

Preface

Days of August

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Today is August 19, 2009, and the Chancellor of a united Germany, Angela Merkel, is in a little Hungarian town called Sopron to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the “pan-European picnic,” the day when the country’s borders with Austria were opened to a flood of East Germans, paving the way for the fall of the Berlin Wall a few months later, in November. That same summer day in 1989, the people of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia forged a human chain of two million, stretching four hundred miles, to declare their opposition to Soviet control of the Baltics. By June Solidarity had emerged victorious from a national election in Poland. Vaclav Havel, so recently having been jailed, led the Velvet Revolution all the way to the palace when he became president of Czechoslovakia by the end of the year. Gorbachev spoke of “our common European home” and Francis Fukuyama of the “end of history.” An era of “anti-politics” and spiritual authority had already been envisioned by György Konrad as an antidote to power relations and ideology as the basis of society. In the White House, George H. W. Bush was laying the groundwork for a new world order in which the triumph of capitalism would be the centerpiece.

The *pax Europa* was not to last. Before long the old ethnic feuds and territorial disputes surfaced after decades, in some cases centuries, of suppression, as communists, democrats, and far-right officials would switch sides in their respective governments for years to come while the old Europe gave way to the new or the new to the old, depending on how you viewed things. Before long the deadly forces of ethnic cleansing were on the prowl in Yugoslavia, a country that had always prided itself on being the very model of multiculturalism, facing West instead of East. When war broke out in that country, the horror of genocide descended again on a continent that still had not laid to rest the torment of the Second World War, and even now Europeans are preparing to mark the seventy years since it began with the German and Soviet attack on Poland, in September 1939. Surveying the last half-century of Europe’s recovery in his monumental study, *Postwar*, Tony Judt unequivocally affirms his belief in the power of history while also allowing that “some measure of neglect and forgetting is the necessary condition for civic health.”

By the time these historic events of 1989 occurred PAJ Publications had already begun the DramaContemporary series of plays in translation, organized by country



or region, and featuring such titles as *DramaContemporary: Czechoslovakia* and *DramaContemporary: Hungary*. The post-war landscape of Europe was still held in check by an Iron Curtain, with East and West Berlin and the two Germanies the most profound symbol of a divided continent. Western and Eastern Europe, represented by NATO and the Soviet bloc, were locked in a fierce Cold War struggle delineated by the Oder-Niesse line. What a different world that was.

Now after German unification the city of Berlin is the cultural capital of Europe, so calm this summer that its inhabitants seem to care more about the international games in its famous (rebuilt) Olympic Stadium than the upcoming election. The expansion of the twenty-seven member European Union, working towards the common currency of the Euro and open borders from Britain to the Balkans, including eight former communist countries, has put into place a map of Europe representing five-hundred million people and twenty-five per cent of the world's wealth. Its Charter of Fundamental Rights includes the right to free education, the right to health care and social services, the right to parental leave, the right of care for children and the elderly and disabled, and the promise of environmental and consumer protection. The ideal of this transnational model of interdependence and cultural exchange is encapsulated in its motto: "United in Diversity." A sculpture of Europa atop a bull stands watch outside one of the European Parliament buildings to remind everyone that it traces a founding, albeit violent, myth all the way to antiquity and across linguistic and cultural divides as a symbol of pan-European-ism. Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida had once proposed turning the EU into the "avant-gardist core" of political cultures on the continent. Alas, nowadays ministers and businessmen hold more power in the affairs of state than intellectuals.

PAJ Publications still retains its commitment to European dramatic literature, if not to Europe's former borders. For this reason, *New Europe*, the start of what I hope will be an ongoing series, includes plays from across the continent. Even though not all of the authors represented live in countries that are part of the European Union, the intention is to consider Europe as a cultural, geographic, political, and economic entity, envisioned as far back as 1950 by Jean Monnet when he wrote the manifesto for a devastated continent that would eventually bring into existence the EU. There remain plenty of Euroskeptics on both sides of the Atlantic and English Channel to challenge the Eurocentrics. Nonetheless, for those countries whose borders, histories, and elites were erased by totalitarian regimes, the idea of Europe has always been a fervent dream. Europe is a place, a state of mind, an idea, a symbol, a way of life.

The authors in this volume, all of them born after the Second World War—in the fifties and sixties—represent new generations of Europeans who cross boundaries



of countries, languages, and genres with ease. Their biographical facts reflect European history and its many transformations while generationally they are freer than older Europeans to move beyond it. Igor Bauersima was born in Prague a few years before the Soviet and Warsaw Pact tanks drove into his city, and grew up in Switzerland. Goran Stefanovski left his home in Macedonia during the Yugoslav War that set ethnic group against ethnic group, and started a career in England. Juan Mayorga spent his early years under the fascism of Franco's Spain. A few years after Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk was born, the long, persistent resistance against Polish communist rule began to grow. Roland Schimmelpfennig was born in a divided Germany and Petr Zelenka in a country still called Czechoslovakia. Jon Fosse was born in Norway less than a decade after the Marshall Plan helped to rebuild its fishing industries. Their histories typify the European of the post-war generation, whose lives are grounded in the great historic events of their individual countries. All of the plays in *New Europe* have been first produced since 2000, foregrounding in their multiplicity of concerns an evolving continent experiencing numerous social changes in the post-1989 era.

The plays represent both the Europe that offers a cradle-to-grave security blanket through a strong government role in the well-being of its citizens, side by side with the Europe undergoing social, political, and economic instability while newer countries in its expanded community of nations build democratic infrastructures and institutions with scant resources. Their authors are writing a new history of mentalities in Europe, in a vernacular language that has now moved away from the earlier, more literary dramatic language of European drama. Unrestricted to any one form, they write plays, films, essays, poetry, and novels. In particular, the plays are often more influenced by popular culture and independent cinema and media. One of the intriguing aspects of the plays is the distinctive use of the pause or the dash, often signifying the silence, tentativeness, and estrangement of contemporary speech, with its calculated fears and breakdown of communication.

What is the news of their day? Iceland has had a financial meltdown. The president of France decided that one cannot swim with a "burqini." Berlusconi is trifling with young women in Rome. Switzerland is making public the names in secret accounts of tax evaders. Britain has just buried its last veteran of the First World War. Pirates have returned to European waters for the first time in centuries.

In August many citizens of the wealthier European capitals are nowhere to be found as they are on the long holidays their generous social welfare systems provide, while those in the poorer countries to the east are trapped in evolving capitalist economies burdened by debt, lack of new technologies, the destruction of rural

culture, and emigration of their compatriots to other countries in search of work. Beneath the veneer of security and wellbeing promoted as the continental social model, the European way of life is full of contradictions and exclusions and looming dangers. Europe today includes the most progressive social model in the Nordic countries as well as its only dictator in Belarus, with diverse political conditions in between.

War and poverty have brought a continuous stream of refugees and migrants, over land and sea, to the gates of European countries, several of which have no desire to welcome them as eventual citizens, even though they are eager for their cheap labor. Earlier this month Italy has gone so far as to criminalize illegal immigration, making it possible for citizen patrols to report undocumented persons living among them. In many parts of Europe, conservative Muslim populations are in conflict with liberal European societies, the most disturbing examples of this tension being the violent protests that erupted when newspaper cartoons featuring the face of Mohammed, published in a small town in Denmark, set off protests in the Middle East, and the earlier assassination on an Amsterdam street of a Dutch filmmaker for his documentary on Muslim women. Whether Turkey is able to gain entry to the European Union in the next decade will be determined by Europe's ability to cope with its rising Muslim population, as much as 15% in Oslo and 10% in Paris. Christianity and Islam are now the dominant faiths on a continent more secular than religious.

The new Euro economies of emerging democracies in eastern Europe have triggered high unemployment, social unrest, and contemporary dystopias, while criminal rings from former communist countries and Russia have spread their sex and porno trade across the continent, often ensnaring young women who have sought to emigrate from their poorer homelands. Basque separatists continue to wage their violent campaign inside a progressive contemporary Spain still coming to terms with the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. Nationalist movements and far-right parties have moved foreigners and the Roma population, still prey to attack and murder, to the forefront of any discussion of cultural identity, one of the main issues on a continent prone to confusing history and myth. Youth facing high unemployment and outmoded institutions riddled with corruption, are provoked to violent riots by confrontations with institutional power, as the Athens demonstrators proved last year, even mounting on the Acropolis, the very symbol of Western democracy, a banner calling for "resistance."

A panoramic play occurring in multiple spaces, such as Goran Stefanovski's *Hotel Europa*, demonstrates all of the tragedy and comedy in the tensions of "old Europe"

with its burnished charm, nationalist myth, and blood feuds as well as the “new Europe” of humiliated exiles and refugees, criminals and consumers. Here heart-breaking honesty mingled with the poetry of broken dreams delineates the bitter-sweet lives of each wandering soul’s definition of “Europeanness.” In Petr Zelenka’s *Tales of Ordinary Madness*, a family coming apart, their neighbors, and friends create an absurdist enclave in a post-communist world defined by the old Marxist-tinged newspeak, sexual perversity, and a peculiar strain of mental disjunction. Terse short sentences and half-formed words circulate in the silent undertow of Jon Fosse’s portrait of a family whose members gather around a dying mother in an intense psychological drama of imploding pauses and rigorous self-control. This is family drama *in extremis* in an aging Europe.

Words take on another meaning in Igor Bauersima’s *norway.today*, based on an actual incident, whose characters meet in a chat room where a young woman is looking for someone to commit suicide with her. She, and the teenager who answers, are the children of affluent Europe, who endlessly analyze their empty lives staring into the abyss, but not before videotaping and reimagining themselves in the dialogue and images of movies and literary texts. Also a view of contemporary life, *Push Up 1–3* moves into the new global world of young corporate executives who are ruthless and competitive, and so little differentiated that they often speak the same dialogue, usually revolving around success, clothes, shopping, food, and sex. Take a leap from *Mad Men* to the new capitalist marketplace.

The inclusion of children and young people is characteristic of contemporary European drama, surely linked to concern for the future of the human race in the face of so much social and environmental devastation worldwide. There has also been a marked rise in child pornography, sex slavery, kidnapping, and murder of children in Europe. Juan Mayorga has given “The Pied Piper” a new twist in *Hamlyn* to reveal the sexual and economic exploitation of young boys, compounded by the corruption of state power. Complicity and obfuscation protect the guilty and destroy the innocent.

The violent assault on the German state was the mission of the Baader-Meinhof gang, an ongoing subject of films, dance, visual art, and literature since their rampages in the late sixties and seventies. On the European continent utopia and revolution are central themes in social philosophy, and so it is not surprising that there are German intellectuals who continue to support the basic premises of Andreas Baader, Ulricke Meinhof, and the other notorious RAF member, Gudrun Ensslin. However, from her contemporary vantage point, Małgorzata Sikorska-Miszczuk views them as burlesque figures whose radical political program can only have led



to death and destruction and, in their case, hanging themselves in a jail cell once their situation became hopeless. This disenchantment with ideological extremes, along with the cognizance of their attraction, can be measured in the decades separating Ulrike Meinhof's tragic-comic role in *The Death of the Squirrel-Man* and Heiner Müller's glorification of the feminist terrorist in *Hamletmachine*.

Those were tumultuous days when the utopian ideals of revolution and social transformation were alive so soon after Europe's experience of '68. Whether your country was locked down or opened up depended on which side of Prague you faced, for it was that year, on August 21, that the Soviet Union's brutal entry into the city in the middle of the night cast an icy shadow over Europe that was not fully lifted until the fall of the Berlin Wall twenty-one years later. A few months before that momentous event, on an August day in 1989, Poland, land of the Pope who had been looking after Europe from the Holy See, elected its first non-communist prime minister, the Catholic Tadeusz Mazowiecki.

Today is August 25, 2009. Fires are raging in the ancient Greek villages near Boeotia where Europa's brother Cadmus came looking for his sister, who had been abducted by Zeus (or Jupiter, if you were a Roman) appearing in the form of a seductive bull and carried to other lands. He traveled on to Delphi to ask about her. Who knows what the Oracle is thinking these days while the hot winds blow this way and that?

