

HEROES' SQUARE

15 March 1938, Heldenplatz: the Viennese cheer Hitler, who just invaded Austria. Professor Schuster, a sophisticated music lover, at once a tyrant and a rebel, flees to Oxford. Ten years later, he comes back, "for love of music." But his wife Hedwig, haunted by the enthusiasm with which her country welcomed its own occupation, convinces him to go back to England. The day before they are to leave, with their trunks already shut and the precious Bösendorfer piano already on its way to Oxford, Schuster kills himself in the middle of the Heroes' Square... Written in the middle of the Kurt Waldheim Affair, when Austria elected a Prime Minister with a murky Nazi past, and dealing with the question of the *Anschluß* in vehement, almost brutal prose, *Heldenplatz* caused a political scandal even before the text was played or published in 1989. After *Woodcutters*, unanimously celebrated last year, the Polish director and the actors of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre are now working on Thomas Bernhard's final provocation, the last play in his "theatre of irritation" which seeks "the part of truth that exists in every lie." Together, they explore the possibilities of a time suspended between the world of the living and the world of the dead, in a fascinating relationship to the persistence of thought.

KRYSTIAN LUPA

After graduating from the Kraków Academy of Fine Arts, Krystian Lupa studied at the National Film School in Łódź, then at the Ludwik Solski Academy for the Dramatic Arts in Kraków. He began his career as a director towards the end of the 1970s, before becoming an artist-associate at the Teatr Norwida (1977-1985). Influenced by Kantor, he used his time there to defend his love of experimental theatre and to direct plays by Polish authors like Witkiewicz or Gombrowicz. In 1986, he became the director of the Stary Teatr, where he remained until 2013. Fascinated by Russian, German, and Austrian authors like Musil, Dostoyevsky, Rilke, Bulgakov, Chekhov, and particularly Bernhard, he has adapted many of the latter's dramatic and literary texts. In *The Theatre of Revelation*, Krystian Lupa, who likes to work as a scenographer or a costume and light designer as much as as a director, developed his conception of theatre as a tool to explore the spiritual situation of individuals struggling within "times of great cultural upheaval."

THOMAS BERNHARD

Born in 1931, Thomas Bernhard spent his childhood in Salzburg, under Nazi rule. After contracting tuberculosis, he had to leave school in 1947 and spend significant time in the hospital. It is at that time that he began writing poetry. His first novel, *Frost*, was published in 1963. In 1968, he used his acceptance speech for a prize to attack Austria, drawing the ire of the institutions. His first play, *A Party for Boris*, was met with acclaim upon premiering in Hamburg in 1970. Thomas Bernhard died in 1989, leaving behind eighteen plays, about twenty texts in prose, five poetry collections, and over a hundred articles.

INTERVIEW WITH KRYSTIAN LUPA

Ritter, Dene, Voss, Immanuel Kant, Extinction, Heroes'square: where does your interest for Thomas Bernhard come from? What kind of writer would you say he is?

Krystian Lupa: It started with *The Lime Works*, which was a literary revelation for me. I didn't expect to go through such a literary experience at the middle point of my life. The emergence of the underground currents of a monologue, to such an unexpected degree, was an entirely new experience. It seemed as if Thomas Bernhard had established new criteria to distinguish between lies and the truth, that he'd unveiled a new inner architecture of the individual, in a very risky and subjective way. Ingeborg Bachman once said that Bernhard didn't represent a new literary style, but a brand new way of thinking. It's precisely that way of thinking that allowed me to redefine my theatre, or rather that drove me to redefine it. Since then, I've been incapable of letting go of Thomas Bernhard. I constantly feel this ever-renewed need to experience his presence in my own transformation, the one that's going on inside me...

Thomas Bernhard wrote this play in a very specific context, in the middle of the Kurt Waldheim Affair. What is the context of *Heroes'square* today?

It's the new wave of xenophobia and antisemitism that's going through Europe, this new landscape of hatred for what's different and of fears that is appearing in our societies. Its aspects are slightly different depending on the country. It's hard to understand exactly the reasons for this new form of withdrawal and rejection of humanistic progress. What can create in an individual and a community such a need for hatred, the need to look for and find an object of hatred? When I was working on *Heroes'square*, I saw all of that unfold in Lithuania. At the same time, there was in Poland such an increase in nationalistic and xenophobic aggressions that it became possible to identify fully with the characters of the play.

There is in Thomas Bernhard's work a question about the nation, about fascism. It's an expression of a larger pursuit of truth. What does this pursuit inspire in you, this never-ending work on history, memory, origins, and legacies?

It's all closely linked. The positions that lead to fascism result from the rise of hypocrisy; what is expressed is the terror of a made-up and toxic "truth," which celebrates only hatred. Everything that surrounds it, and precisely memory, history, national and spiritual legacies, etc., darkens. The darkening of the path towards truth isn't a phenomenon restricted to a small number of people: this wave can also affect those who try to defend themselves against it... It's the deepest and most mysterious theme of Thomas Bernhard's last play. Its characters carry within them thoughts they are incapable of expressing. A taboo? A paralysis of the intellectual process? Human souls and minds have been poisoned.

You've said: "It's while directing *Heroes'square* that I felt for the first time this necessity to save characters from the author's claws." Who do you think is Josef Schuster? What does he represent?

Josef Schuster is like the Sphinx' enigma: by his action, he asked the living and the audience and the readers a question that has no answer but that must be answered at all cost. Josef Schuster, with his enigma, becomes a sort of ghost. A dybbuk! People are always talking about him, and he continues to inhabit the souls of his brother, his daughters, his housekeeper Mrs. Zittel... He survives as a recurring and necessary psychodrama. The original motive seems to be the will: the will of a suicide who aspired to self-destruction. An "extinction," again. To make everything disappear, the work of his life, the funeral ritual, memory: it's impossible. It creates, on the other side, the other face of extinction: an endless existence entirely dedicated to the necessity of answering the Sphinx' enigma, the denial of the darkening of truth engendered by hatred that rules everywhere. That hatred seeps into our souls, we're no longer able to protect ourselves from it. Josef's death initiates in the souls of the living an alchemical work...

Insults, vociferations: in *Heroes'square*, language is treated in a particularly brutal and direct way. How did you grapple with that language? How did you approach the play with your Lithuanian actors?

When we manage to get close to our characters, to overcome the borders of the subjective inner monologue, the language of the characters becomes an organic necessity.

Can you tell us about your scenography, about that box that frames the actors as in a painting, of your treatment of colour? What space did you imagine for *Heroes'square*?

Heroes'square, it's two spaces—the abandoned rooms of an old building (while people are moving out), which opens into the Heroes' Square and the park in front of the Burgtheater—that combine into one archetypal space—the intertwining of a human life and a historic fetish. I tried to recreate all that in Vilnius, which over the course of our research slowly became the place where that intertwining occurs.

In that play, haunted by death, there doesn't seem to be a future. Is *Heroes'square* a nihilistic play, as some like to say?

I've never seen Bernhard as a nihilistic writer, even though he is often seen as one. The radicalism of his critique seems to leave no room for anything else. It doesn't matter. On the other end, there's the desperate struggle of the individual. Even the suicide of the protagonist is part of that struggle. The energy of the narrator's protest, the enraged monologue that verges on the absurd, the crash through the wall of the absurd, the levitation in the space of the absurd, where laughter finally comes!... No, no, you can call it anything but nihilistic.

Often, in Thomas Bernhard's work, love is inseparable from hate. What does this mixture of contradictory feelings inspire you? Is it an engine for the dramaturgy?

That's how it goes in life, especially when we want to free ourselves from our constant lies. It's in our constant lies that love and hate never touch.

Is this play a vanity?

There may be futility in the perspective of a given moment, even in that of an individual life, but there's no futility in the process that leads to truth, which sometimes is bigger than our individual goals and becomes an element of our yearning for happiness. Misfortune, and the anxiety it creates which drives us to search for the truth, is but a constant counterweight to that futility. And in spite of the darkness of this play, you can still find it...

You've said in a manifesto: "Our souls are no longer useful to anyone... / Because in fact the role and meaning of our conscience and our truths / Are probably disappearing. / Our truths are no longer useful to anyone. / Maybe the role of our creative visions is more and more restricted / Within what the mad carnival of political realities produces." From that point of view, you seem close to Thomas Bernhard, who considers that the mind has been obliterated by provincialism, which deprived culture of any substance. What do you think is the role of an artist in today's society?

Indeed, in the situation that arose and is currently spreading through Poland, Bernhard's tools for thinking and determination are becoming crucially relevant. The chaos of criteria for the truth and the devaluation of human dialogue in the public space also devalue what used to be the artist's role, that of someone who would trigger intuitions and thoughts. What we have is either the death of the artist or another one of the Sphinx' enigmas, which forces the artist to exist differently. We're at a crossroads...

JULY 18 19 20 | 22 23 24
L'AUTRE SCÈNE
DU GRAND AVIGNON - VEDÈNE

FESTIVAL D'AVIGNON 70^e

AND...

THE NAVE OF IMAGES

Des arbres à abattre (extract), directed by Krystian Lupa (2015),
July 22 at 14:40, église des Célestins

Heroes' square by Thomas Bernhard, translation Claude Porcell, is published by éditions de L'Arche. Books of Thomas Bernhard are available at the Festival bookshop at the église des Célestins and at the Chartreuse bookshop in Villeneuve lez Avignon

TOUR DATES OF *HEROES' SQUARE* AFTER THE FESTIVAL

- December 9 to 15, 2016 at La Colline - Théâtre national in the Festival d'Automne à Paris
- April 6 to 13, 2017 at Théâtre national populaire de Villeurbanne

#KRYSTIANLUPA
#PLACEDESHÉROS
#AUTRESCENE #VEDENE

70th
EDITION

All the Festival on :
festival-avignon.com



#FDA16

In order to bring you this edition, over 1,750 people, artists, technicians, and organisational staff, have worked tirelessly and enthusiastically for months. More than half of them are state-subsidised freelance workers.