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Post Scriptum Budapest: The Tenth International Meeting of Theatre (MITEM)

MITEM (Mádach International Theatre Meeting) celebrated its tenth anniversary in October 2023, somewhat out of sync and out of time because of the festival's cancellation due to Covid in 2020. It was absorbed into the Theatre Olympics (as discussed in *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXXIX, No. 4 (November 2023) [NTQ 156], p. 377–86), but its most recent edition was something of a replacement for the cancelled event, presented in the round figure of ten that has made everybody happy. It has also allowed this editor to follow through with a 'PS' to that article, acknowledging the importance of MITEM for both the National Theatre in Budapest and the theatregoing public. By contrast with the three and a half months of the Theatre Olympiad, MITEM lasted a modest twenty-four days.

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THE TENTH Festival focuses on theatre works from countries formerly known as Central and Eastern Europe, inclusive of minority-language productions from these geographical areas. Such inclusion, evident in the Theatre Olympiad (see NTQ 156), also guided choices of productions for this MITEM (Mádach International Theatre Meeting). Once again, as had happened in the early summer, I was hampered by professional constraints and so was obliged to make do as best I could in the five days at my disposal.

My schedule involved five productions, but meant, as well, that I was unable to see any of the minority-language works programmed. Nor, for that matter, could I see MITEM's only non-Central-Eastern European offering. This was Ivo van Hove's 2022 *Tartuffe, or the Hypocrite*, which had had enormous success at the Comédie-Française during its *fête* in that year for the 400th anniversary of Molière's birth. Van Hove did not create his *Tartuffe* from Molière's canonical 1669 five-act play but on

the three-act original, which Louis XIV, heeding Church protest against the representation of a Church brother as a sinner, had censored in 1664.

The productions in my portfolio were *Hamlet*, a dance-theatre piece by the Košice Ballet, music dramaturgy and direction by Ondrej Šoth and choreography by Maksym Sklyar and Nelson Reguera Perez at the Košice National Theatre of Slovakia; *Oidipusz*, directed by Slovenian director Vito Taufer with the Yugoslav Drama Theatre in Belgrade; *Woyzeck*, directed by Attila Vidnyánszky Jr. with the National Theatre in Budapest; *The Master and Margarita* directed by Macedonian-born Aleksandar Popovszki with the National Theatre in Budapest; and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, directed by the Georgian director Avtandil Varsimashvili, also with Budapest's National Theatre. These last three productions most certainly showcased the skilful flexibility of the very well trained National Theatre ensemble actors.

The Caucasian Chalk Circle, which had promised so much, was hugely disappointing, probably because the production's key signatures – vaudeville, clownery, slapstick, circus buffoonery, and sometimes farce – did not quite rhyme with Brecht's parable and his anti-war position. Its levity may have been a device to spurn war and reduce Brecht's didacticism, especially as regards his central tale, but its overwrought theatricality worked against these possibilities. Insistent display was, perhaps, meant to supply *Verfremdungseffekt*: Grusha repeatedly runs backwards to go forwards; the doors of a narrow construction the length of the playing space are frequently slammed sideways to open or close but also to indicate scene changes; at one point the doors suggests a train crammed with people fleeing the war; huge fake flowers fall and are then thrown down to stick into the stage as Grusha scrubs her fake husband's back. Altogether, it was overkill.

Woyzeck, made some years ago when Vidnyánszky Jr. was a mere twenty-five years old, draws on rather comparable principles of excess. They are spiced, however, by infectious energy and sheer bombastic gall – enough of it so knowingly preposterous as to generate good-natured laughter. In its early years, I was told, *Woyzeck* had won for its director the reputation of being the new voice of the young. Flexed muscles, shapely bare legs, and flying testosterone abound, oppressing and exploiting, as do chorus-line psychiatrists, a hapless *Woyzeck*, while Marie, clutching their baby to her chest, lusts after the Captain of his army unit, who sports a well endowed moustache, and other bodily parts of note besides. Male bonding and two women in misogynistic perspective – it is all a big romp, without a smidgen of that harsh compassion that makes Georg Büchner's protagonist the epitome of the tragic 'small man' (re)invented in the twentieth century. The big question is: where is this folly going, and why? Something rudderless about this production makes one want to give its young blades a compass.

Another group of confident actors (five of them transplanted from *Woyzeck*) perform *The Master and Margarita*, but this time in cool tones within a sophisticated scenographic framework. Lightly lit strings link the stage and audience space, etching a symmetrical geometric pattern that looks like clever mathematics and just as clever architecture suspended in the air. Its austere elegance, once seized by the eye, is soon divided into two clear-cut rectangles, one in white, denoting the psychiatric hospital in which Ivan Nikolayevich Homeless is confined as he tries in several scenes to explain the unexplainable on which Mikhaïl Bulgakov had constructed his entire novel. The other is black, spot-lit by a round balloon acting as the moon under which a ballerina in a large white shirt trains her body.

This split-scene construction later changes identity, foregrounding, for instance, Pontius Pilate and the Jewish priest who wished Jesus Christ's death, one man in each rectangle; then, on the side where the ballerina and priest had been, a lush garden in a park appears, replete with Satan-Woland's entourage, his outsize cat conspicuously included. The split-scene phenomenon also vanishes to give the whole stage when, for example, a poster-like composition of actors announces Woland's black magic show at the Variety Theatre, or when Woland has Margarita preside over a party full of ghouls and ghosts; or at the end, when Margarita and the Master are reunited in their love nest. For the most part, a highly polished floor, brightly lit, reflects such episodes.

The director had fundamentally opted for attractive visual effects and fun, but more substance and depth would not have destroyed either. On the contrary, a deeper approach would have anchored Bulgakov's surreptitious but loaded allusions to political mayhem, moral corruption, disappearing people, and show trials ('black magic'). After all, Bulgakov was writing in and about the Stalinist 1930s, and the production's sensible dramaturgical work manifestly refers to this fearful period.

Depth showed its face in *Oedipusz*, its protagonist being for director Vito Taufer, it would seem, the embodiment of a modern absolute ruler – a king of sorts, but not quite because Oedipus does not have legitimate descent (until it is discovered, to his woe, that he does – as the son of the preceding king, whom he has killed). It is with regard to this illegitimacy of power, measured by origins, that Sophocles used *turannos* (τύραννος, 'tyrant') in the title of his play to qualify the status of the ruler from whose deeds social and natural calamities spring. Taufer's title is simply *Oedipus*.

Milan Marić in the role of Oedipus deftly draws the image of an adept businessman who is used to power and so to the obedience of subordinates – here of the strongman kind, suggested by the ever-ready bodyguards one step away from him. His image is immediately recognizable from contemporary iconography of the North American model, disseminated in the rest of the world. Local variation on the stereotype comes from markers of dress and behaviour, notably of the Orthodox priests assembled behind microphones at a press conference. The news concerns the catastrophic state of the land and Oedipus's avowal to hunt down the culprit – intentions dealt with in an authoritative but matter-of-fact way.

The production's clichéd opening at least has the merit of homing in on Serbia, Orthodoxy hinting at Russia and Greece but also at political alliance between Church and State. These semiotics allude, simultaneously, to puritan zeal and its sanction of a personal right to unearth the guilty and avenge evil – familiar from the North American politics transmitted globally on television screens and mobile phones. Even so, the production maintains its local associations through the spoken Serbian and the fact that the band plays and sings Serbian folk music in the bar where, after the press-conference 'prologue', the rest of the action takes place.

Spectators realize, soon enough, that this band plays the role of the Ancient Greek chorus. Unfortunately, the band's lyrics were not translated in the surtitles, which diminished the impact of this ingenious device.

A member of the production team gave assurances that all the songs were chosen for their direct relevance to the spoken dialogue and, furthermore, that they reflected and commented on unfolding events, exactly as was expected of the choruses of Greek tragedies.

What was more than a device or merely technique was the profoundly rooted relation of love between Milan Marić, the actor playing Oedipus, and Nataša Nincović in the role of Jocasta. Nincović's subtle performance of boundless, unshakable love, faith, and trust is precisely what motivates Jocasta's running from the bar in horror when, finally, she grasps the truth. Marić, in the meantime, having seized Oedipus's own horror, almost fanatically strives to build up the case for his guilt step by step to his partner until she cannot deny the evidence any longer. The intimate interaction between the two actors alters the tragedy's weight, usually placed on Oedipus. In other words, the production's centre is not Oedipus's crime and its consequences. It is the tragedy of an absolute love, beyond the desire or will of its agents, which turns out to be not only forbidden but also cursed – unthinkable, untenable, unacceptable, and unsolvable.

Something of this endgame universe peers through *Hamlet*, performed in a hybrid style of ballet and modern Expressionist dance in bodily shape, posture, step, phrasing, movement, and sequence of physical actions. At the same time, all dance elements are intrinsically dramatic, articulating characterization, plot structure, and narrative detail. The plot involves deceptions, confusions, tensions, conflicts, and strivings for political power, as well as personal fulfilment on a knife's edge, as in Shakespeare. The difference is that now it is in the perpetual motion and surge of dance.

Dramaturgically speaking, the protagonists are given more or less equal strength, thus nurturing the ensemble work whose potency emanates from the stage; and ensemble unity is palpable, despite the fact that Hamlet and Ophelia are sufficiently foregrounded to assert their dramatic importance for the structure of the whole.

The music (far too loud, for my taste) mixes musical genres, signifying a

polycultural world. It also weaves Tibetan monastic chant into the eclectic score, possibly to evoke the spiritual dimension of Shakespeare's play. Of great dramatic impact is the corps de ballet; at least, these dancers function like a corps de ballet, even though they do not enter and exit (their feature in classical ballet) but are permanently present. By the same token, the dancers of this corps assume their very own musical role, creating a sonic universe in counterpoint to the heterogeneous recorded music. They strike and beat the mesh metal 'walls' around the performance space in full whack with hefty bludgeons – 'instruments' (percussion instruments come to mind) that cooperate with the actions of the principal dancers and the feelings that they convey.

The scenography is integral to the unifying harmony. Prominently integral to the whole is the large central slope on which,

and under and around which, a good deal of dancing is performed. Ophelia attempts to reach Hamlet physically and emotionally on this construction; in burgeoning disintegration, she rolls a wheel upwards along it; Gertrude confronts Hamlet on it; and Hamlet swiftly plunges his dagger downwards from it into Polonius, who is hiding under it.

Artistic or socially marked trends can hardly be drawn from only five productions, especially not when they lack full artistic, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts. One crucial missing contextual factor is knowledge of each director's body of work, or at least of a significant part of it: a single work can by no means be taken as in any way indicative. This account, then, remains within the remit of a post scriptum: fragments of thought, wisps of the heart.

[Photo album follows]



Figure 1. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt, and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 2. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. From left to right: Szűcs Nelli, Katona Kinga, and Herczeg Péter. Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 3. *Woyzeck*. (Left to right) Kovács Tamás, Nagy Márk (visiting actor), and Bordás Roland. Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 4. *Woyzeck*. Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 5. *Woyzeck*. Nagy Márk (Woyzeck) and Barta Ágnes (Maria). Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 6. *The Master and Margarita*. Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 7. *The Master and Margarita*. Szép Domán ('The Cat Behemoth'). Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 8. *The Master and Margarita*. Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 9. *The Master and Margarita*. Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 10. *The Master and Margarita*. Szász Júlia (Margarita) and Trill Zsolt (The Master). Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 11. *Oidipusz*. Bojan Dimitrijević (Tiresias). Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 12. *Oidipusz*. Milan Marić (Oedipus) and Nataša Nincović (Jocasta). Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 13. *Oidipusz*. Milan Marić (Oedipus) and Nataša Nincović (Jocasta).

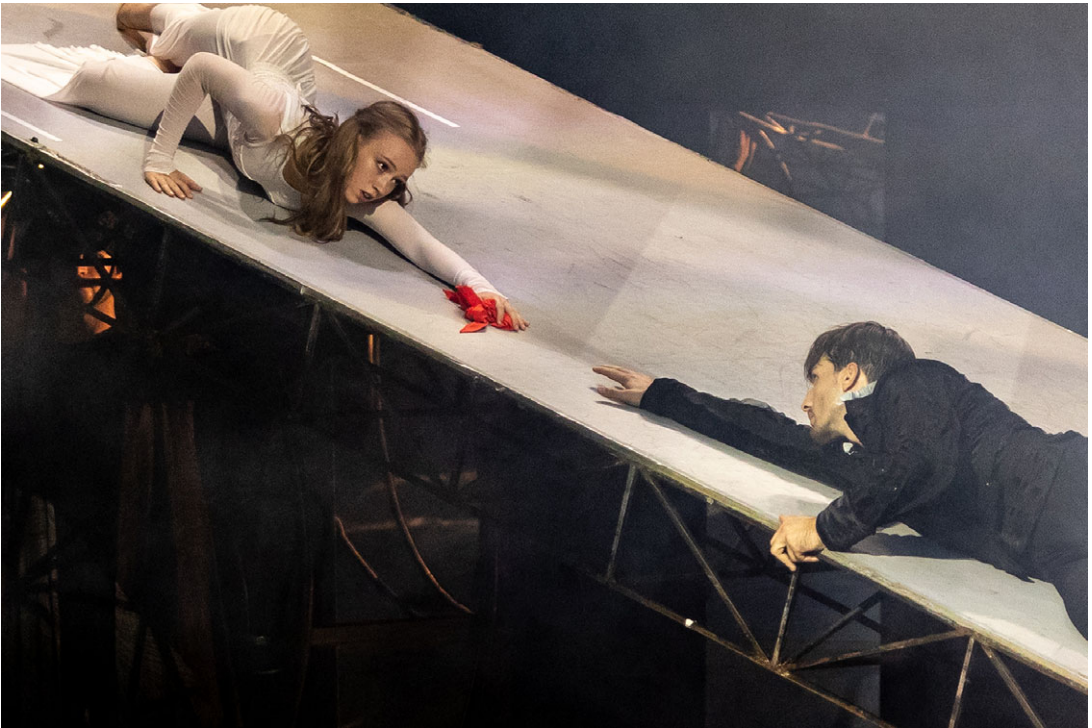


Figure 14. *Hamlet*. Vlada Schevchenko (Ophelia) and Gennaro Sorbino (Hamlet). Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 15. *Hamlet*. Vlada Schevchenko (Ophelia), Marek Šarišký (Claudius), and Tetiana Lubska (Gertrude). Photograph: Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 16. *Hamlet*. Vlada Schevchenko (Ophelia) and Igor Pashko (Polonius). Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.



Figure 17. *Hamlet*. Eöri-Szabó Zsolt. Courtesy of Eöri-Szabó Zsolt and the National Theatre, Budapest.
