

Contemporary pieces offer great opportunity for costume designer's creation

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INTERVIEW – The artist of costume, Angelina Atlagic, on the occasion of the ballet Symphony of Sorrowful Songs at Berlin Opera and exhibition of her work, 'Close Up' at City Gallery in Uzice

By: Ivana Matijevic

Exhibition of the works by costume and set designer Angelina Atlagic 'Close Up', by Theatre Museum in Belgrade, was presented at the City Gallery in Uzice, during this year's Night of the Museums. These days, a new premiere of this artist's work took place at the famous Berlin Opera. This is yet another in a series of project she's recently realised with the Slovene director Tomaz Pandur.

The most acclaimed costume designer from the region left her mark on more than 150 plays, operas, ballets, films and TV projects, not only in Serbia and the region, but also all over Europe, which almost always resulted in numerous awards (Association of Visual and Applied Artists of Serbia, Sterijino pozorje Festival, but also those from Borstnik Meetings in Maribor, Vojdan Cernodrinski Festival in Prilep, awards in Russia and Greece...). She has exhibited her works all over the world, as well as in significant exhibitions in our country, she teaches at the Faculty of Drama Arts in Montenegro, and she has held a series of presentations of her work at a number of US universities.

Back in the day, watching 'Theatre Illusions' at Yugoslav Drama Theatre, some of us have for the first time realised how much costume design contributes to theatre illusions and how much it is in fact their essential part, because putting a stage costume on means starting the game of theatre. Do you, as an artist of costume design, care about the costume being 'visible' or do you think it is better for it to remain 'unnoticeable' in a show?

For me, this production was an opportunity to create attractive costumes in different genres, starting from a fairy tale, through renaissance comedy, classicist tragedy all the way to contemporary costumes, when the actors step out of their characters and remain lost for words at the sounds of tanks announcing the beginning of the war. 'Illusions' are a good example of how a politically engaged production does not have to be played in a contemporary costume in order to be

current. The charm of creating in theatre is to constantly establish new rules and break the old ones. This is also my attitude towards costume and its presence on stage. Depending on the play text itself, director's concept and dramaturgy, I decide whether the costumes are going to be visually attractive and take part in the play in this way, or be completely inconspicuous and thus enable actors to play something that in another show a costume could tell about his or her character even before they utter a word on stage. The presence of costumes on stage is also determined by different theatre genres, if it's an opera costumes are more present on stage as a visual sign, whereas in a ballet it's movement and dancers' bodies that take precedence. Although, nowadays there are variations in these regards as well, so we cannot speak of universal rules.

How much it is important for your 'reading' of a play to coincide with that of the rest of the creative team of a production, primarily that of director, or is it, on the contrary, better for the show for it to be a little different?

I think the core of costume designer's task is to follow directorial concept and the play text, dramaturgy and characters' development and be in accord with set designer's concept, which doesn't mean that it's necessary for all of these to be in line, because this can lead to the production ending up being boring. I believe that each of the authors of a show must have freedom to interpret the play in their own way, within the director's concept, and that this playfulness in various authors' approaches is the secret of a successful show. Sometimes it is good to have stark contrasts between set, costumes, the ways in which actors act, music, lighting, but again, this doesn't have to be a rule. For me, this part of discovering is one of the key moments and crucial for the success of costume design concept. Sometimes extremely flamboyant costumes can produce boredom after a while, if they are not harmonised with other elements. The secret of costume designer's participation in a show is not a grand creation that stops at the costume itself, but rather in playing and correlation with other elements of the show.

Making fairytale-like shows, whose playtexts belong either to a historic period or the sphere of fantasy, is inspiring for a costume designer. On the other hand, how much of a challenge it is for a costume designer to render the contemporary on stage, a realistic play, or is it exactly your profession that contributes to even such plays being defamiliarised?

Even though at first glance it may seem that period costumes or fairy tales are more of a challenge for a costume designer, this doesn't always have to be true. For me, the most important things are the playtext and directorial concept, which matter for me at the time when I decide whether to take part in the work on a show or not. Contemporary plays offer great possibilities for costume design creation, because this involves not only the very design of the costumes, but also a concept

that develops through characters and dramaturgy of the show, actively taking part in it along with other elements, sometimes following them in harmony and sometimes confronting the events on stage or actors' playing. The difference between fashion and stage costume is in the fact that in fashion the focus is on design, details and form, whereas stage costume, apart from all the visual demands, must follow the character played by an actor, their transformation, various psychological conditions and to be present in quite an unusual way, but often also completely unnoticeable on stage.

When someone's career includes leaving their mark in theatres all over Europe, reaching the great Bolshoy Theatre itself with an opera performed in it, and then awards too, what is it that they yet want to achieve in their profession?

I am fortunate to have had the opportunity to work in different environments, to meet great and significant people of theatre, opera and ballet worlds. Along with Bolshoy, National Theatres in Athens and Thessaloniki, Epidaurus, where I worked with Slobodan Unkovski, a very special place in my career is my collaboration with Tomaz Pandur and the shows we have done in Spain, 'Inferno', 'Medea', 'Barroco' and the ballet 'Alas', choreographed by Nacho Duato. Working in Berlin, where the world premiere of the ballet 'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs' starring Vladimir Malakhov took place last Saturday, was also a great experience. Working at such significant institutions such as Berlin Opera represents a kind of perfecting oneself in professional and any other sense. Contact with great artists enriches our lives and makes us change ourselves. This is what I consider the greatest success.

Alice Behind the Looking Glass

Following the premiere in Berlin, I have another premiere coming up in Moscow, based on Lewis Carroll's book 'Alice Behind the Looking Glass', Angelina Atlagic announced today in our interview for 'Danas'. 'Director Ivan Popovski has made a show primarily intended for children, but also for grown ups. The premiere is to take place on May 15, at Masterskaja Fomenko Theatre, under artistic leadership of the famous Russian director Peter Fomenko'.

Symphony of Sorrowful Songs

'Symphony of Sorrowful Songs', a ballet directed by Tomaz Pandur and choreographed by Ronald Savkovic, to the music of Henrik Goreczky, represents seven stage icons following the journey through short history of time. Along with dance, Pandur also uses a narrative current, performed by the famous German actress Hana Schigula. The production, for which Angelina Atlagic did costume design, was based on the dramaturgical concept of Darko Lukic and Livija Pandur, set design was done by Numen Group, and lighting design by Juan Gomez Cornejo.