

Ludus 156-157, November 2009

Interview with Angelina Atlagic by Olivera Milosevic

Costumes In Medea Are Inspired By Serbian Traditional Costume

ANGELINA ATLAGIĆ
Set & costume design
www.angelinaatlagic.com

'Theatre and working in theatre is alike in all European countries. I could say, there is this universal language of theatre, functioning in all surroundings regardless of linguistic barriers', says Angelina Atlagic

Angelina Atlagic, costume designer, a frail and quiet woman at a first glance, but industrious and authentic artist, is known as someone who makes no compromises. Her work in theatre often includes more than costume design, and she is a collaborator of choice of many a significant director.

She has designed costumes for over a hundred and fifty shows in almost all local and many international theatres. She increasingly works outside the borders of our country. Her costumes in the Russian production of 'War and Peace' at Bolshoy Theatre in Moscow are still well remembered, and the ones from the production of 'Poisoned Tunic', for which she received the Best Costume Designer Award in Moscow, are still living on stage of Theatre Fomenko. She won the Annual Award in Spain in 2007 for costumes in the production of 'Barroco'. She has worked in Italy, Belgium, Slovenia, Germany...

Last Summer, at an acclaimed Spanish Theatre Classics Festival in the town of Merida, the production of 'Medea' by Euripides, directed by Tomaz Pandur, was a great success, with its entwining of present day and mythic time planes. Several exclusivities followed this piece – the space of an ancient Roman theatre where the stage was located, no more than ten performances, several thousand spectators attending each of them, actress Blanca Portillo, well known from Almodovar's films, in title role and costumes by Angelina Atlagic.

Angelina has recently returned from Wiesbaden, from the premiere of 'The Stone', new play by Marius von Mayerburg, directed by Slobodan Unkovski, to which she made her contribution as costume and set designer.

Collaboration with Tomaz Pandur has started in Spain? What are the productions you worked on together with him and what's it like to work with him?

Our first collaboration was in Thessaloniki in 1998, on a multimedia spectacle 'Silences of the Balkans', but the first theatre piece we did to-

gether was 'Inferno', in Spain in 2005. We continued our collaboration in 2006, along with choreographer Nacho Duato, on the ballet 'Alas', in 2007 we did 'Caligula', in Zagreb, premiered in Budva, in 2008 we did 'Barroco' and 'Medea' in 2009. We've done all these shows in Spain, in Madrid, except for 'Caligula'. This will be the first time we've done a play in Berlin. Working with Tomaz involves a very specific way of working at all stages of the creative process, from coming up with ideas to the very realisation and dress rehearsals. Preparations usually take around a year. Pandur starts with images, he always has a clear and precise idea of the visual aspect of the piece, but leaves enough room for my creative freedom and building up from this basis. He has his own specific directorial poetics and aesthetics, very close to me, as well as a specific way of working and communicating with his collaborators.

Last summer, for the production of 'Medea' directed by Pandur, you realised around 70 costumes. Dramaturgical concept was interesting. What was it that inspired you?

'Medea' was slow in its conception and took long, it took us months to find solutions on how to tell a contemporary story based on a myth, contemporary in terms of costume design, but blending different times and spaces, as well as dramaturgically different genres. Along with the costumes of Medea, Jason and the Nanny, male and female choruses played a big part, with their demanding dance, music and acting tasks and multiple costume changes. Costumes were inspired by Serbian traditional costume, but combined with details from the neighbouring countries. At the very start of the show, Medea appears in a contemporary refugee's costume, someone from our regions, who, carried by the winds of war, found herself in Spain. Male chorus appears, journalists, who attempt to reconstruct her story, which obtains different interpretations in its media version. A flash from someone's camera provokes an explosion and a wall collapses, from behind which a centaur appears, a mythic creature, making Medea start to recollect events from several thousand years before, she is seen in a mythic cape that she takes off after a lengthy Grecian monologue, to remains in a contemporary dress from the nineteen fifties, in a rural surrounding of a Mediterranean country. This is just a brief illustration of a costume journey through centuries. Along with these time lapses, a particular curiosity of this show are dramaturgical, genre twists. Playing in open air, in a magical Roman theatre in Merida, with a car driving on stage, animals, set made of straw, all this gave this show authenticity of a neo-realist film, both in terms of the experience of the show and in the way we worked on it and prepared for rehearsals.

Slobodan Unkovski is yet another great director whose constant collaborator you have been for years. I am guessing that his system of work is different?

Directorial styles of Unkovski and Pandur are quite different between themselves, but their ways of communication and collaboration are very similar. They both have great respect for each participant in the

show and pay maximum attention to everyone. This style of communication also leads to establishing a specific system of work on development of a production. Tomaz Pandur and Slobodan Unkovski pay great attention to an actor's physical and mental preparedness, each of them has various exercises done before each rehearsal, establishing the mode of speech and introduction to their particular director's aesthetics and poetics. Unkovski includes all his collaborators in these exercises, set and costume designers, stage manager... thus creating a pleasant atmosphere in which we all feel like active participants in the play. Improvisation he does in order to get to know actors and their acting specifics are particularly interesting. It's a pity that in our country there is no system common in Russia, where every significant director gets a theatre of their own, where they develop their specific way of working, together with their actors and collaborators.

You have recently had your first premiere with Unkovski in Germany, in Wiesbaden, with the new play by Marius von Mayenburg, 'The Stone'. What is the play about and what was your starting point in realisation of costume and set design?

The play 'The Stone' has a very complex dramaturgical structure, and if I were to say it was fragmentary dramaturgy it wouldn't be quite true, because I'd sooner call this 'puzzle' dramaturgy. It consists of 35 scenes that take place in 1935, 1945, 1953, 1978 and 1993. The scenes change at great speed, like in a film, and they don't leave much room for changes of set or costume. I tried to manage the time lapses by doing a story board that is usually done in film, and thus portray the development of set, costumes and lighting through the 35 scenes. The basis of the set is a house, a rectangular enclosed space with no doors or windows, with no furniture (save for a table and some chairs), but with closets and storerooms in the walls, in which actors and various props are concealed. A painted sky in the background and a wall which is both the real wall of the house and a symbolic Berlin wall dividing two Germanys enabled me to turn the space into interior or exterior as required, I achieved various times of day, seasons changing and different atmospheres through lighting changes. Costumes followed different time periods and all changes were taking place out in the open, on stage.

You work throughout Europe, how would you compare working in Moscow to working in Madrid, or both of these to working in Wiesbaden, for example?

Theatre and working in theatre is similar in all European countries. I could say that there is a universal language of theatre that works in all surroundings I've worked in so far, regardless of linguistic barriers. I found it cute when, during the work on set design, technical director in Wiesbaden cried 'Why are all artists always the same, no matter where they come from?' It was about a new requirement that hadn't been foreseen at the beginning of the work. In spite of these similarities, there are great differences as well, primarily in production and organisation sense. Maybe the most drastic of these examples would be

in Russia, where costume designer has no possibility to intervene on the costumes during their making, but sees them completed, on stage, and makes corrections there, whereas in some countries costume designers are expected to fully take part in making of the costume. I've had such experience in Belgium and Italy. It all depends on theatre itself, big venues such as Bolshoy don't have time for improvisations and experiments, dates of premieres are never changed. Theatre in Wiesbaden is a veritable little factory, they produce 30 premieres a year on five stages and have over a thousand shows behind them. In spite of the large number of premieres, I was deeply impressed by the enthusiasm and work ethics of the team I collaborated with. The productions I worked on in Spain were directed by Tomaz Pandur, who introduces his own specific way of working to every theatre he works with.

What is the role and significance of theatre in these environments?

Judging by the premieres and sold out tickets for 'Medea', booked for months in advance, I think that theatre is rated very highly on the list of cultural events in Spain. Russia has a long and rich tradition, and what fascinated me was that the play I did in 2002, 'Poisoned Tunic' at Theatre Fomenko, had a waiting list for tickets for over a year in advance. A specific of Russian audience is very high education level and a lot of knowledge, because classics are often performed and each discussion of a show is based on a deep knowledge of the play and comparison with its previous stagings. 'The Stone' speaks of Nazism and new generations' relationship with Nazi heritage, the writer Marius von Mayenburg addresses this touchy subject in an interesting way, and the big and long applause in the end of the show speaks of how important theatre is, as a spoken word and a sort of group therapy for solving traumas in society.

Which productions, which directors and which theatres await you in the forthcoming period?

The first premiere is to take place on December 15 at Madlenianum, it is a new opera 'Mandrake' by the composer Ivan Jevtic, directed by Slobodan Unkovski, in January there will be a premiere in Moscow, 'Alice Behind the Looking Glass' directed by Ivan Popovski at Fomenko Theatre and in late April a ballet at Berlin State Opera, 'Short History of Time' directed by Tomaz Pandur, choreographed by Ronald Savkovic, and starring the renowned ballet dancer Vladimir Malakhov.