

## The Balkan Dream Team

Gideon Lester introduces Slobodan Unkovski and Meta Hocevar, director and designer of *The Winter's Tale*

The last time Slobodan Unkovski and his designer Meta Hocevar worked at the A.R.T., they conjured up a series of dramatic worlds so powerful that audiences will never forget what they saw. As the play opened, the walls of a mighty palace crashed to the ground, forming a jumbled landscape of rocks and rubble that suggested the high mountains of central Asia. Kabuki actors joined the Marx Brothers and guards from the Third Reich, spinning and dancing on the barren, abstracted set which, just before intermission, split in two, revealing a lake that the actress Cherry Jones waded across to reach her waiting lover.

The play was Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, and Unkovski's staging is now remembered as a milestone in A.R.T.'s history. Kevin Kelly, reviewing the production for *The Boston Globe*, described it as "a kind of visionary vaudeville, a ditzzy farce breaking apart at the seams to reveal very real substance inside the stuffing."

A decade after their *Chalk Circle*, Unkovski and Hocevar are returning to the A.R.T. to stage another sprawling epic that joins real substance with vaudeville, Shakespeare's late masterpiece *The Winter's Tale*. In the years since their last collaboration in Cambridge, Unkovski has been involved in a drama of a different kind, as Minister of Culture in his native Macedonia. What induced this mild-tempered theatre director to enter the fractious world of politics in the former Yugoslavia?

When Macedonia declared independence from Yugoslavia in 1991, Unkovski was Professor of Drama at Skopje University. "I became a major critic of the country's cultural policy, questioning the government's financing and support of our national institutions," he recalls. Searching for a way to increase public awareness of the crisis in arts funding, Unkovski mounted a production of Calderón's *Life is a Dream*, and interrupted the performance before it had finished. "We replaced the last fifteen minutes of the play with video footage of our rehearsals to show that we could not complete the production without support," he says. "A camera followed an actor each night from the stage to his dressing room, and we relayed the live coverage for our audience."

With the restructuring of the Macedonian government in 1996, Unkovski was asked to head the Ministry of Culture. "My friends and family all advised me not to take the post, but I thought I might be able to do some good," he says. "It was funny – I realized that I'd have to buy a jacket for the opening of parliament. I never wear jackets. My sister sent me a Pierre Cardin coat from London with a Mao collar, and I wore it to parliament. But it took the government three days to approve the ministerial appointments, and I couldn't wear the same jacket for three days, so I had to buy a second one."

Unkovski served as Minister of Culture for three years, during which time he increased Macedonia's cultural budget by twenty percent and the budget for performing arts by almost forty-five percent. One of the most politically significant events of his incumbency came when Thessaloniki, Greece's second city, was named 1997 European Capital of Culture and Unkovski was invited to attend the ceremony. "I was the first minister of our government to travel to Greece," he says. "The countries had had many disagreements, not

least over our use of the name 'Macedonia.' It is important for us to maintain as good an economical and cultural relationship as possible, because Greece is our door to the European Community. Macedonia sits between the West and East, and has always been the powder keg of the Balkans even though we have only two million citizens."

Unkovski found little time to work as a director during his term of political office, and it was with considerable relief that he left the government and returned to the theatre after almost three years. He now divides his artistic career between classic and contemporary plays – this season he directed the Macedonian premiere of Patrick Marber's *Closer* and a production of Molière's *The Misanthrope* at the Slovenian National Theatre in Ljubljana – and he collaborates frequently with young Macedonian and Yugoslav playwrights. His production of Dejan Dukovski's *Powder Keg* toured to more than thirty theatres across Europe, and Unkovski has staged ten plays by Macedonia's premiere living dramatist, Goran Stefanovski.

For a director whose oeuvre encompasses such a variety of playwrights and theatrical styles, Unkovski works with few designers – two for scenery, and only one for costumes. "They are an integral part of my aesthetic, and we have to understand each other very well," he says. Meta Hocevar is the set designer Unkovski works with most frequently, and their relationship is one of absolute collaboration. "I give Meta my general ideas about the atmosphere of a production, but I'm eager to see what she develops," Unkovski says. "I want to learn how she understands the space for a play rather than asking her to build a set to my specifications."

Hocevar, herself a distinguished director, is currently Dean of the

Academy of Theatre and Film in her native Ljubljana, Slovenia. She has recently published a book, *Spaces for Plays*, which investigates the relationship between scenic environment and actor, and she has been invited several times to present her work at the Vienna Festival, with productions including *Antigone*, Yukio Mishima's *Hanjo*, and Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, all of which she both directed and designed.

Hocevar trained as an architect – few programs in the former Yugoslavia teach stage design – and her abstract, monumental sets give more than a nod to contemporary architectural styles. She left architecture for the theatre because, she says, "as an architect I knew what I was building – a house, a warehouse, a theatre – but I didn't know precisely how people would inhabit the space. I knew the problem, but not the story. In stage design I know both the problem and the story; I know exactly how people will behave in the environment."

There is, Hocevar points out, another fundamental difference between theatrical and architectural design. While architects attempt to build harmonious structures in which people will feel at ease, stage designers must produce a space for dramatic conflict where major human passions can be played out. Hocevar has therefore developed a potent, minimalist style that imbues each design element with great significance. "I refine each set until it is as simple as possible," she says. "Every object on the stage should have meaning, so that rather than simply illustrating the story, we are creating the right atmosphere. I'm not happy when directors tell me that they want a table and two chairs in a realistic room; they don't need a designer for that. On stage, an entire story is told in a very few scenic environments, and we need to understand the atmosphere as soon as we look at the set. Space should function as

part of the dramatic whole, as part of the dramaturgy."

The set that Hocevar and Unkovski have devised for *The Winter's Tale* exemplifies this theoretical approach. Before their first meeting Unkovski knew that he wanted two distinct environments to represent the play's two locations, Sicilia and Bohemia, and that the former should be "a country of terror, where Leontes' private fear has become the central problem of the state." Hocevar responded with a set that is, she says, "deliberately uncomfortable. Sicilia is not a home or a nest; it represents a totalitarian political system." The stage is enclosed on two sides by enormous black walls, "not built to human scale," with a vast entrance that will dwarf the actors. "There is no place for mercy or normal human relations," Hocevar says. "This is a space for jealousy and conflict."

Unkovski's Bohemia is, in contrast, "a sort of paradise, a beautiful place where everyone is laughing – a world of nature, comedy, music, and love." Hocevar has designed a giant patchwork quilt to cover the floor, which characters will both emerge from and disappear into. She describes the environment as "a Moroccan carpet, a landscape for dance, for Nomadic life, for playing." In the brutal world of Sicilia there is nowhere to sit or rest; in Bohemia everyone lies down or moves gently, "like a scene from the Bible."

Hocevar has been refining her designs for *The Winter's Tale* for almost a year – earlier plans included a row of plexiglas columns that slowly filled with red sand – and although the set may evolve slightly over the coming months, her period of development is almost finished. "My designs have to be complete several months before rehearsals begin so that the theatre's shops can build the set," she explains. For Unkovski, however, the journey is only just beginning. "It isn't easy to know what *The Winter's Tale* is about,

and we have plenty to discover in rehearsals," he says. "Some critics argue that Shakespeare's subject is time, nature, or forgiveness, but they're writing from a literary rather than dramatic perspective. While rehearsing we'll learn how to handle the structure, the situation, the characters, because the play contains a great mixture of feeling. It seems as though Shakespeare was trying to write a pastoral or romantic play, but found himself continually pulled towards tragedy." Rather than imposing his artistic concept on the actors, Unkovski will develop the production with them in rehearsal. For the moment, however, Hocevar's set will supply him with as much inspiration as the play itself. "Meta has provided me with an environment, and I have to learn what to do with it," he says.

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