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Bringing Canada to Central Europe's Stages

An interview with Michael Devine

Skim through the repertoire of any theatre in the Western world and you'll see that theatre is the most international of the literary arts. Whether in London or Ljubljana, whether in Berlin or Budapest, the same names appear again and again on the playbill: aside from the ubiquitous Shakespeare, there's Molière from France, Goethe from Germany, Sophocles from Greece, Ibsen from Norway and Russia's Chekhov (or Csehov or Čehov or...). We may not spell these authors the same way, but we certainly play them.

And yet, theatre remains a very local art, utterly dependent on the here-and-now, a specific place and performance space, and a common language. This interview with professor, playwright and director Michael Devine examines the benefits and challenges of bringing "Canadian" theatre to Central Europe.

> *You've been working in Central Europe each summer for around ten years. What keeps you coming back here?*

Several reasons. I first toured through Poland, Hungary and the then-East Germany in 1988 on a Canada Council grant to study the theatre that had influenced me as a developing artist. I first directed in the region in Hungary in 1996, at the state theatre, the Csokonai, in Debrecen, and then again in Debrecen at the state puppet theatre, the Vojtina, in 1997. After running a regional theatre in Newfoundland for three years and experiencing the frustrations of the Canadian theatre system, it seemed natural to come back and to work here creating and directing plays. There's more freedom in terms of both the kinds of plays and the infrastructure of a theatre here, more room for imagination and a willingness to make room for it. Then in 2002 I discovered the CEACS. I immediately felt like I was part of a community of like-minded people – thoughtful, curious and open-minded scholars who are committed to exploring this idea of Canada and what it means to outsiders. As a natural outsider that had an intrinsic appeal to me.

> *Many of the plays you've produced are not Canadian, the actors are from Central Europe... Is there a Canadian aspect that remains even if you're directing something like The Chairs, The Bald Soprano or Cyrano with a Serbian or Hungarian cast?*

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Each production I direct takes place in the home language of the culture where it's produced. Sometimes that means translating a Canadian play, such as the work of Michel-Marc Bouchard¹ or Morris Panych.² Other times it involves the creation of a new work from scratch, where I am the central playwright and animateur working in collaboration with selected actors of a company. These actors have to be open, flexible, not tied to tradition or a single idea of how theatre is made. At other times, such as when I wrote an adaptation of *Cyrano*, called *Cyrano XXI*, for the State Theatre in Niš, Serbia, I've arrived with a script and a working translation that we've all adjusted together to suit the needs of the actors.

In every case the work is intercultural in its focus, in terms of both process and the eventual artistic product. What I mean by that is that intercultural art brings together cultures with respect but not reverence. There is no hierarchy except the hierarchy of art, which forms the host culture for the other cultures brought into the work. So a Canadian director, working with, say, Serbian or Croatian actors, can create a production that mixes their techniques and influences. The result must be comprehensible and accessible to the host culture audience, but is not regional or parochial in its themes or style.

There was a production I created in Užice in 2005 at the State Theatre there, entitled *I Forget*. The themes were memory and forgetting, and how we fail to control either process in the way in which we would like. Following the bitter events of the Balkan war and the NATO bombings, these themes were obviously pretty current for both the actors and their audience, and some of the material I created from photographs brought in by the actors was deeply personal, both to the artists and to the spectators, who knew well what the performers were referencing. But it wasn't a Serbian play, because it was being directed and designed by someone with an outside perspective. It was a production about the elusiveness of perspective rather than the victimization of one side or another.

My work is heavily influenced by the approach of Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Robert Wilson and Ariane Mnouchkine, who bring cultures together in different ways while creating material that is sourced, usually, from a single home culture while incorporating universal themes. Each of these artists has been accused at times of cultural imperialism, or insensitivity, in the use of cultural symbols in their work. What critics fail to understand is that culture is not meant to be revered, and that what is sacrosanct in its home environment becomes negotiable, or placed in play, when it's brought in contact with other cultures. That's the purpose of art: to question the unquestionable.

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- 1) The Order of Canada winning playwright of *Les Feluettes* and *Les Muses orphelines*
 - 2) The Governor-General's Award winning playwright of *The Ends of the Earth* and *Girl in the Goldfish Bowl*.



So I can answer both “yes” and “no” to the question of Canadian content in my productions. I’m Canadian, and in many ways I represent my culture and its values. But I try not to impose them, nor to ignore or suppress them out of deference. Working together we pick what is most effective for the artistic work, and proceed. And that pragmatic approach to cultural difference seems very Canadian to me.

>What major differences have you encountered while directing in Central Europe?

Well, the artists behave in a different way. Actors in Canada are used to a rigid schedule that’s monitored by their union. After two or three weeks of rehearsal, forty hours a week, there’s a sequential run of performances. The actors are hired for that play and by the time it opens they’re already auditioning for other things.

In Eastern and Central Europe the repertory system still persists, though it’s gradually breaking down. For a foreign director it’s quite remarkable that actors must be cast from the same group, that not all will be available for every rehearsal. At one theatre I worked at we used five different rehearsal rooms – I never knew where we would be on a given day. And rehearsals would be shifted from morning to afternoon or evening, depending on whether the actors had a show that night, or a radio appearance in the afternoon. Even more remarkable is that the performance runs are non-sequential: actors in Central Europe are often asked to re-create their performances after a break of a month or more, with only an afternoon of rehearsal. With *Cyrano XXI* I was afraid that after a two-month break the actors would spear each other with their swords!

The vocabulary is also different. Actors here tend to have been trained at the same place, usually the national academies. So they speak the same artistic language. Actors in Canada may have trained at a national academy, or at a university, or might have no training at all. That’s how our system works, by not really having a coherent system. Our actors tend to be weak technically as a result, lacking in knowledge and inflexible in different playing styles. On the other hand, actors in Central Europe are often rigidly technical. They lack authenticity by North American standards; their playing may be accurate but not passionate. To bridge this gap requires an internationalist director who’s comfortable with various vocabularies. One can’t expect the actors to adjust to you; you must create an environment where they feel comfortable, able to create, not just reproduce lines and movement.

> Theatre people are notoriously suspicious of outsiders. How do you convince a local director (even of a national theatre) that having a Canadian director is crucial?

The short answer is most of the time you don’t. If a theatre’s producer is parochial you’re not going to change that. So you look for the exception, the artist who is open to taking a chance on an international director coming in and working at their theatre. You can promote all the positives of such a collaboration – new techniques for the actors, a production that might be appropriate for festivals, some extra publicity and notoriety in the press, a reputation as a theatre that thinks outside the box.

I've found these people in the oddest places, not at all where one might expect. Directors of huge national theatres, like the one in Sibiu, Romania, which hosts the largest theatre festival in the region. The guy is a bit of a buccaneer but that also makes him up for an adventure. On the other hand, alternative theatres, like a couple of the ones in Zagreb, are so tight-knit and inbred that they don't believe they'd benefit from an outside influence.

In the end you create a proposal that's specific to a theatre and what you can intuitively understand about its mandate and its audience. You try to pitch it at the right time and then you keep coming back, because most producers will serve you tea and smile, saying "maybe" and never expect to see you again. When they know you're serious, that you've spent more than fifteen years in the region, producing around twenty plays in seven countries and doing workshops and training actors in virtually all the others, they have more trouble writing you off as a tourist. It's the same equation, true probably in all walks of life but especially so in the theatre: if you desire commitment, you must first commit. As an artist, I'm used to a certain amount of rejection, a certain quantification of risk. That's never a reason to pull back – it's the reason to commit, with all of your intellect and soul.

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Actor, director, playwright, theorist and essayist, Michael Devine has directed 31 professional productions in eight languages, including productions for national theatres in Serbia, Kosovo, Romania and Hungary. His own plays have been produced in Canada, Hungary, Serbia, Kosovo and Ukraine.

Michael's work has featured at the MESS Festival (Sarajevo); FITS (Sibiu); FIST (Belgrade); Ideo/Ideis Festival (Alexandria); and InFoMaT (Athens). He has been a sponsored artist of the Canada Council for the Arts and a number of Canadian Embassies in Central and Eastern Europe.

Trained as an actor in London, England (LAMDA) and New York City (HB Studio, Actors Movement Studio), his internationally recognized performance creation methodology, BoxWhatBox, has featured in 18 countries. He trains actors and lectures widely on theatre throughout Central and Eastern Europe. Recently his work has extended to Africa, with work in Uganda and with Theatre for a Change in Ghana, and to the Middle East, with BWB workshops in Beirut, Lebanon.

Michael has a PhD from the University of Toronto and is currently Associate Professor of Theatre at Acadia University in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada.

