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Travestied Myths of European Culture in the Productions by J. J. Jillinger

SILVIA RADZOBE

The main hero of my story is a young man. However, not so young as you might imagine when you get acquainted with his public activities. Born in 1966, he is now 35 years old. First of all, there is no simple answer to as simple question as to what his name is. When he began to study theatre directing at the Latvian Academy of Culture at the beginning of the 1990s, he was enrolled under the name of Raimonds Rupeiks. However his first production *Emma Bovary* in 1995 was signed by the name of J. J. Jillinger. After some time he disclosed that his stage name had been derived from the name of the famous American gangster Dillinger who was a successful bank robber in the 1920s. Jillinger considers himself to be an intellectual gangster of Latvian culture. Moreover, his claims to intellectualism are based on a firm ground. His productions, including the stage versions of his own playscripts, are based on highly valuable literary works which mostly belong to modernism and post-modernism. Many of these authors were first introduced to the Latvian theatre by Jillinger. For instance, Vladimir Nabokov with *Invitation to a Beheading*, Isaac Bashevis Singer with *The Musician and the Prostitute*, Peter Handke with *The Ride Across Constance*, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch with *Venus in Furs*. He has also worked with Goethe's *Faust*, August Strindberg's *Games with Fire*, Tankred Dorst's *Fernando Krapp Wrote This Letter*, Samuel Becketts' *Molloy*, Gonzalo Torrente Ballester's *Don Juan*, Anton Chekhov's *The Three Sisters*.

However, the word *gangster* could be better replaced by the word *player* and *gambler*. Firstly, he is a player in the meaning of an actor who plays his part and does it very well; secondly, a

sportsman in chess, Jillingers's favourite type of sports; or thirdly, as a gambler similar to a virtuoso in gambling. It is the part of an intellectual cynic who has experienced everything in life. His intellectual cynicism was most conspicuously revealed in the way he treated the theme of sexuality on the stage. His productions have openly discussed various types of intercourse between a man and a woman, up to the smallest physiological details. Besides, his productions provided rich information about sadism and masochism, and different forms of masturbation. Nevertheless, Jillingers is not a perverse personality who is obsessed with sex. At the beginning of the 1990s a new generation of Latvian directors presented themselves with the theme of sexuality. Alvis Hermanis and Regnārs Vaivars were the most impressive figures. All of them offered a new level of openness in discussing this subject. At the same time, this new level of openness was a challenge to the society. The more so, because the Latvian art and culture has traditionally been very shy and resistant in grappling with the theme of sex. In addition, during the Soviet period, according to the opinion of Soviet ideologists, there was no sex either in art or life. To speak about sex meant to break hypocrisy at the heart of the previous social order and to declare one's freedom. In this way the young directors, by carrying out a sexual revolution at the theatre, made the Latvian theatre more open. The older generation accused the young directors of immorality. However, these accusations only inspired the young directors and sometimes they ran into extremes in order to prove their freedom by any means.

When Jillingers was a 4th-year student at the Latvian Academy of Culture, he initiated together with his two course mates, Viesturs Kairiņš and Gatis Šmits, the Union of Unbearable Theatre. They, following a common practice, published a manifesto declaring that the old theatre was dead and a new alternative theatre would be born. This theatre would never become commercial. No member of the Union could explain why the theatre was called *unbearable*. But it was felt that directors used this word in a similar meaning to the concept *the theatre of cruelty* or *the theatre as a plague* by Antonin Artaud. The Union existed for a year, its productions were performed in the Chamber Hall of the Daile (Art) Theatre. Each director staged two plays. When the money fell short the harsh reality set in. Gatis Šmits went to the USA to study cinema.

Viesturs Kairiņš was employed by the New Riga Theatre. Jillinger was offered a contract by the Daile Theatre. At this point, some additional information should be given. At present, there are four professional theatres in Riga. Two of them — the National Theatre and the Riga Russian Theatre are traditional and conservative. The New Riga Theatre is the most modern one. It is a non-commercial theatre searching for up-to-date theatre language. The New Riga Theatre is mostly attended by young people and intellectuals. The most complicated situation is at the Daile Theatre. It has wonderful highly professional actors of all generations and a very small creative potential of directors. The Large Hall of the theatre has 1200 seats which are very difficult to sell out. The Daile Theatre is mostly attended by the so-called regular theatre goer who is used to boring performances and sincerely welcomes everything that is offered. Jillinger's talent and ambitions made him suitable for work at the New Riga Theatre where experiments and challenges are treated as a norm. However, he found himself at the Daile Theatre which willingly supported his ability to make scandals as it hoped to fill the auditorium by these scandals. Provocation ceased to justify the independence of the young artist and turned into a part of the theatre's commercial plans. However, Jillinger felt he had to compensate the disappointment about his lost freedom by creating a specific type of production which I would call *a parody play*.

A parody is defined in various ways: its original meaning in Greek is *counter song*. It can mean also a special type of pastiche or a travesty. An integral part is an actively ironic attitude towards the parodied object. Thus, the new text can be characterised by a degrading attitude towards the original. Most often the function of a traditional parody is to prove that a certain type of style has become outdated. In classic and modern art a parodist always has a certain goal to achieve. Post-modern art parodies without reformative goals. Destruction of form or style is aimed at demonstrating the relativity of any philosophic, ethic or aesthetic values.

Traditionally, the object of a parody's attack is either the author, or a work of art in itself. For the parodies of Jillinger the object of attack is different. He always has at least three aims: to challenge ironically the typical Latvian theatre goer, as Jillinger would say *the simple-minded spectator*; to expose the prejudicial

theatre critics and the Daile Theatre itself, since it substitutes commerce for art.

In 1999 Jillinger, using Goethe's *Faust* wrote a script for a rock opera by the young composer Andris Vilcāns. The title of the rock opera was *Faust. Deus ex machina* and Jillinger staged it at the Daile Theatre.

The script for the rock opera is written as "Antifaust" which can be regarded as a travesty on Goethe's tragedy. Still it is not mere game of an ironic mind. The script parallels the specific problems of a young person facing a situation of choice. Perhaps, this model reflects the current situation in Latvia which is also facing a situation of choice. Just before the first-night show the director articulated his opinion that nowadays Goethe's play has lost its topicality. No one has to be persuaded to sell oneself. On the contrary — Mephistopheles cannot do his job without extra work: those who want to sell themselves are standing in a long line at his office. The philosophic issues of the rock opera are presented in two binary of oppositions: Faust and Mephistopheles, Gretchen and Martha. Both Faust and Gretchen are very naïve, inexperienced and non-standard young people. They are looking for teachers, first of all, in the field of sex. And they find them in Mephistopheles and Martha, who fascinate the young people with their elegance, cynicism and refined Eurostandards. Faust wishes to become Mephistopheles, but Gretchen longs to be like Martha. At all costs they wish to deny themselves, since they consider cultured persons like themselves to be lower than civilised persons. A spiritual person is considered to be a failure in contrast to a successful person; an original person is unattractive in comparison to a standard person. It is impossible to deny the topicality of this opposition irrespective of the fact whether we see it from the point of view of current Latvia, Eastern Europe or eternity. Or in the aspect of the Jillinger's creative biography. However, it is difficult to trace these oppositions in the production, since the actors playing Mephistopheles and Martha (Ģirts Ķesteris and Indra Briķe) are much more impressive than the actors playing Faust and Gretchen (Artūrs Skrastiņš and Rēzija Kalniņa). The perfect performance of Ķesteris and Briķe makes Mephistopheles and Martha the most convincing characters of the play. Consequently,

the audience feel pitiful dislike, even shame that Faust fails again and again to achieve the elegance of Mephistopheles.

The title of the rock opera *Faust. Deus ex machina* parodies both the plot of *Faust* and its philosophy. The performance is complemented with a rock group of A. Vilcāns, named *Deus ex machina*. Since the beginning of the performance a crashed car is hanging from wires above the stage. At the end of the play Faust dies in a car crash after he escapes from prison together with Gretchen. The symbolic character of Faust — *the eternally searching human spirit* — is reduced to any mortal young man who is hunted by the police. Thus fate is replaced by chance, while the part of the God is played by the car.

Jillinger continues to provoke the audience and critics in his production *Don Juan X* staged in 2001. It is also based on a parody about a myth of European classical culture.

The director never mentioned the author of the text. Therefore, the critics took it for granted that it was the product of Jillinger's sick imagination. But he, as it turned out in an interview half a year after the first night performance, just wanted to check the competence of theatre critics. All of us failed at his examination, as we had not read the post-modern version about Don Juan written by the contemporary Spanish author Gonzalo Torrente Ballester. The production was introduced by an intrigue in the press. Ģirts Ķesteris, who played Don Juan, gave interviews in four out of the eleven Latvian illustrated women's magazines, where he shared his extremely rich sexual experience. The language of the production contained many clichés of mass culture, the task of which was to convince the audience that it participates in a courageous session of hot sex. Both *high* and *low* art are utilized in the formation of the clichés of mass culture which dominate in the performance. A new, blood-red theatre curtain was made specially for this performance. It does not open throughout the prologue, which is accompanied by exciting music in the manner of Ravel's "Bolero". Thus the prologue arouses an atmosphere of the brothel and sin. When the curtain opens, the centre of the stage is occupied by tremendous stairs, onto which are glued weird, large-scale images of naked women. Since only some schools in Latvia teach the history of art, the average audience does not recognise reproductions of Salvador Dali's paintings in the nude and treats them as anonymous

pornographic posters. However, the audience has an opportunity to observe a live half-naked woman as well. An intellectual girl Maria visits Don Juan and undresses hastily, leaving on her red panties and high-heeled shoes. As she categorically insists that Juan should prove his male skills, Juan unwillingly knocks her off on the piano and reluctantly massages her erogenous zones. The supporters of mass culture are also happy about the unmistakably ambiguous games with bananas and gun barrels.

The director reveals an absolutely neutral attitude towards the encyclopaedia of banalities used in this performance, by allowing those, who want to, to take them seriously. However, there is another story disguised under this provocative form.

Don Juan X continues the theme of the choice which is topical for the young generation. The aesthetics of *Faust* can be characterized in terms of post-modernism, but its philosophy — in terms of modernism. Conversely, the version of *Don Juan* completely corresponds to the post-modern relativism both in the meaning of form and content. This time Don Juan is a student, while Comandor — the teacher. The student is a success, he fully acquires the teacher's experience and even beats him. The teacher possesses a peculiar attraction, cynical witticism and artistry. Comandor is more interesting than whining or aggressive women who want only sex from Juan and have exhausted him to a complete emptiness. Comandor is a symbol of absolute sexual freedom; he desires his daughter Elvira and trains Don Juan in homosexual love. Actually Comandor is the true Don Juan, Don Juan number one, but Don Juan is number two, his disciple who has inherited his skills, philosophy and freedom. In the framework of performance Don Juan number two also has a disciple, his servant Leporello, who undoubtedly will become Don Juan number three in the future. In the performance Don Juan kills Comandor. Symbolically it means killing one's past after a new stage of development has been achieved. In a similar way six years ago Raimonds Rupeiks killed his past and became J. J. Jillinger.