

A theatre turned inside out

By Rūta Oginskaitė

For quite a lengthy period of time the situation of the Youth Theatre was exceptional in Lithuania as it was the only theatre that toured abroad during the Soviet times and spectators queued up overnight in order to get the tickets to the performances by Eimuntas Nekrošius in Vilnius. However, political changes and the processes related to the Lithuanian national revival took their toll on theatre – fewer and fewer people showed interest in stagecraft as the events taking place beyond theatre walls were of much greater significance. The Youth Theatre also lost its exclusivity and anxious actors continued counting scarce spectators in an unheated hall from behind the curtain. During the five years following his *Uncle Vanya* (1986), Eimuntas Nekrošius had not staged any new performances, even though there had been rehearsals of *Carmen* and *King Lear*. The director had suspended all the rehearsals having decided that there would be no more premieres.

In her book *Space behind Words* (Lith. *Erdvė už žodžiu*) dedicated to the works by Eimuntas Nekrošius staged at the Youth Theatre, Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė indicates that the creators were, “affected strongly by the novel-study *Nikolai Gogol* by Vladimir Nabokov as well as the human evolution according to Mikhail Bulgakov” [p.248], i.e. his novella *Heart of a Dog*. Nabokov interprets the world of Gogol as ‘turned inside out,’ with upside-down people. So, it comes as no surprise that the role of the nose can be performed by any ‘other organ.’ In the performance by Nekrošius, the stage was rampaged by something left over from the castration of Major Kovalyov and dumped in the trash, i.e. the homunculus called the Nose. Actually, the Nose turned out to be a real Bully, whose aim was to conquer the world. Garbage containers became the main element of the set design in the hands of Nadežda Gultiajeva. In the opinion of critic Ramunė Marcinkevičiūtė, with this particular performance Nekrošius, “undertook to bring public discredit on the successes and failures of his former works as if performing the general check-up of the theatre he had been creating and verifying what should be taken to the future theatre from the sacralised territory of theatrical art.” [p. 257]

There were two character couples in the performance – the sinful Major Kovalyov (actor Vladas Bagdonas) and his amputated organ, i.e. the Nose (actor Kostas Smoriginas) that spoke falsetto and introduced himself as Major Kovalyov while referring to the real Major as ‘the mother;’ and the other duo – Gogol, his monument (actor Remigijus Vilkaitis), and the Doctor (actor Povilas Budrys) who tortured the writer with his treatments. The two couples were inevitable to unfold the following themes: the plot of the story by Gogol, interpretation of the biography of Gogol, self-parody of Nekrošius and reflections on the works by Nekrošius.

Gogol’s monument with baggy trousers expressed not only complete helplessness but also the idea that a pedestal is the place of forced public exposure. Nekrošius emphasized the burden of fame, when Remigijus Vilkaitis embodying Gogol bent down under the weight of the pedestal he was carrying.

The story of Gogol’s monumentalisation intertwined with the story of Major Kovalyov and the Nose, and through it the ironic allusions of the director to his former performances as well as comments on the present times unravelled. Kovalyov and the Nose were like an inverted duo from the performance

Pirosmani, Pirosmani... by Nekrošius. Man and his double that personified the meanest and blackest instincts and was shaped of waste. At first Major Kovalyov wanted to get rid of this double but soon undertook the task to educate him – tried to teach him some French, took him to the “Academic Youth Theatre” to see the tragedy *King Lear*. The Nose even expressed his interest in the director, “Who staged this?” and Kovalyov answered, “Nekrošius.” The Nose wanted to take over the world and decided to start from theatre by making ballet-dancers wear military boots and teaching them his favourite dance. The Bully rules?

Here are several reviews published immediately following the premiere.

This must be the first work by the director that hurt neither heart nor mind. Ingenious? Absolutely. A revitalized, despised, tortured and completely unwanted monument of Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol (actor Remigijus Vilkaitis) alone is invaluable. And all those dustbins where all passions of Major Kovalyov (actor Vladas Bagdonas) live. Yet this ‘metaphor’ is more reminiscent of Samuel Beckett than Nikolai Gogol, but nonetheless impressive.

/.../ The director has embarked on a quest and this is the only way I can justify the abundance of original tricks that overshadow the true meaning of the performance. (Jansonas, E. (1991). Linksmųjų daug [Lots of Merrymaking]. Respublika, April 18, p.2)

This god, who remained silent for several years, has been deprived of the right not only to make mistakes but also to wander away from his image created by the society. And the society is already claiming its rights to the newest works by the genius. By staging The Nose, Eimuntas Nekrošius has not only begun to speak but also made a confession of a pushed-around artist. By staging The Nose, Eimuntas Nekrošius demonstrated that he is absolutely free from the reputation imposed upon him. (Oginskaitė, R. (1991). Jo didenybė „Nosis“. [His Highness Nose]. Literatūra ir menas, April 27, p.7)

The Nose was never exported. It might have seemed too anti-Russian for Russia but this could also have depended on the political context. Russian theatre critics, who had always spoken highly of the works by Nekrošius, felt as if they lost Nekrošius following this performance. Western producers were not interested. *The Nose* was shown 83 times at the Youth Theatre and that is a lot indeed.

Translated by Monika Kisliakovaite