



LET US HAVE A DIALOGUE WITH THE NATION
 (On dramaturgy in the National Theatre)



In the wide range of the meanings and concepts of dialogue, as being examined as a main topic in this issue, I decided to pick the dialogue of an important national cultural institution and a nation. I realise it is a wide construct and I will try to be as precise and specific as possible. All my future paragraphs will be based on my own artistic research and praxis: since 2014, I work as a dramaturg (later a chief-dramaturg) of the Drama Department in the National Theatre in Prague. What I am presenting you, is more of a case study of an institution with a national operation and my personal struggle with its heritage.

The origin of various national theatres is very synoptically described in several books; and we generally know that this phenomenon is based on different historical, cultural, social, and political backgrounds. National theatres have various functions and originated from various institutions, the oldest emerged from theatres of nobility (e. g. Comédie-Française), the newest were built in the 20th century (e. g. NT London), or do not have the fixed venue at all (NT of Wales). The National Theatre in Prague belongs to groups of institutions that originated during the 19th century, as a kind of a subversive act against the dominant (mainly linguistically and politically dominant) culture. In our case it was an act of a protest against the reign of Habsburg Monarchy with German as an official language. The original founding movement bears features of comedy (actually, whole Czech national so called «enlightenment» was very much based on principles of game and play, even thought that was recognized and described only recently), but was also very political, severe and strict as far as language was concerned. Throughout the last ¼ of the 18th century towards the second ½ of the 19th century, theatre was one of the tools to spread, develop and uplift Czech language. As

such, it carries such an «educational» role until today, as one of the burdens inherited from a relatively tiny group of intellectuals who refused the inferiority of the Czech nation.

The whole history of the National Theatre is an amazing story of hopes, political ambitions, and pure idealism; once it was described as a beautiful material of an opera with its almost tragical end (it burned down drastically several weeks after its opening in 1881), and a triumphant re-opening two years later, in 1883. After the second opening the crucial question —*What is the meaning of the National Theatre?*— was brought up for the first time. The act of subversion was successfully achieved: and what comes next? This question floats around the building until today and sometimes it seems easier to blow it away, rather than cast around for the answer. A dialog with a silent partner...

By the way, the question has never been answered properly, and even though one tries to avoid it, or close his/her eyes in front of it, being a dramaturg there you will rise it up one day. This happened to me, as it happened to all significant dramaturgical or directing figures of the whole 20th century. Not that I consider myself «significant», it is more: no matter how you try to avoid it, it is there. The question is there, and you should search for the answer. The dialogue is just to begin.

The Czech history since the beginning of the construction of the NT in 1868 was very dramatic; it led through the WW1 to the foundation of an independent Czechoslovak Republic (the revivalist would be completely shocked, not really thinking that far). At that time, the republic was still a multinational state, and beside Czech, you could hear there German as well as Yiddish, Polish, and many other languages. And the artistic director of the Drama Department of the NT Karel Hugo Hilar in twentieth asked very wisely: We have —as a nation— gained independence. What should be NT good for now? In what does its purpose consist?

After the tragic development of the WW2 and many unreasonable steps of Czech politicians in 1945 —1948, almost all other national minorities were erased, or put it more definitely— expelled. After the communist putsch, Czechoslovakia (or at least its Czech part) «belonged» to the monocultural Czech nation —white, heterosexual and perfectly obedient. I want to believe the founders a century ago had not had this kind of superiority on their minds.

Why am I making such a broad historical introduction: in the 21st century, nothing can be more distant than this concept of monolithic society. But this modern approach is quite new to such a huge institution, and to still very monolithic republic, who should get used to its diversity.

When I started to work for the NT (after an audition being a dramaturgical part of an artistic duo), I believed that if one erases the word «national» out of the name, it could save the situation. One magical stroke might transform the NT into an ordinary T —and all the questions could solve themselves automatically. Later on, especially with recent various manifestations of nationalistic movement, I decided to start a dialogue with the term and try to open up a new discussion, even though for relatively limited amount of the audience.

The National Theatre in Prague has three venues. The oldest one is an old «Mozartian» building (from 1783), the newest one from 1983. In-between historically, but above them for its significance, stands, or rather - loom over so called «historical building», the one burned and «phoenixed» back, the building we are used to call «golden chapel» (since it was erased as a temple of the Czech culture). When you say National Theatre in Prague, most of local people would visualise this post-romantic building at the riverbank, with a rich inner decorations and stone three-horse chariots at the top of the roof. Something, that resembles museum rather a place for living culture.

My main concern was to ask whether we could extend this content of the term «NT». And start to work with it more broadly. First of all it seemed almost inevitable, to re-thing the program of the NT. If we consider the repertoire of the three venues as the core of our activities, we still have plenty of opportunities to address our audience. In general, NT is —despite any attempts of several artistic leaderships of the institution— perceived as rather classical, traditional, conservative. In fact, this approach is not connected with its real repertoire whatsoever, often nor even with actual experience. Or it might be even funnier: for many of these who go there, it is not conservative enough, others do not visit because they can imagine how conservative it is (the museum syndrome mentioned above).

Therefore repertoire, or so to say dramaturgical plan, is one thing, and since it is being received very stereotypically, we decided from the very first month in the position to develop other ways how to approach new audience. We inevitably had to ask, who is the NT for. This

question can be (an usually is) answered very rapidly and easily —it is for everybody. The crucial point is a shared concept of all of us (or our ancestors) who saved the money for it. The communist propaganda, trying to exclude German nobility from our common history, help to develop and spread a heart-breaking story of «all of us, even the poorest ones» submitting their last pennies for the construction of the burn-out National Theatre. From my childhood in eighties, I remember historical films where old grannies were taking of their family memorabilia, necklaces, rings, etc., and throw them on the streets in the money boxes for the NT. Not that «ordinary people» did not donate, but a pure fact is that the NT would not be rebuilt (and actually, also built) without a substantial subvention of Germans, mainly the Kaiser Franz Joseph I and his wife personally.

Forgive me my constant leaks to history, only the real basics of it helps to understand the dialog we are continuously having with our tradition - and with the concept of the nation. So, we should think (and often declare), that NT should be for «everybody» because we all donated to its construction. It sounds ridiculous but it —even today— has a very strong echo in a remarkable part of the society. And let me point out one more thing: the fact, that the theatre belongs to «us» does not mean that we necessarily go there! Which is one of the greatest paradox of a living culture.

As a dramaturg of the NT, I do not have an intention to have a dialogue with everybody, since it is totally impossible, but I want to find out, who I should address. I should speak with those who already come - and this is something all Europe now knows as «audience development». Starting with simple «dramaturgical introduction» in 2014, we gradually moved through the Q&A and after shows talks and ended up with a whole department called NT+ that works with many groups and covers the part of the nation that does not really find many shows in our venues for itself (i. e. age group 5 to 9). These programmes bring us member of an audience who are not primarily fans of the NT but often becomes ones. And also, it really helps to develop audience skills and this way frees the future artists working here.

I can observe the development very closely and after 7 years I am sure this dialogue is inevitable, and it is very healthy.

But we tried to think a bit beyond the educational, and tried to attract the people they would never think of going to the NT. At the very

beginning, we made a small community project with an organisation working with homeless women. That was our first year, I had a dramaturgical introduction and spotted there a group of women in very strange clothes, only later I learned how difficult and stressful it was for them, to «dress up» for the NT, even though they went to see a show at the newest building, without any gold or velvet. My notion of who is the nation started to shake —I realised that the construct of «everybody's theatre» is based on very conventional and limited approach to word.

We started with a strong program beyond, or beside the repertoire - during our seven years we organized and established many formats. Out of the theatre often led meetings called *Emergency Briefing* where we tried to talk with people from endangered countries, like Poland, Hungary, Russia, but also Belarus and Syria. *NT Talks* is our oldest discussion format, that started as a lecture program connected with our performances (e. g. LGBT+ community, computer games community, astrology, etc.). Next season we had a whole cycle of very open discussion formats dealing with responsibility of cultural institutions, finances, etc. Later we had discussions dealing with theatrical issues (concept of dramaturgy in everyday routine, playwriting, rehearsal process), and this season 2021/22 we are closing our artistic mandate with a series called *Inventory*, re-thinking our main questions that emerged during our work in the NT, besides the pure repertoire.

This «everybodines» does not apply only to the audience but also to the professionals. NT is a huge institution with a lot of employees, at the same time, it is the richest theatre organisation in the country (being the only theatre financed directly by the state, Ministry of Culture respectively). Such discussions brought to us many professionals, mainly dramaturgs, but also philosophers, journalists, who started to discuss (explicitly or implicitly) the same questions with us. And we could pay them some money for being with us. Many of these discussions were published in our annual books, that we started to publish in season 2019/2020. Since we decided to have them bi-lingual, it opens its context to abroad, and each year we have non-Czech contributors.

Being open for me also means to be friendly to younger generation —the stage of the NT might be too much, too demanding at the beginning of a career, and the expectations are sometimes too heavy to carry, but our venues offer many spaces for stage readings, presentation of new plays, etc. I realised that the dialogue originates when you get the

other part really interested, when you open the floor to real answers and prepare yourself to hear what they have to say. I think the aim of such an institution, which is heavy, remarkable, complex, and often far too scary, is to constantly re-think its position in the society. From what I remember from past, the NT was a golden goal, and a reward at the same time. One had to deserve it, to be part of it. That is something I found extremely toxic and even dangerous —and leading to kind of exclusivity, that excludes the core of the discussions. Those, who are part of the nation.

Yes, and who are they? We know we cannot manage on white heterosexual male (or female actually —according to last measurement in the NT, it is more than 60% of women in the auditorium), we must look at the audience with bigger approach to diversity.

And here we get back to repertoire. One example, that is self-explanatory, and I do not think we heard and analyse it properly when it happened. In 2017, we premiered a play *New Century* by Paul Rudnick. An unknown play by an unknown author is always a risk in the NT - but soon after the opening, it was a huge success, and it was almost sold out each performance until its final show in 2022. The play mainly consists of several monologues dealing with homosexuality, transgender, transsexuality, etc. As such, it became a hit in LGBT+ community, and the same people visited it repeatedly, to the extent we are not used to in the NT. The play (and the show) hit the point, it filled the gap: it showed a certain minority there is a play dealing with their topic.

Similar - but very different - was a Czech play *Colonel Svec* by Rudolf Medek, a play that has not been staged for 80 years, dealing with origin of Czech legions in 1917 in Russia. It was broadly visited by off-springs of those heroes of WWI and received a very warm reception. At both points - we somehow managed to open-up a dialogue with groups that feel excluded from such kind of artistic dialogue. All the events that were connected (many Q&A, lectures, etc.) were kind of a bonus - for those, who were already in the building.

The topic brings those who want to hear and listen about it, that is for sure. The plays are diverse, and I firmly stand behind the statement the NT is not here only to preserve literary heritage but to provoke an origin of completely new texts and constantly artistically experiment.

But there is one gap, which is still open, and I hope the future artistic leaders of the NT will deal with it. It is the cast. Directors and artistic collaborators might be (and they often really are) from various countries and backgrounds, but we still miss minorities on stage. Deeply in the 21st century, we should reflect the fact we are no more monolithic, monochromatic, beautiful, regular people —we are diverse, and the people on the stage should represent it. We have one show (again and for the third time in the newest venue): text written by Ascanio Celestini based on storytelling is called *Speech to the Nation*, and as such it really opened-up - or let us say - materialize the question who the nation is. A young director Petra Tejnorova brought up the audience on the stage, seated them in the circle, and placed the performers among them. One obviously recognizes the actors of the NT (it is six of them) but at the same time, she found several performers of various ethnic background. They sit with the audience, not recognizable, and it is only later publicum sees their role. Until then, they can listen to monologues dealing with racism, and sit next to a young lady of a colour. And soon realise, that she speaks brilliant Czech. This is another moment, where the founders of the 19th century might be surprised. Or maybe not at all, since they spoke fluent German and they probably went to Jewish grocery store. This performance (premiere 2019) shook up all the concepts of who should be the performer of the NT. When we had an open call for the performers, besides many applications we also received many hate messages on our Facebook page. But first students of different ethnicities and backgrounds are finishing the academy these years, and I strongly believe, their way could —sooner or later— lead to the NT. Not that the question «Who is the NT for and what is the nation» will then be answered, but it can certainly get a new dimension.

And I have something as post scriptum of this essay. Often in public discussion, whenever we used the term «national», we received very negative reaction from certain generation of critiques. Our stream discussion during pandemic were called #cultureisthenation (#kulturajenarod), and we wrote a manifest of solidarity along with it. Why I return so strongly and categorically to this word and why I start to advocate it instead of the original intention to stroke it? We live in dangerous time, seeing how nationalists can colonise various labels. «Nation» is one of

the most endangered. If we do now want to leave it in the claws of them, we should take care of it and examine it very closely. And this examination —it means constant dialog. Dialog as a pure nature of any kind of art, theatre especially.

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