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Morbror Vanja (Uncle Vanya) by Anton Chekhov (review)

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Throughout the production Prospero's fan was the tool for his magical powers. At the end of the production, when he resigned his supernatural powers he walked off the stage and into the audience, giving his fan, and its power, to one of the audience members. This final act of magic and the transference of power from Prospero to the audience showed us that we also have the power of magical illusion—not only by being in a theatre, but also by being part of the theatre.

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MORBROR VANJA (UNCLE VANYA). By Anton Chekhov. Directed by Yana Ross. Uppsala Stadsteater, Uppsala, Sweden. 17–18 October 2014.

Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* has traditionally relied upon its melancholic and claustrophobic atmosphere to develop its themes of self-fulfillment, the decline of the landed gentry, and the dichotomies between cosmopolitan and rural living. In Yana Ross's new production at the Uppsala Stadsteater this atmosphere was both intensified and

reinterpreted, providing a contemporary reading that offered alternative understandings of kinship, desire, and relationships. Ross, a graduate of Moscow's prestigious theatre academy GITIS and the Yale School of Drama, has quickly developed a reputation for radical adaptations of classic texts and contentious stagings of contemporary playwrights, such as Elfriede Jelinek, Sarah Ruhl, and Gabrielé Labanauskaitė. Her provocative and confrontational production of Tadeusz Słobodzianek's *Our Class (Nasza klasa)* in 2013 at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre that dealt with contested histories of anti-Semitism and Soviet-imposed communism captured the attention of European theatre directors and critics, prompting commissions from national and city theatres in Hungary, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, and Poland.

Ross's adaptation of *Vanya* opens with Sonya's garden birthday party on a sultry summer's afternoon. The combination of amber-colored lighting, fog machine, and the flirtatious frivolities of the perspiring actors evoked a carnal mood more reminiscent of Tennessee Williams than Chekhov. The Stadsteater's powerful surround sound system, a more familiar feature in cinemas than theatres, amplified the normally dulcet background sounds of the natural world to the point of anxiety—the aggressive swarming of wasps and flies filled the



Sonya's garden birthday party at the Serebryakov bed and breakfast in *Morbror Vanja (Uncle Vanya)*. (Photo: Micke Sandström.)



A scene from *Uncle Vanya*, with Eli Ingvarsson (Ilya), Logi Tulinius (Trugve—Marina in the source text), Mathias Olsson (Vanya), and Moa Silén (Yelena). (Photo: Micke Sandström.)

theatre while birdsong was rendered cacophonous and unfriendly. This hostile encroachment of nature reinforced the libidinous tensions at work within the Serebryakov country estate, transposed as a bed and breakfast in a Swedish country manor house. Correspondingly, Astrov's concern over the preservation of local forests was augmented to the point of a conspiracy theory. This drew a parallel between modern anxieties about environmental disaster and broader experiences of social division and economic instability, which lead to misdirected sexual and emotional attachments.

At an early stage in production Ross and New York-based scenic designer Zane Pihlstrom were inspired by American artist Gordon Matta-Clark, known for his "building cuts" series in the 1970s that deconstructed family homes through the removal of walls and the dissection of ceilings, staircases, and floors. Pihlstrom built the Serebryakov's house from Plexiglas, allowing the audience to peer inside its more ambiguous spaces. Matta-Clark's critique of the American Dream to aristocratic ascent through the purchase of private property provided another lens to analyze the pretensions of Aleksandr Serebryakov, the retired university professor whose ambitions to be a wealthy landowner are finally destroyed at the conclusion of the play. While the

transparent glass walls opened up multiple and simultaneous perspectives on bedrooms, hallways, and the kitchen, the exposure of the bathroom was frequently the most revealing and resulted in a number of unexpected and comical interactions. A strong example of this was Astrov's seduction of Yelena, a brief though energetic sexual encounter choreographed in time to the rumble of the taxi that waited to return Yelena and Aleksandr to their more glamorous cosmopolitan lives in the city. The sudden eruption of white mist behind the glass walls in moments of tension and arousal was strongly suggestive of British artist Antony Gormley's 2007 participatory exhibition *Blind Light* in which spectators walked through UV-purified steam in a glass tank illuminated by fluorescent lights. One suspects that Gormley's intention to produce a feeling of disorientation and euphoria for participants also chimed with the furtive encounters occurring in the Serebryakov household. In both Gormley's installation and Ross's production, the silhouettes produced through the use of steam and fog suggested social encounters both intimate and alienating in unpredictable turns.

Littering the stage with electric guitars, a tambourine, piano, drum set, and children's xylophone allowed the actors to make music at will. Ilya, the

impoverished landowner, and Marina, the elderly nurse, were reimagined as a young gay couple staying in the bed and breakfast. The couple's flirtations and spats were punctuated by the soundtrack they produced live onstage, which ranged from the sexually liberating, drug-induced rhythms of the Doors to the recurrent motif of teenage longing in Lana Del Rey's "Summertime Sadness." The arrangement of these musical elements problematized the extravagant unhappiness that normally sits at the heart of this play. Instead of bemoaning the tedium of provincial life, Ross restaged Chekhovian ennui as a drunken, marijuana- and vodka-fueled nihilism, silly and fleeting as the effects of the stimulants the characters regularly consume. While there was the impression that the members of the household might cheer up as soon as they sobered up, the final image undid this easy conclusion. The "final rest" that Sonya believes will exonerate human suffering in the source text was here translated into an unconscious state produced through the destructive repetitions of unfulfilled aspiration. While Vanya prepares the B&B accounts by reading out an interminable list of necessary supplies, Sonya throws herself repeatedly at the Plexiglas wall of the house, behind which Astrov preens himself in the bathroom mirror. The violence of this repeated action left the glass covered in blood and Sonya passed out among the hotel provisions. Juxtaposing monotonous occupational duties with the repetitive quality of stymied desire, Ross challenged the underlying assumption of the salvational character of labor in the play, as exemplified by Sonya's earlier claim that only work is fulfilling. Work was portrayed as the soulless administration of a bored clerk, checking lists and adding up accounts, while sexual longing was transitory and unrewarding. Concluding with this image, the melancholy of *Uncle Vanya* reemerged suddenly and with unexpected force.

Linus Tunström, the artistic director of the Uppsala Stadsteater, has recently invigorated the repertoire and reputation of the theatre with more experimental and vanguardist productions, piquing the interest of Stockholm audiences. Tunström's commission of Ross resulted in yet another bold new production. With invitations pouring in there is little doubt that Ross will soon become one of the major innovators of the contemporary Scandinavian theatre scene.

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INTERFERENCES INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVAL. Cluj, Romania. 26 November–7 December 2014.

The fourth edition of this biannual showcase of contemporary theatre practice took place at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, Romania, from 26 November to 7 December 2014, and played host to twenty-three companies from fourteen countries. Initiated in 2007 by the theatre's artistic director, Gábor Tompa, this festival has since become a well-regarded platform on the international circuit and attempts to strike a balance among director-led and collaborative, text-based and devised, solo and ensemble-based practices. Distinct from major European events or even its Romanian counterpart, the annual International Theatre Festival in Sibiu, the Interferences Festival aims to offer a much more intimate gathering. Eschewing parallel programming, it creates an opportunity for participants and attendees to potentially witness every event and immerse themselves fully into the festival's deliberately eclectic overview of current trends and practices. Transcending borders—ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and generic—has emerged as a dominant focus of the festival over the years, an ambition that was successfully foregrounded in this past year's festival. In addition, the 2014 festival was structured around the idea of the body as the raw material of theatrical performance. Audiences were treated to an array of promenade performances, productions of physical theatre, and alternative modes of spectatorship—all relatively rare in the local theatrical landscape. From my perspective, recurrent themes from past festivals were just as prominent; specifically, dialogues between theatre and other disciplines, such as music, translation, and adaptation. My review highlights particularly outstanding case studies in this latter sense and suggests that the festival's main merit was precisely the exploration of cultural encounters and border-crossings in a transnational, transregional, translingual, and indeed transgeneric context.

Identifying a need for more focused intercultural dialogue, András Visky, the associate artistic director and resident dramaturg of the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, hosted daily post-performance discussions between practitioners and audiences. With particular attention to translation as a form of interlinguistic and intercultural transmission, the festival championed accessibility on multiple levels; public interventions, including performances, conversations, and talks, were made available in at least three languages via supertitling, or in rarer cases simultaneous interpreting. There was no such thing as a primary language for this festival: translation, to put it differently, was not a subsidiary facet, but its central focus. This concern stems from the Hun-