

East is East?

TAMÁS JÁSZAY

Kalina STEFANOVA, Marvin CARLSON, eds. 20 *Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe: 30 Years After the Fall of Iron Curtain*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. XLI+311 p.

20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe, edited by Kalina Stefanova and Marvin Carlson, delivers exactly what it promises in its title: a concise profile of twenty living directors – with the exception of Eimuntas Nekrošius, who died in 2018 – who were born and worked in Eastern Europe, and who have had a profound influence on the culture of their country, their region, and the continent.

All sentences formulated with similar brevity need to be explained, and the following review contains some comments and observations. The exceptions which immediately strike the reader are, of course, those which spectacularly omit the above definition. First of all, there is Árpád Schilling, whose last Hungarian premiere, *A harag napja (The Day of Fury)*, dates from 2015, and who himself has been living in France since 2018 and (apart from his project in the United States in spring 2022) has worked all over Europe. We can also name another director who is impossible to categorize: Oliver Frlić, born in Bosnia-Herzegovina. He started his career in Croatia, where he was considered an undesirable person a few years ago, now directs in Germany, Austria, Poland and elsewhere; as long as they let him. Among the older generation, we can mention Andrei Șerban, who (for the first time) did not make a career in Romania, but in the United States, in the 1970s.

When talking about any book, the first question must be: was it necessary to write? Is there a real need for it among professionals and interested readers? Does it address a phenomenon whose systematic analysis is timely and necessary? In this case, the answer

is a resounding yes: the volume is undoubtedly a unique and thorough undertaking, especially when considering the small number of works that attempt to provide an encyclopaedic overview of contemporary world theatre. In English, with a specific focus on Eastern European directors living and working today, no work of comparable quality was available, until now.

The need for such a collection is demonstrated by the simple fact that of the *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, edited by Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato, which is a concise collection of prominent European theatre-makers, and which was published for the second time in 2020, only Silviu Purcărete and Krzysztof Warlikowski are also introduced in the present book (the first edition of it in 2010 only included Purcărete).¹ *20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe* is a companion that will benefit professional and amateur theatre-goers, academics and students of theatre studies alike. We cannot name other works with similar focus, and this may be partly due to what Marvin Carlson mentions in his short foreword², i.e. that until the 1960s, Western theatre studies were not interested in what was happening on the other side of the Iron Curtain. The two relatively recent collections³ with an Eastern Eu-

¹ Maria M. DELGADO, Dan REBELLATO, eds., *Contemporary European Theatre Directors* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010¹, 2020²).

² Marvin CARLSON, „The Directors of Eastern Europe”, in Kalina STEFANOVA, Marvin CARLSON, eds., *20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), XXI.

³ Dennis BARNETT, Arthur SKELTON, eds., *Theatre and Performance in Eastern Europe: The Changing Scene* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2007) and Kalina STEFANOVA, ed., *Eastern*

ropean emphasis, which Carlson mentions as a refreshing exception, do not even attempt a systematic overview: instead, they present case studies of theatre cultures in the region, organised in a rather random order.

Each of the eighteen theatre scholars, researchers, and critics who wrote the twenty chapters did an extremely thorough job in condensing the directorial careers into studies of about fifteen pages, which are similarly, yet not uniformly, structured. The directors' careers on average date back to the last twenty to thirty years, but sometimes even span half a century. The volume is also current: the vast majority of the studies were written in 2019, and the premiere dates of performances cited in them generally end around 2018.

The two distinguished editors, Kalina Stefanova, who teaches and researches in Sofia, and Marvin Carlson, who is currently mostly active in New York, are two of the most important theatre scholars who, in addition to their studies and lectures, have summarised current theatre histories in numerous individual and collected volumes over the past decades; not only focusing on Europe. Their new joint volume is a panorama spanning a broad spectrum, and a puzzle that is still being added to.

If I have any dissatisfaction with what is, again, a very useful volume, it is precisely the lack of drawing the undeniable connections: the web of connections between the many direct and indirect ways in which the directorial trajectories communicate with each other is almost completely hidden from the reader. It could be said that this will be the task of another volume or volumes, but it is striking how the chapters written by the same author communicate with each other, if not overtly, in a number of ways. Tomasz Wiśniewski prepared the chapters on Włodzimir Staniewski and Grzegorz Bral, which shed a sharp light on the careers of two artists of different generations, who started out

in related regions but had a decidedly different artistic approach, and who also trace the web of connections between Jerzy Grotowski, "Gardzienice" and the Teatr Pieśń Kozła (Song of the Goat Theatre). The same can be said of Rasa Vasinauskaitė's two protagonists: the stories of the great elder of Lithuanian theatre, Eimuntas Nekrošius, and the prominent representative of the next generation, Oskaras Koršunovas, who absorbed his aesthetic but was still a different generation from him, are also fascinating in their parallels and contrasts.

Both examples are also a particular mutation of the master–disciple relationship, and further parallel stories could have been told in this area. In addition to the Staniewski–Bral circle, which focuses on ritual and myth, the most influential artist of the older generation of contemporary Polish theatre is Krystian Lupa, under whose guidance Krzysztof Warlikowski, Jan Klata and Grzegorz Jarzyna, all discussed in the volume, have emerged. And although the master himself is mentioned in the chapters on his disciples, it is regrettable that the chapter on Lupa does not emphasize the director's seminal work as a pedagogue.

Let's play with the idea, which is perhaps not far from the editors' intention, what if one wants to know the big names of contemporary Eastern European theatre solely from this book. In other words: what are the characteristics of the typical (?) groundbreaking director in Eastern Europe? One thing seems certain: almost all of them are male; with the exception of Gianina Cărbunariu, the names of female directors are barely even mentioned in the book. There is a thirty percent chance that the person in question is Polish: six out of the twenty directors featured were born in Poland. There are also three Lithuanian and three Romanian directors, two Hungarian and two Czech, and one each from Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Latvia, and Bulgaria.

Eastern European directors are well into their forties: eight of the directors featured in this volume were born in the 1970s. Six men were born in the sixties, four were born in the

fifties, and two in the forties. At the two extremes are Andrei Șerban and Silviu Purcărete, born in 1943, and Daniel Șpinar, born in 1979.

Most of the directors in the book studied theatre directing at their home art universities, but it is not uncommon for someone to have come to theatre directing from a social sciences or humanities background, especially among the members of the newer generation. Some of the directors have not become prophets in their own countries: many of them are better known and respected at festivals abroad than in their homeland. It is striking that most of them still think in terms of companies and theatres, when this heritage urgently needs to be reconsidered across Europe. Many directors are, or have been for longer or shorter periods in their careers, leaders of renowned institutions, definers and active shapers of their artistic image.

The idea of the “new theatre”, which is not precisely defined as it means something different in different contexts, reappears again and again. Another common feature is the departure from the mainstream, from the traditions that define the theatre culture of a given country; quickly adding that, in many cases, the paths that started on the periphery tended towards the centre over time, and their creators have been long established there. In most cases, the directors’ careers did not stop at the borders of their own countries: international recognition and acceptance, particularly in Western Europe, played an important role in the selection criteria to be discussed below.

Of course, the biggest differences lay in the chosen method and theatrical aesthetics. Yet, most of them have produced and continue to produce their defining productions in the wake of (mainly Western and/or national) dramatic literature. There are, of course, performances inspired by documents (Cărbunariu), Theatre in Education (Schilling), improvisations by actors (Frljić), autobiographical and social experiences (Béla Pintér), readings and shared traumas (Warlikowski), among many others. And there is another,

perhaps not insignificant, feature that Kalina Stefanova draws the reader’s attention to in the introduction, when she highlights five of the most memorable *Hamlet* performances: most of the directors (including Bral, Frljić, Jarzyna, Klata, Koršunovas, Jan Mikulášek, Nekrošius, Schilling, Špinar, and Warlikowski) staged the world’s best-known drama at one time or another.

Looking again at the dates of birth, it is clear that most of the directorial careers discussed in the book began immediately before or right after the regime changes in Eastern Europe (the subtitle of the volume indirectly refers to this: *30 Years After the Fall of the Iron Curtain*). A (Western European) reader not thoroughly familiar with the region would have benefited from an introductory study of what happened here at the turn of the 1990s. This context is not replaced by Alvis Hermanis’s eloquent words, quoted in the book, on the “reboot” of the Eastern European zone: “An electrician comes and turns the counter to zero. That was exactly the moment in the Eastern European theatre in the early nineties. A zero point. Everything that had been before was effectively erased. It didn’t work anymore, it was drained out.”⁴ I find the lack of a definition of “here” problematic, i.e. a definition of Eastern Europe that is valid within the volume: in his brief introduction, Marvin Carlson merely says that the area in question is “between Germany and Russia”⁵.

In her long foreword, Kalina Stefanova succinctly informs us about the method and criteria of the selection: “after consultations with a lot of colleagues I’ve come up with the current choice.”⁶ She explains that while six

⁴ Quoted in Edīte TIŠHEIZERE, „Alvis Hermanis: »To Be Everything and Nothing at All«, in STEFANOVA, CARLSON, eds., *20 Ground-Breaking...*, 44.

⁵ Marvin CARLSON, „The Directors of Eastern Europe“..., XXI.

⁶ Kalina STEFANOVA, „The Life-Changing Theatre of Eastern Europe“, in STEFANOVA, CARLSON, eds., *20 Ground-Breaking...*, XVIII.

directors from Poland were selected, there are countries that do not appear in the selection at all. If we look at the selection noted by Stefanova, her own definition is certainly true: "The directors included here have been major catalysts for a change in the face of the Eastern European theatre at large during the last three decades."⁷ It would not have been useless, however, if the editor had at least discussed here the reasons for the volume's quite disturbing male dominance.⁸

Two forewords by the two editors open the selection. Kalina Stefanova's informative text, which confidently moves a large body of empirical material, clearly sets the tone for the volume when she gives the title of her introduction, *The Life-Changing Theatre of Eastern Europe*. And indeed, the superlatives, which seem to presuppose some kind of a peculiar Eastern European common taste and flavour, are just a string of adjectives without further elaboration: 'unforgettable', 'breath-taking', 'overwhelming', etc. I can imagine readers questioning this level of enthusiasm, but there is no need to worry: if the language of this introduction is "hot", the essays in this volume are decidedly "cool";, moreover, all of them show a passionate commitment to the subject of the chapter.

In Marvin Carlson's short foreword, I would like to highlight, in addition to what has already been mentioned, the theatre scholar's indication that he has not seen nearly as many of the performances listed in the volume as his Bulgarian colleague. This might sound strange for some readers, but it could even be an advantage for a similar project with a large, international cast of authors: it is the task of the unbiased outside eye to

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ For its possible reasons see Katalin TRENCSÉNYI, „Directors' Theatre in Eastern Europe, 1945–2018: A Survey of Some Trajectories”, in David BRADBY, David WILLIAMS and Peter M. BOENISCH, eds., *Directors' Theatre*, 183–208 (London: Red Globe Press, MacMillan International, 2020), 192–193.

point out when there is too little or too much information to understand.

Thereafter, the twenty chapters, alphabetically arranged by the director's last names, follow a similar, but not identical, structure. Some start with a single, paradigmatic performance that determines the director's career. In Jan Klata's case, the emblematic *H.*, the 2004 adaptation of *Hamlet* at the Gdańsk Shipyard, is the starting point: the origin of his entire thinking. The chapter on Krystian Lupa, written by Katarzyna Waligóra, is particularly fascinating because it begins with an analysis of a production that was not loved by critics and audiences either, *Miasto snu* (*The City of Sleep*) from 2012. The way Noémi Herczog presents Béla Pintér's career, identifying and interpreting each turning point through the term "national theatre", is inspiring and thought-provoking. Others take a more traditional approach, starting the presentation of the directorial portraits with education and the early years, then moving on to the stages of arrival, with a constant focus on the artist's international presence. The material used for the studies is mainly based on the authors' own experiences as viewers/critics/analysts, but the authors also include published reviews, artist statements, interviews, and sometimes even personally ask the main character of the chapter.

The analyses of chosen performances, summarised in few long paragraphs, highlighting the essential aspects, are enjoyable. These are almost never mini-reviews, but rather succinct summaries of the creative thinking and artistic credo. We must pay tribute to the authors, who identify and describe in an insightful way the stages of three to five decades of careers that are still going on today. Each of these chapters is a goldmine for a student preparing for an exam, as the main stylistic features of the directors and the characteristics of their theatre are summarised in the headings. Each chapter ends with a typical performance photo, followed by a bibliography of the works used for the chapter –

the latter is often not representative, and it would have been useful to include a short, recommended reading list on each director.

For the reader who is relatively familiar with the directorial trajectories and methods presented, the comments, which could certainly not be read elsewhere, are a real treat. These little puzzle pieces always fit into the big picture. Here are a few examples that I had not previously been aware of. I had never read about Alvis Hermanis's early career as a film actor (p. 44), or that the title of the Dorota Masłowska play *Między nami dobrze jest* (*We Are Pretty Good*), directed by Grzegorz Jarzyna, refers to a song of the Polish punk band Siekiera (p. 66). I learned that the famous Walpurgis scene in Silviu Purcărete's emblematic 2007 production of *Faust* was inspired by a childhood experience of the director, the cattle fair of Bolintin (p. 184). And now I also know that Rimas Tuminas made the endless Vilnius-Moscow train journey countless times as a young man, which is where the travel motif recurring regularly in his performances may have originated from (p. 237).

Following the twenty portraits, the book concludes with two sets of responses to a series of questions, in which the directors write about their artistic family trees and the role of theatre in the contemporary world. Some do so briefly, others at greater length: for me, these answers did not add much to the picture already formed.

Finally, some annoying little things. The possible lack of time does not excuse the unpleasant typos and inconsistencies in the volume, such as when the chapter on Béla Pintér lists 1948 instead of 1848 or when we read that Nekrošius lived from 1952 to 1918. I cannot understand why Nekrošius's own world-famous company, Meno Fortas, is not mentioned once in the chapter on him, and it is only presented briefly in a footnote, nearly a hundred pages later, in the section on Jonas Vaitkus. A different kind of omission, but equally incomprehensible to me, is that the

chapter on Hermanis makes no mention of the director's infamous 2015 statement on refugees.⁹ Before anyone misunderstands me, I do not want to pick on the director, but the reader would then surely read the short description of a scene in Cărbunariu's *Artists Talk* in a more different context, not to mention that Oliver Frljić's *Naše nasilje in vaše nasilje* (*Our Violence and Your Violence*), which is described at length in the volume, also contains a quotation from Hermanis's text.

A few other inconsistencies: the chapter on Grzegorz Jarzyna says that Krzysztof Warlikowski left Teatr Rozmaitości in 2007 to found the Nowy Teatr, but later the volume says it happened in 2008. The book is also inconsistent in naming the theatres and the titles of the performances and plays in their original language. The main text does not say, merely appears in a caption, that the Theatre on the Balustrade in Prague should be sought out as Divadlo na Zábradlí by the theatre lover who travels to the Czech capital. The names Stary Teatr, Nowy Teatr, i.e. Old Theatre, New Theatre, which are common in Poland, are sometimes used in both languages, sometimes either in Polish or in English.

Even with these caveats, *20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe* is an important and timely volume that helps to identify and recognise the directorial signatures that have shaped and continue to shape the theatre culture of the Eastern European region in recent decades.

⁹ „Alvis Hermanis sagt aus Protest gegen Flüchtlings-Engagement Thalia-Inszenierung ab“, *Nachtkritik.de*, 4/6. Dezember 2015, last accessed 30 August 2022.

https://nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=11864:alvis-hermanis-sagt-aus-protest-gegen-fluechtlings-engagement-thalia-inszenierung-ab&catid=126&Itemid=100890