

Popenhagen, Ludvika Apinytė. *Nekrošius and Lithuanian Theatre*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1999, hardcover, 180 pp.

Dr. Popenhagen describes her work as "an introduction in English to the unique vision of [Lithuanian theater director] Eimuntas Nekrošius, a contextualization of his staging of internationally recognized dramatic writers, and an *expose* on the microcosmic world of his stage settings." The study evaluates Nekrošius's recent work, with special emphasis on several productions viewed by the author in live performance between 1988 and 1995. It is supported by interviews with Nekrošius, his actors and designers and by the reviews of Lithuanian and foreign theater critics.

Appropriately, the opening chapters describe the vocabulary of Nekrošius's "scenic writing," his directorial style, and his use of the scenographic components of color, sound, light, and "actor geography." The focus in chapters one through three is on specific scenic elements of Nekrošius's productions of *Uncle Vanya* (1986), *The Nose* (1991), *Mozart and Salieri* (1994), and *The Three Sisters* (1995). Among the most useful of the author's observations concerns Nekrošius's nonverbal, nontextual production values, which often require "tampering" with the dialogue/text of canonical plays. Not surprisingly, this is a controversial feature of Nekrošius's work. Popenhagen explains that this process may be understood as a method of "very delicately" transposing the various sign systems—language, set, stage composition—into a Lithuanian cultural context. It is therefore a particularly appropriate technique for a Lithuanian-language theater vying for international acceptance. Nekrošius's productions accomplish "cultural transference" while remaining faithful to the essence of the original play.

The final two chapters mark a shift in Popenhagen's method. In chapter four, drawing on opinions expressed at the Theatre Seminar of the VIth World Symposium on Lithuanian Arts and Sciences held in Vilnius in May 1991, the author compellingly recounts a fascinating debate concerning both the role of theater in post-Soviet culture and Nekrošius's role in Lithuanian "national" theater. Because Nekrošius's work is non-traditional and not overtly "Lithuanian" in its repertory, Lithuanian conservatives and "neonationalists" have been reluctant to recognize it as "not just a national theatre, but *the* national theatre." Furthermore, these "ethnic purists" have in effect attempted to "censor or silence" Nekrošius with what amounts to political harassment: "The neonationalists and traditionalists would like to operate in much the same way as their Soviet-counterpart censors making theatre a vehicle for nationalist sentiment and a showcase for nationalistic icons." The cultural conservatives dismiss Nekrošius's work solely because they fail to understand its artistic innovations and do not recognize its distinctly Lithuanian elements.

Popenhagen offers several arguments in response to the conservative faction, which would seek to transform Nekrošius's productions into "the carefully nurtured offspring of patriotism." First, though Nekrošius's theater does not extensively utilize Lithuanian plays—his most celebrated work is a 1985 adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*—its cultural diversity accurately reflects Lithuanian history and current Lithuanian cultural conditions. Moreover, Lithuanian folklore and mythology are in fact present as underlying signature features in Nekrošius's work, as are images extracted from the director's childhood in rural Lithuania. Not insignificantly, Nekrošius's actors are Lithuanian-trained performers using the Lithuanian language conspicuously in international settings; the strong validation they have received at international theater events has increased the worldwide visibility of modern Lithuanian culture.

Chapter five addresses a paradox in the foreign reception of Nekrošius's work. Though Nekrošius has been highly praised outside of Lithuania, the political biases of foreign and especially Western critics have resulted in diametrically opposed interpretations of identical productions. However, the "abundant diversity of readings" of Nekrošius's staging have helped to create for the Lithuanian director an artistic position outside and above political ideologies—a primary reason his work has remained internationally viable and exportable.

In essence, this study argues for a full recognition of both Nekrošius's theatrical talent and his importance to contemporary Lithuanian national theater. Popenhagen sees great significance in the fact that Nekrošius's work has been popular and acclaimed during both Soviet and post-Soviet periods, within and outside Lithuania. Frequently quoting from laudatory reviewers—among whom American Arthur Miller is perhaps most notable—Popenhagen asserts that Nekrošius has

created "a progressive mainstream theatre that crosses cultural boundaries and is not dependent on a single socio/political context." The author's implicit conclusion is that Nekrošius already authentically answers as the *de facto* Lithuanian "national" director, whether or not this is recognized by his detractors.

Popenhagen's work is an engaging study that is not without its shortcomings. First, readers may find the work somewhat emotionally partisan. The book's repeated claims that Nekrošius's creative staging and international honors put him "in the same league" as the world's great dramatists, "one of the great directors of this century" may be valid, but in this brief study they seem insufficiently supported. Also, though Nekrošius's recent acclaimed productions of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are listed in the appended chronology of the director's works, they are never examined in the text, and these would certainly have added insight to this study, which does not cover a very large number of plays. Finally, Popenhagen's text is followed by eight photographs of Nekrošius's productions, but her captions do not analyze their content. In a work which attributes special significance to the director's visual technique, this seems a missed opportunity.

Popenhagen raises several issues that merit further investigation. She mentions, but does not develop, an alleged influence on Nekrošius's work derived from the major Lithuanian artist/composer M.K. Čiurlionis. Detailed treatment of this topic might have bolstered the author's thesis concerning the importance of the visual element in Nekrošius's work. And the complex issue of the political ideology of Nekrošius's drama seems handled with undue brevity. Popenhagen's assertion that Nekrošius's success in the post-Soviet era "invalidates" critical views that have seen his earlier work as primarily political is an innovative theory that requires more complete development.

Throughout the study, the author is at her best when interpreting specific features of Nekrošius's dramaturgy. The text's explications of the staging of *The Three Sisters* and *Uncle Vanya* are concise and illuminating. Unquestionably, the first chapters of Popenhagen's work succeed in conveying something of the uniqueness of Nekrošius's drama. As an introduction to Nekrošius's works and an exposition of certain features of the political dynamics of post-Soviet Lithuanian theater, Dr. Popenhagen's work is extremely useful. This study will certainly enhance the dialogue concerning Nekrošius, though it by no means constitutes a comprehensive critical biography of an artist who is, after all, still actively creating, and it rightfully does not claim to provide the final or conclusive assessment of Nekrošius's international or domestic stature.

Patrick Chura
St. Louis University



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