

The Picture of a Family Crisis and the Criticism of Patriarchy in the Works of Director Peter Konwitschny

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Abstract: This article captures selected aspects of the productions of opera director Peter Konwitschny (1945), whose signature style is rigorously characterized by social criticism, political engagement, and moral appeal. Among the themes invariably present in his works are distorted and pathological family and partner relationships, and a critical questioning of the patriarchal arrangement of the world. The analysis of the above motifs present in Konwitschny's production draws on examples from several productions put on European stages: (Tchaikovsky: *Eugen Onegin* [Eugene Onegin]; Puccini: *Madama Butterfly*, *Bohéma* [La Bohème]; Verdi: *Attila*, *La traviata*; Shostakovich: *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*; Janáček: *Vec Makropulos*, [The Makropulos Affair], *Jenůfa*; Halévy: *Židovka* [La Juive]; Egk: *Peer Gynt*; Strauss: *Elektra*; and Cherubini: *Medea*).

Key words: opera theatre, Peter Konwitschny, the family, partner relationships, patriarchal society

Peter Konwitschny ranks among the most acclaimed and controversial representatives of German opera direction of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. His professional beginnings are connected with two big names of European theatre from the second half of the 20th century: Walter Felsenstein, who ranked among the influential creative professionals of Die Komische Oper Berlin [The Comic Opera Berlin] at the time of Konwitschny's studies at Hochschule für Musik Hanns Eichler Berlin (1965–1970), and Ruth Berghaus, with whom he collaborated on several productions of Berliner Ensemble as assistant to the director (1970–1980). The impact of Felsenstein's psychological realism upon Peter Konwitschny's poetics of music and drama is especially apparent from his focus on the singing actor. Working as assistant to Berghaus has shaped his capacity of visual abstraction, reduction, and stylization.

Generally, the productions by Peter Konwitschny are noted for their high level of social criticism, political commitment, and moral appeal. The director deliberately departs from the interpretive tradition of produced theatrical works, which he reassesses and often denies. His perception of opera theatre is that of a space where a creative professional can and is even bound to communicate his perception of society and the values it upholds (or disproves) to the viewer. Peter Konwitschny's value orientation is rooted in his leftist political views. The director openly states his irreconcilable abhorrence of capitalism and consumerism. In opera theatre, this is reflected in his contempt for "culinary opera"¹ and a life-long struggle with "dead opera"². Typically, Konwitschny's productions are not shallow implants of political or ideological themes in opera theatre. According to him, "stories in operas relate to important matters which affect our civilization. As a director, I am bound to show what they are all about. (...) Back in ancient Greece, the fact was that theatre was best positioned for discourses about the fundamental issues of life. I have the impression that today it is the last place remaining for a dialogue"³.

Konwitschny's ambition is that the viewer, in the meaning of Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre⁴, does not passively indulge in an aesthetic experience but rather leaves the theatre emotionally stricken, disturbed, and contemplating.

A component part of Konwitschny's leftist orientation is his criticism of a patriarchal society. Unlike his younger engaged peers, he does not construe new social models. He does not even dispute gender equality, and one will not be faced with gender themes in his work. Instead, he questions whether

1 This concept was first introduced by the representatives of the Frankfurt School, headed by the musicologist Theodor Adorno. It referred to operatic art that aspires to be primarily enjoyed.

2 By using this evocative term, Konwitschny repeatedly refers to illustrative illusive theatre without the added value of the message, the goal being the communication of an intellectually indiscriminating experience to the viewer.

3 FELLEGI, J. – KONWITSCHNY, P. Dialóg vedieme už len v divadle. In *Pravda*, Vol. 15, No. 210, p. 23, (10. 9. 2005).

4 The director had been working on the inclination ever since the outset of his professional career, at a time when he worked as assistant to the director with the Berliner Ensemble, and he collaborated on several productions of Bertolt Brecht's works: *Die gewehre der Frau Carrar* [Señora Carrar's Rifles], 1971, directed by Ruth Berghaus; *Turandot oder Der Kongress der Weißwäscher* [Turandot], 1974, directed by Peter Kupke/Wolfgang Pintzka; *Die Mutter* [The Mother], 1974, directed by Ruth Berghaus; *Galileo Galilei*, 1978, directed by Manfred Wekwehrt/Joachim Tenschert

a world ruled by men is workable. Sometimes his doubt is full of pain (*Eugen Onegin* [Eugene Onegin], *Bohéma* [La Bohème], *Madama Butterfly*, and *La traviata*). Sometimes he shares it via sarcasm and irony (*Vec Makropulos* [The Makropulos Affair], *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, and partly *Židovka* [La Juive]). His productions are characterized by the dominant position of women who became strong due to the adverse circumstances of life and the incompetence of the men around them. For instance, in Konwitschny's understanding, Eugene Onegin is not a presumptuous young man but rather an unanchored one who is fearful of life and who drowns his insecurity in spirits. Despite Tatyana raising affection in him, he is unable to assume responsibility for their relationship, fearing that love would eventually fall into the trap of habit. He is unable to integrate into society, but he has no courage to challenge it either. His duel with Lensky, which is due to Onegin's childish offended behaviour at a ball at the Larin estate, takes place under the pressure of onlookers yearning for a scandal and prevents them from fixing their friendship. Lensky's death is an immediate consequence of Onegin's inability to stand up against what society thinks, a society he holds in contempt and which frustrates him by its aloofness towards him.

In Peter Konwitschny's interpretation, not even Benjamin F. Pinkerton is a heartless hedonist who ruthlessly tramples the life of a young Japanese girl underfoot. He is to be blamed for his inability to act as a man and assume responsibility for his acts. In the final act, upon his return to Japan with his wife Kate to take away Cho-Cho-San's little son away, he cries his heart out in the aria *Addio, fiorito asil* in an undignified way. He fails to draw the curtain and cover up his disgrace from the audience. The moment of humiliation takes place before the audience and his lawful American wife. By an elaborate *mise-en-scène*, the director questions the functionality of Pinkerton's family; after the event, his wife Kate will never be able to respect and love such a coward. The director's accusation of gutlessness was also directed at another male character, Consul Sharpless. Right from the outset, he had been fatherly, sympathetic, and compassionate with Cho-Cho-San; however, being a soft-hearted and an alcoholic, he failed to protect her from the fate of a "puppet" wife.

In Konwitschny's production of *Bohéma*, Rodolfo is not much support to his sweetheart either. Firstly, when leaving Café Momus with other rejoicing bohemians, he leaves her standing on the proscenium with Mussetta's fur coat in her hands. When she joins them in the final act to die close to her lover, the bohemians' immediate emotion (Rodolfo's not excluded) is the fear of

death. Rodolfo fails this confrontation with human finality; when his friends leave him on the stage with the dead Mimi, he is deranged and has no energy to either join his friends or sink next to his sweetheart's dead body.

Unlike Onegin, Pinkerton, or Rodolfo, who aroused sympathy and compassion, Prince Léopold from Konwitschny's production of *Židovka* by Halévy is portrayed in a distinctively negative light. He is a Christian noble who is passionately in love with a beautiful Jewish woman called Rachel and pretends to profess her religion, but he fails to stand up for his lady in a critical situation and eventually is the immediate cause of her doom. At the time the story of Halévy's opera unfolds (Constance in 1414), sexual relationships between Christians and Jews were strictly forbidden, and breaking the ban was punishable by death. With his identity concealed, Léopold makes Rachel his accomplice only to heedlessly run away from her when the only chance to preserve their love (i.e., by converting to Judaism) is wasted. He finds shelter under the bed of his lawful bride, Princess Eudoxie. The opposites of the cowardly male character are two strong females. In Konwitschny's production, Rachel is dauntless in love, determined in her revenge, and prepared for self-destruction (she accuses Prince Léopold in public with an explosives belt around her waist); Princess Eudoxie fights the hateful world with different weapons, showing her devoted love for the wretched Léopold and compassion for Rachel, which changes to friendship and respect which is unadulterated by religious bias.

The clash between male and female principles has been among the fundamental themes of Konwitschny's production of Verdi's early opera *Attila*. The director believed that the composer's intention was not to hail to the warmongers and that the substance of his artistic interest was the personality conflicts of his characters. He devised a concept based on Jung's theory of archetypes, and as a whole it was committed to pacifism. The production scenes were divided into three segments. The four scenes of the prologue and the opening act were entitled "Kindlich verspielt" (loosely translated, "playful or fanciful like a child"), the second act was entitled "Ausgewachsen infantile" (roughly, "the infantile fully-grown"), and the third act had the subtitle "Immer noch nichts gelernt" ("still have not learnt anything"). In a grand dramatic arch, the protagonists were observed in their pursuit of power, a career, acclaim, and revenge.

The opening scene unfolded on the stage with a mock-up wall, with holes from slings and wooden swords. Adults choir members clad as youngsters in dark T-shirts and shorts decked out in furs and war paint chased each other

with weapons stolen from behind their mothers' backs (wooden spoons, whisks, pins, frying pans, and toilet brushes). The boys' leader Attila stood up on a wooden wheelbarrow with a crop (a wooden spoon with a piece of twine) in his hand, and the gang encouraged him by banging the frying pans. Girls were taken hostage, dressed up in torn white costumes, and were escorted onto the playground by one of the boys. The girls were led by Odabella, who carried the mock-up of a white guitar on her back. This courageous young Amazon warrior maiden impressed Attila, and he cut the twine by which the girls were fettered. The braided Amazon's slap in the face of the boys' chieftain was a witty reminder of the clash between males and females on a children's playground. For being so daring, the girls' leader was given a knife by Attila which was used to set the girls free; then with Odabella as his valuable trophy who is seated in a wheelbarrow, he victoriously left the stage.

The subsequent story line of Verdi's opera is full of scheming motivated by the ambition to murder Atilla, the usurper. Konwitschny's production, similarly to *Peer Gynt* which was staged later on, ends up in a retirement home where the opera heroes live out their final moments of life and fight their ultimate personal battles. The final battle took place in wheelchairs and with rollators. At this point, Odabella is no longer in a position to commit the act of revenge she has been deliberating on throughout the entire opera: she cannot reach out to the lying Atilla from her wheelchair. In any event, there is no need as with the last tones of the opera the old men die a natural death, while Odabella is left swinging the knife in the air like a metronome.

Much like Odabella, Emilia Marty in Konwitschny's production of *Vec Makropulos* [The Makropulos Affair] was a woman who refused to acknowledge the authority of men.⁵ The male territory (i.e., doctor Kolenatý's law office) is not intruded upon by her mysterious mature charm, which is common in productions of Janáček's opera, but rather by her adolescent cheekiness and her showing no respect for men. The space she is given by Konwitschny does not allow for any other attitude: all men in the production are awkward characters, the representatives of a rigid and unviable world. However, it was not just this fact determining Emilia Marty's nega-

5 She was portrayed on the Opera stage of the Slovenské národné divadlo [Slovak National Theatre] by the thirty-year old actress a petite blonde of girlish appearance in the performane *Vec makropulos* (the name of the opera *Věc makropulos* was translated into Slovak).

tive and contemptuous attitude towards them. The trauma determining her future life was her multiple abuse by men in her youth; what else could the experiment from three hundred years ago involving the testing of an elixir on her by her father, an alchemist and physician at the court of Emperor Rudolf II in pursuit of his career, be called? In Konwitschny's production, the unscrupulousness and cruelty of the main heroine was given a moral appeal. It points out how abused and unloved children turn into heartless people.

In the productions quoted above, the criticism of patriarchal society has been achieved by setting strong women against wimpish men; however, the director would occasionally apply an opposing principle: accusing the male world via an image of abused or subdued opera heroines. For instance, in his production of Janáček's *Jenůfa*, Konwitschny opted for the portrayal of a woman as living remorse addressed to the male world that has tragically affected her. The physiognomy of the Kostelníčka (the Sexton's wife/widow of the churchwarden) is rendered by Iris Vermilion, a beautiful, tall, and mature dark-haired woman. Her strapping stiff pose called to mind the irreversibility of an ancient tragedy. Right from the outset, Konwitschny's Kostelníčka was a broken woman, devastated by an unhappy marriage to the late Buryja from which she never recovered. Even though she remained dressed in the same costume throughout the entire story line, her personality disintegrates before the very eyes of the audiences. The neurotic woman who in Act I comes onto the stage with some remnants of her sanity and dignity turns into a shaky, deranged, and unroomed wreck in Act III (after she murders Jenůfa's little boy). Even in the latest Konwitschny production, *Medea* by Cherubini, women do not have an easy lot in a male-dominated society. Their prevalent emotion is fear, aroused in them by Creon. He is a man with the appearance and gestures of an egocentric and sadistic lunatic who makes Medea pay with oral sex for a single day spent with her children in Corinth.

Among Konwitschny's most feminist interpretations is his production of Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, which was conceived as a social and critical crazy comedy of the Brechtian type, being stripped of emotions. The main (anti-)heroine Katerina Izmailova is a revolutionary figure in the director's understanding, similarly to Medea, Aida, Carmen, Cho-Cho-San, and Lulu. Among other things, they share an identical end to their lives: they all are killed by "the old male world which has been hostile towards corporeality, freedom, and women for 5000 years (...) in which women are only

housemaids or objects”⁶. In Konwitschny’s interpretation, Katerina refuses to accept these rules of the game as she covets a future free of injustice, perversity, and inhumane treatment. The only way to achieve this by is murdering her torturers: Izmaylov and his sons.

The wife of the merchant Izmaylov lived a miserable existence in a repulsive void space with white tiling reminiscent of a morgue.⁷ Nothing was real and stable; there was no one and nothing to lean on, and the props and persons were brought in and taken away on a conveyor belt. This atmosphere, which was void of life, matched the uniform costumes of the choir in a “mucky” white-grey-black colouring. The protagonists were stood out from an anonymous crowd through the colourwise hyperbolized costumes. Katerina wore a yellow wig and a gaudy wedding dress (the canary yellow was evocative of a caged bird); Boris Izmaylov, the company boss, who bullied his employees with hard hats, would wear a red suit. Katerina’s husband Zinovy was dressed in a bright green suit, and his impotence was accentuated by a womanish blonde hairdo. Katerina’s sweetheart Sergey, dressed in royal blue, instantly evoked dominance and “machismo”. The unrealistic brightness of colours accentuated the dehumanization and bizarreness of characters who moved around in a hyperbolized and convulsive dramatic gesture of anti-psychological acting.

The scenes of voluntary or involuntary sexual intercourse are chillingly factual and beastily straightforward. It was this situation in which Katerina’s position as a victim of the male world was explicitly accentuated by the director. All the men (except for her husband, the impotent Zinovy) perceived her as a sexual object; each of them (Boris, Sergey, the priest, and the chief police officer) abused or used her, or at least attempted to. The rare moments of humaneness were only allowed by the director in connection with Katerina’s yearning for a child. Her yearning was embodied by a little girl, Katerina’s alter ego, dressed in a canary yellow wedding dress.

This brings us to another pivotal theme of Konwitschny’s direction interpretations: the desire for closeness and for fulfilled family or partner relationships and the criticism of their disintegration due to externalities or

6 BRATZ, B. – KONWITSCHNY, P. Fürchte nicht die Toten, fürchte die Lebenden! In *Dmitri Shostakovich : Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* [Programme booklet]. Augsburg : Theater Augsburg, 2016.

7 Set design by Timo Dentler, costumes by Okarina Peter.

internalities. The director admits that the angle of the perception of society was determined by his childhood.

“As a child, I may have perceived a lack of closeness. My father was rarely at home. My parents’ marriage was typical for relationships in Western culture; there were moments of jealousy and moments of passionate love, ultimately leading to a break up. I was the only child, and I had to cope with everything by myself. Having had such a childhood, the yearning for closeness may turn into a constant need.”⁸

A powerful example of Konwitschny’s proclivity for theatrical and psychological analysis is his production of Verdi’s *La traviata*. In this case, the director also offered a non-traditional, internalized, and minutely elaborated view of a well-known story. In Konwitschny’s understanding, the inferiority complex of Alfredo, the main male hero, was a consequence of the strict upbringing methods of his father, which made the boy utterly dependent on him.

Contemporary theatrical producers often show Giorgio Germont in a bad light. For example, Deborah Warner (Wiener Festwochen, 2012) portrayed him as a churlish fellow who has no empathy for anyone and who (more on account of a poor natural emotional intelligence than wrath) tramples his son’s happiness underfoot. In a scandalous production by Andrea Breth (La Monnaie, Brussels, 2012), the bigoted Giorgio Germont almost succumbed to the charms of his son’s sweetheart personality. Konwitschny’s view of Alfredo’s father was far more negative. When he entered Violetta’s house in Act II to make her break up with Alfredo, he was accompanied by his daughter, whose marriage could be ruined by her brother’s scandalous affair with a mistress. The impersonation on stage of Alfredo’s sister was a crucial moment in Konwitschny’s direction concept: indeed, the libretto makes mention of her; however, the composer did not dedicate a separate part to this character. When the teenager, with braids and wearing a beret and a pair of glasses, quite unexpectedly takes Violetta’s side, she is brutally slapped in the face by her father for thwarting his blackmailing tactics. Violetta feels unease at seeing the child exposed to her father’s brutishness and agrees to his

8 Cf. DRÁPELOVÁ, V. Operní režie: Peter Konwitschny. In *Harmonie online*, (26. 5. 2003). [online]. [cit. 1. 6. 2017]. Available at: <https://www.casopisharmonie.cz/rozhovory/operni-rezie-peter-konwitschny.html>.

proposal. Embracing the girl, they both ignore the sadist, who is hypocritically singing “Sì, piangi, o misera” (Weep, weep, poor girl).

The finale has a strictly moral appeal. The moment Alfredo realizes that Violetta’s determination to live will not prevail over approaching death, he gutlessly climbs over the side box and over the edge of the orchestra pit into the auditorium. In an illuminated auditorium⁹, he is awaited by his father accompanied by Violetta’s maid Annina and Doctor Grenvil. In the remaining part of this scene of dying which is charged with emotions, and which would take place in a loving embrace in traditional productions, the lovers are singing while each of them is standing on the opposite side of the orchestra pit. The abandoned Violetta is drowned in the black void of the scene, without any support or genuine compassion, much like many people today who pass away without the touch of their loved ones.

The daughter-parent relationship of the main character of Konwitschny’s production *Elektra* was stigmatized by another pathological type. Richard Strauss composed his opera based on the libretto of Hugo von Hofmannstahl, which was inspired by Sophocles’ version of an ancient myth. The life of Elektra in Sophocles’ and Strauss’s interpretations is motivated by an obsessive idea of her father and retaliation for his death. The director disclosed the roots of this attitude to the audience before the prelude. The viewers entering the auditorium were greeted by a carefree idyllic setting. The father and his three children are frolicking in a large earthenware tub situated on the proscenium in front of the drawn curtain. This magical childhood is abruptly put to an end with the swinging of an axe: the mother and another man run onto the proscenium, the bathing father is killed, and the crying children are dragged into the depth of the stage. When the curtain is pulled open, a big digital chronometer starts a countdown before the climax of the tragedy caused by unhealable (and unhealed) trauma.

Elektra’s pathological craving for revenge has become the pivotal motif of Konwitschny’s production: the tub with the dead father’s body and the axe with which he was murdered do not disappear from the stage throughout the entire production. In the programme booklet, the dramaturge Werner Hintze alludes to an inspiration drawn from Hitchcock’s film *Psycho*, in which a homicidal son acts in unison with his dead mother: the pathological in-

9 Peter Konwitschny frequently resorts to illuminating the auditorium in order to disrupt the theatrical illusion and encourage a sense of togetherness or complicity in viewers.

ability to live one's own life is regarded by Hintze as a symptom of possessed individuals. On the other hand, the father's constant presence can also be interpreted as Elektra's physical desire for shelter against the world against which she has set herself. The psychoanalytical overtone was especially present in the scene in which the mother asks her daughter for advice on how to get rid of nightmares. Elektra and Clytemnestra had a conversation over a bottle of whisky. Elektra reprimanded her mother for the maltreatment of her brother, whom she had raised with dogs and eventually had cast out of the house. As if having had enough of it, the dead Agamemnon got out of the bathtub and now physically present got involved in a family argument. His wife helped herself to one of his cigarettes, which he lit for her. Elektra used this moment of his mother's inattentiveness and attempted to assault her with an axe. The father prevents her from doing so; he then gets back into the bathtub while the two women continue drinking spitefully. Has the time for revenge not yet come? Or was it simply for the fact that the father opposed the idea of his beloved baby committing a crime of matricide? It was his son Orestes who became a multiple murderer by first murdering his mother and stepfather Aegisthus before getting rid of all the witnesses of this crime, including his two sisters. The new dictator barricaded himself behind the walls of a house and the chronometer was reset; however, this time it was counting backwards.

Konwitschny built upon the theme of the disintegrated family in his opera adaptation of an ancient Greek myth in Cherubini's *Medea*. The main thrust of his production was the belief that the biggest dramas take place in our kitchens. This was the place where his Stuttgart production was located. In the kitchen, there is the preparation of Kreuz and Iason for their wedding; intoxicated bridesmaids help the bride into the wedding dress, and the bride, rather than rejoicing, drowns her fears, having a bad premonition and remorse in alcohol for having to involuntarily marry a family man. The wedding ceremony also takes place there; the briefcase with "the golden fleece" changes owners and the happy Creon signs a marriage contract with Iason. The bargain deal is concluded, and the daughter is sold. Also, it is in the kitchen that the divorcing parents Medea and Iason have an argument over their children, and it is here that the tragic finale takes place: the murdering of the sons at Medea's hands and the lynching of the outsiders (Medea, Iason, and Neris the maid) by the raging Corinthians.

By contrast, within the context of Konwitschny's production, the punchline of Werner Egk's *Peer Gynt* sounds very positive. Although this work is

viewed controversially with respect to the composer's fate,¹⁰ the creators of the Vienna production addressed the contentious issues in the programme booklet rather than bringing them up on stage. Above all, Konwitschny's *Peer Gynt* is about the clash between an individual and society; it is about seeking the purpose of life and the barriers one has to overcome.

Dramatic theatre is familiar with a variety of interpretations of Ibsen's character Peer Gynt from being a daydreamer to a perfidious cynic. To Konwitschny, the (anti?)hero of Egk's opera is an ostracized misfit who, despite lying on the ground, badly kicked and beaten up by villagers who fly into a fit of rage over his imperious freaking out, is steadfast in the pursuit of his goal. It was not just Peer who was unable to integrate into mainstream society. Solveig was also left on its margins. Ostracization was less painful for her than for Gynt, since as she was blind she could not see the mocking grins of the villagers. While in Ibsen's dramatic poem Solveig goes blind at an old age, in Konwitschny's production she arrives on the stage as a blind woman. In this manner, the producers substantiated the fact prescribed by the composer, namely that Solveig would be accompanied by her little sister Helga at all times, and they accentuated her sensitivity (people missing one sense have their remaining senses boosted).

The girl's blindness was not the only unique solution in the interpretation of the main female protagonist. Of greater relevance was the fusion of the innocent Solveig and the voluptuous Redhead, the daughter of the troll king. In Konwitschny's production, they were acted by the same performer. The bipolarity of the male fantasy was embodied in the universal female: yearning for a devoted, loving, and chaste being who is also a voluptuous, elemental, and rotten hellcat in one. (Peter Konwitschny commented on the dual perception of a woman which goes back to biblical times in connection with *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. In the programme booklet, he refers to the split in the perception of a woman as a prostitute and as a saint, and from that perception the ensuing dual male morale.) In the Vienna production of *Peer Gynt*, the alternated presence of Solveig and Redhead on the stage was

10 Egk's *Peer Gynt* was successfully premiered in Berlin State Opera in 1938. Alongside its author, who was regarded as a follower of Richard Wagner, the viewers who deemed it a perfect "masterpiece" included Adolf Hitler and Joseph Goebbels. The words of praise uttered by Nazi leaders accompanied Egk from then on. From 1941 to 1945, he was the chairman of the Composers' Board at the Reich Chamber of Music. Having successfully passed the denazification process (he never was a member of the Nazi party) and until his death in 1983, he had the status of a recognized and appraised composer, educator, and academic.

connected with the specific events of Egk's story and reflected the momentary condition of Peer's soul. Red would occasionally take off her wig and put Solveig's blindman's glasses on: here comes the angel to save Peer from the she-devil. Solveig was not the only woman shielding Gynt. The second one (or, rather, in chronological order, the first) was his mother Aase. Looking for her son, she ran onto the stage uttering: "Where is Peer, where is my son? He who touches him is my enemy." The director puts an automatic machine gun in Aase's hands as an ironizing hyperbole of her smothering love.

Peer's distressful journey to knowing his true self comes to a conclusion in a retirement home. Out on the terrace there is Solveig singing a gentle lullaby. Peer's wish is to stay in a place "where every fight ends"¹¹. After all that questioning, social criticism, a poignant psychoanalysis, and snappish satire, Konwitschny was not the least bit shy to end his production with a catharsis. The retirement home slid off its foundations; it was only Solveig's bungalow that remained on the stage with a loyal woman greeting the squanderer returning to her loyal embrace. She brought two glasses of milk from the house, and in a gentle embrace they sipped it on a bench in front of the house. Peer was now confident that she was the perfect woman for him. The red wig he took out of his pouch served as a mullet in a frivolous bull and toreador game, and Solveig's glasses ended up on his nose; his beloved wife could see. In Konwitschny's own words: "It is not Solveig who is at the end of Peer's journey, but thanks to Solveig, it is himself."¹²

It is obvious that in his cyclic comebacks to the theme of family, Konwitschny is seeking himself. His childhood was affected by the troubled relationship of his parents, who ended up separating, and on the threshold of adulthood, when Konwitschny was seventeen, this was terminated by his father's untimely death.¹³ In one interview he reminisces about his father:

"My father was 'a divine type'; he wouldn't put up with anyone. When I was young, I was his darling. But little did he care for what I would be. I had seven step-siblings. I met some of them for the first time at my father's funeral."¹⁴

11 A quotation from the libretto.

12 BOHNERT, K. – KONWITSCHNY, P. *Peer Gynt – das sind auch wir*. In *Werner Egk : Peer Gynt* [Programme booklet]. Vienna : Theater an der Wien, 2017.

13 For more about Peter Konwitschny's childhood and youth, see *Peter Konwitschny. „Mensch, Mensch, Mensch!“ Oper als Zentrum der Gegenwart*. (Ed. Andrea Welker). Weitra : Verlag Bibliothek der Provinz, 2015, pp. 11–15.

14 LUEHRS-KAISER, K. – KONWITSCHNY, P. *Oper ist kein echtes Vergnügen*. [interview].

The director's reply to the question of whether the theatre was the right place for addressing the traumas of childhood was as follows:

"If it were only Peter Konwitschny's problems, then it would make no sense to bother others. But many other people have encountered identical problems. It is a problem of the patriarchal culture in which we live."¹⁵

In another interview, he argues:

"There is something very therapeutic in theatre. The object of an opera will always be the relationship between a man and a woman. It is about how painstaking it is to reach a reassuring conviction that I am not alone, that I have a true partner. This problem is added by everyone; it is the quintessential issue in all operas (maybe with the exception of Schönberg's *Moses and Aron*)."¹⁶

Translated by Mária Švecová

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Programme booklets

- Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky : *Eugen Onegin* [Programme booklet]. Bratislava : Slovak National Theatre, 2005.
- Werner Egk : *Peer Gynt* [Programme booklet]. Vienna : Theater an der Wien, 2017.
- Fromental Halévy : *Židovka* [La Juive, programme booklet]. Bratislava : Slovak National Theatre, 2017.
- Luigi Cherubini : *Medea* [Programme booklet]. Stuttgart : Oper Stuttgart, 2018.
- Leoš Janáček : *Jenůfa* [Programme booklet]. Graz : Oper Graz, 2014.
- Leoš Janáček : *Vec Makropulos* [The Makropulos Affair, programme booklet]. Bratislava : Slovak National Theatre, 2016.
- Giacomo Puccini : *Bohéma* [La Bohème, oprogramme booklet]. Bratislava : Slovak National Theatre, 2014.
- Giacomo Puccini : *Madama Butterfly* [Programme booklet]. Bratislava : Slovak National Theatre, 2007.
- Richard Strauss : *Elektra* [Programme booklet]. Stuttgart : Oper Stuttgart, 2005.
- Dmitri Shostakovich : *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* [Programme booklet]. Augsburg : Theater Augsburg, 2016.
- Giuseppe Verdi : *La traviata* [Programme booklet]. Graz : Oper Graz, 2011.
- Giuseppe Verdi : *Attila* [Programme booklet]. Vienna : Theater an der Wien, 2013.

Analysed productions

- Giacomo Puccini: *Bohéma* [La Bohème], Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, 2014 (original production Oper Leipzig, 1991).
- Giacomo Puccini: *Madama Butterfly*, Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, 2007 (original production Oper Graz, 1992).
- Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Eugen Onegin*, Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, 2005 (original production Oper Leipzig, 1995).
- Richard Strauss: *Elektra*, Oper Stuttgart, 2005 (original production Copenhagen Opera House, 2005).
- Giuseppe Verdi: *La traviata*, Oper Graz, 2011.
- Giuseppe Verdi: *Attila*, Theater an der Wien, 2013.
- Dmitri Shostakovich: *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*, Theater Augsburg, 2016 (original production Copenhagen Opera House, 2014).
- Leoš Janáček: *Jenůfa*, Oper Graz, 2014.
- Fromental Halévy: *Židovka* [La Juive], Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, 2017 (original production Vlaamse Opera Antwerpen and Gent 2015).
- Leoš Janáček: *Vec Makropulos* [The Makropulos Affair], Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, 2016.
- Werner Egk: *Peer Gynt*, Theater an der Wien, 2017.
- Luigi Cherubini: *Medea*, Oper Stuttgart, 2018.

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Biography:

Michaela Mojžišová is an opera critic and historian, and a graduate of the Department of Musicology, Faculty of Arts, Comenius University, Bratislava (1998). Between 1998 and 2012, she worked at the Department of Theatre Documentation and Information of the Theatre Institute in Bratislava. Since 2012, she has been working with the Institute of Theatre and Film Research of the Art Research Centre of the Slovak Academy of Sciences as a scientific worker with focus on theory, aesthetics, and the history of Slovak and European opera theatre. Since 2014, she has been editor-in-chief of the scientific journal *Slovenské divadlo* [Slovak Theatre]. As a curatorial administrator she has launched twenty documentary exhibitions dedicated to Slovak opera theatre. She is the author of a monograph on more recent theatre production history of Slovak opera theatre *Od Fausta k Orfeovi. Opera na Slovensku 1989 – 2009 vo svetle inscenačných poetík* [From Faust to Orpheus: Opera in Slovakia 1989 – 2009 in Reflexion of the Staging Poetics] (2011), of several chapters in monographs and in scientific studies. Alongside scientific and research activity she is active as an opera critic.

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