UR. JERNEJ WEISS

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OPERNIH GLEDALIŠČ
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THE ROLE OF NATIONAL
OPERA HOUSES IN THE
20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES

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ur. Jernej Weiss

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Opera without Theatre

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“Burn the opera houses”

When Pierre Boulez suggested in 1967 to “burn the opera houses”, he stated, according to Philippe Albéra, “a simple truth: a new form of opera, resolutely modern, requires a new space, new forms of organization, a new project”; in short, “the internal form of the opera no longer corresponds to the structure of the institution”.

That said, since the famous quarrel in the 18th century between the French opera, considered too boring, and the Italian opera, not serious enough, one has always tried to shake off habits. As early as 1752, in a *Letter to a lady of a certain age about the present state of opera*, we could read: “a noisy joy and immoderate outbursts tore down the veil of this Temple [...]”¹. New ideas have always aimed at tearing down the veil of an ‘old Temple’ and bringing in ‘a noisy joy’. The demolition of the decor of the opera in the Marx Brothers movie *A Night at the Opera* (1935), which Theodor W. Ador-

- 1 Pierre Boulez, “Sprengt die Operhäuser in die Luft!” *Der Spiegel* 40/1967, *Spiegel Online*, 25.09.1967. Accessed 05.02.2018, <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46353388.html>.
- 2 Philippe Albéra, “L’opér,” *Musiques – I. Musiques du XXe siècle* (dir. J. J. Nattiez), Paris, Actes Sud/Cité de la musique (2003): 437.
- 3 Ibid., 438.
- 4 Le Baron D’Holbach, *Lettre à une dame d’un certain âge, sur l’état présent de l’opéra* (Paris: En Arcadie, 1752), 2.

no saw as an allegory of “the decomposition of the operatic form”, continues this quest.

Since its creation, the genre of opera has developed in two ways:

- On the one hand, through a traditionalist aesthetic, the ‘official art’, rigidified for too long in academic forms, which evolves exclusively between the walls of the classical opera theatres, and the new staging of which is just a superficial renewal.
- On the other hand, through circumstantial performances, much more experimental, and thus of a much shorter existence. They are often given in less important halls, accessible only to composers too young or not yet well enough known to have access to the Grand Opera. Yet they are the most faithful witnesses of their time: for example, of the political situation and propaganda as in French operas after the Revolution, or of advances in musical language and practices, as in the modern operas of the twentieth century, so heterogeneous and difficult to classify that “the term itself poses a problem”⁶.

Ballet has the same double face, with classical or academic ballet on the one hand, which leaves little room for innovation, and on the other hand, contemporary dance which has quickly distanced itself from the walls of the opera theatre to evolve without institutional constraints by developing a multitude of forms, styles and languages. It is significant that at the beginning of the 20th century the Paris Opera “does not want to receive Diaghilev”⁷, who therefore presents the Russian Ballets at the Paris Chatelet theatre, and that towards the end of the same century Maurice Béjart “repeatedly refused to take the direction of the *Ballet de l’Opéra*, motivating his attitude by the rigidity of the structures and the weight of the traditions which, he judged, prevent creation”⁸. Between those two cases, while contemporary music and modern dance evolved throughout the twentieth century, opera and ballet failed to renew their content and stayed away from innovation.

Modern opera has always been poorly adapted to classical theatre, in which, according to Albéra, “creation is often an alibi [...] it conforms to the

5 Theodor W. Adorno, *Le caractère fétiche dans la musique et la régression de l’écoute* (Paris: Allia, 2001), 81.

6 Albéra, “L’opéra,” 377.

7 Paul Bourcier, *Histoire de la danse en Occident* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 212.

8 Ibid., 308.

standards of the institution”⁹. In fact, it is becoming more and more difficult to comply with its standards, and especially with its walls. For example, Kaija Saariaho’s new opera, *Only the Sound Remains* (2016) is simply not meant to be played in the Paris *Opéra Garnier*: its orchestra pit is too large to accommodate only a few musicians (string quartet, vocal quartet, flute, percussion, and *Kantele*); and its stage is too vast for only two singers and one dancer. In addition, the scenography is so uncluttered that, according to the remark of critic Philippe Venturini, “it could disappear without taking anything from the magic of this singular work”¹⁰.

French musicologist Jean-Yves Bosseur is quite right to point out the mutation that has taken place with the emergence of musical and instrumental theatre, namely that “the occupation of space becomes an integral part of the work, which makes it necessary to take into account the architectural peculiarities of each venue, at each performance”¹¹.

The New Opera Actions

In recent years the Lithuanian musical scene, for the first time since independence in 1990, has been enriched by a new form of opera, initiated by a group of young creators (sometimes still students): composers, scenographers, singers, directors, conductors, choreographers, etc.

Since 2008 they have joined forces for a festival, entitled New Opera Action (NOA), the name of which was borrowed from the Lithuanian theatre festival, New Drama Action, created 10 years earlier. Although this last was imagined, in 1999, “because of a lack of contemporary dramaturgy, because of a need to see it on the Lithuanian stage [...]”¹², the festival of opera, meanwhile, was simply born from a desire of young creators *to reach* a domain which, usually, is inaccessible to young people. According to festival director Ana Ablamonova,

9 Albéra, “L’opéra,” 378.

10 Philippe Venturini, “Only the Sound Remains”: un rêve éveillé à Garnier, *Les Echos*, fr, le 24.01.2018, Accessed 28.02.2018 <https://www.lesechos.fr/week-end/culture/spectacles/0301199594434-only-the-sound-remains-un-reve-eveille-a-garnier-2147757.php#>.

11 Dominique et Jean-Yves Bosseur, *Révolutions musicales* (Paris: Minerve, 1993), 115.

12 ELTA, ““Naujosios dramos akcija” šįmet gali baigti savo misiją,” *Delfi.lt* 14.12.2017, Accessed 15.12.2017, <https://www.delfi.lt/veidai/kultura/naujosios-dramos-akcija-si-met-gali-baigti-savo-misija.d?id=58498288>.

there has been no desire to oppose a genre that has become too rigid, imposing and cumbersome to manage. This festival originates rather from personal initiatives and the desire to freely experiment the genre itself¹³.

The festival has no intention of settling for good at a definite place, not to say that it categorically refuses to do it. Their goal is to preserve the freedom to move in different spaces, to adapt spaces to ideas, and not the reverse. The choice of the environment acquires exactly the same importance as the choice of the libretto or the musical team.

Most of these young creators started their career subsequently to this festival, and for most of them it was their first opera. After 10 years of existence, and 6 editions, NOA has already produced more than 30 operas, created by about 15 composers¹⁴, about 30 librettists¹⁵, more than twenty stage directors¹⁶, etc.

Yet the beginnings were very prosaic: the initiator of this movement, a young opera singer and composer, Jonas Sakalauskas, hung an ad on the wall at the Academy of Music and Theatre of Vilnius, inviting interested people and volunteers to join him in the creation of an opera festival.

Manifesto for a new opera

For its 5th edition in 2012, the NOA festival published a manifesto. It helped, in fact, better understanding of the concerns of the main actors of this movement, as well as the purpose and directions of their artistic research:

13 Interview with Ana Ablamonova (June 2018).

14 Jonas Sakalauskas, Rita Mačiliūnaitė, Rūta Vitkauskaitė, Jens Hedman, Asa Nordgren, Mykolas Natalevičius, Albertas Navickas, Margarita Chodūnaitė, Sigita Mickis, Charles Halka, Lina Lapelytė, Linas Paulauskis, Antanas Jasenka, Leonardas Pilkauskas, George Halloway, Artūras Bumšteinas, Tadas Dailyda etc.

15 Žilvinas Andriušis, Agnė Biliūnaitė, Julius Žėkas, Tomas Andriukonis, Dainius Gintalas, Gabrielė Labanauskaitė, Olegas Kesminas, Margarita Chodūnaitė, Gytis Norvilas, Antanas Šimkus, Marija Simona Šimulynaitė, Erika Vizbaraitė, Sonata Visockaitė, Albertas Navickas, Andrius Kaniava, Vaidotas Žitkus, Jonas Sakalauskas, Vaiva Grainytė, Giedrė Matiukaitė, Rūta Vitkauskaitė, Jens Hedman, Asa Nordgren, Rita Mačiliūnaitė, Justas Tertelis, Claude Willan, George Halloway, Artūras Bumšteinas, Mykolas Natalevičius etc.

16 Jonas Sakalauskas, Olga Generalova, Jekaterina Deneiko, Vilius Malinauskas, Albertas Vidžiūnas, Marija Simona Šimulynaitė, Olegas Kesminas, Agnė Sunklodaitė, Agnius Jankevičius, Sonata Visockaitė, Loreta Vaskova, Vaidotas Žitkus, Rūta Butkus, Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Yanna Ross, Ksenija Orlova, Saba Lagadze, Juozas Koreiva, Antanas Jasenka, Giedrė Brazytė, Justas Tertelis, Vitalija Samuilova, Mikas Žukauskas etc.

Opera is no sacred Cow – declare operamaniacs, who are determined to continue straining and draining this swollen genre. Although opera is considered an attribute and priority of the national culture politics, honestly speaking even on that level it is no longer a sacred cow, so it's time to grab the scalpel and slice off those extra chunks or get into genetic experiments and devise a new breed altogether. It's not an artistic hooliganism, it's a shot for a goal!

The 20th century has been the time of extreme changes for many art manifestations, among which is also opera – from gigantic utopian week-long operas with helicopters (“Licht” by Karlheinz Stockhausen) to microscopic casual several minute-long operas that last as long as it takes to boil a raw egg (“Sands of Time” by Peter Reynolds). It leaves no doubt to operamaniacs that in the 21st century it's time to replace those “giga” and “micro” with “tera” and “nano”!

Nanoopera for the accelerating society – this is the motto for operamaniacs who yearn for opera to remain a part of living culture rather than become a museum exhibit. Opera must confront and react to hectic contemporary daily routines and respond to cult of speed: fast food, fast city, fast internet, fast sex, fast loans, crazy deadlines and shrinking terms. That's why it's time for fast and short opera!

Nanoopera for nanobudget – operamaniacs are raising their hands, giving a middle finger to unfriendly circumstances and declare with certainty that lack inspires. Because a mid-size opera on a sad little budget can turn into a nasty death-row anorectic faster than you can say “economy”, it's essential to introduce a resistant pigmy species of operas that would survive the radioactive nanobudget conditions and that could thrive in non-traditional environments and awkward settings. And that's a metamorphosis rather than metaphor!”¹⁷

Contemporary hybridization

Modern opera has often tried to break out of its conventional framework first through new definitions: *monodrama*, *melodrama*, *lyric drama*, *drama in music*, *musical theatre*, *instrumental theatre*, *musical action*, etc. All these new formulas are intended primarily to clarify the pre-eminence of cer-

17 “Nano Opera Manifesto”, in 5th Contemporary opera festival NOA: *New (nano) Opera Action*, Vilnius, December 19, 2012. Festival program, p. 3.

tain aspects in the work, or the importance of certain mergers: between text and music, between music and gesture, between the musical and the visual, between sound and space, between writing and improvisation, etc.

Among the works produced during the NOA festival, apart from the compositions entitled 'operas', we find the following denominations:

Audovisual installation

Opera video shorts (Short music films)

Surreal farce or comic madrigal

Music, theatre and visual Performance

Audio play

Spatial mono opera in the dark

Audiovisual Project

Haiku opera

Video opera

Dance opera

Animated opera

Monodrama-operas

Film-opera

Mini opera-etude

Nano-opera

We note here an obvious desire to take the opera out of its institutional and conventional framework ("museographical", Mauricio Kagel said), limited by the genre of its repertoire, by its budget constraints and its architectural space. We see the desire to loosen the constraints of academic codes, and to make not just an aesthetic turn, but also a fundamental one. We also see a certain approach to going back to one's roots: the quantity and variety of operas are such that a synthesis has been made through the historical etymology of the word 'opera', which means "work, doing, action".

Just by its name NOA emphasizes a junction between opera and action, and above all, between the opera and its time. By prolonging, inevitably, the avant-garde trends of the twentieth century, it invites the continuation of blurring the boundaries between genres, and experimenting with

hybrid forms that have proliferated for a long time in all artistic fields. NOA brings to opera the sensitivity and the look on its epoch and, inevitably, the new technologies. It talks about inner experiences, parallel worlds, tales, the history of Lithuania, the work field, and so on. NOA does not necessarily seek professionalism, or accuracy and perfection of interpretation. The participants are more interested in the link between matter and emotions.

The first NOA festival in 2008 was actually an ‘action on stage’, in which the most important thing was free expression, and not the expression of something perfectly elaborate in musical terms. Since then, young creators have been developing their ideas in several directions. Firstly, the genre of opera itself is reconsidered:

- There is a strong social commitment (for example, the socio-musical reality in the Lina Lapelyte’s opera *Have a Good Day* (2011), which is about the daily life of cashiers in supermarkets)
- And there is also a search for certain limits of the genre (for example, the Rūta Vitkauskaitė’s &co. acousmatic opera *Confessions* (2011), which is performed in the dark to awaken other senses).

Secondly, the concept of current music is expanded:

- For example, through mini or *nano* operas, which could be considered as exercises of style with imposed constraints (for example, all the NOA festival of 2012)
- Or through the use of new technologies, video, video games, animation, etc ... (for example, the Tadas Dailyda Audiovisual project based on music of video games *Consolium 3000* (2015)).

From “Opera Space” to “Space for Opera”

Opera is usually a slow and heavy body. The small formats offered by NOA are first and foremost conducive to experimentation and innovation. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Schoenberg renewed the genre by composing monodramas which he himself called “mini-operas”¹⁸. Finally, let us remember that modern dance also began to innovate by shortening duration: a series of short ballets instead of a single long ballet that took the whole evening.

Short or very short operas such as *nano* operas make it easier to test and renew ideas and their components. We note the individualization

18 Arnold Schoenberg, *Le style et l'idée* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 1977), 87.

of the role of the performer, as in musical theatre, but at the same time a search for homogeneity between different constituent parts: music, singing, dance, new technologies. The composer can be at the same time the interpreter, the director, the scenographer and/or the choreographer. Such conditions, which facilitate the mastery of the different disciplines, allow the creator to express more freely and authentically his artistic temperament and his stylistic personality. The architectural space appears as an active, organic element, as an extension of the general idea of the work, sometimes as its unique 'envelope', not adaptable to other creations.

For example, Jonas Sakalauskas's monodrama-opera *Izadora* (2009), which recounts the psychiatric case of a woman who identifies with the dancer Isadora Duncan, moves in a small and enclosed space: all the opera is played in one corner. It could therefore even be performed in a recess of the Paris metro, for example. This opera develops from the idea of one emotion, of the confinement in an unreal and painful world of the unique character (mezzosoprano) of this piece. The opera echoes the real Isadora Duncan, her conception of dance, in which the most important thing was to find the innate rhythm of her body.

Another example, Lina Lapelyte's opera *Have a good day* (2011), which is about the daily life of cashiers in supermarkets, does not need the depth of a stage, and can even be played in front of the closed curtain, since the main characters are supermarket cashiers, sitting on their chairs, aligned and static. The space occupied by the cashier-singers in itself sums up the sociological view of certain aspects of human conditions in our society.

Opera as a start-up

By transgressing the boundaries of the genre, NOA has upset the codes of Lithuanian opera. Without seeking any institutional support, it has invented new perspectives. In fact, the founder of this movement, Jonas Sakalauskas, himself an opera singer and composer, makes opera work like a start-up. Theatre for him is a cultural platform that reacts actively to his environment: it has taken a cultural and social form.

- In 1999 he created NOA and the production house *Operomanija* ("The Mania of the Opera"),
- In 2012 he founded the *The Baltic chamber opera festival (Baltijos kamerinis operos teatras)* and added an internship structure

for young opera singers, *Vilnius opera studio* (*Vilniaus operos studija*),

- He also organized the *Baroque opera workshops* in a provincial Lithuanian town (Kražiai) in 2013,
- In 2015 he initiated the *M-FEST* festival of short musicals, and
- In 2016 he was appointed Director of the *Klaipėda State Musical Theatre* (*Klaipėdos valstybinis muzikinis teatras*) in the third largest city in Lithuania.

Arriving in Klaipėda, he said he wanted to “blow up the theatre” (but not set it on fire anyway, as Boulez stated), but over time, he acknowledged, “it is very difficult to change everything, and you get discouraged. I imagined that everything was possible, but I came down to earth, and am much more pragmatic now”¹⁹.

The classical opera theatre works, if one can make such a comparison, as an old family business that is handed down from generation to generation, undergoes reforms, adapts to new processes, but does not change fundamentally. Conversely, the start-up model makes it possible to work the opera genre as a living organism: the start-up does not need owned walls, it can start as a tenant or even in the ‘family garage’; With little means and little space, an idea is developed, and if the environment allows for it, it becomes institutionalized and adapts the physical space to its needs, and not the other way around. Inventions happen outside the walls, and once the ideas work, they can be adopted, most of the time, by larger structures. They can therefore extend within the walls of the opera theatre, which has always needed fresh blood.

This makes it possible to say that the activity of Jonas Sakalauskas, in the field of opera, is more like the model of a start-up, with the multiplication of directions and forms of activities, collective inventions, or structures with little or no hierarchy. This corresponds to what science journalist Laure Cailloce summed up in the start-up spirit: “More than age, it is actually the way of working which defines the start-up: a certain sponta-

19 Monika Svėrytė, “Teatro vadovas, “El Fuego” narys Jonas Sakalauskas apie meilę Klaipėdai ir sulaužytus principus”, *15min.lt*, 24.09.2017. Accessed 20.11.2017, <https://www.15min.lt/vardai/naujiena/lietuva/pajuryje-isikures-jonas-sakalauskas-apie-meile-klaipedai-teatro-uzkulisius-ir-sulauzytus-principus-1050-810948#.WnrBTF8N990.facebook>.

neity, a taste for innovation”²⁰. She emphasizes also a friendly working atmosphere, a permanent movement, anti-routine initiatives, a reduced hierarchical structure and constant exchanges. This is exactly the case of NOA.

What is extraordinary in the case of Jonas Sakalauskas, who is the main initiator of this new operation, is that from 1st of March of this year he was appointed director of the Vilnius National Opera. What direction this theatre will take remains to be seen, but it is certain that the developer of opera start-ups, once again as in the long history of opera, will blow up the old forms to the benefit of new ideas.

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20 Laure Cailloce, "C'est quoi, avoir l'esprit start-up?" *Capital.fr*, 10.08.2015, Accessed 15.02.2018. <https://www.capital.fr/votre-carriere/c-est-quoi-avoir-l-esprit-start-up-925485>.

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