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Shakespeare With a Baltic Accent

Notes on the New Book by Guna Zeltina and the Baltic Theatre Phenomenon

When it takes one over 20 years to write a book it must be due to the subject, or the research it needs, or the working conditions, or the chosen approach. It's a combination of all this in the case of the prominent Latvian theatre critic and scholar Guna Zeltina and her *SHAKESPEARE With a Baltic Accent*. Propitiously published at the very turn of the year (by the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia), the book is chosen as one of the 11 best successes in science for 2015 and, at the same time, nominated for the 2016 Prize of the Baltic Assembly, the most prestigious award for cultural achievements in the three Baltic Republics.

"Zeltina was absolutely absorbed with the subject from the very beginning of her career", says Edite Tisheizere, editor-in-chief of the main Latvian theatre magazine *Teatra Vestnesis*. Yet, meanwhile, she wrote and edited a host of other books, mainly on Latvian theatre, relying on the fact that "Shakespeare is very patient." "He also knew", adds Zeltina, "that my grandchildren come before him."

The awesome 600+ pages thick volume, a first-of-the-kind on the Bard in all three Baltic countries, is not simply a new entry on the overloaded book shelves of the international Shakespearean Studies but rather a practical guide in the complex and constantly reinvented love affair of the world's stages with their favorite playwright. Written in "a very accessible language and passionately researched", as the young Latvian critic Zane Radzobe describes it, it starts with the story of Shakespeare's life and persona, complete with the main identity theories and even a chapter on the portraits attributed to him. Then, after a survey of the Shakespeare's cannon, it enters the vast territory of the numerous production approaches manifested throughout the centuries around the world. Here Zeltina leads the reader with an amazing ease, not the least due to a first-time applied categorization. So one ends up with a very comprehensive map in hand where the paths are meticulously detailed and marked by signs for all styles, experiments or merely eccentric 'readings' of the Bard that have made him exult or turn in his grave all these years.

The historical archeologism, like the productions of Charles Kean and of the Meiningen Ensemble; *the stylization of Elizabethan theatrical*

practices, like the activities of William Poel and their resonating with Nikolai Evreinov's experiments at 'Starinnij Teatr' in St. Petersburg, the symbolical treatment carried out by Gordon Craig and in collaboration with Constantin Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theatre, *the modernised Shakespeare*; *the psychological interpretation* that consolidated within the André Antoine's Théâtre Libre, the Independent Theatre Society in London, and the Freie Bühne in Germany; the so called *Shakespeare revolution*, initiated by Jan Kott and manifested in the works of Peter Hall and Peter Brook in UK as well as of Yuri Lyubimov, Robert Sturua, and so many other Eastern European directors; the *intercultural stagings*, like Ariane Mnouchkine's experiments with the forms and elements of Eastern theatre and Giorgio Strehler's merging Shakespeare and commedia dell'arte; *the metaphorical, the postmodern and postdramatic, the deconstructed, the 'site-specific' Shakespeare...*

"It's difficult, almost impossible, for one researcher to digest all that info and put it in such a vivid and interesting way as Guna Zeltina has done. No word needs to be changed," notes Arnolds Klotins, head of the Department of Theatre, Music and Cinema at the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, a post held by Zeltina from 1992 to 2014.

"The capacity of any national theatre depends on the interpretations of world classics, Shakespeare in the first place," says Zeltina, defining her motivation to undertake writing the book. How is it then that the last third of the narrative, devoted to the destiny of the Bard in the Baltic region – obviously the focus of the book – does not weigh down and make it of a limited, regional-only scope?

The short answer is: because of the unique Baltic theatre phenomenon whose impact and reverberations have long been felt way over the borders of the region.

Latvia and Lithuania (tiny states of 2.3 and 3.2 million inhabitants respectively and with languages forming a singular linguistic group) are the motherland of three of the most extraordinary contemporary theatre directors who have been making a huge difference in the face of world's theatre: the Latvian Alvis Hermanis, also a famed opera-director, and the Lithuanians Eimuntas Nekrosius and Oskaras Korsunovas, whose renderings exactly of the Bard have unquestionably expanded Shakespeare-land and earned them international renown. The three are laureates of the European *New Theatre Realities* prize, their oeuvre most accurately fitting the award's name, and Nekrosius is a recipient of the special Craiova International Shakespearean Festival award too.

The theatre of these directors is like someone's mother tongue that we hear for the first time and yet, with a Pentecost type of revelation, get to instantly understand it because it speaks to something deep in us which does not necessarily need to be explained with words. No wonder the show that made Hermanis famous all over the world, *Long Life*, was without words at all. And the speech-void time in Nekrosius's shows is one of the trademarks of his theatre.

This organic blend of the classical no-barriers, heart-melting humaneness of great art and the barrier-breaking new, where the new is not for the sake of being different, nor is it only in the form, but comes as a natural way of saying things from the stage, is the very core of the Baltic theatre phenomenon.

Zeltina dwells extensively on these two ingredients in her book. For instance, she points out that "during the wave of Shakespeare's modernizations in the 1920s and 1930s, an original note was sounded by Eduards Smiļģis, who in *Cupid on the Dreadnought* (1931), his version of *Much Ado About Nothing*, transferred the action to the deck of a modern warship, creating on the stage of the Daile Theatre an impressive model of a ship that could have competed with Theodore Komisarjevsky's 'aluminium' *Macbeth* in Stratford-upon-Avon." Or that Mikhail Chekov's guest performances at the Latvian National Theatre (*Hamlet*) and the Riga Russian Theatre (*Twelfth Night*) in the early 1930s „left a considerable impact". Yet „the Latvian theatre practitioners did not strive to copy and imitate the achievements of the great theatre cultures in staging Shakespeare's plays, but preferred to seek their own ways of interpreting these works, mostly moving towards psychological theatre." Impressive also are the very fact that the Latvians first saw Shakespeare presented by traveling German-speaking traveling actors in the 17th c. and then, between 1884 and 2014, there have been so many productions of his plays that the very listing of them takes nearly 60 pages in the book!

„It is difficult to imagine another theatre culture, Zeltina writes about Lithuania, that would so naturally incorporate into Shakespeare's interpretations the shards of ice, the wooden candelabra with ice pendants, and the metaphor of the human as a dog (*Hamlet*), the human as a tree (*Macbeth*), or the Lithuanian kneading troughs in *Othello* that have been transformed into ships – gondolas – and at the end of the play into a symbolic ship – a coffin." All these examples being from the theatre of Nekrosius, whose achievements, Zeltina underlines, are being compared by Prof. Alexey Bartoshevich, known as 'the Russian Jan Kott', to Peter Brook's practices.

At the end of the book, not only is the reader convinced that the Baltic theatre practitioners, „with their mentality, idiosyncratic creative personalities and subjective vision" of the Bard „have contributed to the global perception of Shakespeare." What is more important – and what does special credit to Zeltina! – is that the reader has also the palpable feeling of having as if heard their concrete accents, Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian, resounding from the stage.

Of course, the Baltic theatre phenomenon is not accidental, it stems from the rich and diverse cultural traditions in the region. The interest in Shakespeare, for instance, is not limited to the theatre field only. There is an opera *Hamlet*, created by Latvian composer Jānis Kalniņš, a poem *Hamlet's Songs*, by the Estonian Paul-Eerik Rummo, a same-name choral work by the Estonian composer Veljo Tormis, written as a dialogue between nature and the human being. The less than 7 million inhabitants of the three states support and enjoy an amazing amount of cultural

institutions and events. In Latvia only there are 9 state-subsidized theatres (including the National Opera and Ballet Theatre, the main stage-arts venue), 12 independent companies, more than 200 amateur groups and two international theatre festivals. Moreover, a visit there comes with a nearly certain guarantee that one will see at least one so memorable and unusual show that even if it won't always go as far as changing one's life, it will for sure change one's idea/perception of the theatre as an art form. Not only because of the always anticipated work by the three aforementioned master-directors but also because of what the small theatres may have up in their sleeves. For instance, during the recent years, the off-center, G,ertrudes ielas teatris, located on the 4th floor of an old residential building, has been launching to national and international fame young directors with very strong new visions, like Vater Silis, Vladislavs Nastavševs, Andrejs Jarovojis and others. Recently, with great fanfare, a new Art-criticism award was inaugurated in the name of the late theatre and film critic of great renown Normunds Naumanis and a special "shelve of his books and records" was unveiled at the impressive new building of the Latvian National library, a project of the Riga European Capital of Culture.

The scope and the contribution of Zeltina's book exceed the Shakespearean universe. Exactly because it sheds light on the mystery of the whole Baltic theatre phenomenon and, for that matter, the Baltic culture in principle. It does so, first, by providing substantial clues to their context and their essence – a very considerable achievement indeed. Also, by itself being a theatre and cultural event as well – a worthy part of the same phenomenon. As the prominent Latvian critic Valda Cakare points out, "Facts, assumptions, legends, even gossips - nothing has been overlooked by Guna Zeltiņa, thus helping her to create a book which is illuminating and indispensable to the whole Baltic theatre culture." Then, there is the special stylistic accomplishment the book stands out with, very well noted by another leading Latvian critic Maija Svarinska, "In it documentary fact, analysis and description of stage productions melt into a true work of literature." A piece of literature with a *Baltic accent!* Which means – as one learns from a description of a Latvian Hamlet (of Rihards Rudāks, a soulmate of Vladimir Visotsky at Yuri Lyubimov's Moscow Taganka Theatre) – a mixture of sensitivity, emotional depth and „a quiet intelligence and restraint" (typical of the Baltic style of acting). One more thing: this book has nothing to do with the usual lustre of the anniversary books. Its coming out exactly now is a coincidence. However, such that has to do with something bigger than general celebrations: the book's being a dream and now a dream-come-true. And this encompasses the fact that, rather than watching cartoons, Zeltina's grand and grand-grand children prefer to browse through the illustrations of the big beautiful books on Shakespeare from around the world. Now including hers.