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CIRCUMSCRIPTIONS

(CHAPTERS FROM THE HISTORY OF KRÉTAKÖR THEATRE: 1995–2011)

- Summary -

The subject of my dissertation is tracing the history of Krétakör Theatre, founded in 1995 and – in a decade – turned into the most significant, world famous Hungarian independent theatre group that was radically transformed in 2007. This paper does not aim at completeness, neither in its goals nor in its results: functions as a *basic research* in theatre studies, while trying to serve as a multi-perspective foundation of the history of Krétakör Theatre.

In the introductory chapter, after walking around the general dilemmas of theatre historiography, we try to answer the question: What can be seen of the contemporary (Hungarian) theatre? The view is distressing: bigger volumes of works on the last few decades of (Hungarian) theatre history do not exist at all. The reason behind the fact that there are no monographs or overall summarizing writings on the most important Hungarian repertory theatres and alternative ensembles of the second half of the twentieth century, can be found in the ‘anti-theoretical’ attitude of Hungarian theatre, also about the creators (trans)forming theatre history actively, we can find a longer study only about a minor part of them.

This cannot be accepted any more, since a reflected and (re)constructed past that is thoroughly explored and has a place in public thinking, helps us discovering the meanings of today’s happenings: as it can be clearly seen from the closing chapter of my thesis, in case of Krétakör Theatre, their features that are held to be unique innovations seem – from the perspective of the world theatre – much more to be a sensitive reaction to the present and the past of the theatre.

In the same place we review more extensive works that were published in the past two decades about (Hungarian) contemporary theatre, that were written not primarily for the small scientific community, grouping them based on methodological and typological aspects. Silence about contemporary theatre is not necessary, moreover theoretical summaries equipped with case studies – bearing *usefulness* in mind – may have a clear effect on the wider public as well (see the reception of the book *Postdramatic Theatre* by Hans-Thies Lehmann). In Hungarian there are no similar summarizing works, we can get a picture about contemporary theatre mostly from collections of critical writings and interviews. At the same time we find that the volume titled *Maladype. 10 év / 10years* prepared for the tenth anniversary of Maladype Theatre containing subjective reminiscences and writings of professionals from different viewpoints – can be useful even from the perspective of our dissertation.

The second chapter reconstructs the history of the traditional, theatre-like operation of Krétakör Theatre, primarily based on the chronological order of their twenty-seven productions: here we collected the main events between the year of foundation, 1995 and the year of radical transformation, 2008. We reflect on the summarizing studies that were published with regards to this period, including the historical overview from the company leader Árpád Schilling, which we identify as one of the evidences for the unique myth-creation in Hungarian theatre life by Krétakör Theatre. We also cover the „unlearnable” method and style of Schilling, in other words we cover the early acknowledged fact that he has consciously tried different theatre languages in every performance, and then has left these behind. To be able to diagnose the possible thematic-linguistic connections between the plays,

we utilize the one and only (!) longer study written in Hungarian on this topic, a paper from Gabriella Kiss on the „project based” thinking of Schilling.¹

We mention the start of Schilling’s career in the first half of the 1990s before Krétakör in the mirror of later developments, like his commitment to the student and amateur theatre movement (that comes back later, see *hamlet.ws*, *The Priestess*), then about the year 1995, when two events have happened that seemingly exclude each other. Schilling was admitted as a student of directing at the University of Theatre and Film Arts in Budapest and he founded Krétakör Theatre in the very same year. In accordance with our hypothesis the premiers of the company between 1995 and 2001 gave account of the momentary common thinking of the ensemble as a manifest. In the analysis we show the chapters of project based thinking on every performance, covering elements that were determining the further development of Krétakör Theatre, like the consistent rejection of the concept of alternative theatre, the long process of rehearsals based on improvisation and leaving the urban world behind, the exceptional work-relationship between István Tasnádi playwright-dramaturg and Schilling or the early foundation of the group’s international career.

The period between 2001 and 2007 is the ‘heroic age’ when the well-established, experimenter workshop was raised to professional level by Schilling and the actors of Krétakör Theatre. The number of plays on the repertoire increased quickly, the plays run long series: Krétakör becomes an unavoidable factor both in the Hungarian and in the international theatre life. Árpád Schilling and Máté Gáspár, leaders of the company want more than a well operating theatre: in the beginning of the new millennium they build Krétakör as a brand with marketing tricks that are unusual in Hungarian theatre life, while being unable to keep a permanent space to work at. Meanwhile performances directed by Schilling one after the other become emblematic in Hungarian contemporary theatre history – as we explored in our investigations they are far from being equally successful, in which the interpretative community has always faced challenges, keeping interest in Krétakör alive: *W – Workers’ Circus* (2001), *Fatherland* (2002), *Seagull* (2003), *BLACKland* (2004). The few guest directors (Wulf Twiehaus, Kornél Mundruczó, Sándor Zsótér) brought diversity in form and in language to the lives of actors and audience of Krétakör.

The ‘crisis symptoms’ at the end of the period in subject lead us through to the third chapter, a discussion on the period between 2008 and 2011 of Krétakör. Leaving behind the so far followed chronological method, here we walk around practical changes and theoretical fundamentals that can help in understanding the radical aesthetic twist, the transformation of Krétakör Theatre with a company and a repertory to a firm looking after independent projects that becomes more and more virtual, except for a few permanent creators and organizers. After having the two premiers – (*The Astronomer’s Dream* /2006/, *hamlet.ws* /2007/) that can be considered as direct antecedents of this change – inserted to the history, comes an explanatory description of some projects after 2008. In these latter ones certain phenomena, topics, problems were in focus through portraying specific projects, to be able to come to a conclusion in the two case studies of the next chapter.

Two of the most important practical changes leading on the transformation of Krétakör were the termination of the ensemble form and vanishing the bigger part of the repertoire. From being a theatre, Krétakör became a firm looking after projects, so addressed its audience through new channels. After presenting the medium and genre change, we focus on the question of termination vs. transformation: in accordance with our hypothesis the radical change was a consequential result of the antecedents, and the credo of the director and company leader Schilling. For the collection of the theoretical foundations of transformation

¹ Kiss Gabriella: Színházi (tükör)képek – Schilling Árpád rendezéseiről. In: Kiss Gabriella: A kockázat színháza. Fejezetek a kortárs magyar rendezői színház történetéből. Veszprém, 2006, 121-143, and Kiss Gabriella: Színházi projektek. Schilling Árpád rendezéseiről. In: Alternatív színháztörténetek. Alternatívok és alternatívák. edit. Imre Zoltán. Bp., 2008, 528-549.

we examine how a spectator can become a participant, and how that affects the actors. Starting up from the concept of 'useful theatre' from Brecht we assess, what the notion of socially responsible theatre means in Hungary in these days, and how the newest projects of Schilling contribute to that. Looking at the theoretic essay of Schilling entitled *The Apology of an Escapologist* where the company leader defining himself as an 'escapologist', we collect the main characteristics of the new theatre model represented by him: 'There is no performance, there is an event. There is no premier, there is a meeting. There is no play, casting, but there are research, experimentation and autonomous creators.'² However, if a performance is not shown in a given space (mostly in a theatre building), is not presented during a determined time (mostly always the same duration of time), mostly performed by actors to the audience that mostly listens to them in silence, then this will have consequences not only on the new kind of actor-spectator relationship, but also on the work of the theatre critic or aesthete analysing the performance. We examine all the characteristics of the new type of theatre ideal outlined by Schilling: use of space, use of time, audience from community – community from audience, relationship of text and performance.

Chapter 4 includes two case studies: explanatory descriptions of the *New Spectator* that ran in disadvantaged villages of North Hungary in August 2010, and the *Crisis*-trilogy that summarizes the ambitions and experiences of Krétakör after the changes, performed between June and October in 2011 in three cities of three countries.

For the interpretation of the *New Spectator* we have involved the project called *The Astronomer's Dream*, in which Krétakör experimented for the first time with small civil communities. The question of *New Spectator*, that ran for one and a half years, was: 'do we manage to... through staging, make the local people visualize, recognize and move the meanings that create conflicts, tension, rupture in our everyday lives?'³ After listing the antecedents and samples from abroad we show the course of the project, evaluating the happenings from the point of the major components of the new theatre ideal of Krétakör, thus presenting the participant contribution, the genre of 'theatre soap opera', modifications of the prior script of the event, the carrying strength of the drafted stage model situations, and in the end the effects of these plays on the villages, and the reception of *New Spectator* by critics.

Crisis-trilogy had its premier in 2011, when discussing it, we mention the intentional non-classifiability of the genre of this undertaking, the consequent cancellation of the borderline between actors/spectators/participants, furthermore their effect on the actors/spectators/participants. We try to collate three episodes of *Crisis* that were born in three cities, when we interpret what we saw from the concepts of family, runaway, democracy, freedom, self-examination, self-recognition, confrontation: *jp.co.de* of Prague, *Ungrateful Bastards* of Munich and finally *The Priestess* of Budapest. The part closing this chapter, analysing the opinion of media echo on *Crisis* shows that the new projects of Krétakör do not only rewrite the traditional roles of theatre, spectators etc., but also require a different level of being prepared, different terminology and in some cases different genres.

In the fifth chapter we detail the method tried out in the end of the previous unit, when analysing the reflection of critiques on two emblematic performances of Krétakör Theatre. In the previous chapters we have pointed out several times that up until the change in 2008, theatre critics have faithfully and consistently followed the works of Schilling, this is why here we highlight the consequences and the reasons behind having no reaction from critiques after the change, and also the elements of the new system of expectations towards the spectator-critique that can be read out of the projects. We look into the evolution of the relationship with theatre criticism in the one and a half decade long period in review of Krétakör Theatre, in other words, the pendulum-like movements of the company between the 'off' and 'in' statuses. Then we examine where theatre criticism is located in Hungarian

² Schilling Árpád: A szabadulóművész apológiája. Bp., Krétakör Színház, 2010, 7.

³ <http://www.ujnezo.hu/kutatas> (Date of last download: 11 Sept 2012)

theatre thinking, mentioning conflicts of theatre studies and criticism, and also the consequences of the already covered 'anti-theoretical' attitude.

Having processed the critics' reception of *W – Workers' Circus* (2001), it is unambiguous that its performance was an exceptional event in contemporary Hungarian theatre. After a short touch on the Hungarian theatrical context of Büchner's *Woyzeck*, we make a collection of and methodize the most important problems from the published critiques, interviews, essays together with the attempts to react to these. Theoreticians were interested in, for example, (the lack of) storytelling, the place of quotes from Attila József applied in the Büchner text, the visceral-instinctive effect of the performance on the spectators, the pre-figurations from world theatre, the acting of the performers that could not be located in the so far ordinary categories. We found that the reason behind the *The Seagull* (2003) scoring a great success is its location within the own 'history of life' of Krétakör Theatre and in Hungarian theatre history, then we analyse the abundant reaction of critics, and the fundamentally distinct nature of that from those to *W*, which we correlate to the choice of play and to the chosen stage language that was (thought to be) familiar to critics. After this, we go into details regarding problems (use of space, acting of performers, the atmosphere of the performance, estranging effects during the play) that were touched upon by most critiques.

To be able to understand the Krétakör phenomenon, the exceptional duality must be considered, which has the same essence as Hungarian theatre life, and which comes from a well-established setting into balance of elements that are completely strange to that, whether it is about structural or artistic questions. Krétakör, existed between 1995 and 2008 as a theatre company and then from 2008 as a firm looking after independent artistic projects, could score great success for the same reasons: the diversity in form and in language stated as an *ars poetica* has let neither creators nor the spectators joining them to 'stand in one place'. The key figure of this story is the founder, leading director of the company, Árpád Schilling, who has not only built up himself and his team successfully, but has also proved that the order of the basic structural elements of Hungarian theatre that was thought to be immovable up to now, can be carefully modified by quick reactions to the trends in the world theatre.

One of the key words for the interpretation of recent Hungarian cultural state of affairs is *overdueness*: to be able to understand the legend of Krétakör Theatre we have to realize the fact that (how) Schilling and his company keep count of being lagged behind in almost every areas of art, not as something pulling back, but as a catalyst force, which is, at the same time the key to the non-existent 'Schilling-style' as well. The scenical attitudes of Krétakör Theatre, their changes of topics and directions certify the working off of this lagging. Besides the so called homage-performances (see *W – Workers' Circus*, *Liliom*, *Leonce and Lena*, *The Seagull*) which salute to the significant pre-figurations of world theatre, they are also interested in (seemingly) new forms as well (see the political theatre of *Fatherland* and of *BLACKland*), what is more they insert such genres to the canon that are treated somewhat with negligence by the Hungarian professional theatre makers (see for example including drama pedagogy in *The Priestess*).

The key to the success of Schilling's activities in and outside of the theatre can be found in the consequent *present tense* of his words: the secret of his unambiguous messages, provocative questions and ideas generating disputes is in being bound to today. This necessarily implies emphasising certain topics that are polemically treated in the Hungarian society and negotiating acute problems within the lifetime achievement, which tend to be understood as sheer political-ideological commitment by simplifying interpretations.

The spectator is all the way through the main character of the story of Krétakör Theatre: the story of the stagings of Schilling could be written from approaching them from the different forms of communication with the audience tried out throughout the years which were then rejected or matured. Krétakör Theatre wanted and expected from the spectators something different than what we were used to, since Schilling, on the one hand wanted to

make the audience part of the theatre, on the other hand managed to deliberately break the thick wall built between spectators and actors through the centuries. The attempts in these directions, with different 'genres' point into a similar direction: want to free theatre from mystique. This is in close connection with the extensive activities of Árpád Schilling as a public writer that has been ever since self-reflexive, theory making, arguing for the values of democracy.

We cannot talk about very close points of connections between the specific performances of Krétakör Theatre, however their similar tone and problem-orientation is rather typical of them. We have already touched upon the 'project based' thinking, which was worked out by Gabriella Kiss, being a characteristic of Schilling, and the social/political, literary/dramatic, theatre/theatrical episodes of that, so in the closing chapter we examine the construction of their repertoire. Classical and contemporary, Hungarian and foreign authors all can be found here: on the whole the repertoire of Krétakör Theatre could and wanted to have a traditional and innovative spirit at the same time, this generated a constant attention and interest of the spectators for the newer works of the company. Far from tumbling the expectations of spectators radically, it is rather about methodological and careful expansion of limitations, about stations of teaching-learning process with a diverse overall picture together with the spectator.

Another determining feature of the period of operating as a repertoire theatre is that Krétakör Theatre does not have a permanent space for rehearsing and playing. Through the works of the company, having made a virtue of necessity, we sketch up how placelessness becomes an aesthetic factor. We prove that the ambitions of the new projects that move both spectators and actors can be explained from the theory of useful theatre: Schilling and the Krétakör encourage action, what is more they encourage for a playful and common (in the play with the community) action, reinforcing the belief of the spectators that their presence does make sense and their contribution does count. From the chosen topics a determined modification of the content of the audience is consequential, which connects with the publicly admitted view about its effects: Schilling and the Krétakör admittedly only encourages the change, when offering alternatives, but does not take on the practical and moral burden of long term implementation.