

## *Synonym for youth*

### **Festival Review: Fast Forward European Festival for Young Stage Directors, Dresden, 2-5 Nov. 2023**

Youth is not synonymous with impetuosity, nor is it synonymous with rebellion. However, both rebellion and impetuosity can become valid attributes of youth and may foreshadow what the theater of the future looks like. Does it resemble that of yesterday and today, or is it completely different from everything that has ever existed? I do not think this can be answered, but certainly, small surveys can be conducted annually so that the next Hans-Thies Lehmann can find another attribute of the theater, one apart from the postdramatic. The issue of innovation did not appear yesterday or today, as every furious young person has rejected the specificity of the previous generation and tried to bring something extra to the field of theater through their own filter.

Annually in Dresden, the renowned Fast Forward European Festival for Young Stage Directors takes place, organized by the State Theatre of Dresden (Staatsschauspiel Dresden, Germany) in partnership with Théâtre National de Bretagne (France) and the National Theatre of Greece. Since 2011, the festival has annually selected works from young directors in Europe, attempting to both create a launching pad for them and gauge the pulse of theatrical evolution. There are no age criteria; youth refers to the number of projects realized by directors. Specifically, to be eligible, they must have between one and five professional productions to their credit. The 13<sup>th</sup> edition of the



festival began on November 2, 2023, offering an extremely diverse theatrical experience in terms of styles and perspectives on theater. This phenomenon emphasizes not only the eclectic and innovative nature of the presented productions but also the festival's ability to become fertile ground for the varied artistic expressions of the new generation of directors. Through the diversity of approaches and perspectives brought by these emerging creators, the festival becomes a dynamic cultural hub, reflecting the plurality of voices and artistic visions manifesting in the contemporary theatrical world. This diversity is not merely a collection of different aesthetics but a true mirror of ongoing cultural and social debates in contemporary society. The festival's curator, Charlotte Orti von Havranek, states that she never has preconceptions about selecting performances, she does not follow a thematic curatorial program, but by traveling extensively through Europe, she observes how new directorial voices develop and seeks the most original and personal productions.

The first surprise of the festival was the performance *Goodbye, Lindita*, directed by the Greco-Albanian Mario Banushi, aged 25. Reminiscent of the ritualistic theater of the last century, Banushi's meditation is a profoundly personal theatrical experience exploring ways to cope with the loss of a loved one. Inspired by the image of his deceased aunt surrounded by people bidding farewell and the death of his father three days later, Banushi brings to the stage a strange combination of everyday and surreal elements. Initially, relatives mechanically arrange old clothes while watching television absently, and a wardrobe unfolds to reveal the figure of a lifeless and naked woman. The body is then ceremonially washed and dressed in an Albanian bridal costume. The bed transforms into a baptismal font, the icon with the Black Madonna unveils a hiding place in the wall, and the walls split open to reveal a throne of thorns occupied by an African-American woman, a Christ-like figure. Grief manifests in different forms, but the impression left by Banushi's show is that regardless of cultural backgrounds, the ritual presented by Banushi will inevitably transcend any belief.

In the same evening, on the opposite pole, there was the performance *I'm Still Excited!* by Portuguese director Mário Coelho. Designed as a wild entertainment show, where everything is what it seems, and interactions with the audience are natural, the two actors reflect on their failed relationship in an energetic and frenetic manner. From the sexual issues of Mário (character

played by the director himself) to Tinder escapades and shifting spotlights onto the stage, everything is exposed gradually, turning the performance into a commentary on relationships: between actors and spectators, between film and theater, between what is real and what is fictional. It transforms into a roller coaster, resembling an hour-long scroll through YouTube shorts by the end.



**Fig. 1:** *Goodbye Lindita* by Mario Banushi, produced by National Theatre of Greece

Two of the performances were based on classical texts. Katharina Stoll, of German origin, chose a feminist perspective of the play *Woyzeck* set in the perfectly crafted kitchen of two students. Meanwhile, Finnish director Minna Lund created a bloody blend of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* and Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*, titled *Message from Tyler*. Conceived as an immersive experience, Lund placed the action in a dystopian universe where the climate has gone awry and Tyler clashes with a Russian family over the inheritance of the cherry orchard. The actors' vivacity and intense physical effort transform the banquet table, where spectators are invited, into a real battlefield.

Another innovative approach to theater was evident in the performances *Koulounization* (winner of both audience and jury awards) and *Our Son* (winner of the young jury award). Both directors, Patrik Lazic (Serbia) and Salim Djaferi (Belgium), have extremely personal and almost therapeutic journeys where they choose to speak about their traumas and identity. Salim wonders how to say “colonization” in Arabic. He questions himself, the audience, his mother, and his Arab friends, ultimately receiving numerous answers that confuse and challenge him to embark on a linguistic investigation into the origins of Algeria’s colonization by France. In an interactive dialogue with the audience, he reveals that Arabic lacks a direct equivalent for “colonization,” instead having words with multiple meanings, such as to build, to fill, to order, to dispossess. In this context, the discussion about colonization becomes an exploration into the subjective world of meanings and different perspectives. The presence of an assistant in his explanatory process adds a captivating dimension, suggesting not only a diversity of interpretations but also how we view and perceive reality from different angles. Thus, in a subtle approach,



**Fig. 2:** *Koulounization* by Salim Djaferi, produced by Habemus papam, Cora-Line Lefèvre and Julien Sigard (Belgium)

the performance becomes a profound meditation on belonging and origin, demonstrating how the act of occupying territory can be surprisingly simple and complex at the same time.

Patrik Lazic writes and directs a subtle three-character play about homophobia, exploring its coming out to a fractured family, with a suicidal father and a mother waiting for her already adult son's illness to heal.



**Fig. 3:** *Our son* by Patrik Lazic, produced by Heartefact (Serbia)

The comedic interlude was provided by the German-Norwegian co-production *Second Season*, directed by Simon David Zeller, based on Carl Zuckmayer's comedy *The Merry Vineyard*. Four performers walk through the space, waiting for the audience to settle. They also take seats in front of the audience and begin a delightful show of storytelling and improvisation, offering an external analysis of Germany's recent history. The original play was written concurrently with Hitler's *Mein Kampf* and satirizes the rise of the Nazis. The performance concludes with a tragicomic scene where the performers attempt to drink water from a bottle held between their knees without the use of their hands. However, we discover just a scene earlier that what they are drinking is their own urine.

This year, in addition to the eight selected productions, the organizers established a debate platform, Forum Fast Forward, designed primarily to facilitate direct meetings between various theater professionals – young artists, experts, producers, teachers, and students – with the intention of sharing and discussing their visions of theater and pedagogy. Three international experts and six student directors from England, Serbia, France, Slovakia, Slovenia, Germany, Greece, and Romania were selected for this festival's pilot platform. The meeting between these theater professionals and the production teams of the eight shows aimed to conceptualize and analyze the searches of each director and provide an overview of the specifics of each theater and school in the artist's home country. Despite the diverse nature of the productions, the young directors shared similar quests, indicating that each was concerned with a highly personal genre of theater, focusing on autofictions that, through specific examples, addressed all categories of the audience.

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