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Belgrade International Theatre Festival: Half a century of uniting Europe through theatre



A scene from On the Grave of Ignorant Europe at Bitef 2016. Photo: Jelena Jankovic

Features

by Michael Coveney - Oct 13, 2016

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In its earliest years, the Belgrade International Theatre Festival – Bitef – was a Cold War buffer state, rather like Tito’s Yugoslavia itself, between the American and European avant-garde of the 1960s and 1970s, and the mysterious, spiritual effulgence of the Polish and Russian theatre of Jerzy Grotowski, Konrad Swinarski, Anatoly Efros and Yuri Lyubimov.

Both sides had humanism, and even, sometimes, liberalism, in common. But it’s fascinating to see how, under the new Bitef artistic directorship of Ivan Medenica, a brilliant scholar and critic, the political and cultural axis has changed. Instead of east and west, the talk, and indeed the programme, is now of north and south.

The first wall built in Europe since the Berlin Wall came down is a wire fence on the Hungarian border, a deterrent to refugees from Africa, Syria and Lebanon entering the northern ‘rich’ part of the continent; Bitef celebrated its jubilee by presenting two German-speaking, and one Croatian, play about the immigrant crisis and, indeed, the crisis in Europe itself.

Unlike any other theatre festival, Bitef is more than a collection of shows, and always has been. Newness and trends in theatrical production are paramount, but always in a larger context of political and cultural history and a profusion of parallel activities, discussions, side-events. One of the most established (since 1999) is the Bitef Polyphony, where young artists and students let rip in workshops, debates, dance and devised work. All of these strands are focused on issues of national identity and purpose after the catastrophe of the civil wars in the 1990s that tore Tito’s post-war Yugoslavian federation apart.

And all of this was given a further piquancy in the simultaneous gathering in Belgrade this year of the International Association of Theatre Critics, itself something of a refugee body, as the French critic Georges Banu implied in a speech touching on the susceptibility of their critical situation to winds of change and the need for young critical blood transfusions.

Continues...



Bitef co-founder Jovan Cirilov and current artistic director Ivan Medenica. Photo: Bitef 50

5 things you need to know about Bitef

1. It was founded 50 years ago by Mira Trailovic and Jovan Cirilov.
2. During the 1960s and 1970s, the festival was a vital bridge between the American and European avant-garde scenes.

3. Cirilov's successor as artistic director is critic and academic Ivan Medenica.

4. Companies presenting work at the 2016 festival include those from Singapore, Lebanon, Germany, Croatia and Serbia.

5. The 2016 Bitef jury awarded the Grand Prix Mira Trailovic to *The Ridiculous Darkness* by Vienna's Burgtheater. The Jovan Cirilov Special Prize went to *Suite No. 2*, by Jorise Lacoste and *Encyclopedie de la Parole*, and *Riding on a Cloud*, directed by Rabih Mroue. This year's Politika award went to director Dusan David Parizek for *The Ridiculous Darkness*.

Medenica – like his predecessors, festival co-founders Mira Trailovic (who died in 1989) and Jovan Cirilov (who died in 2014) – is playing a long political game with the city executive and the ministry of culture to preserve and rejuvenate the institution, hailed by the great American director Robert Wilson at the opening ceremony in the National Theatre as one of imperishable importance: “If we lose our culture, we lose our memory,” he said, visibly moved by his own peroration.

He had spoken for 50 minutes, prefacing the speech with five minutes of total silence, during which he raked the house with challenging stares before semi-collapsing in giggles, then describing how he first participated in Bitef in 1971 by giving a five-hour press conference when his breakthrough show, *Deafman Glance*, proved a logistical impossibility to put on. He returned the following year with his masterpiece, with a score by a virtually unknown Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach*. Tito – who allowed Bitef to thrive though he disliked the theatre – visited him backstage. “Do you know Elizabeth Taylor?” he asked. “No, I don't,” said Wilson. Tito turned on his heel and left.

Wilson was followed on the stage by the Tao Dance Theatre of Beijing in *6 & 7*, a stunning, simple dance piece co-produced by Sadler's Wells, both abstract and curiously profound, synchronised in straight lines, rhythmically repetitive, sinister and beautiful. There was far more blood and thunder in the early days, when Grotowski collaborated with the anarchist free spirits of the Living Theatre or when, in 1976, the programme included Yuri Lyubimov's production of *Hamlet* for his dissident Taganka Theatre in Moscow, Patrice Chereau's sexy and sublime revival of Marivaux's *La Dispute* (treated with critical disdain when it played briefly at the National Theatre here in 1974) and Peter Zadek's outrageous *Othello*, precursor of the violent contemporary German theatre, in which a blacked-up Othello smeared a white-robed Desdemona in his own body paint before raping her on, and around, her deathbed.



A scene from Freedom: The Most Expensive Capitalist Word at this year's festival. Photo: Sonja Zugic

All the great and the gurus attended over the years: Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba (Grotowski's disciple), Richard Schechner and Joseph Chaikin, Otomar Krejca and Victor Garcia (both of whom we knew from the World Theatre Season at the Aldwych in the same period), Pina Bausch, Lev Dodin, the best new directors from Lithuania and Poland and, from Britain, the Peter Gill DH Lawrence trilogy from the Royal Court, Lindsay Kemp, the Glasgow Citizens, Steven Berkoff, Simon McBurney, Wayne McGregor, Lloyd Newson's DV8.

Because of their own political situation, I've always found the Bitef audience the most attentive and curious of bodies, and this puts the visiting foreign work, especially, into a high-definition relief. The Bitef buzz remains the best in the world. When I turned up in 1991, a 30km convoy of tanks was setting off for Croatia, and a local play about the exiled Prince Paul posed a comic fantasy about a welcome (impossible) return to the monarchy after this disastrous post-communist phase. And, again, in 2000, a Ukrainian production of Chekhov's Three Sisters – a play about a military occupation, in a sense, and a longing for a civilised metropolitan stability – coincided exactly with the night of the presidential elections in which Slobodan Milosevic was defeated by Vojislav Kostunica. Milosevic's 'official' pop concert in the main square was drowned out by opposition crowds converging on the centre, their own street music of choice – the Rolling Stones' (I Can't Get No) Satisfaction – blaring above the din. Milosevic refused to accept the vote, but stepped down two weeks later when the parliamentary building was stormed and set on fire.

That was real theatre, or gesture politics, depending on your point of view. As a prologue to this anniversary year, Kantor Downtown from the Teatr Polski of Bydgoszcz, northern Poland, evoked another great Bitef guru, Tadeusz Kantor, whose mesmeric, unforgettable *The Dead Class* was first brought to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe by Richard Demarco; Kantor's pre-war schoolroom was inhabited by the ghosts of the holocaust and political repression. In Kantor Downtown, one such ghost was berated by a parody of Kantor in a black suit and bushy beard, surrounded by eight video screens bearing witness to the 'great director' by representatives of the New York avant-garde in the 1970s – including Penny Arcade, associate of Andy Warhol and Charles Ludlam, Lee Breuer of Mabou Mines, Thomas Walker of the Living Theatre and several 'queer' feminists.

Not enough was made of this jolting cultural confrontation, perhaps, but the show certainly played with notions of authenticity, spiritualism, low pay, tyrannical directors (including Kantor, who actually sat in on, and 'conducted', his own shows) and the sheer manic energy that characterised Bitef in its Cold War melting-pot days. Now, the barriers are more transparent and less marked in cultural priorities and political ideologies, in theatre at least.

Two brilliantly acted productions, *The Ridiculous Darkness* from the Vienna Burgtheater, and *Compassion: The History of the Machine Gun* from the Berlin Schaubuhne, dealt in shared reactions to post-colonial racism, simmering savagery, journeys into nightmare – no, nothing about Brexit – and the limits of feeling and experience when confronted by images of drowned refugees, devastated townships or screams of genocide. What should we feel? What can we do? As Wilson said at the top of the festival, artists cannot solve the problem, but they can ask the questions. And that is precisely what Bitef has done, in many different ways, for 50 glorious years.

Profile: Bitef

Location: Belgrade, Serbia

Dates: September 24-October 2

Artistic director: Ivan Medenica

Executive director: Jelena Knezevic

Curator: Anja Susa

Number of performances: 12 (main programme), seven (side programme)

Audience numbers: 5,000 (main programme), 6,000 (side programme)

Funding: *Public funding bodies (City of Belgrade, ministry of culture, municipality)* – €347,000. *Sponsorship* – €40,000 (cash), plus €20,000 (in-kind contribution). *Ticket sales* – €26,00

Focus on Bitef 2016

With unity and discourse across Europe as relevant today as it was 50 years ago, reviews editor Natasha Tripney reflects on some of the best offerings from this year's Belgrade International Theatre Festival

For a city of roughly 1.3 million, Belgrade has an incredibly rich and thriving theatre scene. In the city centre, there's the National Theatre, housed in a grand building on Republic Square, the similarly significant Jugoslovensko Dramsko Pozoriste, the more populist Theatre on Terazije, and the more experimental Atelje 212.

For the last half-century, the city has also been home to Bitef, a once vital bridge between east and west theatre cultures. A lot has changed in 50 years, but Europe is still divided in many ways. Some walls may have fallen, but new ones continue to be erected. (The last night of the festival coincided with Hungary's vote to scrap EU migrant quotas.) Many of the pieces in this year's programme concerned, explicitly or otherwise, people's capacity for empathy, particularly in regards to the current migrant crisis.

One of the strongest pieces of the 2016 programme, under the artistic directorship of Ivan Medenica, is Milo Rau's **Compassion: The History of the Machine Gun**. This Berlin Schaubuhne production was a vigorous and none-too-gentle inspection of the contradictions and complexities of humanitarianism. Bookended by short, potent monologues by performer Consolate Siperius, the bulk of the piece took the form of a monologue by Ursina Lardi, captured unflinchingly on video. Standing amid a sea of flotsam, Lardi slips between an account of an actor on a research trip and the words of various NGO aid workers. At times the things she says are utterly repellent, at times they are pragmatic, persuasive: compassion here is an industry, it's a badge to be worn and a box to be ticked. Performed and directed with precision, Rau's play explores this morally slippery area with insistence and intelligence.

In comparison, **The Ridiculous Darkness** by Vienna's Burgtheater was a far blunter instrument. A response to Conrad's Heart of Darkness, the production contained a long sequence in which the performers smeared black paint on their faces while singing The Lion Sleeps Tonight. Despite an absolutely storming performance from Stefanie Reinsperger, as both a Somali pirate and a Serbian smuggler, the production was more of a butter knife than a scalpel – it felt like post-colonial angst by numbers.

Alongside these more high-profile pieces, the smaller Bitef Theater played host to work by emerging Serbian artists. Maja Pelevic and Olga Dimitrijevic's **Freedom: The Most Expensive Capitalist Word** took the form of a photo documentary of the performers' trip to North Korea. They discussed the slightly surreal experience of being tourists in Pyongyang while occasionally breaking off to sell 'authentic' souvenirs from North Korea at increasingly high prices to the audience. Though slightly muddled, the piece touched on a number of fascinating themes – nostalgia for a communist past and the difficulties of thinking collectively – and Pelevic and Dimitrijevic are warm and affable performers with an appealing rapport with each other and the audience.

In dance piece **Only Mine Alone**, by Ana Dubljevic and Igor Koruga, two performers repeatedly butted their heads and bodies against the back wall of the set. What resulted was both an effective expression of a kind of national frustration that also demonstrated rather too well how work that tries to evoke inertia and depression can be hard work to watch.

Andras Urban's **Patriots**, on the other hand, was thrilling, exhilarating theatre. A production of a 19th-century comedy by Jovan Sterija Popovic, produced by the National Theatre of Serbia, it's an acute and accusatory satire in which the performers break away from the text to lock eyes with the audience and chant the names of Serbian politicians throughout the years, up to and including current Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vucic.

The closing production of the 2016 festival, Sebastijan Horvat's **On the Grave of Ignorant Europe**, is similarly interrogative of the Croatian national character. A wealthy, privileged family from some frozen point in time slowly transmogrify into a group of people all desperate to get a poorly paid cleaning job and a family of terrified migrants on a storm-tossed boat; tellingly, and in a similar way to *The Ridiculous Darkness*, it concludes with a scene of collapse and destruction – of walls falling, or being torn down.

The 2016 Belgrade International Theatre Festival ran from September 24 to October 2



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