

... and All Men and Women Are Critics or Criticism in a Mirage- Universe

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Abstract: This text/speech is an attempt to provoke discussion or at least thoughts regarding the increasing omnipresence of *the false* in our reality – something which results in sort of a theatricality in a negative connotation of the word. A theatricality that has always accompanied imposters and surrounded the production of copycats/fake stuff, both in life and in art, especially in comedy. Yet, the false pretending so masterfully to stand for the genuine has for some time already started to be more and more an object of worry and concern rather than of ridicule. Among the most worrying of its many manifestations has been the feeling that we, as human beings, are getting closer and closer, that we are having the world at our fingertips. One of the saddest illusions we so easily succumb to. For, in effect, we have been getting more and more estranged. During the last two years, when we needed to keep a distance and closeness was so much missed, sometimes I thought why we were not as indignant at and horrified by the invisible distancing taking ground between us long time before the pandemic. The centrifugal motion on so many levels has been getting frighteningly strong for a long time already: we have been kind of flying away from each other, mistaking communication for communion, having our bodies touch a lot but less and less experiencing the elevating feeling of our souls embrace. So much so that, I dare say, for many years before the pandemic we have been living in a time of a new Big Bang. Only it is a Big Bang that is taking place not somewhere in the universe but within the mankind itself; a Big Bang that is already happening within our own selves too – within the single human being, since we often start to question our innate sense of what is good or bad, and to what extent something is good or bad. It is like the increasing outside chaos is getting to creep inside us, throwing into disarray our inner moral magnet, that invisible thing that holds us as humanity. Isn't the mass erosion of criteria a result exactly of an eroding of our innate criteria? How have theatre and criticism been affected by this dwelling of ours in sort of a mirage-universe? How have they responded to the different faces of the false? While trying to open a conversation on this topic, I'll also try to outline the evolving response of the critics and the search for possible ways-out en route back to the genuine.

Keywords: theatre criticism, reality, illusion, criteria, imposture

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During the last two years I've often heard people saying that we live in biblical times – obviously referring to the new plague (COVID-19) and the huge scale of the ongoing unexpected transformations. I do not agree. I think we have been living in sort of biblical times for much longer and for another reason: the increasing abundance of illusions and consequently of temptations we encounter nearly on a daily basis. Since much, much before the pandemic we have been witnessing *the false* becoming threateningly ubiquitous. The substitution of the real by the false has, alas, long ago transcended the realm of objects and infiltrated deep into essential spheres, like human relations, values, work and art (into its creation and its appreciation alike). So much so that the imitation and simulation are now perceived nearly as a “normal” part of our reality!

Of course, there have always been imposters and fake products: next to indistinguishable copies of paintings and painters' styles have been produced since days of yore and Don Juans have been luring women into their embraces, convincingly claiming the obvious lie that they are truly in love. And, of course, this pretending of people or objects to be something they are not has been providing excellent material for comedy. I can't help laughing even at the thought of Eddy Murphy in the role of an African prince in the film *Coming to America*, directed by John Landis (1988). Or, when I remember the scene from Emir Kosturica's film *Black Cat, White Cat* (1998), where the old, bed-ridden gypsy character tests the fake whisky, produced by the illegal “factory” whose boss he is, and obviously savoring it in delight, utters the famous line: “Better than the original!”

I do not know when exactly the false pretending so masterfully to stand for the genuine started to be more and more an object of worry and concern rather than of ridicule. Yet, roughly at the turn of the millennium, it already quite palpably felt like the false was quickly turning from a mere laughing stock into a major threat. Maybe because of the gross enlarging of the very scale this process got to transpire on.

The arts have, of course, been masterfully reflecting this process. Think, for instance, of David Mamet's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Glengarry Glen Rose* (1983/84) and the same-named film based on it (1992, directed by James Foley). Or the beautiful-cum-chilling scene from Oskaras Korsunovas's unforgettable *Hamlet* (OKT, 2008) at the end of the first part: when Ophelia is used as bait.

The unforgettable mirrors of this production – to me, mirrors for souls rather than for appearances – are en face to the audience, as in the very beginning, but now in front of them, on them and on the tables there are white flowers. White too is the

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dress of Ophelia who is right in the middle of all this. And behind the mirrors, hidden also behind flowers, are the eavesdroppers whom Hamlet doesn't see in the beginning and of whom Ophelia, on her part, gradually forgets. And the latter is of great importance, since the kiss of the two is real, the words they say to each other are real – real is the hope. Until the moment Hamlet realizes he's in a trap. Then the whole heart-melting beauty of this scene all of a sudden becomes awfully ugly. Exactly because it turns out to be fake! This was, to me, the painful way in which Korsunovas zeroed in on the false as being part of evil and on the eternal illusion that one could get away with compromise even when we have managed to forget it, as Ophelia does.

Another striking production with a very strong accent on the frightening impact and increasing ubiquity of the false was *Don Juan* directed by Alexander Morfov at the Komissarzhevskaja Theatre in St. Petersburg, in 2003, and later on in other countries.¹ It was very powerful a show maybe also because it very masterfully mixed the beautiful and the comic's different faces – from the slap-stick to the grotesque. Beauty and comedy get juxtaposed in an unforgettable way, with the grotesque prevailing at the end to a chilling effect, exactly because it still appears beautiful on the surface.

I believe everyone who has seen *Don Juan* directed by Morfov, no matter in which of its versions, would always remember the omnipresence of masquerade there as part of the big theatre of Don Juan himself – i.e. theatre created and performed by Don Juan. Since he is not the famed seducer there, he does *play* the part of a seducer. For that purpose, after being donned with his suit (reminiscent of a toreador costume), Don Juan sits in front of a mirror, puts on an ugly wig with preposterous whiskers and paints on his face even more preposterous and uglier moustaches. That is, he makes himself *look like* a seducer, or rather: like the cliché of a seducer – a cliché brought to a laughable and repulsive extreme, all at once. The very topical tragicomedy of the main character is exactly in this *theatre in life* which Don Juan will henceforth perform.

Gradually the joy of the role he has conjured up for himself drains out and gets depleted: nothing anymore can transform the unbridled consuming of pleasures into a real delight. Maybe this happens as some kind of a presentiment about the emptiness of consumption per se?! For the *theatre in life* is not a whim of Don Juan only. It is

¹ In Bulgaria, at the National Theatre, in 2006 (it visited the Romanian National Theatre in 2013); in Israel, at the Gesher Theatre in Tel Aviv, in 2011 (it visited the Beijing People's Art Theatre in Beijing in 2013 and brought Morfov subsequent invitations there); it swept the St. Petersburg theatre awards in 2003 and was nominated for the major Golden Masks in Moscow in 2004

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the very essence of the world around him: there it is not even theatre, nor a masquerade, but a very authentically looking *substitute* for the real things – were they feelings, relationships, ideals, even faith. Together with Don Juan, the audience finds itself facing a whole fake world where everything is an imitation. And because Don Juan is smart, soon he begins despising both those who gullibly take his own theatre at its face value and the others who remain blind to the mechanics of the bigger theatre – that of the world we live in, a theatre which isn't even meant for pleasure but is created only out of greed and for purely manipulative purposes.

An epitome of this frightening reality of falsified and substituted values is a stunning scene in the second act. Don Juan, dressed in black, fences with seven swordsmen, all in white, in the typical outfits and masks. Four fencing couples, playing perpendicularly to the audience, are formed. From behind, a black-dressed Elvira rushes in their ranks, admonishing Don Juan to repent amidst the hissing sound of the swords, while she tries to wade through them. When she manages to overcome the grip of the last couple, all of a sudden, together with her, the audience realizes that all the swordsmen are in white. I.e. in the hustle of the fencing and enchanted by the striking beauty of the scene we haven't noticed when Don Juan has disappeared and, as Elvira herself, we realize that we have landed in a world where everyone is without a face and all are fully alike. When, seconds later, Don Juan reappears, he's the only one without a mask, both literally and figuratively. Nothing's left from his role but the inertia of the "having fun": he drags Elvira behind the wings and rapes her – without any joy whatsoever. The over-the-top indulgence has turned him into an ordinary brutal bully.

This scene looks like a beautiful focus of an illusionist. De facto, though, it's the essence of the nightmare this world of imitations has turned into. In the process of Don Juan's own theatre, the core of his very being has already been replaced - irrevocably. Again, as in *Hamlet* of Korsunovas, this is a hint that succumbing to illusions is rarely with innocuous consequences. In the world around this Don Juan there's nothing to believe in anymore. There's nothing that can help.

This persistently topical and so contemporary existential impasse I remember captured in an excellent way in a Romanian *Faust*, which I saw in Bucharest in 2003 and will never forget as well. There, while Faust was making love again just by inertia, without having anyone underneath him anymore, the Devil gradually started feeling pity towards him – towards all of us, human beings, for so easily succumbing to temptations. I.e. even the Devil pitied Faust, and thus humans in principle, not only for not knowing where to stop in our insatiable need and greed for superficial pleasures but even more so for not sensing the mirage nature of these pleasures and for mistaking contentment for happiness. The Don Juan of Morfov, on the contrary,

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is completely aware of his unhappiness and the impasse he is in. At the end, when facing not so much his terrifying host, the Commander, but his own self, Don Juan doesn't even manage to die, as if condemned to immortality in a world which for a long time already hasn't been the merry place inhabited by great adventurers but belongs now entirely to the great falsifiers.

A very worrying offspring of the marriage of the false with the mass production and mass communication is the *everything-goes* trend today: everyone can be an artist, everything could be presented as, and claimed to be, an art piece, and, in the same vein, everyone can claim to be a critic. Leave alone the political correctness which in some countries has already led to the extreme that it can not be said that someone/something is beautiful and someone/something is not: everybody “**is**” beautiful, period. This, to me, is an epitome of false democracy. On top of it, the false *everything-goes* “axiom” leads to false expectations and, thus, a constant underlying frustration that we do not manage to see/know/experience everything that is on offer. Yet succumbing to the temptation of the many-ness pursuit is so easy today.

The false *everything-goes* axiom has one more extremely damaging consequence: it dilutes criteria, substituting them by false criteria. And even worse: makes people, especially the young, question the inner, innate sense of beauty, good, harmony, which we all possess by birth. And artists themselves sometimes contribute to this. I've heard artists, even recipients of most important theatre awards claim, very proudly that they want confusion, they want fog.

Another manifestation of the false is the contemporary *have-fun* mantra, as if having-fun is the ultimate achievement, as if there is nothing more important in life. This has been leading to mass infantilism and to undermining *the substantial* in favor of *the superficial*. It contributes to the tendency of us living more and more, so to speak, horizontal lives, treasuring much more *to have fun* rather than *to be good* – the latter, of course, requires much more efforts. What is this if not a very subtle, yet profound substitution of values?!

One more absurdity connected with the false is the voluntary dispensing of one of our most precious and totally irreversible possessions – our time. When I see people literally squandering their time by being hooked to social media or never getting offline, the latter at times required by their employers, I can not help but think of the novel *Momo* by Michael Ende. We don't anymore need his gray people to take our time, we voluntarily and gladly give it away; we do not anymore need the charming and courageous Momo to fight for us in order to help us keep our time for ourselves.

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The greatest of the illusions today, to me, is that we are getting closer and closer, having the world at our fingertips and having more and more friends, while people, especially the young ones, are actually getting to be lonelier and lonelier. Now, when we were forced to keep a distance for over two years and we so much complained of it and missed closeness, sometimes I think why we were not as indignant at and horrified by the invisible distancing taking ground between us before the pandemic. The centrifugal motion on so many levels has been getting frighteningly strong for a long time already: we have been kind of flying away from each other, mistaking communication for communion, having our bodies touch a lot but less and less experiencing the elevating feeling of our souls embrace. So much so that, I dare say, for many years already before the pandemic we have been living in a time of a new Big Bang. Only it is a Big Bang that has been taking place not somewhere in the universe but within the mankind itself. The estrangement, the alienation – aren't these just other words for the ubiquitous process of disintegration that has been taking place again on a global scale?! Maybe, in metaphorical terms, the pandemic transpired in order for us to realize all this?!

For the thing is that this Big Bang is already happening within the single human being too. This phenomenon is the most worrying to me. For, as I already mentioned it, we start questioning our innate impulse that tells us unmistakably what is good and what is bad, and to what extent something is good or bad. Thus, it is not at all easy today to innocently shout out loud, as the boy in the fairy-tale, “The Emperor is naked!”, when the n'th impersonator of an artist tells us that they have created a masterpiece and then the n'th art dealer “confirms” this with a huge paycheck.

When deep down in our heart we do know something is no masterpiece, yet we start doubting this “knowledge of the heart” (Pascal) under the pressure of the siren songs of well formulated false claims multiplied by the media hype, it is then when our inner integrity starts gradually falling apart. To me this “knowledge of the heart” is something like a moral magnet each of us has in our soul. And the more we get to question our innate criteria, the more we get lost, since we in effect get alienated from our own soul.

In brief, the false with all its numerous metastases creates an avalanche of temptations, and a feeling of being in a fog, or in a thick forest without a real path in front of us, despite the host of mirages of so many paths. It is like the increasing outside chaos is getting to creep inside us, throwing into disarray our inner moral magnet, that invisible thing that holds us as humanity.

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How could we, critics – the professionals whose mission is to be in charge of the criteria in the arts – contribute to preserving the human innate sense of accord/harmony (i.e. criteria’s original spring-board) and, thus, how could we contribute to weakening the power of the false at least in the arts field?

At the end of the first decade of the new millennium I had no doubt the answer to that question was quite simple: by being *moral realists*, as opposed to *moral relativists*. That is to say: by drawing clear lines between *beautiful* and *interesting*, between *new* and *fashionable*, between *superficial* and *deeply humane*... Because these are the demarcation lines that separate the *temporary* from the *long-lasting*, the merely *striking* from the *substantially profound*, and in the end: the *fake* from the *genuine*. Criticism – I thought then – could also guide people to think about the existential differences between *reacting* and *thinking* and between *reacting* and *contemplating* – something of extreme importance for the arts! Also: between *pleasure* and *happiness*, between the knowledge of the facts, figures and mechanisms, on the one hand, and the “*knowledge of the heart*,” i.e. the knowledge imbued with human understanding and compassion, on the other hand.

At that time I was armed with my experience of having researched some of the world models of theatre criticism for as long as two decades. Importantly, all along my research (for two years in New York, then in London and in other English-language countries), what I was constantly coming across (and have been ever since) was the critics’ shared sense of a mission not only in regard with the theatre but in regard with culture on the whole, and implicitly humaneness, in principle. As Billington says, “The fun of criticism is not talking about plays only but talking about culture generally - what’s good and what’s bad about it. Because theatre is a social commentary as well.”² Or as he later wrote in his book *One Night Stands*: “[Criticism] is a public service, an art form in the service of society... The critic should be the moralist of everyday life”³

During the last decade (2010-2020), a lot of things changed, though, thus turning it to, so to speak, a ‘border’ one. A decade not only of the decisive shift to the digital but, at the same time, of the intensifying of the already mentioned processes of an increasing take of the false over the genuine, of illusions over reality, of the façades

² *Who Keeps the Score on the London Stages?*, Kalina Stefanova, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000, now under the logo of Routledge

³ *One Night Stands*, Michael Billington, Nich Hern Books, 2002

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over substance. Very logically, given all this, the word *moralist* and all its derivatives have been getting more and more depleted of meaning. And so has been another word: *quality*.

Everyday objects now are not expected to last long and this is taken for granted, while the opposite has always been a sign of quality. In the arts realm fundamentals that used to make a work of art of quality, like beauty, harmony, ultimate goodness – or, as a matter-of-fact, the very fight for achieving them and the pain of losing them – are now not only put under question but in some cases easily swept aside as irrelevant and old-fashioned.

This has consequently not only affected criticism of the arts and literature, and theatre criticism per se, throwing criteria in disarray, but has also affected the very discussion on criticism itself. *Quality* of criticism used to be the key-word in that discussion. Now it has more and more been tacitly pushed aside from the main spotlight and the attention has shifted to rather extraneous and non-artistic factors affecting the profession.

In the discussion on criticism, the at least partial neglect of the quality of writing in the discussion on criticism was one of the saddest conclusions in a recent research I did in British and American criticism of that ‘border’ decade – a phenomenon clearly manifested in the US, especially in the regional theatre-criticism’s landscape, but not unavailable in Britain either, albeit to a lesser extent. And this is a sad piece of news because in English critics are often referred to as ‘writers’. And not by chance, since the most skilled among them have made criticism at its best dwell in the territory of literature, i.e. be a real art form, which is one of the reasons their writings are of value long after their opinions have stopped being of interest.

Among the main extraneous factors that have drawn the attention away from the quality of writing are the substantial changes in the economic situation, the advent and rapidly gained omnipresence of the digital, and the ensuing problem with the sustainability of the profession. The first two factors have led to drastic changes in the press and, thus, in the role of critics. Namely, the mere necessity of critics in the respective media has been put under question. An issue often solved via entire cutting off of the critic-on-staff position. Or, in the better scenario, when theatre coverage is spared a full dispensing with, most common is the practice of hiring free-lancers to write for much smaller payment or entirely non-specialists, like celebrities or just people interested in theatre.

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The migration of critics to the net as bloggers or as free-lancers for digital media has in turn underlined even further the necessity of a formula that is to secure steady payment and prevent incessant dynamics and the ensuing next-to-impossible longevity of critics there. Thus *subsidized criticism* has become the key phrase as the answer of these problems, private, state, and mixed funding being among the options, as well as embedded criticism. For, as Alex Sierz very rightly wrote back in 2014, "... good criticism cannot be left to the open market, which just forces down prices and rewards the cheapest rather than the best. In the future, as in the past, it's economic independence, however that is created, that will be the *sine qua non* of strong, impartial, informed and fearless criticism."⁴

The political correctness has also contributed to deviating of the attention from *how* criticism is written to *who* is writing it, in terms of how this person looks like rather than what their talent and professional skills are.

In brief, many of the extraneous factors are indisputably of great or even urgent importance for the very survival of criticism. (In 2013, at the Critic's Circle Centenary Conference in the UK, Michael Coveney, one of the very famous veteran British critics, "made the remark that if someone was to consider theatre criticism in the future it should be as a hobby."⁵ In 2020 Ben Brantley, the ex No:1 critic of *The New York Times* said, "I think there will be a period in which daily critics as such, as we've traditionally known them, don't exist."⁶) Yet, the focus on the extraneous factors has also indisputably contributed to spreading thin of the discussion on criticism.

The massive digital shift during the 'border decade' has not helped bring back the focus on quality of criticism either. Indeed, the net has been the refuge for criticism on a global scale, as the traditional media have been getting rid of their critics. The net could even be credited to a certain extent for keeping criticism alive and even for contributing to its development, since it has given freedom to critics to write without the confining word-limit and strict deadlines of the traditional press, and to experiment with the format of theatre coverage. For instance, the British *Exeunt* magazine publishes reviews in the form of sonnets, of storybooks, plays, and drunken

⁴ <http://www.critical-stages.org/9/british-theatre-criticism-the-end-of-the-road/>, by Aleks Sierz, Critical Stages, 14.02.2014, issue No:9, (access: 07.12.2020)

⁵ As quoted by Jake Orr in his text <http://www.jakeorr.co.uk/blog/2013/10/future-theatre-criticism-hurling-car-crash/>, Jake Orr, 2013 (access: 07.12.2020)

⁶ Ben Brantley: "My Tastes Have Broadened", *The Stage*, Nov. 3, 2020

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dialogues.⁷ Yet, while today, obviously thanks to the internet, “more people are writing about theatre, and publishing what they write about, than at any other time in history,” as Lyn Gardner wrote already back in 2013, the seamy side of this phenomenon is the increase in quantity has not at all led to any conspicuous improvement in quality.

Moreover, in 2017, already approaching the end of the decade, David Cote used the word that to a large extent encapsulates the relations between the net and criticism: *illusion*. (Not surprisingly again *illusion*!) “*Show-Score*⁸ maintains an illusion,” he wrote, “To look at the site, you’d think our profession were healthier than ever.”⁹

Why is it actually not so? Kote’s answer was that “It’s getting harder to distinguish message-board fan chatter from citizen journos.”¹⁰ He even defined the bulk of those writing on the net as “a swarming mass of unedited amateurs with domain names and hot takes”¹¹ The same lack of quality corrective, i.e. availability of a traditional editor “above” the reviewer, because most of criticism on the net is self-published, was underlined also by Alez Sierz in the above-mentioned article¹² And Lyn Gardner too cautioned: “we need to take care here: does a tweet count as a review?”¹³

The reality behind another of the illusions that the omnipresence of criticism on the net has created is very well summarized by Laurence Cook, a British blogger: “Online-only journalism may have nabbed a few readers from major publications but the real unintended consequence of it is the creation of a class of badly paid or unpaid reviewers and writers whose passion (or hunger) means that national publications no longer feel much pressure or need to cover those niche or marginal events.”¹⁴

⁷ <http://exeuntmagazine.com/about-exeunt/>

⁸ A New York-based aggregator includes reviews from New York’s *Daily News*, *Newsday*, NY1, etc., also runs advertisements

⁹ *A Second Act for Theatre Criticism?* David Cote, *American Theatre Magazine*, November 28 2017

¹⁰ *A Second Act for Theatre Criticism?* David Cote, *American Theatre Magazine*, November 28 2017

¹¹ *ditto*

¹² <http://www.critical-stages.org/9/british-theatre-criticism-the-end-of-the-road/>, by Aleks Sierz, *Critical Stages*, 14.02.2014, issue No:9, (access: 07.12.2020)

¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2013/oct/08/theatre-criticism-in-crisis-critics>, by Lyn Gardner, 08.10. 2013, *The Guardian*, theatre blog – part of the subtitle, (access: 07.12.2020)

¹⁴ <https://medium.com/@LaurenceCook/in-a-world-without-professional-theatre-critics-e7e8b8f42e22>, Laurence Cook, *In a world without professional theatre critics...*, May 14 2018, (access: 08.12.2020)

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And there is yet another illusion, again well captured and dispelled by Cook. Namely: on the one hand, he writes, “internet is great. It has allowed marginal voices to flourish (everywhere!) and superserve their marginal audience (anywhere!).”¹⁵ Yet, on the other hand, “At a time when we desperately need to find the language and tools to speak to as many different people as possible, we are breaking up critical thought into increasingly specialised, localised and private units.”¹⁶

The “atomisation of our critical conversation,”¹⁷ as Cook so accurately put it is to me the worst of the digital-shift impacts on criticism on the whole and on theatre criticism per se. Since this atomization is to a great extent an epitome of the overall process of disintegration, the Big Bang of our time I was talking about earlier. To some extent this atomization is the parallel, invisible counterpart of the many-ness phenomenon. And, as the over-abundance of choice could in effect be equal to a lack of choice, so may the atomization of the critical discourse translate into a substantial decrease of its potential of effectiveness. In other words, the atomization of the critical conversation could as well lead to criticism becoming ultimately pointless.

A very special take on the problems the digital age poses to criticism was voiced in 2019 by Sarah Crompton of *Whatonstage*, at the tribute to Michael Billington at the National Theatre on the occasion of his retirement from *The Guardian*¹⁸. “The truth is, she said, ... that the role of the critic is under threat in the modern age, not so much because everyone thinks they are one, but because at a time when internet metrics apparently measure every part of our lives, it's easy to ignore the incalculable influence that the conversation between critic, audience and artist has. If everything is weighed by simple numbers, a report of a ground-breaking production in Nottingham is always going to come off worse than the match report of Real Madrid and Manchester City. Yet in the end, the production in Nottingham might have more impact on society.”¹⁹

I think Crompton zeroed in on yet another of the illusions of our time, which is not new but is yet massively promoted nowadays: that everything of importance is measurable and that the immeasurable can not be expected to fare well. Of course,

¹⁵ ditto

¹⁶ ditto

¹⁷ <https://medium.com/@LaurenceCook/in-a-world-without-professional-theatre-critics-e7e8b8f42e22>, Laurence Cook, In a world without professional theatre critics..., May 14 2018, (access: 08.12.2020)

¹⁸ after nearly 50 years as the paper's chief theatre critic and over 50 years as a critic on the whole

¹⁹ *Michael Billington's successors are going to have to fight hard to preserve his legacy in the modern age*, Sarah Crompton, WhatsOnStage, February 25 2020, (access: 09.12.2020)

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artists of all fields as well as critics do well know how untrue this is. I believe it's one of our main duties as today's critics to constantly remind people with our work that this is a false axiom and art does matter exactly because its essence and its impact can not be counted with figures, and this is actually its biggest strength.

In the last decade in Eastern Europe there has been a surge of a type of theatre that denounces the exuberance of stage means of expressions – the use of multi-media, for instance, or of complex stage sets. It's not exactly going back to the 'poor theatre', it's more about stripping life of its appearances in a time when the prevalence of façade over substance has become a 'norm'. This theatre aims at entering directly into the territory of the pure spirit, therefore, to me, it is, so to speak, a *vertical theatre*, as opposed to the horizontal mode of living today. Among its best samples are many of the productions directed by Grzegorz Bral with his *Song of the Goat Theatre*, in Wrocław, or by the Slovenian Jernej Lorenzi, or any production that does not waste time to create a make-believe world on stage but concentrates exclusively on delving deep into the life of the human spirit – and we well know that this is what theatre is all about (Stanislavsky).

I believe, we could also speak about the necessity of a corresponding type of criticism, so to speak, *vertical criticism*: criticism that, yes, deals with how a piece of theatre is made and how it works, yet focuses not so much on the concrete, measurable mechanisms of that theatre piece' but on what it says about how we ought to live our lives, how the human soul fares in that piece of life the respective production dwells on. Something not at all new in the arts – I'm paraphrasing Socrates – but something that is of urgent importance in the age of the digital, i.e. of the concretely measurable. At the end of the 'border' decade, that was my answer to the question how could we, critics contribute to preserving the human innate sense of harmony and thus to weakening the power of the false at least in the arts field?

What is the answer to this question now, after the two years of the pandemic? In the Fall of 2020 I went to the International Theatre Festival in Pilsen, the Czech Republic, the only foreign theatre event I could attend during this period. It didn't happen outdoors, neither in a shortened edition or a mixed digital-meets-real one. It transpired in a fully real, traditional manner – the only large-scale festival in Eastern Europe that dared to undertake such a brave step in the second half of 2021.

I have never let the critic in me oust the ever enchanted by the theatre viewer. Nevertheless, I have to admit in Pilsen, in 2021, I relished then as never before the mere sitting in the dark together with the other viewers. After months on the mirage-

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like digital theatre diet, letting the energy of the live communion with all these people around me and on stage run through all my being felt like finding oneself in an oasis. I was on the verge of entirely abandoning my critic's hat and succumbing to the delight of merely experiencing theatre. I was ready to forgive any of its imperfections.

Aren't all of us, critics, now, in that position, to one extent or another? I was reminded then of what Gore Vidal famously said about a female colleague of ours – that she is a great critic uncorrupted by compassion.

When asked to elaborate on the motivation of organizing the festival fully live against all odds, in the midst of the pandemic, its head Jan Burian, who is also head of the Czech National Theatre in Prague, told me: “We have to preserve the energy of the theatre alive. We know people can live without many things. People can live even in a prison. Yet, we should not let people live without the energy of the theatre”.

Indeed, maybe the illusion that needs to be most urgently dispelled now is that people can live without art, without theatre per se, without the feeling of belonging, of being literally a part of the warm and pulsating body of the audience, and live without all this only because of fear. I firmly believe that dispelling this illusion is our first and foremost task at this point – of the theatre-makers and theatre critics alike. Hopefully, we, human beings on the whole, will start then gradually regaining our real world from the mirage-universe, will restore our moral magnet and, thus, our inner integrity, and will become much better at differentiating the genuine from the false.

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