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# Political Theatre in Europe: East to West, 2007–2014

What political theatre may be in contemporary times and in what sense it is 'political' are the core issues of this article. Maria Shevtsova discusses examples from within a restricted period, 2007 to 2014, but from a wide area that begins in Eastern Europe – Russia, Romania, Hungary, Poland – and moves to Germany and France. Her examples are principally productions by established ensemble theatre companies and her analysis is framed by a brief discussion concerning independent theatres, 'counter-cultural' positions, and institutional and institutionalized theatres. This latter group is in focus to indicate how political theatre in the seven years specified has been far from alien to, or sidelined from, national theatres, state theatres, or other prestigious companies in receipt of state subsidy. Two main profiles of recent political theatre emerge from this research, one that acknowledges political history, while the other critiques neoliberal capitalism; there is some unpronounced overlap between the two. Productions of Shakespeare feature significantly in the delineated theatrescape. Maria Shevtsova is co-editor of *New Theatre Quarterly* and Professor of Drama and Theatre Arts at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her most recent book (co-authored) is *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (2013).

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'POLITICAL THEATRE' is only 'political' in a particular society in time-space and place and its resonance as 'political' varies according to socially defined groups of people. Nothing is absolute, universal, or essentialist about political theatre. The issue of the specificity of contexts evoked here cannot be expanded upon adequately for the examples to follow: the framework of a short paper simply does not allow a full account. However, several details, here and there, will suggest differences between sociopolitical and cultural contexts and, as well, between the theatre productions being discussed in implied relation to them.

A major principle – contextualization – thus underlies this presentation instead of being explicitly pursued by it. My main purpose is other: it is to select promontories on parts of the European theatrescape, roughly from 2007 to the near end of 2014, which might serve as signposts for drawing the field as it appears now, however incompletely. It is essential to keep in mind Pierre Bourdieu's idea that a 'field' is perpetually dynamic, so

that change is always incipient in it; and those who participate in it take position (*prise de position*) and hold a position within a broad terrain of plural, diverse positions shaped by the perceptions, attitudes, and aspirations, including political aspirations, that guide their actions.<sup>1</sup> The making of theatre, which is a form of position-taking, is one such value-oriented and value-laden action, as is going to see theatre work, or attempting to get a grip on it analytically after the event.

## Independent Theatre and Teatr.doc

A further point of importance has to do with the types of theatre that are made. All, whatever their creative processes or their artistic accomplishments may be, are related in some way, positively, negatively, or quasi-indeterminately, to institutions, institutional power, symbolic capital, and economic support, which risks bringing control in its wake: are X, Y, and Z theatres financed through state, city, and other government organs, or



From the Teatr.doc production of Yelena Gremina's *One Hour Eighteen* (2010). Photo: Guterman.

through private funds and foundations? What conditions are set for subsidization? Theatres in a negative relation to official frameworks are differentiated by a singular lack of most, if not all, of the benefits to be had from subsidies, whatever the attendant drawbacks imposed by the conditions. This is frequently the case of numerous small-scale theatres known as 'experimental', 'alternative', 'non-establishment', 'non-conformist', 'underground', or simply 'independent'.

All such descriptions have a political colouration, depending on the actual context in question. The small-scale Maladype in Budapest comes to mind since it defines itself as an 'independent' theatre; and this is so not only because Maladype is privately funded

(though with difficulty and insignificantly), but also to indicate its opposition to current Hungarian state politics.

The verbatim Teatr.doc in Moscow is also independent, and its dedication to new playwriting prepared the scene for *Praktika*, founded in 2005, a few streets away. Teatr.doc itself was co-founded in 2002 by playwright Yelena Gremina, author of the canonical verbatim piece *One Hour Eighteen* (2010) on the lawyer Sergey Magnitsky's trumped-up imprisonment and then death in custody in traumatic circumstances.

Teatr.doc was initially modelled on the documentary and neo-naturalist precepts of the Royal Court in London, as part of the Russian and British cultural politics of the



*The Soldier* (2013), a Teatr-post production by Dmitry Volkostrellov. Photo: Paulina Koroleva.

late 1990s. London may have been the trigger and Maladye may be a parallel independent theatre case, but both Teatr.doc and Praktika operate within parameters that are quite specific to Russia at the turn of the twenty-first century. These two groups openly develop social-issue work, and they are influential. They also consciously and openly mediate political opinion, as largely held by their demographically varied groups of spectators.

Additionally, Teatr.doc has extended its remit, providing a platform for like-minded, young, and innovative directors, notably in 2013 for Dmitry Volkostrellov, a former student of Lev Dodin and director of Teatr post, another independent theatre, which Volkostrellov founded in St Petersburg in 2011. Teatr post's one-man show *The Soldier*,

a ten-minute performance with no more than two lines of text by Pavel Pryazhko, is a straightforward action, even though it usually baffles spectators in its cryptic brevity. A young soldier on leave from an unspecified location walks down a corridor, takes off his street clothes and takes a shower, all filmed in situ in real time; and this imagistic synthesis leaves gaps for spectators to connect or disconnect at will, such freedom allowing this spectator to glimpse in it a critique of war. Its two lines, aphoristically placed at the end of the performance, encourage that critique: 'A soldier came home on leave. When it was time for him to go back to the Army, he did not return.'<sup>2</sup>

The gestalt crispness of the performance with its fable-like epilogue exposes the soldier's dispassionate demeanour and behaviour. At the same time, it appears to be addressed to audiences presumed to be equally dispassionate because of their lack of awareness or denial of war, their physical and psychological immunity from its horrors, and their incapacity or unwillingness, therefore, to empathize with its victims. A soldier who takes a shower in ordinary life and who, moreover, is distanced by a film screen, cannot easily be perceived as a killer. Nor do the routine actions that he carries out mechanically suggest a soldier's capacity to kill, unless this, precisely, is the point. In other words, his routine actions could well allude to the systematic, and systemic, killing generated by the machinery of war.

It helps to know, when viewing *The Soldier* in this way, that one of Volkostrellov's most important themes as a director is callousness: a collective lack of empathy or what could be called 'social autism', which he repeatedly projects in his productions as if to throw the image of this autism back to spectators as a critical image of themselves. 'Social autism' is tied up with, but is not the same as, the early Marxian concept of 'reification' whereby people are treated as things, and their relations are merely instrumental.

Lack of patronage or 'sponsorship', the going term in Russia, generates difficulties – venues of fortune, tiny venues, unpaid rent, unpaid actors, and so forth. It is consequ-

ential for the types of small-scale theatre noted previously, but affects, as well, the 'community' or 'participatory' theatres and street theatres typical of Western rather than Central and Eastern Europe. By the same token, it is paradoxically at play in marginal and marginalized political theatre – think of the 'counter-cultural' 1960s – which has acquired something of a secondary status in the overall field of the theatre, garnering all of its varied categories.

### **Institutions, Ensemble, and the 'Political'**

The attributed or perceived lower status of this particular 'fringe' category of political theatre tends to be the result of position-taking by collaborators who, refusing to be co-opted by society – hence the 1960s notion of 'selling out' to society – *deliberately* seek a lower status, since this, too, is a rejection of the political status quo. Either way, whether the status is imposed or chosen, the opt-out variant of political theatre is to be distinguished from the political theatres of Meyerhold, Brecht, and Piscator, which, engaged in the very thick of political struggle, also wielded political clout (although at what price!). The three Russian theatres referred to (Teatr.doc, Praktika, and Teatr post) by no means emulate these flagship endeavours – on the contrary, they debunk heroic politics – but nor do they bail out from the social network. They are both outside the network and in it, without, so far, 'selling out' to it.

My final introductory remarks concern my choice of productions, which are from the state-subsidized houses of Europe rather than from variants of independent theatre. My selection is not motivated by an unhealthy penchant for institutions, but from the necessity of pointing out that institutionalized theatres certainly can, and do, generate political theatre in some sense of the term 'political'; indeed, this is the case of institutionalized theatres in the formerly Communist Eastern European countries. In other words, a theatre need not be marginal or counter-institutional, and marginalized or starved of institutional approval, to produce 'political' theatre.

The second reason for my selection is tied up with my lifelong research on the work of directors. That they are primarily, although not exclusively, the directors of established theatres has a great deal to do with the fact that they are the directors of ensemble companies. Some are stable and permanent, largely composed of the same actors for thirty years and more, like the Maly Drama Theatre of St Petersburg. Others are renewed ensembles of long duration in that their members stay for prolonged periods, generally ten to fifteen years, and then leave, while the company and its 'brand' name remain. Such are the Théâtre du Soleil in Paris or the Volksbühne in Berlin.

The key point, however, of my sustained interest in ensemble companies is that ensemble practice fosters the ongoing development of actors, directors, and, most important of all, their co-creation of work; and this, in time-space-place, makes ensembles richly layered sites for research into creative processes, while they indicate, as well, because of their duration, the socio-political tensions, shifts, and changes occurring in their societies. State-subsidized permanent ensembles are the hallmark of Europe's national theatres (the National Theatre of Britain excepted, since it does not have an ensemble troupe in situ).

My selection indicates how productions get a grip on, and come to grips with, the great difficulties, political and otherwise, of the world contemporary to them. Equally, these productions raise the question not so much of where political theatre is going as of what it *might* be when gathered up from within the seven or so years leading to the present day. Indeed, is it a matter of *political* theatre or of theatre that (only) has a political *dimension*? Is such a distinction viable? These questions suggest a double difference: the difference between material that has an explicitly political content and material from which political content can be deduced; the second difference concerns direct and indirect communication, each involving formal and stylistic devices and how material is presented and performed. A third possibility regarding what constitutes political theatre or (only)

gives it a political dimension arises from Heiner Müller's argument, in a 1987 interview, that it is the form of art and not its content that makes it political.<sup>3</sup> Following Müller, it is *how* you make theatre that shows whether it is political or not.

Further, what kind of 'political' is it in an age of the much trumpeted 'end of ideologies', which, together with an overwhelming global economic crisis, appears, in democracies, increasingly to disempower and disenfranchise citizens, so much so that the very notion of citizenship is at stake? In the ex-Communist countries of Europe, citizenship is made more vulnerable still as would-be citizens struggle against repressive reflexes that die hard and, in addition, struggle with – or against – the conformist consumerism and other demands of the 'modernization' pushed by neoliberal capitalism. The entity 'Europe', which was formerly known as the 'European Union', is the progressively strident standard bearer of this 'modernization'.

Then, what kind of 'political' is it in an age of false-start revolutions, rampant wars and civil wars, religious, racist, and other fundamentalist terrorisms, and the terrorist tactics – the adjective may not be too strong – of disinformation, media invasion, celebrity culture and the idolatry of money? The latter instances of civil-society terrorist-style intimidation have bred a palpable narcissism that erodes the spirit of collectivity and a palpable cynicism as regards politics, politicians, and above all, ideals, whether political or of any other kind. Virtually unimaginable is the 'spirit of utopia', *pace* Ernst Bloch, in this scenario.<sup>4</sup>

### Finding an 'Impulse to Change'

Well, my preamble and text proper have merged, bringing to memory a public discussion between directors at the Hungarian National Theatre on 27 March 2014 for whom the ambient cynicism, in its impact on audiences and so on the role of theatre in society, was of grave concern. Attila Vidnyánszky, managing and artistic director of this theatre, asserted that 'today's cynicism devours everything', disorienting directors in

their work. Valery Fokin, director of the mighty, government-backed and showcase Aleksandrinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, echoed his sentiment, calling the pervasive cynicism 'fatal' in its destruction of 'internal values' on which the vitality of theatre depends.

As to the suggestion that politics was to blame for this state of affairs, Fokin replied that 'we' – that is, those who have a stake in the theatre – were responsible. His answer is consistent with his sense of personal ethics, and his feeling of personal responsibility for the work he produces and where it goes. But he does not believe that theatre is capable of bringing about collective change. Nor does he believe that it can change individuals. At most it can give them the 'impulse to change'.

Fokin's reasoning overall suggested that his 'we' is a collection of morally motivated individuals, while politics is 'they'; and his assumption that politics is on the outside, alien, in fact, to artistic endeavour, has been common for decades among a good part of the Russian intelligentsia because of, although not exclusively because of, the mistrust generated by the repression of dissent characteristic of despotic regimes. However, if 'politics' has acquired nothing but negative connotations and 'political theatre' is believed to be estranged, by definition, from decent people in society – 'theirs' but not 'ours' – then 'political theatre' is not a feasible proposition for serious artists,

Or is it? It would seem, then, that the ground needs to shift from politics to history and to art for 'political theatre' to gain some sort of credibility. When this happens, a production can have political dimensions without being dominated by politics, even when political motifs permeate it through and through; and, by avoiding agit-prop and similarly overtly didactic and persuasive methods, it can go about its artistic construction, retaining the artistic sensibility and abilities necessary for carefully considered and well-crafted theatre of quality. This kind of quality in the 'ours'-versus-'theirs' perception at issue here is the presumed antithesis of the agitational, propagandistic, and slog-



anistic features adjudged to be intrinsic to 'political theatre'.

### **Dodin's 'Human', Krymov's Derision**

This shift to history and aesthetics is Dodin's line of attack in his 2007 *Life and Fate*, devised with the Maly Drama Theatre from the 1960 novel by Vasily Grossman, unpublished in Russia for political reasons until 1988, during *perestroika*. The production, the first to be based on the book, embraced its explosive thesis that Nazism and Communism were two sides of the same coin: they were interchangeable totalitarian regimes. Even more explosive was the Gestapo officer Liss's contention, in dialogue with Jewish Communist Moskovskoy in a German concentration camp, that the Nazis still had much to learn from the atrocities perfected by the Soviet Union.

The camp's prisoners are identified directly by their striped pyjamas. The camp, by contrast, is identified metaphorically, thus indirectly, by a volleyball net, the production's central design element. The latter is used for flashback scenes to the pre-war youth of the protagonists, or for remembered, imagined or dream sequences; it is, as well, an index of temporal change – past, present, and hints of the future – as of location, situation, event, and narrative. The net thereby permits a switch of focus, without set changes, to a kitchen, bedroom, apartment, office, the battlefield of Stalingrad (1943) caught in a flash, and the Gulag, the adjudged reverse side of the Nazi camp.

The production is a masterpiece of montage simultaneity in which stories of family, love, and moral transgression – Shtrum, the nuclear scientist at the core of the family narrative, is tricked into betraying his colleagues – are in counterpoint with history writ large. Nowhere, in the composition, is the volleyball net a more chilling indicator than when the musicians of a brass band stand firmly behind it in a horizontal line, play Schubert, strip, neatly fold their clothes, and walk into the imputed gas chamber of dim and seemingly steamed-up light at the back wall. Their instruments remain on the floor behind the net as signs of lives that once

were *lives*. Dodin's finely etched scene reflects the central interest of his *oeuvre* in what he calls the 'human' rather than what might be called, for nuance, the 'politicized human' – or, indeed, the 'politicized inhuman'.

*Life and Fate*, a landmark production in so far as coming to terms with traumatic history is concerned, possibly helped to clear the path for Dmitry Krymov, who is some fifteen years Dodin's junior. (Dodin turned seventy-one in 2015.) Krymov, a designer and painter, deals with history through satire and burlesque in installation-type pieces. The 2009 *Opus No. 7*, his first substantial production, is in two juxtaposed parts. The first is built on powerful visual images, reinforced, at the beginning, by the roar of an invisible machine whose wind blows thousands of bits of newspaper into the space through the holes punched out, just before, in the panels of a long, white paper wall. It becomes clear soon enough that the seemingly random images that follow refer in some way to the Holocaust, which, by association rather than through logical connection, is imbricated in the second part of the work.

This second part has, for focus, the infamous persecution of Dmitry Shostakovich, who in 1936 was accused by a *Pravda* article (rumoured to have been written by Stalin) of composing not music, but cacophonous noise, the opera at issue being *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District*. A huge puppet of a woman, indubitably Mother Russia, is manoeuvred through the space amid three fake pianos, which are rolled in and eventually smashed. In one vignette, a midget puppet Shostakovich is set down at a keyboard. Mother Russia picks him up, clasps him to her bosom and all but squashes him as placards with the names of artists who were Stalin's victims go up, and the voice of Shostakovich is heard, reading his recantation.

This reading is deeply disturbing in that Shostakovich's fear and public humiliation can be inferred from its dispassionate, almost neutral inflections, as can the brutality of the Stalin years. Even so, its immediate, powerful effect is virtually negated by the overriding derision that invades the second part,

which is at odds with the relatively sober tone of the first. Grossman's universe peers through Krymov's construction, and this is hardly surprising, given the overlap between their selected tranches of history.

Krymov's aesthetic arrangements since *Opus No. 7* have dug into derision, prompted less, it would seem, by 'today's cynicism' than by something like contempt, or the settling of scores, where sons oppose their fathers and, with them, the historic past. Unbridled contempt is fully evident, in my view, in his 2012 *Gorki 10*, which, like the preceding work, is in two parts. The first is a slapstick-grotesque skit on Lenin. The second is a collage of various writings, notably featuring Boris Vasilyev's *The Dawns are Quiet Here*, which concerns the Second World War, with visual pastiche references to Yuri Lyubimov's iconic 1970 production derived from this novel.

The purpose of Krymov's 'citations' of prominent novels and plays, as of those connected with Lyubimov, is to slap them down for their ideological bravura and/or sentimentalism vis-à-vis Soviet life. The tone of *Gorki 10* links the production with the parodic deconstructions of Chekhov that, in the meantime, had drawn his attention, and which preoccupy him in the 2013 *Honoré de Balzac: Notes on Berditchev*, inspired by *The Three Sisters*. Here the sisters are hybrids of zombies and vampires recently arisen from their coffins.

### **Bogomolov's *Lobster: Lear. Comedy***

All things considered, the most interesting aspect of Krymov's theatre of derision (my terminology) is how it feeds into a current circulating among directors in their early forties, exemplified in Russia for the purposes of this argument, by Konstantin Bogomolov's 2011 *Lear: Comedy*. The production is after Shakespeare, but not entirely, since there are liberally inserted text fragments from Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, Valam Shalamov's Gulag tales and Paul Celan's poetry.

Bogomolov dismembers tyranny, lust for power, political corruption, sexual depravity,



Rosa Khayullina in Konstantin Bogomolov's production of *Lear: Comedy* (2011).

and so on down the line of disfigured and disfiguring behaviour with an unparalleled savagery as each and all, including Cordelia, reproduce, clone-like, the dictatorial, foul-mouthed Lear. The fact that none has any conscience or expresses the slightest bit of sympathy, empathy, or remorse is a devastating picture of that 'social autism' referred to earlier, but also of a sociopathic condition, which, the production shows – targeting the Kremlin, past and present, from Stalin to Putin – is configured in absolute power. The fact that a woman plays Lear (the Moscow Art Theatre's Rosa Khayullina) and, moreover, that the entire cast is cross-gendered is a subterfuge for not naming names, and this attempt at anonymity is a strategy, among several in the production, for turning it into an emblematic rather than a particular case.

The 1940s appear in *Lear: Comedy* and thus war is inevitably embedded in the production. The barbarism of war is theatricalized, displayed, and derisively undercut, in the same instance: Gloucester's eyes are gouged out with a corkscrew; Cordelia suddenly turns up in pilot leather and goggles, while dummy plastic lobsters – probably metaphors for machine-guns – hang from her sides; 'Victory Day' ('Den pobedy'), the patriotic song of the Second World War, is hoarsely intoned, rather than sung, with animal-like sounds to rock music, testing, with this sneering sacrilege, the limits of how far the production can go. (War veterans would not be laughing.)

For Bogomolov, this war is, in his words, the 'war of our fascism against theirs'.<sup>5</sup> Echoes of Grossman resound in his statement, intentionally or not, but there is no doubt from Bogomolov's reference to fascism that his production involves the idea of 'our' and so of a 'we' responsible for a political history fraught with catastrophes.

Bogomolov's acknowledgement of politics in history leads back to the earlier point on estrangement noted via Fokin, who, like Dodin – it is now crucial to observe – belongs to a generation of directors who *worked* in the Soviet era. Such is not the case of Bogomolov and his generation of directors. For Fokin, as was indicated, politics is essentially other than the theatre, a domain separate from the theatre, which would make political theatre an anomaly. Bogomolov confronts politics, for there is no doubt that *Lear: Comedy* is political theatre through and through, aided in being this very phenomenon by its single-mindedness, single track, and coarse grain. The latter characteristics emerge all the more aggressively when the production is placed side by side with Dodin's multi-layered, temperately textured *Life and Fate*.

Furthermore, *Lear: Comedy* does not have the opt-out-of-society clause available to 'counter-cultural' theatre. It intentionally seeks high-status visibility of the kind encouraged by secure institutions, especially as it was born of an association with one of them, the Moscow Art Theatre, no less, where, in the past three years, Bogomolov has been

enjoying increasing notoriety and critical and public success. Clearly, the protection and cachet of established houses is not to be sneezed at. His enemies are the traditionalist, Orthodox-conservative and right-wing publics whose pressure on the Moscow Art Theatre to dismiss him exerts pressure on his directorial integrity.

### Purcarete in Craiova

National Theatres are an integral component of such established houses in Europe as the Moscow Art Theatre (which, it must be noted, has never been described as 'national'), and the National Theatre of Craiova in Romania, a provincial institution as distinct from its metropolitan homologue in Bucharest, is a significant example of how ensemble-theatre strength in a subsidized framework is able to engender and support political theatre in freed-up conditions.

The Craiova theatre is indelibly linked with Silviu Purcarete, whose talents it nurtured from shortly before the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu in 1989, continuing through the 1990s. It is here that he carved, with a sure hand, his outrageously violent, excessive productions replete with metaphors, touring them to international festivals far and wide.

Purcarete's 1992 *Titus Andronicus* became his and Craiova's emissary and calling card. Stirred up by the execution of the hated dictator, *Titus Andronicus* let loose in the theatre the rage festering in a nation against tyranny, looking back on history in order to take stock, as the Russian directors were radically to do a whole decade and more later. But, then, Russia had not executed Stalin, and its delay in processing trauma through the theatre was bound up in the delays and complications of its newly emerging mechanisms for democratic freedom. Needless to say, Russia is also a much bigger country than Romania, and a far more cumbersome socio-economic structure to turn around.

Still, some factors of common experience may help to account for the comparable savagery of Purcarete's *Titus Andronicus* and Bogomolov's *Lear: Comedy*, and the extravagant theatrical devices that drive them. Com-





From Silviu Purcarete's production of *Measure for Measure*, set in a canteen-cum-psychiatric hospital (2008). Photo Florin Chirea.

parison need not be extended too far, however, since Purcarete, without foregoing his interest in the idea that political violence begets multiple forms of other violence, developed a theatre idiom less inclined to straight-out mockery and more to absurdist ambivalence. This entailed excavating the grotesque, both in the sense of gargoyle grotesque, with its emphasis on visual impact, and in Meyerhold's sense of the startling juxtaposition of opposites, with its emphasis on the double edges of meaning.

Purcarete's 2008 *Measure for Measure* is a good example. Commissioned by Craiova, the production is set in a canteen-cum-psychiatric hospital, where the sick and the supposedly not-sick are mixed and matched. Everything hovers on ambiguity. Isabella is no less salacious in her alleged innocence than Angelo in his righteousness, while Angelo's courtiers, whether in domestic dressing gowns or business suits, are interrogators and torturers. The sinister presence of a police state is right there in the canteen-asylum, and the whole lot is rubbish, as suggested by the piles of sawdust and straw on the floor.

Purcarete has his actors pick up brooms and sweep away the sawdust and straw – intimations of a barnyard, and so of the presence of animals – that was on the floor from the very start, but which has moved about continually, like a living organism, affected by the movement taking place on the stage. The production closes with the hint that the old cannot be swept out because, like a living organism, it will return with the new. What, then, it might be asking, has come of the hope of change promised by the euphoria of the Romanian revolution?

Purcarete had emigrated to France between these two productions, keeping his family life in France and his working life in Romania, and so it was that, besides maintaining his close relationship with the Craiova ensemble, he established another with that of the National Theatre 'Radu Stanca' in Sibiu. His 2007 *Faust* there was enveloped in his trademark stage opulence: flames of fire; streams of running water; flying devils; rapacious starlet she-devils (not without touches of misogyny); Mephistopheles popping out from beneath the floorboards, or

appearing on shelves or coming down from ceilings; visitations floating in and out of view; and more in this rapturous vein.

The power of knowledge and how it encourages thought, critique, and re-evaluation is at the heart of the production, as in Goethe, and in this proposal resides its political dimension. Nevertheless, the production's celebration of theatricality is its strongest dimension, its political innuendos receding with the cumulative sweep of the sensuality of the whole.

### Poland and Germany: 'Soft' Power

But we are not yet done with history or with *Titus Andronicus*. The 2012 *Titus Andronicus*, directed by Jan Klata from Teatr Polski in Wrocław in collaboration with Staatsschauspiel Dresden, revisits the Second World War. The German actors play the Romans and the Polish are the Goths, reversing the enduring stereotypes in both countries as to who is civilized, and who barbaric. Shakespeare, in any case, provides plenty of evidence that war cannot be a site of civilization, any more than can the cycle of revenge on which *Titus Andronicus* turns.

Fragments from Heiner Müller's *Anatomy Titus, Fall of Rome* filter into the production Müller's perspective on power as a force that cannibalizes itself as it destroys the colonized. This, for Müller, was the Roman Empire in its colonization of the Goths and Africa. The parable with Nazi Germany is transparent but, instead of being activated by the production, it lies dormant in it as background information to be recognized by spectators. The production is bilingual, in German and Polish, which in itself suggests that it is a dialogue – or clash – between two cultures and/or an intercultural approach. Surtitles are used in the language appropriate to the audience.

Judging by the production, the intention of both companies was to revisit the Second World War so as to bury it by ridiculing the German–Polish stereotypes that had developed before, from, and after it. The opening scene is businesslike and solemn as men in T-shirts boasting punk-style war illustrations haul in numerous casks, one by one, that might contain the spoils of war but are actually the coffins of Titus's sons killed in action.

It is a silent prologue for a sequel that trades on comedy verging on farce. Xeno-



From Jan Klata's production of *Titus Andronicus* for Teatr Polski (2012). Photo: Natalia Kabanow.



Another scene from the Teatr Polski production of *Titus Andronicus*. Photo: Natalia Kabanow.

phobic jokes about the incomprehensibility of the other side's language and cultural habits belong neither to Shakespeare nor to Müller but were compiled by the actors and the director during rehearsals. Their purpose was to foreground the prejudices among and around them today. In other words, the production's emphasis is on the here and now, and its story, borrowed from Shakespeare but filled out by German and Polish collective memories, is the precondition for that emphasis.

The rest follows, and it is, in turn, excoriating or lurid, or merely snide or flippant, appropriating Shakespeare's bloodbath of a play for the exposure of stereotypes as instruments of power. Power is fundamentally understood in this production as manipulation and brainwashing. However, the production alters the play's parameters, moving away from hard-core politics, including political indoctrination, to what should most probably be defined as lifestyle issues.

Take, for instance, the satirical deflation, by means of heavy-metal rock in full blast, of a symbolically charged Polish war song, which was the signature tune of a more or

less nationalistic television series popular several decades ago; or the mockery of Chopin's music, a national icon, beautifully played during the Romans' ghastly scenes of revenge; or the jingle of an advertisement for soap powder in some lewd scene; or the sexually charged Tamora, Queen of the Goths, styled in the images of celebrity-watch magazines; or the pornographic, B-movie rape of the Roman daughter, Lavinia. As Klata and the two ensemble companies working with him see it, power today, in Germany and Poland, is not the 'hard' power of governance, but the 'soft' power of media spin and pop-culture narcosis of capitalism.

Whether *Titus Andronicus* is a persuasive vision of where the power really lies today is moot. There is no denying, on the other hand, its mocking energy, which carries it into the 'theatre of derision' profiled above, and places Klata somewhere in the vicinity of Bogomolov's *Lear: Comedy*.

### Germany: 'Capitalism Pays for Criticism'

Furthermore, Klata's production reverberates with Rene Pollesch's iconoclasm at the Volksbühne, and perhaps, most tellingly, with his

2012 *Kill Your Darlings! Streets of Berladelphia*. Pollesch kills shibboleths: witness his reference to *Mother Courage* in his reproduction of Brecht's wagon, which circles the stage to actor Fabian Hinrich's virtuoso parody of showbiz babble. The wagon is in unvarnished plywood to stress ironically that it is a pastiche of the prop Brecht used to such effect in his production of his own play. Hinrich flays the stage boards with the massive rodeo and circus whip with which he also makes circles while the wagon circles around the stage. The whole display demonstrates Pollesch's thesis, which Hinrich's monologue spells out, on how entertainment rules in contemporary capitalism.

As is well known, Frank Castorf, director of the Volksbühne, has for many years made capitalism the core subject of his productions, wielding his unholy trinity of power, sex, and money in what I have elsewhere called his 'post-Dadaist' fashion.<sup>6</sup> Castorf has only recently turned to Balzac, that phenomenal critic of capitalism and its bids for political power. Castorf's *La Cousine Bette*, premiered in 2013, may not yet be his last word – any more than are his 2014 Bayreuth productions of Wagner's *Ring* cycle – on the syphilis that is capitalism (Balzac's metaphor) in the global economic crisis of the twenty-first century. Castorf takes up with relish Balzac's corrosive image of inherited family disease for the spread of capitalism in nineteenth-century France to suit his own ends.

Notwithstanding Castorf's East German origins, his critique of capitalism is of a piece with that of Thomas Ostermeier, born and bred in West Germany and director of the Schaubühne in reunified Berlin (1990). Ostermeier makes no bones about the necessity of appealing to the young, and his theatre language has come to resemble more and more their bodily languages, dress codes, gestural short cuts, pop-cultural referents and, yes, also their confusions over how to get a handle on the conflicting social values that constantly make demands on them. Thus his 2012 *Enemy of the People* is by the young, for the young, on the problems of how action can be taken with integrity in a

world based on commercial transactions that spill over into transactional relations between human beings.

While Ostermeier shakes the dust off Ibsen, he also uses the device of a public debate, which the actors, stepping outside their performances on stage, initiate from within the audience. The device is a curious throwback to a late 1960s and then a 1970s technique of political theatre, or of making theatre politically, returning to Müller's distinction. In the process, Ostermeier resumes an argument, which he repeated in a public forum at the Schaubühne in March 2013 and reiterated in an interview in *Le Monde*, 6–7 July 2014, that the neoliberal state – and, after all, neoliberalism is the name of the game in the European Union – understands that it has to subsidize the theatre for its wellbeing. Capitalism digests the criticisms made of it, Ostermeier argues, in order 'to develop better'; and the role of theatre is to continue its criticism while being 'paid' to do so. Ostermeier's diagnosis and solution sound like old-fashioned *realpolitik* lightly bordering on cynicism.

Nevertheless, and regardless of the self-aware opportunism that also peers through Ostermeier's bold words, the director draws attention to a serious issue, namely the contradiction of democratic states – a 'dialectical' contradiction, in Brecht's terminology – that cannot but leave open, in the name of democracy, the freedom of others to criticize them. Furthermore, these states, when driven by neoliberalism, have no alternative but to accept and *finance* criticisms of neoliberalism, alias capitalism, not least when state neoliberalism, alias state capitalism, is at issue: such is the condition of both neoliberal polity and neoliberal economics in the world today. Money is to be made by someone for someone through the (entrepreneurial) exercise of critique.

### Mnouchkine's Corporate *Macbeth*

There is a difference in optic and character as the road is crossed to reach Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil, whose *Macbeth* was premiered towards the end of



April 2014. *Macbeth* is Mnouchkine's first Shakespeare production in thirty years after *Twelfth Night* in 1982, followed by *Richard II* and *Henry IV, Part One* in 1984. She intended *Richard II* and *Henry IV* to be part of a bigger, unrealized cycle of Shakespeare's history plays which are, most certainly, political.

Politics has always been integral to Mnouchkine's professional life, as to her life as a citizen fighting for social justice. The abbreviated Shakespeare cycle that she succeeded in mounting announced, for the first time, her commitment to the stylized and highly corporeal forms of Asian theatre and its performance to accompanying non-stop, live music. Mnouchkine rendered her translations, with a few minor cuts, into modern colloquial French. She also translated *Macbeth* in a similar register.

The Soleil was established in 1964, soon taking position in the existing field of the theatre as a theatre of 'collective creation'. This, in the given sociopolitical context of May 1968 and its flow, in spirit, into the 1970s, was also a political position, as was – and remains – the Soleil's very organization and practice of ensemble theatre.

*Richard II* was 'in the manner of' Kabuki rather than a replica of Kabuki, and its shades-of-an-imaginary-Asian idiom, not altogether free of Orientalism, marked several of the productions in a series whose scripts were by Hélène Cixous. The last of the Cixous series was the 1999 *Drums on the Dike*, a marvellously magical and sumptuous work with real-estate imbroglios and financial-political corruption for its main themes. It was played by actors playing puppets playing characters, the simulated puppets being manipulated by black-clad puppeteers played by actors, who were by their side throughout the performance.

Mnouchkine is clear about her antipathy to psychological theatre and the aesthetics of naturalism and realism. 'Realism is the enemy,' she has declared on more than one occasion;<sup>7</sup> and her outright rejection of realism entailed her complete embrace of theatricality under which she subsumed her imaginary Asian performance modes and their accentuated use of movement, masks,

make-up, costumes, headgear – in short, of everything that was externalized and that foregrounded *not* the character, but the *actor*, while enhancing the actor's playing.

When Mnouchkine left Soleil versions of Kabuki, Kathakali, and so forth behind her, after *Drums on the Dike*, she retained such features of her theatricality as whitened faces with ostentatiously heavy make-up while seeking new principles for it. Such are the dollies on which episodes of the 2003 *The Last Caravanserai (Odysseys)* were performed, the dollies having been wheeled in and out by half-visible actors hugging the floor. Such are the filming techniques, film tricks, silent-film overacting, and over-the-top vignettes of cliffhanger adventure films, all done with humour, of the 2009 *The Shipwrecked of Mad Hope*, the production immediately preceding *Macbeth*. *The Shipwrecked of Mad Hope*, in which Cixous was involved, entertains the idea of a utopian community, which was destroyed from within by the very characters who had made great efforts to start it up. The production secretes an almost pessimistic, albeit *not* defeatist, viewpoint on the enterprise undertaken with hope, however 'mad' it may have seemed.

Whichever production Mnouchkine offers her audiences, its theatricality guarantees an indirect transmission of social, moral, and political consciousness and a metaphoric transposition of sociopolitical questions of importance for the time in which the production is performed. Questions of the moment concern immigration, homelessness, exile, the flight of refugees, and the search for asylum (the case of *The Last Caravanserai*) together with a whole raft of other sociopolitical and humanitarian dilemmas that run through her entire body of work. In her approach to politics through theatricality, where metaphor is indispensable, Mnouchkine demonstrates her common ground with Eastern European theatricality.

### The Perfidy of Power

Then comes *Macbeth* with its more discreet theatricality than is usual at the Soleil, and its more direct treatment of political subjects.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are a glamorous couple. All the social semiotics of their clothing, from Macbeth's male casual chic to Lady Macbeth's fine blouses and tailored suits, as well as of their home – beautiful marble on the floor, streamlined couches, coffee table, Macbeth's designer desk with computers – conjure up modern royals, who, nevertheless, look like sleek bourgeois, and/or an elite of politicians, bankers, and corporate men and women. Serge Nikolai, in the role of Macbeth, even recalls Nicolas Sarkozy, having played a wickedly Berlusconi-like figure in the 1994 *The Perjured City*, text by Cixous. The Macduff household resembles, in its layout, the Macbeths' comfortable home.

Lady Macbeth appears to own a high-class florist shop (unless it is an outhouse of her château) set against a rose-trellised wall, and it is presumably the source of the hundreds of pink rose petals with which she strews the floor to welcome Duncan, victorious from war. Duncan arrives in a helicopter, evoked by sound, to a gaggle of eager photographers and journalists grouped tightly together, as they will be later for Macbeth's coronation, although in a greater frenzy. The celebrity universe undergirds these images, which are touched up satirically by exaggerated detail that gives a critical edge to the otherwise smooth pomp and circumstance of these scenes.

A similar process through which the everyday is theatricalized occurs for the cloyingly sentimental vision of moneyed bliss in Lady Macbeth's trellised pink roses and how she repots flowers, covered by an apron and wearing gardening gloves, her hands full of soil, when her husband comes home to be greeted by a kiss. What more could this happy couple want, when it has everything? The answer, as we know from Macbeth's reference to his 'vaulting ambition', is to be king.

Domestic clichés, of which there are many, cross with the clichés of politics familiar from television, movie screens and *Elle* and *Hello!* magazines – take your pick. It is not always easy to tell when clichés denoting nationalities are jokes. The shorts and knee-high socks associated with English colonialists

appear to be seen comically, whereas the large group of Scots in tartan kilts and tam o' shanters in the closing scenes of war, when Birnam Wood does, indeed, come to Dunsinane, might well not be. In fact, the Scottish tableau – for it is arranged as a tableau – could decorate a tin of Scottish shortbread. Yet how *is* it to be seen, given the events played out?

By contrast, the supernatural elements are dealt with in an unambiguously theatrical way. The witches are strangely padded out, clustered together to look like a mound on the landscape. This mound suddenly begins to talk. Macbeth stares into the the trapdoor of the stage at the imaginary sword that appears before him. Banquo also appears from the trapdoor, but as smoke and light. He is visible only to Macbeth during an elegant, gently ironic formal dinner scene, fleetingly reminiscent, in its superb brief dance, of Pina Bausch's choreographies. The dinner scene, a façade for deceit, might well clinch the production's view of the perfidy of power.

### Unique, but Not Isolated

The little space left me for a conclusion is probably best left open, since the promontories dotted on my theatrescape could be joined from several different directions, depending on the point of departure. Looking from the end of my analysis rather than from its beginning, it would seem that the connections between the points trace pathways that are not strangers to each other.

The theatre examples have features in common, while each is quite distinctive, with its unique voice in its specific chronotope; and yet none of them is an isolated case precisely because societies, particularly in the early twenty-first century, are not hermetically sealed. They interconnect, as can only be the case in our global market, and also increasingly politically interdependent, world, irrespective of its push-and-pull antagonisms. When taken together, these examples open up a pattern of tones, which are mostly variations of shades on a colour chart that have to do with mockery and some kind of

critical/mistrustful/scathing perspective on contemporary political forces.

However, none of these tonal variations appears to offer anything like an alternative, let alone a solution, to a sea of troubles itemized daily by the news networks in all their multiplicity. The theatre is as disarmed as are citizens in the face of daily disasters – citizens who are not so much led as generally misled, in both the directional and the moral sense of the verb. What appears to be striking is the difference of emphasis between the theatres within the seven-year period demarcated here, beginning in 2007, more or less at the acknowledged ‘start’ of the economic crisis, which continues into the present as we enter 2016.

In almost all the cases cited, the beginning of the crisis has a history or at least a hinterland of political theatre, or of theatre with a political dimension, or of theatre made politically. Take only the last example provided of Ariane Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil, whose interface with politics now goes back fifty years. And the difference of emphasis hinges on whether the productions selected deal primarily with their society’s traumatic political history, which appears to be especially the case of theatre in Russia and Romania, or with capitalism and its attendant political, economic, and cultural manifestations, which appears especially pronounced in Germany. In France, this second trend is reflected in concentrated form at the Théâtre du Soleil.

Of course, the difference between the two emphases has to do with the longevity of capitalism in Western Europe, against which the upsurge of neoliberalism during the past fifteen years and more has been thrown into greater relief. By contrast, the advent of neoliberalism in formerly Communist Eastern European countries is a recent phenomenon and, to boot, the experience, in each country, of coming to terms with its political history has been slow and painful.

Recognition, acknowledgement, and ownership of devastating political history trigger complex responses, including denial. Bogomolov’s savagery, for instance, is doubtless a fully conscious reaction against the thickly

wrapped layers of self-protection which, in Russia, have led to a faltering or even complete lack of historical memory, particularly among younger generations. Hence Bogomolov’s impulse to ‘restore’ historical consciousness, which is shared, in different ways, by Dodin, Volkostrellov, Gremina, and the playwrights and directors of Teatr.doc as a whole.

Variations between the two points of reference here identified in the theatre field – political history and capitalism with its neoliberal face – do exist and, although it has not been possible to focus on them, several examples have been sighted. So, too, has the not overly obvious overlap of traumatic history and the critique of neoliberal capitalism in *Titus Andronicus* as performed by the Teatr Polski in Wrocław and Staatsschauspiel Dresden. Even so, for the moment, the prominence of the two points of reference marked out here appear to be hubs around which the productions cited may be identified, as may, indeed, others not discussed on this occasion.

## Notes and References

This is a version adjusted for publication of my keynote address presented at the conference *Whither Political Theatre?* on 19–20 September 2014 at St John’s College, University of Cambridge. The conference was supported by the British Academy as a British Academy Research Event.

1. These are consistent preoccupations in Pierre Bourdieu’s work, but see Part 1 of *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. and trans. Randal Johnson (Oxford: Polity Press, 1993), p. 29–141. See also Maria Shevtsova, ‘Appropriating Pierre Bourdieu’s *Champ* and *Habitus* for a Sociology of Stage Productions’, in her *Sociology of Theatre and Performance* (Verona: Qui Edit, 2009), p. 83–109.

2. My translation.

3. Cited in review of *Anatomy Titus, Fall of Rome*, *Theatre Notes*, 29 November 2008.

4. See *The Spirit of Utopia* (Stanford University Press, 2000).

5. Round-table discussion with the director at the Golden Mask Theatre and National Awards Festival in Moscow, 6 April 2013.

6. See Christopher Innes and Maria Shevtsova, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 105–11, for further details on Castorf and Ostermeier relevant to this discussion. For supporting observations on Fokin’s views, see p. 94–6.

7. *Entretiens avec Fabienne Pascaud: l’art du présent* (Paris: Plon, 2005), p. 58.