

A Provocative Cold Consideration: *3 Winters* at the National Theatre in London **Lena Šimić with Neal Anderson and Gabriel Anderson**

On 31 January 2015 I took a train with my two sons aged 14 and 12 from Liverpool to London. We were going to the National Theatre. This was their first ever visit. Ron Meadows, my colleague at Liverpool Hope University, suggested I see *3 Winters*, a Croatian play at the National. I am Croatian. Feeling intrigued, I watched the trailer, felt it was a bit too 'traditional/standard' for my taste but emailed Duška Radosavljević, my research collaborator on 'Mums and Babies Ensemble' project and my national 'frenemy' (we were both born in Yugoslavia, but now Duška is from Serbia and I am from Croatia), sharing my 'traditional/standard' concern and asking for her thoughts on this play. Duška responded fairly positively, confirming that it was traditional but also 'not bad'. She shared her *Exeunt* review of the production.ⁱ I read it, and was hooked. There might have been a tiny flicker of nationalist feeling in me provoked by Duška's last sentence in the review: 'And, despite any minor reservations, it must be said it was a joy to be finally admitted into the fold of the British mainstream in this way, for the first time in over twenty years of regular theatre-going.' Yes, I will go! Moreover, I will take my two older sons with me, my two British-Croatian boys', exclaimed the dormant nationalist in me.

3 Winters is the first ever Croatian play (written by Tena Štivičić) to be produced and staged at the National Theatre in London. It opened on December 2014. Croatia joined the EU the previous year. In a way, *3 Winters* represents Croatia's cultural entrance into British mainstream theatre, literally and metaphorically. Croatia has arrived; in Radosavljević's words *3 Winters* is a 'state of the nation play' with its appropriate dramaturgical and performance aesthetics, those familiar theatrics of the mainstream theatre, witty and smart, humourous and bold, technically well executed, funny and serious at the same time, somehow apparently pluralistic and diverse, appealing to the idea of multicultural Britain. However (and unfortunately) 'if you are not pissed off, you are not paying attention' still applies. The moment I sat down to write this consideration, the moment I decided to pay more attention to the event, it all started to collapse. To think deeper means to get angry; now I'm pissed off.

3 Winters appears as a solid, responsible and appropriate play to stage. Yes, it is time for Britain to accept Croatia into its cultural mainstream; it's time for the British public to (re)consider the Balkans 1990s war. *3 Winters* fits in well with that middle class sensibility of multicultural Britain. Štivičić herself lives in London and has written the play in English, even when her early writing process involved drafting the play in both Croatian and English as she herself explains in the NT podcast in conversation with Susannah Tresilian.ⁱⁱ As someone who is also a Croatian emigrant and living in the UK, as well as a performance practitioner who has written and performed specifically for a British context (although predominantly within live art not theatre), I applaud this specificity of artistic engagement. According to Štivičić herself in the podcast, she didn't want to end up with a Croatian play and then have to translate it as 'plays in translation always lose a dimension.' As it is commonly acknowledged translation might misfire or misrepresent. Furthermore, one would imagine that being part of the performance making process and sitting in rehearsals allows for a more direct intervention into one's artwork. But does it really? What happens when we lose translation? What happens when we smooth over the cracks of transcultural engagement and (critical) problems which translation offers? What influence can one writer (and in this case a willing representative of one's nation who is writing this play in the knowledge it will

be produced for NT in London) have on the NT and its predominantly mainstream theatre aesthetics - which are there to please the usual crowd of middle class theatre goers? Isn't it more likely that any new play will have to 'bend and blend' in order to slot into the mainstream theatre machine? I would note that in the NT podcast Štivičić herself claims she's not wanting to represent Croatians, nor educate the British on Croatian history but just tell the story of a family, and in that showcase an aspect of our human condition, which is, of course, noble but deeply problematic. Having *3 Winters* written for and staged at the NT is a cultural and contextual event, not the isolated private affair the writer seems to believe.

Then why am I bothering to writing this consideration? I do not long to call it a review as the play's already ended, and yet, the writing cannot be called an article either. I don't feel committed enough for that endeavour. I am sure that some committed academic, a defender of innovation at the National could very easily dismantle my superficial claim that the National offers predominant mainstream theatre aesthetics and support it by an array of examples of different productions which confirm 'innovations' in the last 20 years, if not more. But, here I am, and here it is. This writing stuck somewhere in between a review and an article; I'm calling it a consideration, a provocation, a more thoughtful reflection on the experience of visiting NT with my children, themselves first time theatre goers to the National, to watch the first ever Croatian play being staged there.

This writing stems from uncomfortable notions of nationality. I ask myself: why am I stuck in this national frame? Do I feel a sense of responsibility to my Croatian nation? I tell my children I am uneasy about saying I was born in Dubrovnik, Croatia, because I was born in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, that country which is no longer here. I explain to them: and if it is possible for me to have been born in Yugoslavia, a nowhere, then it's possible I could have been born anywhere else, and that elsewhere could have been renamed into somewhere else. I am beyond the idea of national borders, very much beyond it. I can't muster that nationalism, and yet, here I am, somehow excited by a thought 'well, it's the first ever Croatian play at the National; it's an occasion; you better go and see it; take the kids!'

My other hesitation here is that I am critiquing a fellow Croatian emigrant, moreover a fellow woman artist? Should there be a sense of national, even gender solidarity between us immigrants into the UK? Shouldn't we just be pleased to be allowed in, both into the country as well as its cultural and academic milieu? Why bother with this critique? Writing this cold consideration is no revolution, after all. Croatia has got a play about its past, an interwoven story of three generations of the Kos family in a house in Zagreb, staged at the National. No one is expecting it to be an upheaval, one play in the NT factory. Is this really the thing over which one should pause, pay closer attention and use as a vehicle to get angry about the world and our reactive, mainstream culture? 'Don't write about performances you don't like' I remember my PhD supervisor advising. Why am I writing this and who for?

Taking the children changed my rules of engagement. I suddenly became much more bothered. I want to use this as an opportunity for critical parenting, for an engaged conversation about arts and culture, as well as history, citizenship and nationality. This becomes a pedagogical opportunity. 'What do my children make of this experience?' becomes for me that crucial question. The following day, on our Virgin Pendolino back to Liverpool, I held a conversation with them both, individually, first Neal (14) followed by Gabriel (12).

The play itself is a story of the Kos family and their family home across three generations. In 1945 just at the end of the war, we see Rose (a strong-willed partisan woman) move with her husband and baby daughter Masha into an aristocratic house where her family used to work as servants; she is given the key to the house by the newly formed communist government. In 1990, at the brink of the break up of former Yugoslavia, the house is occupied by Masha, her husband Vlado (a history teacher and socialist) and their two daughters Alisa and Lucia. Finally, we find ourselves in the year 2011, at which point the two daughters emerge as the main protagonists. Whilst Alisa is a PhD student in London, who enjoys her moralising and yet oddly detached critical voice for the current situation in Croatia and beyond, the younger daughter Lucia is to become the new legal owner of the house with the help of her entrepreneur capitalist husband-to-be. The house passes from aristocrats through communists to new capitalists.

Conversation with Neal Anderson (14)

Conversation with Neal written up from notes made on the train home.

What was London like for you before going to see this play; what do you remember doing in London?

Eminem, airports, protests and always loads of people Wembley. And I remember my Year 7 trip to London when we went to the London Eye and saw the Lion King. Oh yeah, Artsadmin and Dad shouting about injustice in this world, about everything that is wrong, about climate change. And then G20 protest when someone got hit by the police and ended up dying. I remember standing there with lots of policemen and meeting people and eating fish and chips. Also St Paul's Cathedral and that weird video of Gabriel dancing.

Was that Occupy?

Yes, it was Occupy. I'm not even sure why we go sometimes. I don't think you tell us everything.

Well, why do you think the protestors occupied the area around St Paul's?

They occupied the area because they could. Well, they did it, didn't they? Their statement was about injustices in this world, how unfair democracy is because we can only vote for our constituency, and nothing bigger and that's not fair.

Why did we go this time?

You wanted to expose us to the theatre, National Theatre and 3 *Winters* play.

So what was the play about?

It was about three generations of people in the same house, 1945, 1990 and now. It's the first ever Croatian play to be shown in the National Theatre and it's important because theatre is branching out with a new genre and a new culture.

How did you feel about the National Theatre, the building and atmosphere?

It's definitely for richer people. We wouldn't normally go there. Café is expensive, like really expensive. People were quite middle class. That's clear from the way they spoke and the way they dress and walk around. They stroll around, without purpose, it's hard to describe but you could tell. I doubt there were many Croatian people there. Tina didn't go.

Do you think it's important to have this play in the National Theatre?

I think it's important to have that play there because it shows what the UK thinks of Croatia. Even when the play is written by a Croatian writer, it's not Croatian really. It's all in English: set design and props and actors. It's British. The play had different types of characters in it representing different demographics: communist (Rose and Vlado, the Dad), capitalist (young daughter Lucia), the one who went to London who is a liberal intellectual (older daughter Alisa). The problem is that they can't get along with each other. They are all shouting a lot and then after that there's a bland joke. Shouting followed by a bland joke. Bland is important because I didn't laugh.

Did you not enjoy it? You seem to have followed it rather well.

I followed it because I had to. I might as well follow it. What else could I do? I wouldn't recommend it to a friend because they don't know about Yugoslavia. Documentary footage in between scenes was more interesting. You constantly had to switch mind-sets between different time periods. 1990s were the most interesting. Most characters were in it and there was so much going on. The last scene before the end of the first act was the best. I thought £100 was too much for it all (£50 for adult and £25 per child). They all spoke in clear English with no slang, all were middle class. The only view was from the middle class. There was no view from soldiers on the battlefield or controllers of the war but only from the middle class point of view. The play must appeal to the middle classes in the audiences otherwise it wouldn't be on. They wouldn't want to see some boring story of a soldier whose father died of tuberculosis and now he's living in a shack and has to fight in a war. I mean that's capitalism as well but they don't want that version of capitalism. At the end of the play capitalism wins, the younger daughter gets the house. Capitalism wins because that's where people think they are most free. They are made to believe they can make money. I didn't like her, that younger daughter character.

So are you disappointed to have seen it? Do you think it had an effect on you?

Maybe. I will have to reflect on that. Maybe on the bus when I go to school one day, it will come back to me.

How's this theatre different from the one you usually see with us, say at Artsadmin when we go for Two Degrees festival?

This one is much more practiced. I wouldn't say there is more skill, but it is professionally produced and then it's much more immersive.

Do you know about Bertolt Brecht, playwright and theatre practitioner from the 20th century, and how he wanted to disclose the means of production in theatre, showcase how everything is made. He would break the illusion (what you call immersive), so the audience would see how all the scene changes are done and how, for example, actors change costumes.

I was wondering about all the transitions and everything that actors have to do to be in place for the next scene. I kept looking at that, the changes in between. The other performances, like Tuebrook Transnationalⁱⁱⁱ, were a lot more interactive. Seeing Tuebrook Transnational work was a better experience, for me, because I knew the people involved. But films look better and you can do more in film. I don't want to do theatre.

Conversation with Gabriel Anderson (12)

I sound recorded the following conversation with Gabriel and wrote it up afterwards.

Gabriel remembers London for the Eminem concert and the protests we never win on. He thought this play would be pointless because of its depressing subject: war in Croatia. However, it turned out it wasn't that bad; it was dramatic and therefore enjoyable. Gabriel gave it 8.5 out of 10. He enjoyed the younger daughter Lucia's attitude on her wedding day, the arguments, intensity and stress of the situation. He compared wars to weddings. Lucia was funny as she used to take pictures of everyone and annoy them. In a way, she was the only normal person in the play, with an iPhone. As for the other women: the older sister, Alisa, was shouted at by the former boyfriend and soldier suffering from PTSD, the mother Masha was depressed and lonely, the mother's sister was beaten up by her husband.

It surprised me that Gabriel read the play quite negatively in terms of women's roles, whilst the reviews I've read about this play seem to highlight the power and importance of women's roles.^{iv} Should simply having female characters in plays be enough, regardless of how they are portrayed? Gabriel offered an analysis of the mother figure, Masha, as someone who couldn't feel affection and only complains to her husband. To him, she seemed to have no political affiliation. The father figure, Vlado, a history teacher, on the other hand, was very political. He reminded him of his own Dad and myself, his Mum, especially with all that talk of communism, capitalism and anarchism. I was glad not to be compared to Masha, with no political affiliation. Lucia also seemed apolitical to Gabriel and he glossed over the problematics of her connection to the new capitalist society and dirty dealings of her fiancé in order to secure the house for their family. In his eyes, she was normal. Her politics were invisible.

We talked about nationalism and my inability to identify through national borders. Gabriel told me he thought that Yugoslavia was just like Great Britain, but a lot bigger, with more countries. He said he learnt about that congress in 1990 at which the republics disagreed. The last lines of the first part of the play were: Yugoslavia is fucked (he spells it out in letters). He said that Yugoslavia fell apart because people disagreed about their future and that in a parallel universe somewhere, it still exists.

As for the experience of the NT, he was reminded of the Empire Theatre in Liverpool: both venues sell ice-cream. He complained about the eating at the café being dreadful, not the food, but the seating plan. We did wander around the building trying to find an empty table and in the end sat outside on a rainy day. People, by the looks of them, seemed really old, he insisted. Gabriel saw two young people, both around 10. People at the National have those plain accents, posh plain accents; he doesn't belong there because he has no such accent. He wouldn't really want to go again; it takes up too much time, a whole weekend in London.

When concluding on his experience Gabriel thought the play was good but also inaccurate: I mean that wasn't really true that you could just get a key to a house? How did Rose get a key? I told him it was idealistic and true: in Yugoslavia all property was state-owned and therefore owned by the people. He wondered how come they couldn't do that with homeless people now. Furthermore, it seemed to Gabriel very unlikely that the masters would get off with their servants. Why not? I wondered. Well, if they did, and the baby was really theirs (the masters) why would they kick her onto the streets? I explained that it was socially unacceptable and that therefore Carolina (the aristocrat) wasn't able to handle it. It took her

30 years to get over it, exclaimed Gabriel. The baby was her family, Gabriel persisted. In the end, the servants got mixed up with the aristocrats. Such a mixture produced young capitalists, the young daughter being a prime example. She owns the house now, I explained. She is the only normal one, Gabriel reiterated.

Concluding thoughts

I am predisposed to praise this production but I can't. I would like to affirm it, but the critical in me is stronger. 'If you are not pissed off, you are not paying attention,' rings in my mind. It is wintertime here in Liverpool and I am cold and ungenerous. I did just spend £180 on this experiment (and this is only on the train and theatre tickets), on this family trip with teenage children to London to see a play at the National. This is the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, being critical, being pedagogical, learning together, being pissed off together, disagreeing with dominant mainstream culturing, pointing to the cracks, to the areas where we just accept culture as it is and content not to delve deeper. In the upcoming springtime family day trips might include something else rather than theatre. Our next London trip with the whole family is for Time to Act national climate march at the beginning of March. I am excited to experience it, be part of the social movement for ecological justice but also to think through the problematics of ideology I, as a parent, impose on my children. On the other hand, the children themselves, are sure to surprise me with their own viewpoints on the event, just like they did with this consideration on *3 Winters* at the National.

ⁱ Duška Radosavljević, *3 Winters* at National Theatre
<http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/3-winters/>

ⁱⁱ Tena Štivičić on *3 Winters* with Susannah Tresilian, National Theatre podcast
<https://soundcloud.com/nationaltheatre/tena-stivicic-on-3-winters>

ⁱⁱⁱ Tuebrook Transnational is a community based performance group in Tuebrook Liverpool that stages outdoor site-specific projects., such as audio tours and collective performance walks.
<http://tuebrooktransnational.com/>

^{iv} See Elaine Aston, *3 Winters*, Tena Štivičić, Lyttleton, National, 22 December 2014
<http://dramaqueensreview.com/2014/12/22/3-winters-tena-stivicic-lyttleton-national-theatre/>
and Susannah Clapp *3 Winters* review – generous, surprising and extremely powerful,
Observer 7 December 2014