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Technology as Generator of the Spectacular

PERFORMANCE REVIEW*:*

The Ploughman and Death, directed by Silviu Purcărete, production of the Vasile Alecsandri National Theater in Iași, 2022



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One of the most representative performances of the Vasile Alecsandri National Theater in Iași, *The Ploughman and Death* after Johannes von Tepl, bearing the signature of Silviu Purcărete, the fourth show created by the director in this theatre, has had a spectacular run, being invited/selected for prestigious theatre events both in Romania and abroad. Winner of the UNITER Award for Best Performance and a Special Award for creativity in video design and mapping, Andrei Cozlac received, in September 2022, in Serbia, at the International Theater Festival "Theater at the Crossroads", organized by the National Theatre in Niš, awards for: Best Performance, Best Set Design (Dragoș Buhagiar), Best Video Design (Andrei Cozlac), and Best Male Role (Călin Chirilă).



Photo credits for all the pictures from the performance: Iulian Ursachi

The spectator takes part, disturbed, impressed, vibrating in front of the greatness, the grandeur and at the same time the simplicity of the construction of the show, of the message of the work, at some sort of revelation. Written

in the Middle Ages, around 1400, when some texts of solace for the "last moment" (*Ars moriendi*) circulated widely, the book *The Ploughman and Death*, an authentic work of art, has a special depth and intensity, surpassing similar older works or even those that will follow it. The paradoxical and indissoluble link between life and death, death teaching us how to live life, and life teaching us how to die, inspires Johannes von Tepl's dialogue between the Ploughman and Death, transformed into a character. Rediscovered at the beginning of the 20th century, the book appeared in Romania, translated from medieval German by Marin Tarangul and Emmerich Schäffer, published by Humanitas in 1997.



The idea of staging this text, dramatized and directed by Silviu Purcărete, at the National Theater in Iași, was suggested to the director by theater scholar and critic George Banu, as he himself admits in an article in *Dilema veche*. Silviu Purcărete creates a stirring performance in which the Ploughman is not one in the true sense of the word, but rather the Man who thinks, rebelling against his ruthless destiny. It is the Ploughman who works by creating/writing works of art in the fertile soil of life. Two characters defend, through a deeply thoughtful approach, their right to exist against each other: on one side, the simple man, the Ploughman, the essence of Life,

who rises up against the existence of unjust death, and on the other side, Death, who claims and pleads for her right to reap lives. From the moment the curtain rises, the audience enters the intimate space of the ordinary man, his home, imagined with suggestive depth and sobriety by set designer Dragoş Buhagiar, through a few pieces of furniture that fictitiously delimit the rooms – the kitchen, the living room, the bedroom, and that Chekhovian wardrobe, which often serves as a gateway to another world. The crooked walls, which delimit the playing space, rising almost to the ceiling, become functional screens for the video projections that follow, an eloquent paradigm of the perfect collaboration between Silviu Purcărete, Dragoş Buhagiar, and video designer Andrei Cozlac.

The animalistic cry of the Man, overwhelmed by the pain of losing his wife, unable to give voice to the torrent of thoughts, precedes their transposition onto the page on a typewriter, with the keys struck aggressively. The widowed farmer conceives the draft of the curse, which in fact all of humanity, through the absurd condition of existence, throws at Death. "If I could curse you, [...] I would do so with evil words to bring misfortune upon you! [...] I should live only in mourning. My praiseworthy falcon, my righteous woman, has flown away. I weep with good reason. [...] With such pain in my heart, I cannot but rise up against you. [...] I will oppose you with all my strength, and all my breath will be with me against you. Everything that exists in heaven, on earth, and in Hell, may wage war against you and hate you forever."



Silviu Purcărete's unique directorial vision gives the show its originality. It uses Johannes von Tepl's ideas, according to whom Death resides in what accompanies the human being, which has been part of the human being since birth: "We are nothing and yet we are something. We are nothing because we have no life, no appearance, no spirit, we cannot be seen or touched. [...] We are an accident that is destined for every human being. [...] Every human being owes us their death, because death was given to them as a legacy at birth." Following these ideas, Purcărete gives both characters to the same actor. Death thus becomes the other side of being, its inevitable double. Călin Chirilă portrays, through subtle details of his acting, with playfulness, through skillful alternations of rhythm, both the pain and rebellion of the simple man and the complex score of Death, sometimes ironic or cruel, sometimes philosophizing with accents of bitter comedy, embodying with virtuosity the certainty of the Almighty Death. The originality of the exchange between the Ploughman and Death is amplified by the exceptional creation of video designer Andrei Cozlac. The development of technology, which can stimulate the imagination of video designers (and others!) and at the same time enhance the spectacular nature of stage creations, has been intelligently exploited by Andrei Cozlac in this show. The farmer, physically present on stage, dialogues with Death in the form of a hologram or



video projection, which appears, disappears, sometimes playfully, manipulates objects, grows in size, multiplies, through dozens of suggestive, breathtaking, spectacular images. Thus, two characters, impeccably played by the same actor, interact through technology in an original way, unique in Romanian theater.

The alternation between the real world and the world beyond also supports the illustrative moments of family life, in which, later on, the couple's happiness is transformed into pieces of dust from the marital bed, "the best death is when life is at its best!" The perfect wife, as a living expression of the man's happiness, "supple and full of enthusiasm, surpassing anyone else; pious and sincere in her words, humble in body and joyful in heart," is suggestively interpreted by Diana Chirilă, with remarkable plasticity of movement, also oscillating between physical presence and projected image, the moment of her disappearance, her disintegration into thousands of particles, being particularly unique.



The cast is completed by Petronela Grigorescu, Irina Răduțu Codreanu, Mălina Lazăr, Ioana Aciobăniței, Camelia Bogleș, Smaranda Hăisan, Robert Agape, Marian Alexandru Chiculiță, Flavius Grușcă, Alexandru Maxim, Valentin Mocanu, in the collective character of the dead with mummified bodies. They swarm both in reality and in images, with relevant appearances and eloquent movements, combining the energies of those whom Death

defeats through Original Sin, which made Her the Master and Almighty over the earth, the air, and all flowing water. The bizarre sounds, as well as the scores sung by Diana Chirilă, Diana Roman, Livia Iorga, Oana Sandu, Mălina Lazăr, Ioana Aciobăniței, Camelia Bogleș, Smaranda Hăisan, conceived by Vasile Şirli, enhance the spectacular and original nature of the production.

In the struggle between Life and Death, there are no winners, because everything has Divine meaning. Man is the work of God, who made him in His own image and likeness, a perfect and skillful work. The Ploughman dances in defiance of Death, becoming the primordial Man who will cross the ages, but hand in hand with Lady Death, as permanence, until we all stand before the Divinity.

Tamara CONSTANTINESCU
University of Arts "George Enescu" Iași, Romania
Email: tamara.constantinescu@unage.ro