

# INFERNO

Angelina Georgieva

***The Dance of Death*** by **August Strindberg**, adapted and directed by **Margarita Mladenova**, set and costume design **Daniela Oleg Lyahova**

Cast **Svetlana Yancheva, Vladimir Penev, Tsvetan Aleksiev**

*Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory, *To Damascus* Programme, premiere 13<sup>th</sup> April 2007, Sofia

*Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory's *To Damascus* Programme in its parts *Julie, Jean and Kristine* based on *Miss Julie, The Dance of Death* and *Strindberg in Damascus* rereads the work and personality of August Strindberg. The name of the Swedish playwright immediately brings to mind the intrusion of the unconscious into the modern European drama which he transformed into a battlefield of libidinal energies putting in its centre the "subject divided" between the rational/the reason and the irrational/the instinctive. He pointed out the mentioned bifurcation as a fundamental existential conflict. And in the context of the mystical religiosity confessed by the author at that. The programme unites in a peculiar manner these two main lines into a common trajectory that determined its name *To Damascus* – after the title of per-



Vladimir Penev (Edgar) and Svetlana Yancheva (Alice) in *The Dance of Death*

Photographer Simon Varsano

haps the most mystical and mysterious play of Strindberg that takes place as a gradual spiritual journey in the quest of the primary truth about the human being and existence. Even the choice of programme's name per se is enough to identify the "moral imperative" of the philo-

sophical platform which has been condensed by *Sfumato* over the years in their practice through the question of the relation between man and God that relates them to the Christian existentialism, on the one hand, and, on the other, to the theatrical quests aiming at the sacred as opposed to the “profane” and understanding theatre as “ecstatic living”. An apocalyptic mind resonates in the performances of *Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory; they set an apocalyptic expectation, thus opposing the main attitudes of the present day that has remained with “No God! No Master!”<sup>1</sup> as a recent review on their production was titled. In their most recent programmes dedicated to Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Marina Tsvetaeva the theatre’s directors (Margarita Mladenova and Ivan Dobchev) dig more than ever into the Modernity in which they see the relationships between the individual and the sacred/of spiritual value manifested in their extremity and vicissitude. *To Damascus* programme continues this line that has found a very categorical, aesthetic and conceptual manifestation in M. Mladenova’s *The Dance of Death*.

*The Dance of Death* is the sequel to *Julie, Jean and Kristine* whose finale with the figure of Julie (Albena Georgieva) raised up in the air and symbolically nominated a victim echoes apocalyptically, creates fatalistic tension which acquires the meaning of an end of a certain value position, of “a human species” – a phrase mentioned in passing by Strindberg in his preface to the play and made by Margarita Mladenova a semantic centre of the performance. The title of her adaptation based on *Miss Julie*

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<sup>1</sup> Iordanov, Nikolay. “No God No Master!” – *Literaturen Vestnik* Weekly, No. 11, 21–27 March 2007.

is indicative of the re-directed centre of attention. It goes beyond focusing on Julie and is equally allocated among the three characters. The libidinal motivations typical of Strindberg’s naturalism, combined with inherited predisposition and social position, taking the form of a “war of sexes” are subdued, they are preserved only schematically. The characters’ motivations are pre-formulated on the basis of personal and life positions. The conflict as a suggestive libidinal play of power and submission is “rationalized,” shifted, first and foremost, towards a collision, a struggle for domination and subordination to values, to world-views on the basis of which they make their dramatic choices. (This struggle is also transposed into the performance as spatial configurations among the characters on the levels in between them – in almost any moment one of them stands higher or lower than the other.) M. Mladenova thus stages Strindberg’s naturalistic tragedy as a hyper realistic drama. Amidst the sterile environment of the metallic glow of kitchen appliances, the meat mincer, and the rising steam of boiling water as an open lid of seething passion, Julie’s sacrificial body – trembling, rendered lifeless, dragged, hysterically tossing – is her principal excess. The cynical pragmatism of Jean (Hristo Petkov) and the roughish narrow-mindedness and pseudo-religious conformism of Kristine (Miroslava Gogovska) push aside Julie presented in her vulnerability in which she insists on some principles in spite of all. Julie is transformed into the victim having taken upon herself the impossibility of an exit, and thus the “transgression” and the “crime”. By Jean’s unprincipled egocentrism’s “victory” over her character *Julie, Jean and Kristine* echoes a suggestion of

some apocalyptic re-arrangement of the personal and social layers in terms of the values that guide them.

*The Dance of Death* is the next stage of the “apocalypse” – the one that has happened inside the human being, that takes out into the open his/her “other” face, that liberates the destructive spontaneity. If the motivation deduced from male-female unconscious impulses planted by Strindberg is to a great extent rationalized and transferred to another basis in the performance *Julie, Jean and Kristine*, in *The Dance of Death* these impulses are exteriorized to the point of deformation. M. Mladenova focuses and over-strains the basic power tensions among Edgar (Vladimir Penev), Alice (Svetlana Yancheva) and Kurt (Tsvetan Aleksiev), abstracts them and blasts them from primordial female/male strategies into extreme manifestations of an automated struggle for domination. It echoes in every step, in the rhythm of the fierce silent card game, in the feeling of constant spying in which the tempo-rhythm between slowdown, standstill and acceleration is very skilfully orchestrated. Here any circumstantiality is unnecessary. As early as on the textual level the lines are synthesized, the phrases are condensed as much as possible, some schemes are added which are modelled after the absurdists and in which the automated “dead” communication misfires for a moment, ready to disintegrate

and die out entirely; the memory starts to “go round in circles” into reiterations and blank spots while the “machine” of everyday ritualized actions and conversations is re-set into motion. Out of the detailed setting of the action in which the “family war” takes place M. Mladenova materializes mostly its atmosphere that creates the feeling of a thickening nightmare. If Strindberg’s play presents a complex combination of his specific naturalism with symbolism overexposed to an extent which will later find an outlet in the expressionism, M. Mladenova’s performance focuses precisely on that tension which she takes to the extreme in an absurdist expressionist stylistics. The performance is concerned with finding a form of living in death, in some inner, spiritual death rather than with recreating the plot. This is death which is also, in a sense, the abyss between



Hristo Petkov (Jean) and Miroslava Gogovska (Kristine) in *Julie, Jean and Kristine*

Photographer Simon Varsano



*Strindberg in Damascus* by Georgi Tenev and Ivan Dobchev, directed by Ivan Dobchev

the characters. And as Bataille wrote that death (after the abyss) is vertiginous. Like Alice's dance in circles which as if causes some infernal, destructive forces. In her love and hate constantly overflow into each other, and are always on the edge of the abyss.

The stage is hopelessly black. As if out of some primordial darkness one hears two "emptied" monotonous voices repeating a tired ritual that has long since made unnecessary any content. Communication fallen to some pettiness and senselessness. Its only remaining and driving energy is the one of confrontation. The stage is lit up into pale light and Edgar and Alice show up, two statues sitting on a bare bed, as if standing still into an absurdist painting. It is as if they are the last people on earth, destined to automatically act out the absurd theatre of the absolute impossibility in the life with the other person. In Daniela Oleg Lyahova's ascetic set design only the principal places of "family life" have remained, reduced to their bare objectness. But in the stage space composed of beams of light focusing on the figures it is as if these "places" appear and then disappear back into the darkness. The world of Edgar and Alice is further isolated by a black tulle curtain. The shape of the faces lit by beams of yellowish light falling from above or

coming from aside is markedly deformed through that curtain; it is transformed into a lifeless mask. Actors Vladimir Penev and Svetlana Yancheva take Edgar and Alice outside/beyond themselves, transformed into automata of a grotesquely-hateful (self-) destruction whose power is measured via Kurt (Tsvetan Aleksiev) – their victim. Each of the actors delivers a remarkable performance moving along the edge of madness and ecstaticity but mastered into self-detachment. Along these general lines they carry out different strategies in the acting.

Svetlana Yancheva's Alice is like an archetypal monster of the swallowing-destructive female forces which reach here a "vampire" metastasis when they rush to their victim, Kurt. Her character is flatly set in the zone of the mask. Her figure is abstracted into the coarse contours of the costume, into the mechanical, jerky movements, into the lighting that outlines in chiaroscuro the lines of the skull, into the ritualized speech in which different intensities of hate or predatory passion come out as the only emotion, into the rhythmic echoing steps. Some lines from *Sfumato* Theatre Laboratory's former quests in the archetypal as a resource for theatrical means of expression have passed into Svetlana Yancheva's performance. Alice's motivation is focused solely on the level of "satisfaction" of the female life strategies and their dissatisfaction is like her death. Here even the shortage of money, the absence of a housemaid or the missing dinner go beyond the household order. In a powerful scene Svetlana Yancheva's Alice, with distanced irony, enumerates them to Kurt as some robbing energy-existential lack that hampers her "realization".

Vladimir Penev's performance as Edgar goes towards the grotesque to which he takes the "male strategies" of his character into the tyrannical hatred for everything living and into the lordly imposition. The emotional intonational intensity of the role is dominated by a hateful petulant anger and childish convulsive fear that get to some abnormal "tricks" the actor has inventively found, such as the grotesque, emphasized utterance of "Copenhagen" or the neuroticized wheezing while listing the problems he has conclusively put an "end" to. His fits are like interruptions, renunciations of an already dead body devoid of life, destined to an eternally mechanical existence. In the logic of the absurdist grotesque it is completely deformed, and Vladimir Penev acts out brilliantly its convulsions and hysterical "captain-like" pacing. Here the "captain's" duties are again abstracted, made into ravings of a sick mind, actions devoid of substance that mechanically generate the main energy of his "male" strategy – power and subjugation.

In the configuration of the characters Kurt has a position that is difficult to perform, one that moves in between a narrator-commentator and balancer but Tsvetan Aleksiev turns him into a full-fledged participant in what happens on stage. His Kurt steps in as one who holds off some balance within the norms of collective decency as he is able to politely play with them as a balancer of good and evil. He comments in a reserved manner, his conduct is

well-controlled, weighed-up, in the interesting jerky tempo-rhythm of expression and fluency of movements that are characteristic of the actor's style, with a very good sense of gesture. But he soon gets involved into the destructive game of the spouses that "wakens the beast" inside him, he also "goes outside himself" by getting transformed into a farcical tragicomic vampire. Amidst the scene of "devastation" his Kurt quite successfully makes a mimic that is key for the interpretation of the performance by literally quoting the facial expression from a painting that has become emblem of both Expressionism and Existentialism, *The Scream* by E. Munk (a good acquaintance of Strindberg) – underneath the deadly yellowish light and through the tulle curtain that further outlines the skull contours – the face is deformed into a grimace of "existential dread" and "nausea" of a scream for which there is no human voice.

In M. Mladenova's interpretation the existentialist actually dominates if we paraphrase "hell is the life with others" as well as the destiny that cannot make do without them. A highly professional performance that creates the rare impression of a tragicomic "horror theatre."

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*Translated by  
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