



International Symposium Borštnikovo srečanje 2020

THEATRE, DANCE AND PERFORMANCE AFTER COVID-19

Between current damnation and opportunities for the future

Vetrinjski dvor, Maribor, 22. October 2020

Conveners: Tomaž Krpič and Alja Lobnik,

The Association of Theatre Critics and Researchers of Slovenia

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Theatre, dance and performance are unique artistic forms distinct in one particular performing element: physical proximity of human bodies, both on the stage and in the auditorium. This characteristic was not pushed aside or eradicated even with the introduction of technology in the late nineteenth century or during the twentieth century. On the contrary, only against the background of the new media can one now fully appreciate the close relationship between theatre and its audience. However, the inevitability of the synchronic presence of the actors, dancers, performers and spectators in time and space, dependent on the corruptible human body, revealed the sensitiveness and brittleness of theatre art during the outbreak of the latest epidemic. Recognized as a potential carrier of COVID-19, the performing body was temporarily suspended, this time not only locally but globally. The theatrical world was thus literally arrested.

This is not the first time theatres have been closed due to a pandemic. This relationship goes far back in human history. From William Shakespeare to Antonin Artaud, countless theatre scholars, critics and practitioners have produced plays, visions, concepts and theories addressing the issue



of contagiousness in and of theatre, yet none have given us the final answer. This symposium thus brings together researchers and theatre critics from around the theatrical world to elucidate new ways of understanding the numerous consequences of COVID-19 for theatre, dance and performance. As the new health regulations fundamentally restrict theatre production, artists are now forced to painstakingly invent new forms of aesthetic practice to regain recently lost performing strength and stamina. Many of them also face brutal social insecurity because of the lack of professional engagement. Whether the influence of society and above all (cultural) politics on this vital process for theatre will be positive or, unfortunately, negative is unclear and must still be evaluated put on trial. Yet, as Bertolt Brecht once said, new times evoke new theatre forms, so we should enthusiastically count on that, adding that demands new concepts, theories and cultural politics about theatre as well.



PANEL I

JURE NOVAK

ROMANCING THE STONE – A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE SLOVENIAN (PERFORMING) ARTS SCENE

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In this presentation, I will attempt to give a brief overview of the impact of the pandemic on the Slovenian (Performing) arts scene. I will begin by broadly outlining the situation we were in when the pandemic hit, focusing on the disparities of (existential) security between the



institutions, the NGOs and the individual artists. I will then present the (sparse) policies undertaken by the authorities and the initiatives and actions the scene itself took. These will be presented chronologically and divided into four sections: the initial panic and total lockdown, the declaration of victory over the disease, the reprieve of the long summer and the autumn, when the bill comes due. I will conclude by presenting a broader view of the realities and economics of the situation for the whole sector and connected industries and by hopefully making some good suggestions for the future.

BIO:

Jure Novak is a freelance theatre director, author and performer who dabbles in cultural politics.

He has written and translated literature and theory for a number of portals and publications at home and abroad.

**GIOVANNI BOCCIA ARTIERI, LAURA GEMINI, STEFANO BRILLI,
FRANCESCA GIULIANI**

**THE THEATRE DISPOSITIF AND THE CHALLENGE OF COVID-19:
MEDIATIZATION, LIVENESS AND DIGITAL AUDIENCES IN THE ITALIAN
CONTEXT**

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Italy is one of the first European countries to be deeply affected by COVID-19 and one of the first in Europe to have adopted lockdown measures. The lockdown required the suspension of all live performances and rehearsals, including the cancellation of seasons and festivals. Since the early stages of the lockdown, Italian theatres and companies have developed several online initiatives to counterbalance the suspension of their activities, such as circulating unpublished archive material, creating ad hoc domestic performances, engaging enthusiasts in collecting memories of past seasons and experimenting with plays on videoconferencing platforms. These efforts have aimed at maintaining contact with the remote theatre audiences, by extending the presence of artists, theatres, and performances in the online context. However, they have also provided an opportunity to reason about the digital transformations of performing arts.

This paper reflects on how we are researching the response of the theatrical sector to the lockdown from the perspective of sociology and media studies. Our aim is to contextualise the phenomenon within the processes of theatre mediatization and digital transformation of liveness, and to present what we think are the most urgent research questions in this direction. The first part of the presentation introduces the theoretical premises of the investigation, by analysing the processes of theatre mediatization. The second part will explore some of the most successful online initiatives of the theatre sector, observing how they fit into the previously introduced mediatization trajectories. To this end we have mapped 120 initiatives developed throughout Italy between March and May 2020. Among these initiatives we have observed some recurring aesthetics and productive strategies such as *serialization*, *platform adaptation*, *participatory dramaturgy*, *recomposition of the event* and *recomposition of the sense of place*. The third part will observe how the online audiences responded to the social media initiatives of some of the main Italian theatres. In the conclusions, we will discuss which research questions we consider crucial to connect the analysis of this critical moment to the main themes of sociological and media studies research on performing arts.



BIO:

Giovanni Boccia Artieri, Ph.D. is Full Professor in Sociology of Communication and Digital Media and Head of the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies, of the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. His main research interests revolve around media theory, with a specific focus on social network society and participatory culture. Current research projects include social history of the Internet.

Laura Gemini (PhD) is Associate Professor of Sociology of Cultural and Communication Processes at the University of Urbino Carlo Bo, Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies. Her research focuses on the contemporary media imagination and visual culture, with particular reference to cultural and artistic performance, especially theatre.

Stefano Brillì (PhD) is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies (DISCUI) of the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. His main areas of research include the study of irreverence in digital cultures, the relationship between performative practices and social media, and the study of live entertainment audiences.

Francesca Giuliani is a PhD student in Humanities at the Department of Communication Sciences, Humanities and International Studies (DISCUI) of the University of Urbino Carlo Bo. Her main areas of research include live performing arts, with particular attention to audiences and audience development.

TOMAŽ KRPIČ

THE ANTAGONISTIC CONTAGIOUSNESS OF THE PERFORMING BODY

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In this paper, I demonstrate the double antagonistic contagiousness of the performing body, which originates from its substantiality. The current epidemic highlights the sensibility, vulnerability and fragility of the performing body. While the performing body is not recognised as a creator or source of the COVID-19 virus, it is conceived as the virus's potential and actual host and transmitter. Despite the wide use of communication technology in modern society, which contributed to the disembodied culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, theatre's *differentia specifica* in the twenty-first century remains live communication between an on-stage actor/performer and an audience in an auditorium. While we consider the physical presence of actors and audience members in a theatre as a precondition for experiencing the full splendour of a play or performance, physical presence in a theatre also offers other features. It enables construction of a temporal theatre community, where one feels at home. Empathic relationship is grounded in the performing body's cognitive ability, when in close proximity, to trigger mirror neurons—an ability I refer to as cognitive theatre contagiousness—in all who are involved in a theatre community. However, with the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the close proximity of sensational performing bodies—actors or performers—to theatregoers is no longer considered safe. The physical performing body has become a suspicious agent of contagion, and theatres have had to temporarily close their doors. To theatre creators and theatregoers, this represents a severe antagonistic conflict between medical and cognitive theatre contagiousness.

BIO:

Dr Tomaž Krpič is a sociologist, theatre scholar, editor and fellow researcher at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Ljubljana University. His research interests concentrate on various aspects of the performing body, the spectator's creative engagement in theatre, social construction of the theatre community and political theatre. He is currently working on a monograph about the performing body.



PANEL II

PIA BREZAVŠČEK

IN THE OPEN. RETHINKING OUTSIDE LOCATIONS AS AUTONOMOUS AGENTS IN PERFORMANCE SITUATIONS (CASE STUDY: *LABOUR OF PANIC* BY BADCO)

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The recent epidemiological measures have closed theatres down or severely reduced the audience and thus altered what was once a mutual experience. In order we preserve the critical mass that makes an event, this is an opportunity to rethink site specific outside locations for performances, which are of course nothing new, but their importance is rising due to pragmatic reasons in the new public health situation. This focus does not mean that I am arguing for open air theatres exclusively – public infrastructure for culture should be intangible as a public good. What is more, few performances made for theatre can survive outside their special laboratory conditions - without the apparatus, consisting of a black box, scenography, light system, conventions and discipline. What I want to do is, through an analysis of the last performance by the Croatian collective BadCo, *Rad panike (Labour of Panic)*, to rethink “the outside” with all its fierce tactile, olfactory, visible potential as not only a passive scenery, but an autonomous agent, that is not only integral to the performance, but has a life beyond it. There might be a readymade place and a timing for every setting. In *Rad panike*, the spectator enters this ambiguous natural scenography amidst the man-made infrastructure in Grobničko polje. She has earphones, which isolate her from other audience, that slowly disperse in the open field. There is a strong wind and it is becoming darker by the minute. Strange poetic texts are played and have sporadic references



to the dancers' doings or the concrete environment surroundings. Every step is choreographed by the bulges and stones in the soil. Why redo the feeling of how small and helpless a human is by special theatrical effects, if one can be, all technological metaphors aside, simply placed in an open field?

BIO:

Pia Brezavšček is a PhD student, coediting Maska journal for performance art and www.neodvisni.art, an online medium for local performing arts. She is the president of The Contemporary Dance Association Slovenia.



BRYCE LEASE

YOU'RE INSIDE MY HOUSE: RECONFIGURING PROXIMITY IN COVID

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In this paper, I will discuss rehearsal techniques that have been developed during the pandemic with a specific focus on the work of directors Katie Mitchell (UK) and Eleanor Bishop (New Zealand). Rehearsing and performing on Zoom has specific implications for gender and performance. Both Mitchell and Bishop have developed a feminist theatre praxis that has been reconceptualised by the introduction of theatre makers' domestic spaces. I will consider how the rehearsal room has been adapted to allow the public into the home and how the exposure of intimate space is reconfiguring our understanding of the professional sphere. At the same time, these directors are working with the actors' control over the camera and the frame to investigate new forms of naturalism and agency. The optimism of this paper signals developments in our field that realign intimacy and subjectivity at the very moment of limiting physical proximity.

BIO:

Bryce Lease is Reader in Theatre & Performance Studies at Royal Holloway, University of London and Co-Editor of *Contemporary Theatre Review*. His publications include *After '89: Polish Theatre & the Political* (2016) and as editor *Contemporary European Playwrights* (2020) and *A History of Polish Theatre* (2021). Between 2018-21, he is leading the AHRC-funded project 'Staging Difficult Pasts: Of Objects, Narratives and Public Memory' (<http://stagingdifficultpasts.org>)



MAJA ŠORLI

**KVIROVSKA UMETNOST V EPIDEMIJ COVID-19: DOLGA POT DO
TRAGIČNEGA OPTIMIZMA / QUEER ART IN COVID-19 PANDEMIA: A LONG
WAY TO TRAGIC OPTIMISM**

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Ukrepi med epidemijo bolezni Covid-19 so gledališke ustvarjalke, a tudi publiko, zadeli nepripravljene – ker je na kaj takega pač nemogoče biti pripravljena. Slovenijo od petka trinajstega v marcu 2020 pa do junija, a tudi prej in predvsem kasneje, obvladujejo ukrepi, ki temeljito spreminjajo gledališko krajino. Ta je – kot družba nasploh – prežeta z negativnimi afekti žalosti, nemoči, obupa, a tudi z novimi občutki, ki jih mogoče opisati s pojmi podaljšane negotovosti, nejasne izgube, sluteče žalosti ter morda tudi pozitivnimi vidiki karantene: upočasnjenja ter možnosti za povezavo s sabo in drugimi, novega zavedanja za masovno vzajemno zaupanje. V prispevku bom analizirala, kako se nove psihične vsebine in dejanja kažejo v delih v Londonu živečega makedonsko-britanskega umetnika [Petra Miloshevskega](#), ki je med zaprtjem gledališč doma ustvaril dva kvirovska spletna videa: *You Will Marry Me* (junij 2020) ter *My Dreams Will Be Your Dreams* (julij 2020) ter videe, ki so nastali za tehnoburlesko [Tatovi podob](#) (produkcija Emanat, Slovenija). Vprašanja, ki si jih zastavljam in preverjam, kako nanje odgovarjajo izbrani primeri, so: kaj lahko naredimo v epidemiji, katera občutja smo zmožni identificirati in katerih ne, kaj so stresni sprožilci, katere so intervencije, ki se jih poslužujemo, katere zgodbe delimo, kakšne načrte delamo ter predvsem, v kolikšni meri umetnost odraža tragični optimizem, ki pomeni človeško zmožnost zasukanja negativnih vidikov v nekaj pozitivnega ali konstruktivnega (Viktor Frankl).

BIO:



Dr. Maja Šorli je znanstvena sodelavka v raziskovalni skupini na UL AGRFT na programu Gledališke in medumetnostne raziskave, preživlja pa se tudi kot samozaposlena v kulturi kot dramaturginja. Zanima jo gledališče kot del socialne resničnosti, znotraj le-te pa predvsem manjšinjske prakse, ki prinašajo spremembe. Med letoma 2015 in 2019 je bila odgovorna urednica edine slovenske znanstvene revije za teorijo scenskih umetnosti Amfiteater.

PANEL III

ROK VEVAR

SODOBNI PLES IN KRIZE V DVAJSETEM STOLETJU / CONTAMPORARY DANCE AND CRISES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Po zaprtju, ki smo mu bili priča ob razglasitvi pandemije Covid-19, se je več generacij umetnic in umetnikov, kulturnih delavk in delavcev prvič srečalo z globalno zdravstveno krizo, ki sta se ji pridružili še ekonomska ter v večjem ali manjšem obsegu na različnih koncih sveta tudi politične krize. Zaprtje javnih prostorov pomeni za sodobni ples velik produkcijski in ustvarjalni udarec, saj je vrsta plesnih praks v temelju odvisna od dotikov ali stikov teles. A če se ozremo na zgodovino sodobnega plesa ugotovimo, da aktualna zdravstvena kriza za sodobni ples še zdaleč ni nikakršna novost. Zdravstvene krize (epidemije ali pandemije) ter različni vidiki ekonomskih in političnih kriz so zelo temeljno določali načine proizvodnje te umetniške prakse, ekonomski in politični vidiki kriz pa so imeli zanjo v različnih kontekstih in obdobjih tako zelo negativne,



kakor tudi zelo pozitivne posledice. Pandemije tuberkuloze in AIDSa, obe svetovni vojni in hladna vojna, propad industrij v posameznih kontekstih, različni tipi migracij, socialni korektivi v krizah različnih držav, nacionalizacije in marginalizacije itn. so ključno dikrtrali dinamike razvoja kulturno-političnih sistemov in kontekstov, v katerih se je sodobni ples razvijal, vznikal, izginal in se selil. Moje predavanje bo skušalo osvetliti posamezne presenetljive primere v preteklem stoletju.

BIO:

Rok Vevar je zgodovinar in arhivar sodobnega plesa. Ustanovitelj Začasnega slovenskega plesnega arhiva (2012, od 2017 v MSUM). Je avtor knjig Rok za oddajo - izbor kritik in člankov, Dan, noč + človek = ritem: Antologija slovenske sodobnoplesne publicistike in Ksenija, Xenia: Londonska plesna leta Ksenije Hribar, 1960-1978. Je član Nomad Dance Academy Slovenija in sokurator CoFestivala, mednarodnega festivala sodobnega plesa.

JASMINA ZALOŽNIK

SODOBNI PLES V IZOLACIJI / CONTEMPORARY DANCE IN ISOLATION

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Eastern Europe, is strongly opposed to those contemporary performing arts practices (including contemporary dance) that are based on the generation or perception of material, bodily experiences. However, it is precisely these practices that, by their very existence, confirm the incompleteness of the arts that were institutionalized in these geo-cultural spaces. Contemporary dance was most often associated with alternative, marginal and non-institutionalized artistic practices, seeking in them its close allies and became a bearer of meanings and innovations in production, creativity, reception and artistic and cultural subjectivations in their areas. Within



this framework, contemporary dance has always been subject to various cultural isolations, while at the same time always representing a persistent element in the production of specific artistic experiential values that the public has not received elsewhere. The experience of bodily affect, expression, material (in)directness, as well as spatial and social compositions and constructs entered the urban cultural public much more intensively through contemporary dance than in the case of institutionalized stage practices. Other physical presences were with contemporary dance, with various forms of performance art works, including body art, etc. more intense witnesses of modern and contemporary experience of cultural heterogeneity than with any other form of artistic symbolization. In this lecture, I will focus on the thesis that the crisis is inherent in contemporary dance and that the current pandemic has not found itself in any area that is not familiar to it. Problematizations of material bodily positions, crises, and criticism have always provided this practice with vitality, uncertainty, attention, and focus.

BIO:

Dr. Jasmina Založnik je dramaturginja, teatrologinja, rezententka/kritičarka *in* producentka.

Prvenstveno deluje na področju sodobnega plesa; posveča se njegovemu zgodovinjenju, motrenju in ustvarjanju spodbudnejših pogojev. Je članica kolektiva Nomad Dance Academy Slovenija in Mesta žensk. Je članica uredniškega odbora revije Maska in Dialogi. Končala je doktorski študij vizualne kulture na Univerze v Aberdeenu.



UNA BAUER

PRIVILEGE OF PRESENCE

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In a twitter thread, Gianpiero Petriglieri argued that the reason why everyone's so exhausted after video calls is because of "the plausible deniability of each other's absence". Watching theatre performances online, which usually comes down to watching recorded performances, reminds us of "the constant presence of each other's absence", which is a kind of deprivation. I would however argue that for a theatre and performance scholar, watching visual archives such as photography, film and video is an important part of our research and sometimes the only way we can access some materials as we either can't afford to travel to see some pieces originally, or have simply been born in another time, as they are not longer available to be seen alive. Presence is, in many ways, *a privilege*. To be able to be *there*, right *there*, *on the spot*, *in the same place and venue where the performance is happening*, is a privilege. A privilege that some of us have, sometimes, taken for granted when it comes to theatre. However, not everybody has. Global pandemic has placed us in a situation where the issue of accessibility is becoming more present than ever, unfortunately because it has now become an issue for abled bodies. In that respect, I would like to turn the question around. Has theatre been aware enough of its *privilege of presence*? Has it thought consistently of immuno-compromised audience, of audience with Tourette's syndrome, of wheel-chairs users for whom the difficulties or even impossibility of *being there*, in that very moment, with others, presents a standard issue rather than a deviation from it. But it seems to me that this question goes further than the question of accessibility, or medical and social models of disability and audience development. Something about this issues touches the very nature of our understanding of liveness, live performance and ephemerality.

BIO:



Dr Una Bauer is associate professor at the Academy of Dramatic Art (Zagreb). Her research interests include dance, physical theatre and experimental performative practices, history of ideas, theories of affect, networked publics, travel writing, community, death studies and disability studies. Her first book on theatre and everything else, including tea cosies and bicycles, *Pridite bliže: o kazalištu i drugim radostima (Come Closer: on Theatre and other Joys)* was published in 2015. Her forthcoming book is a dialogical “monograph”, a series of conversations with and on the work of Croatian dance and theatre collective BADco.

PANEL IV

OPHELIA JIADAI HUANG

THEATRE, ARTIST, AUDIENCE: THE DYNAMIC TRIANGLE IN A CHANGING TIME

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Almost 20 years since the market-oriented shift for theatres and performing arts companies in China, both theatres and artists are once again at crossroad. In the narrow space between policy and market, artists and theatres in China always have to choose its own path to survive, with or without help. While the current government seems to be in favor of developing the role of technology in culture and art, many Chinese artists seem to be doubtful of that and choose different approaches to connect with audience in their own way. If the pandemic has make the world more divided, can it bring the performing arts sector closer?



BIO:

Ophelia Jiadai Huang is a cultural worker, artist and dramaturg based in Shanghai, working currently as Director of International Projects in Shanghai Dramatic Arts Center and Programme Director of ACT Shanghai International Theatre Festival. With a decade of experience working for international cultural agency in China, her area of interests often sits the intersection of performance, cultural policy and international relations. Ophelia received MAs from University of Warwick and University of Arts in Belgrade

RENIDA BALTRUŠAITYTĖ

**PERFORMING ARTS IN LITHUANIA DURING QUARANTINE: THE CASE OF
CONTEMPORARY CIRCUS FESTIVAL CIRKULIACIJA 2020**

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“Cirkuliacija” is an educational and an international contemporary circus festival that grows bigger since 2015 and attracts new and various audiences with each year. The main goal of the festival is to introduce contemporary circus to more people and to show its subtle and unique language by letting to experience its educational and social capabilities. The specificity of this festival is to bring the contemporary circus to spaces that are in a distance with the city centre and by this to enable abandoned buildings and spaces with contemporary culture and communal activities. Moreover, this annual festival is lasting for two weeks during summertime.

But. The summer of 2020 was different for the whole world. Lithuania acquainted quarantine and the challenges which it brought to the culture sector. However, the quarantine started in



March of 2020, but the festival needed to be organized in June. During March, there was no way to know what is going to happen and what kind of requirements from the government will need to be fulfilled after several months. Nevertheless, organisers decided to make a plan B and to change the festival schedule and form – everything that has already been decided in September of 2019.

This presentation will acquaint with the successful case of the possibilities for performing arts festival to adapt to the COVID-19 situation. The participants will be introduced to how it was successfully done, what were the negative and positive consequences and how all of this adaptation inspired the organizers to make permanent changes to the festival program.

BIO:

Renida Baltrušaitytė, sociologist and coordinator of the Contemporary Circus Festival
Cirkuliacija

IVAN MEDENICA

FESTIVALS AND THE THREAT OF BODILY DISTANCING

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The restrictions imposed by pandemic of Covid 19 do not affect only theater and performing arts in general, but festivals as well. The restriction of “bodily distancing” reduces the number of spectators in an auditorium and artistically intervenes in the stage action itself. It is evident that this affects both a single theater piece and theater festivals made out of a multitude of performances. However, I would argue in this presentation that festivals are even more affected,



because they are not artistic performances but cultural ones. Social intentionality which is a crucial feature of cultural performances (the one that differentiates them from artistic performances) is not an essential element of theater pieces but is or could be the most important feature of festivals. The festival-specific temporal and spatial framing – they are an extraordinary and intense experience concentrated in short period of time and in a limited space – invite all kinds of side programs, such as lectures, conferences and debates, which sharpen festivals' thematic focuses with an aim to make an impact not only on the theater scene but on their social, political and cultural background as well (I refer here only to those festivals which have an elaborated concept). In other words, I would argue that festivals are more *discursive* than the performances they are made of. For achieving this “social intentionality” (through organizing lectures, conferences, debates, etc.), festivals require, even more than theater pieces themselves, the condition of – *bodily co-presence*. If they cannot achieve it, festivals are at the same risk as other crucial manifestations of the life of community or social sphere (universities, parliaments, etc.). One can recognize here a similar threat to the one Giorgio Agamben is afraid of regarding the life of universities.

BIO:

Ivan Medenica, PhD, works at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts (Belgrade) as a professor of The History of World Drama and Theatre and The Introduction to Theater and Performance Studies. His book *The tragedy of initiation or the inconstant prince* was also awarded as the best book on theater published in Serbia. He was the Artistic Director of Sterijino Pozorje in Novi Sad and one of the main editors of the journal Teatron. Medenica is the artistic director of Bitef (Belgrade International Theater Festival) since 2015. He was honored by the French Medal "Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres".