the contemporary world and interhuman relationships.
- Elena Basteri: Presentation of an experiment in creating a creative community. Site-specific project based on a dialogue with a building and its history. Multilayered project bringing together different media and challenging traditional theatrical space, time span and rhythm.



*jp.co.de*, production by Árpád Schilling staged during Prague Quadriennale, photo by [unreadable]





# GH PLEASURE FROM THE TY OF INTERPRETATION

I *Andrea Rádai*



by Máté Tóth Ridovics © Kretakör



## How did you feel about spectators as a community?

- Diana Damian: I felt that as an experiment it was engaging and potentially transformative for its participants. However, its language was too closed and its medium too self-mythologizing really to connect with an outside audience. The piece had no overall position, no starting point, so it felt too controlled and misdirected, therefore propagating clichés about micro-societies instead of intervening in its own set-up.
- Mette Garfield: I felt like an outsider who observes what is going on and wishes to take part but is unfortunately not able to.
- Primož Jesenko: I could even see our group of writers as an analogue of the group in the performance, everybody striving for something not really defined but letting themselves into the experiment. The community, though, turns out as vague, open and undefined enough to be constructive.
- Karl Svantesson: There was a community and in a way I felt part of a community, but it was more like being inside an outside community.
- Anna Teuwen: I didn't really feel I was part of a community. Subconsciously I felt slightly uneasy, manipulated and part of something uncontrollable.
- Elena Basteri: I think the piece was honest in this sense: The actors didn't try to give you the illusion of being part of their community, the 'separation' was clear. I felt like a guest, so maybe it is more about the question of hospitality. Did I feel hospitality? The atmosphere was obscure and uncanny, somehow, but this fits with the history of the building, so I could enjoy it.

## Does the piece have an ideal audience?

- Diana Damian: Yes, its own participants.
- Primož Jesenko: Appropriately adventurous and open-minded spectators without fixed expectations or presumptions.
- Anette Pettersen: I think the last piece has its ideal audience in its participants. Otherwise a younger audience gets both the piece as a whole and the concepts within [it].
- Elena Basteri: Probably not a traditional theatre audience, but rather for well-educated people open to different languages (film, performance, lectures).

## Does this piece go beyond the boundaries of theatre? What was theatrical about it?

- Andreea Chindriș: It is not that important to decide whether it was theatrical or not, because it is obvious that these distinctions are crossed over.
- Diana Damian: I feel it is disappointing to see how little it understood of its own model of presentation, how it relentlessly tried not to be a performance in any way. If the theatrical had been acknowledged the piece would have developed an intriguing relationship with the theatrical, as opposed to theatre. The potential for this is what I find intriguing and challenging.
- Mette Garfield: It was theatrical in the way it was staged: There were the three acts, the rooms were used as theatre spaces and characters told and unveiled the story.
- Karl Svantesson: Are there any boundaries today?
- Anna Teuwen: Speaking about the theatre as a genre in a conventional way, it does. Regarding it as a live -experience, everything about it was theatrical.

## What should the role of the critic be when discussing this piece?

- Andreea Chindriș: It depends on the critic. But no matter what one chooses, it is necessary to describe it to the public so that they get the picture.
- Anna Teuwen: It's a nice play to report on, but I would prefer to read a text analysing its structure, symbols, dramaturgy and action and background information about the group, the director and the history of the building.
- Anette Pettersen: Here, as elsewhere, the critic should analyse, try to shed light on the meaning, participate by giving different readings of the piece.
- Anna Burzyńska: Reporter.

# TOWARDS A EUROPEAN ONLINE PLATFORM

| *Anna Teuwen*

CONFRONTED WITH THE BURGEONING ROLE OF THE THEATRE CRITIC AND THE SEISMIC CHANGES IN EUROPE'S THEATRE LANDSCAPE, THE AUTHOR FORCEFULLY ARGUES THAT IT IS TIME TO CREATE A PAN-EUROPEAN ONLINE PLATFORM.

What nowadays in Germany is referred to as the 'Freie Theaterszene' or independent theatre scene, has its roots in the 1970s: A theatre form that had disposed with the administrative apparatus of municipal and regional theatres, both in terms of production conditions, and stage structures dominating artistic output. Once considered 'off' or 'fringe' theatre, the independent scene now operates on a competitive level, and is focus of international attention. The artists, for their part, have now institutions and a professional network with whom they work together. Participants on the independent circuit have in the meantime learnt how to organize themselves flexibly across borders; financial and structural adversity having triggered the development of an intricate support system. The independent scene enjoys the reputation for being the nexus where new aesthetic forms are invented, while serving as a field of experimentation for a future theatre system. Nowadays successful independent artists work on site-specific projects, in free venues as well as in municipal and regional theatres. They enjoy a particularly prominent position on the international circuit – for the simple reason that their work is tailored to the business of being on-the-road in travelling companies and because they collaborate with their international partners on a regular and cross-border basis.

In light of this trend, we are currently witnessing the emergence of a host of new, non-specific job profiles, which fulfil the evolving structural requirements in the artistic sphere with a combination of diverse qualifications – if nothing else to enable a flexible response to the labour markets, and also because in many cases a sole job no longer suffices to make ends meet. An increasing number of those working in the field are making their mark as hybrids, comprised of artists, writers, producers, playwrights, curators, scientists, and experts in other related spheres, and as a matter of course internationally networked. Consequently, those boundaries between the cultural institutions and artistic domains, between being on the 'outside' and being 'inside' have become more fluid. The artists' work now involves engaging in dialogue, theory building, acting as their own production company; they receive requests to act as curators or jury-members. The institutional format has likewise evolved and now boasts its own creative character. This new set up, in turn, acts as a stimulus on the independent theatre world and its projects, leading to surprising encounters and collaborative undertakings – and all in all is thoroughly fruitful.

Theatre criticism has its origins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the rise of bourgeois theatre into a highbrow art form. The theatre critic was a pivotal player in the establishment; in hierarchical terms he was almost on a par with the stage director and his pronouncements were of political import. His function was to initiate and moderate a dialogue corresponding to that of the role of theatre, a dialogue within both the system itself and its representative structure, as an integral part of that structure. However, with the subsequent decline of theatre's social significance, the critic was also to suffer a loss of his hitherto influence, along with his role within the scheme of things. For the theatre itself was no longer part of the reigning political order; instead it had stepped outside of it, and taken to pointedly criticising and destabilising the state's structures. As such, it was to assume the original function of the critic. Moreover, as theatrical works began to be produced beyond national frontiers, dialogue on an international level ensued, thereby causing the critic's initial role to be further subsumed within the theatre. Nowadays the theatre critic in Germany enjoys but a minor position in the overall scheme, and is unfortunately in most cases underpaid. Whereas the arts coverage in regional newspapers is generally comprehensive, detailed and remains close to the readers' interests, the national press is more selective, detached and intellectual in tone. The few specialist monthly magazines provide valuable background information as well as open up avenues for an abiding discourse on the subject. New media platforms haven't thus far introduced fresh dimensions to critical journalism – the largest online magazine in the German-speaking world proposes theatre journalism in a very up-to-date, albeit conventional, form.

Unlike in the past, few writers nowadays practice as full-time journalists owing to the struggle to survive on the meagre salary an independent critic earns: we are thus seeing an increasing number of hybrid types, who when not active as a theatre critic, are engaged in other related activities – careful as to how they pursue their various tasks. Regrettably so at times, for the work of a curator or dramaturge does to some extent overlap with that of a journalist or critic: Contacts are fostered; opinions are formed, shared and advanced, which in turn encourages the re-formulation of new opinions – and more often than not employing the same material that is mutually bandied about. Just as theatre

journalism, dramaturgy continually demands a detached outside view accompanied by a critical scrutiny of the subject: whether addressing an individual artwork, the theatre as such or the cultural realm as a whole, the essential is to do so with an inquiring spirit directly linked to a sense of a practical application. It's a matter of shaping and observing, and consequently to change and seismographically record whatever changes occur. Whoever works as curator and critic in one, is not necessarily burdened with a double workload but rather benefits from their complementary nature, and is possessed of a more embracing, alert, up-to-date and critical regard of both practices.

But while the theatre making process along with its associated job profiles, qualifications and perspectives are in a constant state of flux, hardly any changes have occurred in the form in which reviews are published and theatre is written about. Those structural and aesthetic developments happening in the theatre have as yet to find their echo in terms of the form and organisation in the world of critical journalism. Of particular note is how the various language groups remain isolated, a circumstance incompatible with efficient international networking and transmission of cultural work.

*The international 'free' theatre scene is in need of a media platform befitting its structure.*

The ensuing gap is so obvious its continued existence is astounding. The international 'free' theatre scene is in need of a media platform befitting its structure. A platform, which can address the evolving needs of those working in the domain. A platform, which takes into account the blurring frontiers between both performance spaces and countries, not so as to deny their existence but rather to embrace difference positively. It need not engage with its subject in a purely observational, critical, detached and antagonistic manner, but rather can, and should, remain open to a mutual right of response. In addition to feeding off the scene, it can contribute to its survival, and become an integral part of it.

It can transform an international public into an international readership, and lead the way towards them engaging in dialogue. From the outset it needs to be designed differently from traditional magazines: its editorial structure should be devoid of hierarchy and network based; its topics need not be categorised but rather allow associative access to related issues, and thus over time grow into a large research pool, which documents the changing theatrical landscape. A portal is required, which offers scope for challenging journalistic, cultural and scientific exchanges, for criticism and enquiry, for reflection and expression, for research, for discussion and networking. In sum, a medium that once again can and will provide a vibrant forum for wide-embracing dialogue on contemporary theatre and its place in society.

*Translated (German) by John Barrett.*



# CRITIC AS AN OBJECT

## Primož Jesenko I

WITH WHAT POWER STRUGGLES IS THE CRITIC CURRENTLY ENTANGLED? FROM ITS PUBLIC POLICIES TO ITS MEDIA AND ARTISTIC CIRCLES, THE TRADITIONALLY AVANT-GARDIST SLOVENIA IS REMARKABLE FOR ITS DYNAMISM.

In the 1930s, Vladimir Kralj (1901-1969), a notable critic and theoretician, renounced the mild standards in looking at national theatre and insisted on harshness without considering 'particular circumstances' which tend to paralyze the growth of every theatre. After 1945, he formed an analytical genre of criticism that defines, documents, classifies, and argues, but does not pronounce judgment – Slovenes got acquainted with this type of criticism no later than that, even though this is not the most common critical form present in Slovenia today.

Somewhat surprising was the enthusiasm of a British critic of the younger generation over the analytic capabilities of Rok Vevar, the workshop leader from Slovenia (at the *Baltic Circle Festival* in Helsinki), whose insight into a performance offered the students an example of analytical criticism, using the references to Žižek and Lacan. His approach was very different from the usual 'pro and contra' criticism, which usually takes an unambiguous stand to performance as a product of theatre industry.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Haydon's admiration reflected his own country's milieu where it is almost impossible to imagine that a critique with special emphasis on analysis would make its way among media reviews on theatre. This does not mean that the media situation in Slovenia is more idyllic; it shows, however, how important it is to continuously call attention to what theatre criticism could contain and could signify. This seems even more significant in the context of marketing algorithms, profanisation of critical thought and its small-cut length, where the critic's style of expression is more or less unimportant, of the waning authority and impact of the traditional cultural criticism, of social networking and blogging.

The analysis of typical traits of contemporary theatre criticism in Slovenia exposes a dynamic state of things (however, the 'immediacy' of the internet can show rather ambivalent sides): one can notice an awareness of the importance and possibilities of stage direction; openness to experiment, while there is no evident political division among the critics (liberal vs. catholic) that used to be typical for critics in the period prior to and after World War 1. Significantly, more conservative critics even seem to be driven out from the theatre criticism scene which seems rejuvenated, in many cases starting out from Radio Študent – the medium which seems to refine one's wild charge of youth and channels the directness of diction (not by corrections and cuts, but by the nature of medium itself), one is allowed to be daring in that context, though accepting the economy of spoken word that is heard only once (even though today the radio texts are archived as well).

*What makes a good critic is writing a lot  
and publishing a lot.*

The principal essence of criticism is in the continuity of writing, this is what a good editor never forgets when shaping a young writer. Theory can be written in irregular phase nodes, but what makes a good critic is writing a lot and publishing a lot, striving and keeping up, possibly being an insider who is able to write in an accessible, 'erotic' way. In order to make a critic give it up, you need to cut off his fees and publishing space (which is still a lot, some might say).

The power of capital is mightier than any ideology, it can affect everything and is immediate, using a much more perfidious form of restraint.

The tradition of advertising performances with the help of quotations from pieces of criticism was abandoned in Slovenia around 2000, which also gave way to slow withering of the attention and appreciation for criticism by qualified writers. Extensive polemical conflicts in the media among critical minds, which were lively in the 1980s, somehow grew out of fashion or are not a priority anymore, as if the critical potential is lost. Critique may set the tone of the performance's reception, but in general the power of public writings in exerting impact on life of a theatre piece is limited. While theatre criticism was once the principal record left after the theatre show, it is in the multimedia world of today often underestimated (not only by the managerial boards of the media), even though it shifts artistic production into the area of thought. Moreover, public resources for theatre in Slovenia are (luckily) not directly tied to artistic results and don't depend on the number of spectators either. But as a paradox, the reviews have to be enclosed with the application for any project and programme funding at the state or municipal level.

An impression at a micro-level prevails that the situation for the community of critics in Slovenia is relatively settled – but how naive to think like that since it is not possible to live a decent life from writing criticism (or, say, support a family). It all shows that the need for writing criticism comes from some irrational depths, from a kind of Eros, an Eros with a lot of vigour and 'balls'. This is why the ephemeral field of criticism suits the young who finish university and are without a regular position but have the possibility of brushing up their work skills in various media. Those who display talent happen to be those most 'taken' by regular employment. That is why few persevere.

At this point, we do not possess any thorough analysis on the proactive impact of criticism on stage production (which variables to take into account?) but the assumption that criticism is without any influence on the state of the national theatre sounds excessive and not very mature. The relation between theatre and criticism undoubtedly exists and is ongoing, it is a relation of mutual fructification – but precisely because of that, the starting point would need to be turned upside down: what impact does theatre make on the development of the critic and his writing? In what way does the stage sharpen its proactive impact on him?

There are many types of relation between theatre and criticism, not necessarily first-hand; being a normative aesthetic police is nonetheless past. However, if we reflect on retrospective meta-reflections of critics in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who were able to look upon themselves and their criteria as an object, we see how vital it is for a critic to keep changing the perspective and see him- or herself every now and then from a bird's height. After all, it is all a way of existence. The optimal activity and basic aspect is thus wrestling with one's own approach.

A knockout is always an open possibility.

1. HAYDON Andrew, 'The role of theatre reviews', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2008.



Pes ve / *The Dog Knows*, photo by Lev Predan Kowarski



## Expertise I

# INTRODUCTION TO TECHNOLOGY AS AN ACT OF WRITING

I Cyril Thomas

TECHNOLOGY HAS INVADDED OUR STAGES AS EXTENSIVELY AS OUR SCREENS. WHAT EXPERTISE MUST A CRITIC DEVELOP TO COPE WITH THE NEW LANGUAGES THAT IT SPAWNS?

### Getting a Jump on Technology

The critic must take a stand on new technology, ponder a form of performance, a thing to see or explore on a theatre's stage (even in the wings), in the street, in a cybercafé, and so on. Technology sometimes transports the audience from the hall to a computer screen (Annie Abrahams's *Huis Clos/No Exit* performance series, for example) or in front of a touch pad (the various occurrences of the project *DU LIVRE de Mallarmé au livre mal armé* created by Franck Ancel). Even more recently, Celia Houdart, Sebastien Roux, André Baldinger and Martin Blum's proposition *Fréquences - projet pour iPhone* shifted the writing of a show as of its inception to attempt other fictional journeys. In the theatre, the spectator can sometimes interact and receive, even send out, information intended for the actors (for example, in Jean-Paul Delore and Hauke Lanz's propositions with the X-réseau network). Technology lets us travel through uncommon spaces; it is also the vehicle for such journeys. It challenges the spectator's (and critic's) knowledge, asking them to rethink their habits, to compare and contrast them with unknown elements.

Technology remains the prime agent of a mutation that affects critics and audiences alike. New technologies sometimes depart from the frame of conventional representation. They transform the set and stage direction in depth, reveal what is behind the scene. They upset what is seen and produce changes of scale, for they reconfigure the stage volume.

The critic then strives to understand the various configurations, to look at what shifts technology produces in the theatre. A technological action must be envisioned in terms of both the time of the manipulation and longer-term aspirations. Thinking means trying, not asserting. The critic must then take a diachronic view, even, if possible, embrace anachronism, for technology is at work on various temporal levels. Indeed, technology lets you decline time in many variations. Time is declined differently from one virtual world (*Second Life*, for example), to another. It is materialized differently when combined with a webcam or e-mail software that influences the actors' acting on the stage. An exegesis of technology is then required. The technology that is used in a show can effectively complete a text, libretto, or work. Whether in theatre or dance,

*Thinking means trying, not asserting.*

the text, words, actors/dancers' positions and gestures, music, sets, and light, form a language that tells something, that lets one understand the director's intentions. Similarly, the technologies that are used for the sound, images, and actors' voices are so many languages to decipher. What is one to think when a sow with sensors fitted to her head determines the order of the sequences that the audience will see? The animal's movements on the stage effectively dictate the order of the tableaux in *Tournant autour de Galilée*, staged by Jean-François Peyret. This work on Galileo, enhanced by real-time videos, is much more than a fictionalized biography. It oscillates between various forms (dance and cabaret) to explore better the notion of composition: visual arts composition, scientific composition (the text came out of an exchange of ideas between neurobiologist Alain Prochiantis and physicist Françoise Balibar), but also literary composition on the stage.

The main difficulty is to uncover a technology, for it is not necessarily readable and visible for the spectator. Even though the understanding, knowledge, and interpretation of a given interface or type of lamp or amplifier, etc., are important pieces of information, the critic focuses more on the choices that are made, for the technological solutions and technical options that have been used reveal something, perhaps the unsaid part of the staging.

What attracts the critic's attention is not so much the creation of a 'patch' driving various elements, but rather the thinking that presides over this creation. So, the critic questions the stage director, but also the accompanying technicians on the set, for they, too, have their own distinctive signatures, their predilection for a given device or medium. The wiring diagrams, patching of lights, machinery, and sound components are so many elements to analyse. Together they create the dialogue's structure, they form the staging's 'in-between'.

### The Technological Edifice

The critic discovers that this dialogue between the technological equipment used for the rehearsals and the final staging also contains elements that give one another understanding of what has just been seen. Technology is neither a simple answer to a problem nor a simple solution used to grapple with a technical difficulty on the set. It is intrinsically a genuine object. It remains a component of a piece of writing. It is the place of the slip of the tongue or pen, it reveals what is hidden, what is secret. It incarnates the id and the superego. It brings the merits and literary stakes of the performance to the fore. It is the place of the transformation, transcoding, passage from literature to the technological, where vocabulary, words turn into objects, cables, connections. Technology is by essence fragile, obsolete, and capricious as well, but it makes part of the staging's history accessible. Technology is a vector of wondering as much as of the fears or expectations of a cultural horizon. All in all, technology remains the place where paradigm changes occur. Like the return the spurned, Lyrebird Theatre, in its *Ships of Sand*, speaks of technology as well as of high-tech imaginary robot machines through mime, simply by movements and body positions.

The critic looks for the place of the technological, a complex node in which society's history, literature, the director's urges, fantasies, desires, and projections, and the performance come together. It is a sort of hidden side, where omissions, errors, and weaknesses are revealed. The technological is the network that gives birth to (that midwifes the birth of) the staging. Technology covers the means, tools, and media that are at work on all levels of the performance. The use of technology, however minimal it may be, establishes correspondences, even though it sometimes fails (bugs), crumbles (data can disappear), or dies to be replaced by another. Technology remains the flow that enables the critic to take an oblique position, to change the angles of approach. It opens the door to other accounts and acts of writing.

Translated (French) by Gabrielle Leyden.



Annie Abraham's workshop *Huis Clos / No Exit - Training for a Better World*, december 2010, École nationale supérieure d'art Villa Arson, Nice © Annie Abrahams

# SPECTATORSHIP, PARTICIPATION AND THE POSITION OF THE CRITIC

*Diana Damian* |

THE TIMES IN WHICH WE LIVE – WHERE INTERACTIVE AND AUDIENCE PARTICIPATING TYPE PERFORMANCES ARE ROCKING THE TRADITIONAL HIERARCHY – MIGHT WELL BE A HISTORIC JUNCTURE IN WHICH TO RE-THINK THE CRITIC'S ROLE, IN A BRANCH OF THE PERFORMANCE ARTS IN THE THROES OF CHANGE.

Contemporary notions of distance are versatile, atomic, narrative and interchangeable. Increasingly, we are testament to shifting cultural topographies in which the local and the global, the personal and the public, the social and the political interact. Postmodernism has dislocated the relationship between how culture is produced and how it is received. Its legacy has left contemporary performance and inherently, its discourse, with an interest in fluidity, relationality and thus the displacement of authority.

There has been a shift in the hierarchy of cultural voices. Theatre practitioners are interested in providing audiences with narrative and formal agency, crafting temporary communities and carving utopic encounters. This is a landscape with an increasingly hybridized aesthetic, topical concerns and language that has arguably been responding to the changing nervous system of a global society. This concern with the direct encounter is a manifestation of the relationship between artistic practice and flows of meaning – the form of communication becomes a medium, not an objective, thus creating a circuit of shifting criticality.

This affects contemporary politics of distance within the performance ecology; audiences are invited to shift and adapt narratives, engage in formal play and inherently, in a critical position towards the work. Yet as Hal Foster underlines Roland Barthes' "death of the author does not necessarily mean birth of the reader".<sup>1</sup> These circumstances are only simulations of micro-communities with isolated rituals and models of social and intellectual engagement that are not synonymous with wider societal practices.

The practice of the critic, responsive to the wider ecology and concerned with the production of knowledge and meaning, has been widely affected by this shift. Reliant, at least historically, on a critical distance between both cultural receptors and producers, it has become vulnerable in light of the developing politics of spectatorship. The task that traditionally belonged to the critic – that of enquiry and articulation of meaning, has been shifted by the development of the embodied critic – the limited agency with which audiences operate in participatory theatre. This direct encounter has positioned the critic within, not outside the creative act, thus shifting the formation of meaning and diluting critical distance.

The contemporary critic is, to borrow Augusto Boal's terminology, a spect-actor, embodied in the performance act, observer and active participant with the limited ability to influence the narrative or formal development of a performance. Arguably, there has always been a flow of meaning between spectator and

*The critic can no longer be an  
incognito audience member.*

performance. Yet the shift emerges with the externalization of this subjectivity and its reorientation back into the performance. If traditionally the audience member took a critical position to no direct effect in the performance, participatory theatre relies precisely on this position to affect the perception and sometimes form of the live experience. The critic can no longer be an incognito audience member, and is therefore forced into a different formal dynamic.

Critical discourse has been institutionalized by the performance industry in an ecology of micro-democracies where cultural transactions are enabled without the necessity for mediation which criticism provided. There is a fundamental issue here; if these micro-democracies operate in isolation, the same applies for the critical discourses. Therefore the practice of criticism has a new set of challenges: negotiating the direct experience of an event with a clear critical position, participating without the direct interference of critical expertise in the performance act, and crafting a new language to adequately critique hybrid forms. Add to that the growing pressures of a problematic publishing industry and the availability of cultural voices propagated by artists, producers, institutions and marketing departments.

The performance ecology needs a potent discourse to remove institutionalized modes of thought; in a theatrical vocabulary of hybrids and micro-communities, the critic is the cultural operator who can articulate the noise and formlessness, elucidating the almost apolitical relationship to social politics that performance has appropriated. There is a need to reposition criticality and expertise within this growing ecology.

The practice of criticism is an inherently reactionary one. If performance appropriates dynamic notions of distance, then criticism needs to also examine the cultural transactions it is part of, its form and dramaturgy, in order to reposition the practice at the heart of cultural discourse and make sense of the contemporary performance ecology. Critical examination needn't require a radical shift, but a clear negotiation of its variables in light of this dependency. Distance and objectivity can no longer be the remit of the critic, yet expertise and a wider view of contemporary symptoms can.

*A distinction needs to be made  
between performance and its  
discourse to avoid standardization.*

The incessant formal experimentation of participatory theatre has led to its consecration, but it underlines the need for a critical response that both acknowledges the direct encounter and underlines its problematics. There is a distinction that needs to be made between performance and its discourse in order to avoid standardization.

Despite the fluid distance that performance has appropriated, the critic's position requires independence, and this needs to be negotiated in light of the contemporary performance practice. This is a unique moment for the practice of criticism to deconstruct its mode of cultural reception and articulate the discursive requirements of contemporary performance. This involves carving new space for a developed and more diverse form of critical practice: the critic as an active, independent curator of public discourse.

1. Hal Foster, 'Arty Party: Chat Rooms', *London Review of Books*, London, 4 December 2004.



## Creation I

## WRITING, EXPLORING

## I Pilvi Porkola

FACED WITH CRITICISM'S DECLINE, THIS FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT BY AN EXPERIENCED CRITIC CUM EDITOR SUGGESTS THAT THE SOLUTION MIGHT BE FOUND IN NON-CONFORMISM, AND IN USING WRITING STRATEGIES THAT INDUCE INVENTIVENESS.

I'm still a bit upset with Aristotle because of his influence on us, making us think we need a beginning, middle and end. His idea does a disservice to the performing arts and writing about it. When I'm writing I'm mostly confused in the beginning, somehow lost in the middle and almost wasted at the end. I feel Aristotle's structure very hard to follow. It's quite different if you consider writing about a painting. You are not looking for a beginning; you don't ask what the middle is in a work of art, or in a text, either, for that matter. You just write. You are freer to circle in your writing. Or am I just romanticizing this?

*When I'm writing I'm mostly confused in the beginning, somehow lost in the middle and almost wasted at the end.*

In *Esitys*, the Finnish magazine for contemporary theatre and performance art, one of our aims has been to expand the idea of art criticism and to find new ways of writing about art. When we started, four years ago, art criticism in Finland seemed to be too often based on a conventional form: description, interpretation and judging. Instead of criticism we decided to have a section for texts under the title 'Experiences', 'Discussions', 'Documents' to underline the multiple foci of the texts. In my opinion writers can write many different ways, depending on the context, but a magazine or paper accepts only more conventional forms of writing. I think my job as an editor is to create more structures where writers can use their skills widely, to explore. It is then up to the writers to decide how they want to use this option.

Well, we didn't start a revolution with our mission to develop art journalism. Not all texts in the section have been experimental or super-inventive; many of them still follow basic ways of writing focusing on description and contemplating the piece in well-known forms. Still, you can see some special outcomes.

When director and writer Tuomas Laitinen wrote a text 'Killing Time – Tehching Hsieh, *The Cage Piece* and *Life as a Life Sentence*'<sup>1</sup>, he decided to put Hsieh's performance into practice. In *Cage* (1978-79), the Taiwanese-American performance artist Tehching Hsieh locked himself in his studio for one year and



Akseli Gallen-Kallela, *The Symposium* (Akseli Gallen-Kallela, Oskar Merikanto, Robert Kajanus and Jean Sibelius), study, oil on canvas, 1894 © The Gösta Serlachius Fine Arts Foundation

stayed there without communicating, reading, writing, listening to the radio or watching television. A friend came daily to bring him food, take away his refuse, and take a single photograph to document the project. Hsieh's aim was to transform the artistic process of thinking into artwork itself. In Laitinen's version he spent three days in the attic of a detached house in a small city in southern Finland to get an inkling of Hsieh's thinking and experience. Like Hsieh, he was not allowed to write during the experience; the writing came later. In his text Laitinen considers his experience of time in a closed space, comparing it with Hsieh's act. "Time in art is different from time in daily life", he states.

The text is in part very minimalist:

"I lie on a bed. I fall asleep. I stand. I put a blanket on the floor and stay on it. I think about the past. I stretch. I sit. I think about my breathing. I cry. I dream about the future. I walk back and forth, around, in a figure eight."

Another part of it is more philosophical, following Foucault's idea of discipline and spiritual practices. Whereas Hsieh didn't want to think of his work as a spiritual act, Laitinen cannot avoid thinking about that. Being in an empty room makes Laitinen ask existential questions about how we spend our days and why. Still, for me this text is most of all an example of how to create a special writing method. Here the method was extreme physical seclusion to get an experience for writing. The method of creating the text was parallel to Hsieh's method of making art.

Another example is a series of columns entitled 'Symposion'. It comes from an idea of the old classic Finnish painting *Symposion* (1894)<sup>2</sup> by Akseli Gallen-Kallela, where artists Jean Sibelius, Oskar Merikanto, Robert Kajanus and Gallen-Kallela himself are sitting around a table, strange looks in their eyes, drinking and thinking about 'the meaning of art and life'. In our version this means an interview where both the reviewer and reviewed drink a bottle of vodka, talk about art and record the session. A third person transcribes and edits the text later.

The result has been fun. I don't know if it's only because we Finns don't really talk unless we are drunk, or if it's because of the special flow you get when the interview is not supposed to be taken so seriously. The discussions have been deep and multifaceted, concerning everything from local politics to the Japanese Butoh master Kazuo Ohno's cat, from Shakespeare and Michael Haneke to sex, and so on. It is a physical method, too: I heard that people had bad hangovers the next day.

I write when I swim or run. The physical action makes words, sentences and structures flow in my head. The pool is a good place for thinking. Well, sometimes Aristotle is standing at the pool, staring at me. "Start from the beginning", he says. Where the hell is the beginning? I haven't found out. There is no beginning in my thoughts, no beginning in my movements in this water. I didn't create the language, I just swim in it.

1. LAITINEN Tuomas, 'Ajan tappamisesta – Tehching Hsieh, the *Cage Piece* ja elämä elinkautisena', *Esitys* 3, 2009.

2. <http://goo.gl/uXiTi>



# FROM SLOW CRITIC TO IMMEDIATE ACCESS

*Pauline de la Boulaye I*

EUROPE, AUGUST 2031: TRACING THE HISTORY OF SLOW CRITIC, THE EUROPEAN MOVEMENT CREATED BY ART CRITICS WHO MET EACH OTHER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN LONDON (WESTERN INSULAR EUROPE) AND PRAGUE (CENTRAL EUROPE) IN 2011.

It was after the start of the far-reaching crisis that overturned the global system and annihilated Europe's states. They were chosen at a competition organized by physical cultural magazine publishers worried by the disappearance of articles that reviewed the creations of their times. In a spirit inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, critics were making every effort to continue to stir up ideas, stories, and debate about art to shake up the minds of theatre-goers, dance audiences, and exhibition visitors, to stimulate their imaginations, feed their souls, and enhance the taste of freedom. However, times had changed: Art had become a consumer good. Everyone could slake their thirst, according to their own individual desires, directly at the springs of endlessly flowing creativity brought to all and sundry by Internet.

Today, we are well aware of how indispensable art critics' reviews are for a society's life. They echo the idealized visions of the world that artists hold up. They take positions with which people can identify, thereby helping to cement collective imaginings. They give each person individual cultural food for their spiritual well-being, before becoming useful archives for historians in later generations.

The art critics' gatherings were part of a programme financed by Europe, which was apparently aware of the holes in its cultural policy and thus keen to facilitate the movement of artists between European countries.

The twenty critics meeting in 2011 all reported the similar developments in their respective countries: deteriorating work conditions (dismissals for economic reasons, non-compliance with copyright laws), less room for expression (no more cultural pages in the daily papers, bankruptcies of cultural magazines), increased censorship, and national policies' chronic lack of interest in artistic education. They could share sufferings that hitherto had been borne alone, for this slow disappearance of their work was painless and invisible for everyone else. Indeed, no one even thought about the discreet but, in the long run, irreplaceable contributions made by these observers of art and the times. Everyone was preoccupied by recovery: regaining lost speed, economic recovery, and resuming the race for money. No, the world truly had no need for this spiritual supplement. If art exists, so be it! But art reviews? For what purpose? All the more so as if the criticism is negative, it damages art's profitability! Their trade clearly was incompatible with this world's requirements.

*If art exists, so be it! But art reviews? For what purpose?*

Why, then, did they not give up? Why did at least a score of critics across Europe want to carry on? Perhaps they knew that art's profound meaning was threatened by the consumer society's demands. The system had infiltrated all areas of human activity and was now taking on the artistic sector. On television, broadcasts produced disembodied singers imitating a global model. The visual and performing arts were taking the same tangent. However, some artists remained viscerally attached to this unfathomable language for the soul.

The Slow Critic generation wanted to be a reflection of this growing minority, to connect, by words, the mystery of the human being and their fellow citizens' concerns, the dizziness of time and the present, the immaterial and the material. As worthy successors of Baudelaire, that French critic of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they did not want to let themselves be swept along on the fast-running currents of happenings and progress that promised a fake brilliant future, engendered excessive proportions, erased responsibility, created belief in success, and deployed the tyranny of the present time. Like the poet, they preferred the notion of modernity that was rooted in the power of the imagination's renewal.

Following the example of the Slow Food movement, which successfully fended off the Fast Food invasion and set regional cuisine back on its feet, the Slow Critic movement took on the Fast Critic trend, which consisted of disastrous cut-and-pastes of press releases disseminating the precepts of communication managers on a massive scale. Slow critics would finally be able to return to stewing their ideas over low heat, letting their analyses age like good wine, and appreciating the flavour differences between different cultures.

Together, the critics realized that their most precious know-how was being able to get their readers to traverse time scales, to prolong the instantaneous perception of a work. They set themselves the goal of cultivating a way of travelling between the time of the work (genesis of its creation, history of its interpretation, and ability to last), the context of its staging (sets and venue), and the time of its audiences (pace of daily life and the different times of life).

Their second aim was to cultivate their cultural differences. Before their decline, each country in Europe had spent centuries developing its own views of the world and of art. To preserve this diversity, the critics began compar-

ing and contrasting their points of view of artistic creation. What did a German think of that Bulgarian performance? How did Swedes perceive Italian contemporary theatre? What reviews surfaced along the trail of an itinerant exhibition from the Georges Pompidou Centre? What did Czechs say about the Finnish circus? That would put an end to the accommodating commentators who simply fuelled a consensual discourse within the same culture. Viewers, who were increasingly mobile, would have access to their similars' visions when they discovered a work of art whilst travelling and would be able to compare them to other points of view.

Easy access to this extension of perception, to this European echo of the strata of time and cultures, was thus needed. At the time, indeed, getting access to reviews was an extremely arduous process: Magazines were not distributed everywhere, whilst for the Internet one had to have a computer and telephone link to be connected.

It was the time when bar codes were used solely to scan the prices of goods in supermarkets. No one imagined that this innovation in the service of consumption could also help to disseminate knowledge by shortening the links between the work, viewer, and commentary. Europe, which wanted to make up for its lack of cultural identity by making an effort in favour of critics, as the wet nurses of collective representations, thus financed a digital platform of reviews and a new technology to access it: the CODE (Community Of Developing Events).



This QR (quick response) code is found on tickets, screens, posters, cultural centres, and performance halls – wherever a performance takes place. All mobile phones, tactile screens, and GPS systems can receive and send the information supplied by this code. Today it makes it possible to have access to European critics' comments about any and all contemporary works, and to delight in knowing to what extent they never agree.

The present has been connected to the long-running; instantaneous culture has been connected to the diversity of knowledge. Everything is imaginable once again. And that is how Europe has become modern.

*Translated (French) by Gabrielle Leyden.*

## PROFILES

Elena BASTERI is a freelance performing art curator and critic based in Berlin. She has been working with different institutions and festivals like Haus der Kultur der Welt, Tanz im August, Italienischer Theaterherbst in Berlin and Tanzfabrik. Her last project is Rehearsing Collectivity. Choreography beyond Dance at the Tanzfabrik Uferstudios in Berlin. As a critic she wrote a.o. for the Italian magazine *Hystrio*, *Tanz and Corpusweb*. [elena.basteri@gmail.com](mailto:elena.basteri@gmail.com) | Anna R. BURZYŃSKA is a theatre scholar, critic, journalist, editor, curator. Since 2010, she works as an assistant professor at the Department of Theatre at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Editor and critic for the *Didaskalia* theatre journal ([www.didaskalia.pl](http://www.didaskalia.pl)). [annaroz@autograf.pl](mailto:annaroz@autograf.pl) | Andreea CHINDRIȘ is a PhD student at the Faculty of Theatre and Television (Babes-Bolyai University Cluj) researching performance in Romania. She has a bachelor's degree in Letters and a master's degree in Theatre Studies. Her main areas of interest are performance and violence in theatre, film and video. She works as a research assistant and she is a member of IACT, writing for *Man.In.Fest* and the online platform [www.liternet.ro](http://www.liternet.ro). [andreea.chindris@yahoo.com](mailto:andreea.chindris@yahoo.com) | Diana DAMIAN is a London-based critic, editor and curator. She is founder of Royal Holloway's new digital platform for critical writing and has recently developed the performance intervention 'The Critic is Present' in collaboration with BAC. She has been published both in print and online internationally and is undergoing a funded PhD in contemporary performance criticism at Royal Holloway, University of London. [www.dianadadian.com](http://www.dianadadian.com) [diana.d.damian@gmail.com](mailto:diana.d.damian@gmail.com) | Pauline DE LA BOULAYE, born in France, studied contemporary history and social sciences. Since 1998, she has organized exhibitions and conferences and undertaken research for museums, local authorities and cultural centres. Her work covers stage design, visual arts (from painting to photography) and performing arts (from circus to street art); it always has a historical or philosophical connection. She works as a journalist and author and lives with her family in Brussels. [paulinedelaboulaye@gmail.com](mailto:paulinedelaboulaye@gmail.com) | Inga FRIDRIHSONE lives in Riga, Latvia. She studied theatre research at the Ruhr University in Bochum (Germany) and is a PhD student at the University of Latvia. She works as a freelance writer and translator. [inga@fridrihson.de](mailto:inga@fridrihson.de) | Mette GARFIELD has a Master Degree in Comparative Literature and Culture Journalism from Copenhagen University and l'Université Paris-Sorbonne. She is the Executive Editor of *Teater*, Senior Editor of PUF-art.com and a freelance writer, mainly about Danish and international performance theatre and performance art. [mettegarfield@gmail.com](mailto:mettegarfield@gmail.com) | Angelina GEORGIEVA is a freelance writer about performing arts for a number of Bulgarian cultural periodicals. Currently she is finishing a MA Programme in Theatre Studies at Freie Universität - Berlin and starts a PhD Programme at the Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, Sofia. As a co-founder of the New Dramaturgies Platform based in Sofia, she initiates

educational and artistic projects in the field of performing arts and is editor and author for performing arts theory and criticism website [www.dramaturgynew.net](http://www.dramaturgynew.net). [agypg@yahoo.com](mailto:agypg@yahoo.com) | Olivier HESPEL is an independent critic and dramaturge involved in dance and theatre. In addition to being member of the group L'L, a centre for research and development for young creators in Brussels, he is also an artistic advisor at L'Ancre in Charleroi. As a dramaturge, he is affiliated with K.C. Barakha, and works with the choreographer Fernando Martín. He is also the author of a detailed study on the choreographer Robyn Orlin (2006). As a reviewer, he frequently collaborates with the quarterly *Scènes* and is a regular contributor to the 'queer' programme Bang Bang on radio Pure FM. He moderates discussions and debates on the performing arts, gives workshops on the links between dance and dramaturgy, as well as on critical writing. [ohespel@brutele.be](mailto:ohespel@brutele.be) | Primož JESENKO received his M. A. in Theatre Studies at the Academy for Theatre, Film, Radio and Television at the University of Ljubljana. He currently works as a theatre critic for the daily *Dnevnik* and is also a theatre researcher, with particular focus on experimental theatre tendencies. His *Dramaturgical Concept in Slovene Theatre 1950-1970* was published in 2008 by the Slovenian Theatre Museum. Since 2004, he has been the editor of the performing arts section of the journal *Dialogi*. He is a regular contributor to various international seminars, symposia, festivals and exhibitions like Exodos Festival 2005-2007 (Ljubljana), Performing Revolution (New York, 2009). [primoz.jesenko@guest.arnes.si](mailto:primoz.jesenko@guest.arnes.si) | Sergio LO GATTO, theatre critic, playwright and freelance writer, has a degree in Theatre and Performing Arts from the Università La Sapienza in Rome. A professional journalist since 2009, he writes about theatre and dance and has collaborated in publications such as *Krapp's Last Post*, *Teatro e Critica*, *Hystrio*, *Stratagemmi* and the monthly magazine published by the Theatre of Rome. He designed the Ricettario Teatrale format for experimental criticism. He also works for the Università La Sapienza, and for the Venice Biennale (as a journalist for its daily *Ottavo Peccato*). [silencio82@gmail.com](mailto:silencio82@gmail.com) | Miroslava MARIANOVA has an MA in Journalism from Sofia University, MA in Theatre Studies from National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts, Sofia, PhD in Theatre studies from Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. She is a co-founder and project manager of the New Dramaturgies Platform, author and editor of the site for theory and criticism ([www.dramaturgynew.net](http://www.dramaturgynew.net)). She works as a free lance theatre and dance critic for various cultural periodicals and as a researcher, lecturer and editor for different artistic and theoretical projects. Her book *Dramaturgical Adaptations in the Art of Postmodernism* was nominated for the Ikar award for theatre criticism. [miramarianova@gmail.com](mailto:miramarianova@gmail.com) | Vladimír MIKULKA is a theatre critic. He lives in Prague. He graduated at Czech Polytechnical Institute Prague (Microelectronics) and Charles University Prague (Drama Studies). He is currently an editor and staff writer of *Svět a divadlo* magazine (World and Theatre, bimonthly), and works in Arts and Theatre Institute Prague (Departement of Foreign Language Journals). From 1998 to 2011, he was editor and staff writer of *Divadelní noviny* (Theatre Newspaper, fortnightly). Contributor of *Lidové noviny*

daily and *Respekt* weekly magazine, he is also a singer and guitar player with the rockband Inženýr Vladimír, and a non-professional director and actor. [vladimir.mikulka@divadlo.cz](mailto:vladimir.mikulka@divadlo.cz) | Antoine PICKELS lives in Brussels and works throughout Europe. Author, artist, reviewer, teacher and cultural co-ordinator, he is currently director of La Bellone, House of Performing Arts, and the quarterly *Scènes*. He is currently programming the forthcoming Festival of Live Art 'Trouble', which he established at Les Halles in Brussels in 2005. [antoine.pickels@bellone.be](mailto:antoine.pickels@bellone.be) | Anette Therese PETERSEN has a Master in Theatre Science from the University of Oslo (Norway). She is a freelance theatre critic, writer and editor. She writes mainly for *Dagsavisen* ([www.dagsavisen.no/tema/article355471.ece](http://www.dagsavisen.no/tema/article355471.ece)) and *Norsk Shakespeare- og Teater Tidsskrift* ([www.shakespearetidsskrift.no](http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no)), and is also editor at [www.kunstloftet.no](http://www.kunstloftet.no). [anepetersen@gmail.com](mailto:anepetersen@gmail.com) | Pilvi PORKOLA is a performance artist, researcher and writer. She works as the chief editor of *Esitys*, magazine of contemporary theatre and performance art in Finland. [pilvi.porkola@teak.fi](mailto:pilvi.porkola@teak.fi) | Andrea RÁDAI lives in Budapest. She studied Hungarian, English and Dutch Language and Literature. She started to write theatre reviews at the age of 25 when her piece was selected at a writing contest and has been writing for *Színház* and *Revizoronline* ever since. Her special interest is socially engaged and multicultural theatre. As a member of the presidential board of the Hungarian Critics' Association, she strives for a better understanding between creators, audience, critics and politicians. [andiradai@gmail.com](mailto:andiradai@gmail.com) | Karl SVANTESSON is a high school teacher and freelance critic from Sweden. He writes mainly in *Danstidningen*, *Åbo Underrättelser* and *Horisont*. [karl.svantesson@idunskolan.se](mailto:karl.svantesson@idunskolan.se) | Ana TASIĆ is theatre critic for daily newspapers and lecturer in World theatre history at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade. As a critic, she is often invited to be a member of juries for different theatre festivals in Serbia, as well as the selector of festival programs (she worked for the most important festivals in Serbia - Sterijino pozorje, BITEF, Days of Comedy). But writing about art is her greatest passion. [anatas@eunet.rs](mailto:anatas@eunet.rs) | Anna TEUWEN graduated from the Institute for Applied Theatre Studies in Giessen in 2009. She works as dramaturge and curator at Kampnagel in Hamburg. She writes a.o. for the magazine *Theater der Zeit*, has a lectureship at the University of Hamburg and was 'scout' for the Theatre Festival Impulse 2011. [annateuwen@googlegmail.com](mailto:annateuwen@googlegmail.com) | Cyril THOMAS is PhD Student at University of Picardie Jules Verne et Telecom ParisTech. He belongs to various research groups and has curated several exhibitions, focusing on new approaches to curating, mediation and publishing. He is a frequent contributor to several print and online periodicals, including *Ciel Variable*, *Scènes*, *Poptronics* and *Patch*. For a while, he edited *Transdigital*, a trilingual journal dedicated to new technologies and the performing arts. Along with Philippe Baudelot, Cécile Denis and Emmanuelle Raynaud, he has launched a cycle of seminars 'El mundo Pasta Unica' on emergent approaches to digital art, net art and new media, held at the Centquatre in Paris. [cyrilthomas@orange.fr](mailto:cyrilthomas@orange.fr)

## SPACE – SUPPORTING PERFORMING ARTS CIRCULATION IN EUROPE

### A pilot project on artist mobility 2008-2011 supported by the European Commission

In late 2007, ten national cultural institutions, each with an international remit created a new platform dedicated to Support Performing Arts Circulation in Europe: SPACE. The members of SPACE all operate in between politics and the artistic field in their own countries, acting as information hubs, promoting the (performing) arts on a national and international level and where appropriate supporting and running European cultural projects. While they share the belief that one of the cornerstones of a meaningful European Cultural Policy is to facilitate the circulation of (performing) arts across the region, they also realise that a lot of imbalances still exist in this transnational arts sphere between countries, cultural operators, artists and disciplines.

The core SPACE objectives are to give greater priority to the mobility of artistic productions and to combine cultural mobility with cultural diversity by embracing the concept of European citizenship and investing in emerging generations. Still a young initiative, SPACE continues to enlarge its network through the implementation of a series of different multi-layered activities.

SPACE is also the name of the pilot project devoted to improving the conditions of mobility in Europe promoted by the platform. The project received a grant from the European Commission in 2008 and will end in November 2011. In the three year duration of the project, SPACE has contributed to the professional development of more than 80 professional practitioners (art managers, programmers and critics) and in tandem launched an innovative mapping system (called Travelogue) in collaboration with a number of intermediary organisations based in Europe to improve their collective analysis of performing art circulation across the region.

For further information on SPACE please visit: [www.spaceproject.eu](http://www.spaceproject.eu)

SPACE members are:

ONDA (France), [www.onda.fr](http://www.onda.fr) | VTI (Belgium), [www.vti.be](http://www.vti.be) | THE RED HOUSE (Bulgaria), [www.redhouse-sofia.org](http://www.redhouse-sofia.org) | ARTS AND THEATRE INSTITUTE (Czech Republic), <http://institute.theatre.cz> | ZENTRUM BRD DES INTERNATIONALEN THEATERINSTITUTS (Germany), <http://www.iti-germany.de> | MIBAC/ex-ETI (Italy), [www.enteteatrale.it](http://www.enteteatrale.it), [www.spettacoloalvivo.beniculturali.it](http://www.spettacoloalvivo.beniculturali.it) | NEW THEATRE INSTITUTE OF LATVIA (Latvia), [www.theatre.lv](http://www.theatre.lv) | TIN (The Netherlands), [www.theaterinstituut.nl](http://www.theaterinstituut.nl) | PRO HELVETIA (Switzerland), [www.pro-helvetia.ch](http://www.pro-helvetia.ch) | BRITISH COUNCIL (UK), [www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

Partners of the project:

ENICPA, [www.enicpa.net](http://www.enicpa.net) | IETM, [www.ietm.org](http://www.ietm.org) | TEAM, [www.team-network.eu](http://www.team-network.eu) | LA BELLE OUVRAGE, [www.labelleouvrage.fr](http://www.labelleouvrage.fr)

## TEAM NETWORK

TEAM Network, Transdisciplinary European Art Magazines, has been launched as a move towards increased international co-operation and exchange of ideas. The network aims at enhancing common thinking on priority issues and defining a programme of joint initiatives and actions.

Confronted to an often binding economic reality, to the necessity of a strong political commitment and the need of thorough intellectual debates, independent editors and publishers of art magazines in Europe have much to exchange. From the different angles of the European continent where the most authoritative art magazines are conceived, critical positioning and practical experience are extremely rich and diverse. It is important today to have a chance to debate these issues together, to learn from each other's experience and to further reflect about our common professional activities about how to preserve our independence, critical level and public proposal.

Next project: symposium 'New Strategies in Art Education', co-organised by Cifas, La Bellone, Brussels, 10-11 november.

[www.cifas.be](http://www.cifas.be) | [www.team-network.eu](http://www.team-network.eu)



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Editor: Antoine PICKELS

Writers: Elena BASTERI (DE), Anna R. BURZYŃSKA (PL), Andreea CHINDRIȘ (RO), Diana DAMIAN (UK), Pauline DE LA BOULAYE (BE), Inga FRIDRIHSONE (LV), Mette GARFIELD (DK), Angelina GEORGIEVA (BG), Olivier HESPEL (BE), Primož JESENKO (SI), Sergio LO GATTO (IT), Miroslava MARIANOVA (BG), Vladimír MIKULKA (CZ), Anette Therese PETERSEN (NO), Antoine PICKELS (BE), Pilvi PORKOLA (FI), Andrea RÁDAI (HU), Karl SVANTESSON (SE), Ana TASIĆ (RS), Anna TEUWEN (DE), Cyril THOMAS (FR)

Translators: John BARRETT (French, German), Nina Larissa BASSET (Danish), Gail FAGEN (Italian), Laura FREIDENFELDE (Latvian), Jechka GEORGIEVA (Bulgarian), Barbara KOSCIA (Polish), Gabrielle LEYDEN (French), Tatjana MARČIĆ (Serbian and Czech)

Proof reading and rewriting: John BARRETT, Gabrielle LEYDEN

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[www.bellone.be](http://www.bellone.be) – [infos@bellone.be](mailto:infos@bellone.be)