

THEATRE IN AN ISOLATED SOCIETY

Slobodan Savić



After Covid-19, the world will never be the same as before. It is a worldwide public opinion, a common statement and a firmly rooted mock profound phrase of our everyday life. We have been living for months in a world and a time of the “new normalcy” which, among so many other things, requires a physical distance between people. The so-called new normalcy has deprived us of touch and hugs, handshakes and kisses. It has shuttered interstate borders,

theatres and cinemas, concert halls and museums, restaurants and sports stadiums, schools and universities... Isolation, self-isolation and physical distancing have become our everyday life, the way of life and behavior, as if we have not been withdrawn enough in ourselves and our own homes, as if we have not been sufficiently alienated and (self) isolated in our own loneliness, in artificial, virtual and viral worlds. Is this “new normalcy” a bitter fruit and a devastating consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has conquered the world without a single bullet being fired, or is it the way of life we have long been accustomed to (or have been primed to get accustomed to), the moment we agreed to express our feelings through text messages, emoticons and stickers, and that the “reality”, tangibility, uniqueness and bliss of real life are being mediated by electronic media and social networks?! Perhaps time and further sequence of events in this, for me, beyond any doubt, twisted world, will provide us with some answers or guidelines. Perhaps. It is our duty as self-conscious and responsible individuals, as it is the duty of responsible theatre and art in general, to ask questions.

I don't have to emphasize and explain how hard, taxing and stressful, and at times even exhausting it was to make this year's selection and organize the Festival in the conditions of pandemic,

fear and qualm, closed theatres and borders, with the common sense unable to predict what will happen tomorrow, let alone a month or a few months in advance. But at no moment was I giving up, and I completed the selection already in early July. After all, it's easy to give up when you have no quality performances to select.

The organization of an international theatre festival in such (anti) conditions, when most festivals and other events in the country and the world have been canceled, is a supreme accomplishment for both the organizers and the hosts, but, above all, for all theatres participating in this year's Festival at abnormal conditions of the “new normalcy”. Knjaževsko-srpski teatar and the city of Kragujevac can be proud of that. So, despite the difficult and uncertain situation, Joakimfest once again celebrates and nurtures an aesthetically sophisticated,

socially responsible, subversive and emancipatory theatre that tackles the burning issues and phenomena of the time and world which we live in. Finally, and to make things perfectly clear, this year's selection was not forced upon us by the pandemic, nor is it the result of any compromises. These six performances would participate in the 15th Joakimfest even if it weren't for Covid-19, because they deserve it for their aesthetic qualities, thematic range and masterful acting performances.

The world was polarized and divided even before the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been divided into the rich and the poor, the great powers, global rulers and small nations, the great and small cultures... Today, the world is divided, with all the enumerated and unnumbered divisions, into healthy people and those sick with the Covid-19 virus, those who can provide themselves with an appropriate treatment and those who cannot, those who will be able to buy the vaccine and those who will not. At first glance, the subtitle of this year's festival (*Theatre in an Isolated Society*) refers to the difficult situation which the world, art and theatre found themselves in during the pandemic. But that is only the first layer, the first level of meaning. More importantly, I have chosen the performances that thematize life in an isolated society in a relevant theatrical way. It doesn't matter if we are isolated due to illness, poverty, denied human rights, within our own family and marriage (like Ibsen's Nora), within a small-scale totalitarian community that alludes to society as a whole (*Animal Farm*), in the world of post-truth (*The Wound Philoctetes*), in the categorical imperative of progress and success (*Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?*) or as a manipulation-prone voting machine and cheap labor whose protagonist is the so-called little man (*It's All Gustav's Fault*). We who live in the Balkans, and in Serbia, know very well what it is like to live in an isolated society: economically, politically, culturally isolated - behind closed borders, behind lowered boom barriers. The theatre which in an artistically and aesthetically referential way thematizes different types of isolation, which, despite the required physical distance, crosses the barrier, is at the center of my selection this year. That is the essence. Covid-19 is just one of the references, a ubiquitous cause and a menacing consequence. Despite the so-called new theatrical tendencies, despite the theories and studies trying to explain them, true theatre does not exist without the presence of a living, breathing actor on the stage, just as it cannot exist without an audience. This has always been the case, since the first performances of our distant ancestors in barely lit caves, since Ancient Greece. This has been most evident in the past months when watching video recordings of theatre performances that have flooded the Internet. Theatre has always been for the community and in the community, of those on the stage and those in the audience.

As much as it is in discord with contemporary theories of performing arts, without that community, without the interaction of actors and audiences, there is no true theatre. A theatrical performance is a unique, one-of-a-kind act.

Just as we cannot enter the same river twice, so we cannot watch the same show twice, no matter how many times we rewatch it. That is the unique charm of the art of theatre. This is why I believe the spectators will enjoy the selected performances this year as well, despite the fact that the audience will have to wear masks and sit at the prescribed distance, both from the actors and from each other.