Opheliamaschine

Interviews with Magda Romanska and Uršulė Barto

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Interviews: Jan Stephan Schmieding
English working translation from German: ChatGPT

Original German text · Open PDF

Seeing through the eyes of the other can be very painful

An interview with playwright Magda Romanska · Original booklet pp. 10–13

QUESTION: In a conversation with our ensemble, you said that Opheliamaschine was the work of an "angry young woman". What prompted you to write the play?

ROMANSKA: I wrote the play after graduating from Stanford, during the "Silicon Renaissance", a world of men who saw themselves as masters of the universe. A young woman in that world could predict quite concretely the consequences of each of her decisions, and therefore the course of her life, in terms of career, family and children, for example. This was also because no woman before her, no generation of women before her, had cracked the code for a world in which her needs and desires, her ambitions and impulses would be given priority from the outset. It took me a while to process and understand that experience, and to grasp what this knowledge means for a woman.

QUESTION: A stage direction at the beginning of the play reads: "Hamlet and Ophelia are the two ends of the world. Between them lies the Atlantic, full of rotting corpses, dead birds and urine." Both are surrounded by a postmodern wasteland, yet separated from one another. The play traces a whole range of boundaries and inequalities, on both personal and ideological levels. What thoughts lie behind this for you?

ROMANSKA: It is a commonplace that you can be lonely while lying in bed beside another person, or feel close to someone despite being physically far apart. Human connection and physical proximity do not always coincide. Our psyche is a product of the world into which we are born, and the process of seeing the other, and our own self, through the other's eyes can be very painful. The moment of transition from childhood narcissism to genuine identification with the other is often profoundly revealing. Women are conditioned to enter every relationship in accordance with this prevailing mindset. For men, discovering what a woman thinks, what a woman wants, can be traumatic. Typically, women are asked so rarely that sometimes they do not even know themselves.

QUESTION: Opheliamaschine engages intensely with body politics, gender and violence, and paints an openly pessimistic picture of the state of the world. Has the struggle against patriarchy, male aggression and globalised capitalism been lost?

ROMANSKA: I do not think that all the battles have been lost, but I do believe that the larger struggle has been lost. We see it again and again: every thirty to fifty years, Europe experiences a genocide. The last took place in the former Yugoslavia. Today it is Ukraine. As though time, history itself, were not passing at all. It is like 1939 again. There is a kind of circular repetition in history: every generation yields to the male God or to war, only eventually to reject him or it. But by that point, many men and women have already lost their lives, on the battlefield or through violence behind the lines. Once again today, women become refugees, have to care for their families and mourn the victims. Peace is a kind of victory of female rationality over male irrationality.

QUESTION: After four hundred years of a dysfunctional relationship on stage, the two main characters from Hamlet seem to remain chained to one another in your play, too, in a tragic or tragicomic way. It seems that neither can exist without the other.

ROMANSKA: Would a modern Hamlet and a modern Ophelia go to therapy to solve their problems? Would they be saved if they fled their toxic family structures and married in Vegas? What Shakespeare tried in vain to capture in his tragedies, and sometimes also in his comedies, is a kind of impossibility of the heteronormative relationship, the contradictory nature of its cycle of power and consent. You can love only those who are your equals; loving them means willingly relinquishing certain elements of your individual freedom and your own selfhood. Only a free person, someone not constrained by social conventions, can do that. For women, it is always a very fine line…

QUESTION: It has been ten years since you finished the play. Has your view of the play and its protagonist changed since then?

ROMANSKA: It took me a while to process the things I wanted to capture in this play. I wrote it and then put it aside for a few years. Strangely, it seems to resonate more with today's generation of young women than perhaps it did with mine. We were not given permission to be angry.

Five questions for director Uršulė Barto

Original booklet pp. 6–7

QUESTION: What brought you to theatre?

BARTO: The theatre I saw and enjoyed. The drama club I attended for almost twelve years. The desire to change social and hierarchical structures. The privilege of having access to many art forms from early childhood. But perhaps most important was the realisation that directing has the ability to draw all the creative forces of theatre into particular discourses, to speculate together. It creates images that enable audiences to find common ground and perhaps shared answers.

QUESTION: How would you describe the theatre tradition in your home country?

BARTO: There has always been a debate about whether a Lithuanian theatre tradition really exists. Because theatre was so strongly influenced by the state's mechanisms of power, it had to find ways of criticising the regime without being censored. This gave rise to a more image-based system of signs, one that does not place language at its centre.

QUESTION: What has occupied you most since moving to Berlin?

BARTO: Honestly, the show and the text we are currently rehearsing. I would not say that I am experiencing Berlin in all its splendour, but I am beginning to get a sense of its complexity. Also, Google Maps.

QUESTION: What project would you like to realise within WORX?

BARTO: I do not feel that I am here only to put together two productions and perhaps a few staged readings. I also feel invited to observe other people's work and processes, and to see how this particular theatre operates artistically and organisationally. That said, a week before the premiere of Opheliamaschine, this play has inevitably already taken me over completely.

QUESTION: What do you need for a good rehearsal?

BARTO: A space in which vulnerability is perceived as a gift rather than a weakness.

Source and translation note

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