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THEATRE AND GEOGRAPHY

OR BEGGARS GESTUS

If we imagine that in the age of Sophocles and Euripides a hypothetical European Union generously provided its funds for the organization of a score of festivals with the aim of encouraging the integration of the barbaric West into the civilized East, we could expect that the equally hypothetical theatre people from the forests of the Alps or of the shores of the Rhine would behave as follows: They would present to the first selection committee to come from Athens that which they believe is of merit and later as the result of experience they would present to the next selectors a production which would have a higher chance of being exported. That would, most probably, be some concoction of ritual movement and sound in which the local language (let's say Celtic, for example) would be reduced to a minimum. Here and there an actor who has at some point visited Athens would add some more easily pronounceable by the Celtic players, Greek phrase. For the Athenian theatregoer there would have to be plenty of foreign oddities, as a feast for the eye, to keep his attention. He would be especially pleased to feel that he finds himself so far from the ways of barbarism and can enjoy the indisputable advantages of the slave-driven society. For that reason the visiting players would with readiness reenact pre-historic ritual cannibalism, let's say. That which through speech would ultimately reach the hearts and minds of the people of the Alps or of the shores of the Rhine, would not reach the Greek spectators. They would not have known Celtic nor would they have had a reason to do so. That language, as well as the whole unique culture of the Celts, after their travels through the East, including settling for a time on the Balkan Peninsular, would be ultimately condemned to disappear. Only specialists would later show interest in its remnants, analyzing the structure of the living languages of the West or the archeological finds, such as swords or women's beautiful jewelry.

All of this is, of course, a hyperbole, we do not have the self-confidence of Barbarians. It may also be a good idea for us to hope that the speech that actors and audiences will use in the future in order to communicate will not be just one language. This language, for example, which we are using at this international theatre forum in our effort to understand each other. And yet: the striving for a universal theatrical stylistics which would clear the way for the productions toward the market of the major theatre festivals (no need in pointing out in which part of Europe these festivals take place) logically leads to a narrowing of the content. The natural drive toward reaching foreign audiences, on the other hand, introduces a barrier for the texts written for the stage and questions the very role of the “play” in general. I believe that a fact that cannot be overlooked is that the tendencies in regards to this problem are least apparent or sometimes even non-existent in the theatrical metropolises where the communication between stage and hall takes place in English.

If I, for example, in the capacity of Artistic Director or Dramaturg of a theatre receive a well bound text of 50 or 60 pages, with an excellent reference that this is a wonderfully written text by a Finnish author, the only thing, to start with, that I can do with it is to place it with care in my desk drawer. The very sufficient Finnish section of ITI would probably have taken care for the text to be translated into English. In this case, among the limited number of good directors, I would need to find one of the even more limited number of those who use English and then if there is interest in the work, a risk would have to be taken for a translation from the original language. To expect that of the very few Bulgarians who have a knowledge of Finnish there will be someone who will be able to deal with the specifics of translating drama, when amongst the so many interpreters from the major European languages there are still so few in number who achieve this feat, is to have very high expectations. In one of the bigger countries the chances for the Finnish author would be better, but even there the chance of an adequate translation are inversely proportional to the wealth of his or her writing. Naturally, the easiest text for translation would be the one written in elementary language but elementary language usually goes hand in hand with an elementary way of thinking. (I would like to make it clear that what I

understand when using the expression “wealthy language” in playwrighting I include the principles of economy and nuance.)

In this case the Finnish author may only feel unfortunate for not being born, as Max Frisch or Friedrich Dürrenmatt in a region where national boundaries do not coincide with linguistic boundaries, or like Ibsen, Strindberg and Ionesco, didn't chose in time to move and live elsewhere. The reason I mention these names is because it seems to me that there are not all that many playwrights from countries, the size of Finland, who have acquired international acclaim.

Apart from the senseless self-pity and the thought of emigration there is another alternative: To simply write for your fellow countrymen without paying much attention to the fact that at one or another theatrical forum there are discussions of the possibility for an exchange of summaries, of preparing literal translations, and other similar hopeful ideas, which usually lead to nothing.

The main thesis of the anti-globalists, namely that the poor countries are getting poorer and the rich countries are getting richer, has its equivalent in the world of theatre. Thus, for example, putting the minimal subsidies the state provides for the theatre, it is even more difficult to raise additional money for producing in Sofia a Bulgarian play than it is for the staging of a French, English or German play. In addition to supporting productions of their own playwrights' works, the Cultural Institutes of these countries subsidize the publication of translations of scores of their authors. And, naturally, it would be an absurdity to blame them for this. On the contrary, great gratitude is expressed. There seems to be no hope however that in the foreseeable future such a generous gesture might be extended on the part of any Bulgarian Cultural Institute abroad.

If there is any link between the problematic place of the “play” and the integration processes in European theatre, it has to be secondary and cannot, of course, in itself give rise to any reservations towards these processes. The primary reason has to lie within the general crisis of ideas, due to which so very few contemporary theatrical texts have the capability to capture the attention of a large and varied audience. The lack of depth or the banality of the linguistic content naturally leads to the pretension that stage components such as set design or choreography become the primary vehicle of the theatrical expression.

One does not need to go into the problem of the relationship between the linguistic and the visual in order to realize that betraying what is most essential in the theatre - the presentation of human relationships foremost through the most human means of communication, which is language - theatre turns its back on it's deepest nature and enters into an unequal battle on foreign territory.

When one considers the link between change as a category and action as a synonym of drama, one would expect that the tremendous social developments in a country such as Bulgaria would become the source of a huge dramatic output. This, however has not happened. Seemingly endless, obviously dramatic stories are left by the playwrights to the crime pages of the newspapers. And, indeed, the process of initial accumulation of capital and everything that goes with it is not in and of itself a real challenge for the playwright, if only because in this part of the world it is history repeating itself. What could be more banal than illustrating direct or indirect links between wealth and crime and chewing on moral postulates such as: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God ". The unrefracted reproduction of the grotesque realities in the countries to the East of the dismantled Berlin Wall, and in particular those on the Balkans, could to a greater extent, perhaps, hold the attention of audiences to the West of it; there is no need for people here to go to the theatre when they themselves are performers in the drama of the day. The fear and compassion which the ancient philosopher connects with the notion of drama, are emotions which need to be evoked in the spectators, not in the players, and at that done with a measure of restraint, otherwise the theatre would not be a place for pleasure. The frightening images of life, in the regarded as the darker regions of the continent could, indeed, fuel the legitimate confidence of western audiences that they live in a more ordered world. But, one wonders, whether the writing of texts which are aimed for export but hardly hold any interest for the people of this region, may not be not only a pointless endeavor but one which is also rather less than honorable. For it resembles the familiar gestus of the crippled beggar who exploits his abnormality in order to get a coin in his cup.

A more detailed discussion on the subject of "Balkan Theatre in the European Context" would require more detailed information than I have, as a playwright

who rarely has the chance of attending the occasional international forum and of leafing through some of the available theatrical periodicals. Yet, my far from superficial experience of Bulgarian theatre and the less immediate but fairly lengthy contacts with German theatre have led me to believe that the reasons for the ever increasing tendency of marginalization of the theatre in two countries as far apart as Bulgaria and Germany are in fact very similar. If at least since Ibsen it is a truism that the playwright is not obliged to provide answers, no one has yet succeeded to explain why he might decide to cease to ask questions. When the stage, with all the power of all the means at its disposal, fails to confront the audience with the essential problems of existence, it is only natural that that audience would turn its back on it. And it makes just as much sense that our contemporaries are happier to spend their time on simple straightforward entertainment, or on the morsels of reality that can be seen on television or on film. The completely uninvolved irony or the artistic games of cynicism in the theatre may have seemed adequate to a time when the assertion of an end to history sounded almost convincing. But what is going to happen now, after the explosions in New York and Baghdad, which seems less like an end than like a new beginning?

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