

**THEATRE IN THE UKRAINIAN BORDERLAND:  
VERTEP, AVANT-GARDISM AND CABARET  
DRAMATURGY – LES KURBAS, JURA SOYFER  
AND THEATRE ARABESQUE**

*Knut Ove ARNTZEN (University of Bergen)*

**A dialogic space between East and West in Ukraine  
and Central Europe**

The Republic of Ukraine, as well as the earlier Soviet republic of Ukraine, has an ethnographically very diverse population, something that has left tracks in folkloristic theatre as well as in the artistic practices of the avant-garde and has had quite an impact on the interrelation between the two. In this context folklore means popular telling of tradition, and that again may merge into and inspire avant-gardist forms of expression.

After the dissolving of the Soviet Union it was an official aim to enforce the complex Ukrainian cultural heritage and make it the basis of a national identity. Another basis for this was finding back to the avant-gardist heritage, not the least in connection to the work of the theatre-pedagogue and director Les Kurbas (1887-1937). The avant-gardist heritage got more or less lost along with the eradication of the Ukrainian avant-garde in the middle of the 1930s, which was the period when Kurbas himself was deported. Both before and after 1945 the Soviet-Russian theatre has had great importance, especially after social realism was adopted into theatre from the early 1930s and became a psychological-realistic mainstream within theatre of the Soviet Union in general. This mainstream may be compared for instance to the Norwegian Ibsen-tradition and other traditions of realism within European theatre.

The Soviet Avant-garde had better surviving conditions in Russia than in Ukraine, but the avant-garde of both regions had a common source of inspiration in the folkloristic expressive forms of Ukraine as well as of Caucasus and Turkey (Picon-Vallin 2008: 123-135). The Ukrainian folklore was especially predominant in

the Vertep-tradition, and after 1990 the Vertep-tradition has been revived in Ukraine, while contemporarily the Ukrainian avant-garde of the Soviet-Republican era has been academically investigated and tried out as a basis for a new avant-gardist theatre (Kornienko 1969-2005). Hereby both traditions have become central in the creation of a new national Ukrainian majority culture while in the Soviet time it was a minority culture, in a time when the Russian mainstream-tradition within theatre was coloured by the fact that the Soviet-Russian theatre education of Moscow and Leningrad was the career way of both Russian and Ukrainian theatre.

In light of this I will focus on the dynamics of dialogic rooms of culture within a Ukrainian borderland between east and west, as well as in relation to Central Europe. I will show you Les Kurbas himself as an example of this dynamics, and also look at how the heritage from the Jewish-Ukrainian-Austrian cabaret artist and dramatist Jura Soyfer (1912-39) has been adopted into the productions of the Theater Arabesque, which was founded in Kharkiv in 1993. This theatre ensemble has attempted to combine the avant-gardist heritage from Les Kurbas with vertep, an old folkloristic tradition of pantomime that along with the Russian balagan inspired the avant-gardes of the 1920s and early 1930s in the Soviet Republics of both Russia and Ukraine. I will look at how this has contributed to the creation of a neo-avantgardist theatre form with features of recycling (Arntzen 2009) and postmodernism. Not the least thanks to the Teater Arabesque the neo-avant-gardist theatre has adopted into it strong elements of cabaret dramaturgy from Jura Soyfer's political cabaret enterprises during his emigration to Vienna as well as influence from the many plays that he wrote. The Theater Arabesque has worked with Jura Soyfer's texts and his form of political cabaret and has connected these elements with les Kurbas' physical and stylized theatre style.

My methodic perspective is seeing Ukraine as an example of exchange of the popular-venicular, the religious and the political within the dialogic room (Arntzen 2012). Ukraine is in many ways comparable to a cultural room in which the borders have moved throughout history and where you can trace important historical connections from different geographic directions in prehistoric

and elder historic time and, of course, in modern history. Ukraine, comprehended as a geographic region with a common language, Ukrainian, has historically been divided in west and east between Galitsia, which was a part of Poland-Lithuania and later Austria-hungary, and then again in 1945 along with East-Ukraine merged into the later Ukrainian Soviet republic with Kiev as its capital. The first Ukrainian Soviet Republic (East-Ukraine) had Kharkiv (Kharkov) as its capital. The Russian influence, especially linguistically, has been especially strong in eastern Ukraine, particularly so in the geographic triangle of Kiev-Poltava-Kharkiv (Kiev is Kyiv in Ukrainian, Kharkiv is Kharkov in Russian).

### **The Vertep-tradition, the balagan and the Sovietic avant-garde**

Popular theatre has a long tradition in Ukraine and its borderlands, and may be traced back to the influence from the Byzantine era under the Kiev Rus-reign. In the Sofia-Cathedral in Kiev you can see a fresco from the 1000th century or older depicting dancers and musicians. In relation to the old contact with the Scandinavian countries well known in sources from the Viking era, there are some interesting tracks that we may take notice of. One is the story of Viking funeral rites from Ibn Fadlan's description of his journey (cfr. Ibn Fadlan 1981), another is the Viking graffiti on Haga Sofia in Constantinople (Istanbul) and all the tales of fish traders from the time who took part in festivals such as is documented.

The popular Ukrainian vertep-tradition, also spoken of as "Christmas-pantomime", possibly originates in the popular ritual theatre forms that survived even the Byzantine Church that the Kiev Rus-empire joined in the early Medieval Ages. In the Santa Sofia Cathedral of Kiev there is a fresco depicting dancing jugglers and musicians. This fact touches even the question whether the theatre survived in the Byzantine Empire and its region of influence. It is not a central issue in my investigation but is an aspect that will be dealt with. This means that vertep may trace its origins back to the Byzantine era and survived the Stalinist eradications because popular folklore art was not struck down on in the same way as

avant-garde art. This was so in spite of the fact that folklore art of all kind was a source of inspiration to the avant-garde theatre. Vertep means “plank shed” or “Christmas manger”, and corresponding to the Ukrainian Vertep there existed a specific Russian variant of a folklore pantomime theatre or market place theatre; the so-called balagan.

Balagan is the name of a popular market place pantomime that may have come to Russia from Western Europe, where Theatre de la Foire or Jahrmarktstheater was known in France and Germany. This market place pantomime could also be used to show morally enforcing theatre, but it was most famous for its comical pantomimes. The Grotesque was an important dramaturgic form to the Soviet avant-garde theatre workers and it has its background directly in this combination of market place theatre, circus and chaplinism (Meyerhold).

The Russian and Soviet avant-garde artists were very preoccupied with such popular traditions as sources of inspiration to their working processes. It was a common thought that it was in these types of expressions the Russian soul was kept alive, and in this thought these artists came close to something authentic that even was open to political use. In painting this is particularly known from the paintings of Marc Chagall who combined folklore and surrealism, and before him in the paintings of Vassilij Kandinsky with his abstract-mystical pictures.

### **Les Kurbas and the Berezil-group: Soviet theatre avant-garde**

The strong avant-garde movements within the Soviet Union in the 1920s, and before that at the end of the Tsar-regime, had great impact on international art- and theatre development. Its impact on theatre development expressed itself through the work of theatre directors who put their emphasis on physical stylising or a biomechanical acting style, in Russia represented by Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940) and Jevgenij Vakhtangov (1883-1922) and in Ukraine by Les Kurbas. In many ways Kurbas represented a Ukrainian parallel to Meyerhold's biomechanical acting style with emphasis on the stylised and on external impulses.

The western theatre research that has preoccupied her self a lot with Les Kurbas' work is professor Beatrice Picon-Vallin (Picon-Vallin 2010), the French specialist on Sovietic theatre history who has written an article comparing Meyerhold and Kurbas. In her article Picon-Vallin is emphasising the fact that there was a kind of competitive relationship between them while contemporarily they respected each other sincerely. Both of them were strongly influenced by *commedia dell'arte*, the grotesque and by the Russian and Ukrainian folklore traditions *vertep* and *balagan*. Each in their own respective cities, Moscow and Kharkiv, they established theatre studios with corresponding schools, training facilities and stages. Kurbas' Teater Berezil was established in Kharkiv in 1922, with its own theatre building from 1924. Meyerhold as well as Kurbas took interest in contemporary European theatre, in German expressionism and in the work of directors such as Edward Gordon Craig and Georg Fuchs. More importantly they were preoccupied with Eastern European marketplace-theatre traditions and by Japanese *kabuki*-theatre. It was important to the two that theatre and acting regained the physical dimension and abstained from producing theatre regulated by text. In this directing was central and in fact determinant to both Meyerhold and Kurbas who were the very first to establish their own theatre education within their studios. During his childhood Kurbas lived in Galitsia, then a province of the Austrian-Hungarian monarchy, so he was well acquainted to Germanic-lingual theatre and especially in Vienna.

Berezil became a centre of experiments with theatrical and physical forms of expression within Ukrainian theatre, and they developed a style that the Soviet government accused of being formalistic, anti-psychological and contrary to popular acting. Kurbas however insisted that theatre should not be illusionistic or have anything to do with empathy. The actor should rather objectively portray the character and never identify with it. This program is also known from Berthold Brecht's epical theatre even though there this is more modified. Les Kurbas' style and theatre method was by far more radical than that of Berthold Brecht.

Yosip Hirniak was one of the actors in Kurbas' Berezil-group and survived the 1930s' persecution of the formalists. Hirniak

immigrated to the US where he wrote about the rise and fall of Ukrainian theatre (Hirniak 1954, cf. Picon-Vallin 2010).

The avant-gardist movement in Ukraine was crushed in the 1930s because Stalin saw it as formalistic and unable to create what the Soviet government characterised as social realism. In Ukraine most of the avant-garde artists were deported to the Solovetski-islands in the White Sea, not far from the Norwegian border to the Arkhangelsk-region. There they either died or got killed after a varying length of time when they all suffered inhuman labouring conditions. The paradox is that this concentration camp within the Gulag system had been established in what was formerly a monastery. Les Kurbas himself still continued to produce theatre here until death put it to an end, using fellow concentration camp prisoners as actors.

The inheritance from Les Kurbas was more or less forgotten, but when the Soviet Union disintegrated and Ukraine became an independent state this inheritance was revived and his work documented and researched. The theatre group named Theater Arabesque in Kharkiv is trying to work with this inheritance in combination with making use of *vertep*, since in its time it inspired Les Kurbas, Meyerhold and many other Russian avant-garde artists. In Kiev Les Kurbas' work is documented at the Les Kurbas Centre which is working with documentation as well as being a location for productions of new theatre forms that are all inspired by him (Les Kurbas National Centrum for Theatre Art, Kiev, Ukraine).

### **Jura Soyfer: A Jewish-Ukrainian-Austrian cabaret artist in Vienna**

During a stay in Kiev and Kharkiv in the autumn of 2012 I visited the Les Kurbas- Centre in Kiev, the Sancta Sofia cathedral in Kiev and the Theater Arabesque in Kharkiv, and I took part in an arrangement by the Literature Museum in Kharkiv in connection to the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Jura Soyfer. The Jewish-Ukrainian-Austrian cabaret artist and dramatic Jura Soyfer (1912-39) had been working with theatre throughout all of his time as an emigrant in Vienna. His cabaret-dramaturgical style is one of the sources for the Theater Arabesque and his work as a cabaret artist in

Vienna in the 1920s and -30s will be dealt with here as an example of cultural exchange in borderland regions.

It is difficult to say exactly what Jura Soyfer brought with him from Kharkiv during his escape with his parents from the Soviet Union via Istanbul to Vienna in 1921. His father had been the manager of Hotel Astoria in Kharkiv and the name Astoria is used repeatedly in one of his plays as an ironising synonym for Austria, the land that rose from the ashes of the First World War and the fall of the Austrian Empire. The Austrian folklore theatre-tradition from Johann Nestroy and the Germanic-lingual *Commedia dell'Arte*-tradition and *Fastnachtspiele* maybe, or the German comical and grotesquely folkloric theatre tradition (cf. Münz 1979), both of which could be both moralistic and simultaneously comical. This tradition has a slight resemblance to the *vertep* and *balagan*. In Vienna Soyfer got politically active on the left wing, something that destined his fate when during the Nazi regime he was deported to a concentration camp where he died of Typhoid fever in 1939. His plays were built up as cabarets accompanied by music, quite similar to the manner in which Berthold Brecht developed his epical theatre where the stages were cabaret acts accompanied by ballads and music. For Soyfer's part this theatre form was inspired by the cabaret style known as *kleinkunst*, which made use of comical effects and improvisation at basement locations (Jarka 1984: 7-21). To Soyfer as well as Brecht the political message becomes the predominant and adopts in it self the popular-vernacular and religious elements transformed to a political moralism. Cabaret dramaturgy involves the use of acts, episodes and situations loosely put together with musical acts and ballads, something that is found repeatedly in Soyfer's play *Der Lechner Edie, Astoria, Vineta and Broadway-Melodie* 1492. He also wrote some lyrical ballads that had a very poetical and existentialistic character.

Jura Soyfer's play *Astoria* (Soyfer 1934) has some features by it that are predicting surrealism, something which is indicated by the fact that Soyfer him self wrote an article in a newspaper where he stated that something new was going on in French cabaret- and folklore theatre, where playwrights connected the lyrical, the epical and the dramatic with emphasis on the eternal issues of art (Soyfer

1937, Arntzen 2000). A striking parallel to Beckett is when the two tramps in Astoria, Hupka and Pistoletti, resemble Estragon and Vladimir in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In Astoria the two tramps are picked up by an American tourist, who is almost a Godot who is actually coming, she makes the two tramps ministers of the new Republic of Astoria, which is a symbol of the post-Habsburgian Austria that was divided into the two states of Austria and Hungary. It was the Nazis' communist hunt that ruined Jura Soyfer in the years succeeding the Anschluss, and he died from Typhoid fever in Buchenwald as political prisoner before the Holocaust gained its full force in Austria.

### **Teater Arabesque's Radio and the inheritance from Les Kurbas and Jura Soyfer**

As I have mentioned earlier, Teater Arabesque was founded in Kharkiv in 1993 and has been licenced to work in the same industrial area in Kharkiv where Les Kurbas and the Berezil-group were working, right below the Jewish Synagogue. Through its productions the Teater Arabesque is processing something like a Ukrainian avant-gardist esthetical identity existing in the suspension area between verstep, avant-garde theatre and a recycling (cf. recycling, Arntzen 2009) of modernism but with postmodern features. In 2002-2003 Teater Arabesque presented a co-production in Poland that in English was titled *Critical Days* and engulfed a visual artistic project in Kharkiv, Kiev and Yerevan in Armenia. It released a series of sound recordings, debates and lectures.

Radio (*Eight Stories about Jura Soyfer*) is a political cabaret based on Jura Soyfer's stories on life in the urban jungle, on the struggle for survival in the shadows of the City world. The textual edition is by S. Zhadan and the directing by Svitlana Oleshko who is also the manager of Teater Arabesque. Radio was produced for the first time in 2007 and then for the second time in connection with the celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the birth of Jura Soyfer at Kharkiv in December 2012. The production is working with an acting technique that is making use of very stylised movements, and this resembles a recycling of Les Kurbas' and Meyerhold's physical acting technique. It takes the character of juggling acts where the



spectators are placed close to the stage area and are surprised by physical techniques and elements of neo-circus such as acrobatics and use of stelts. The spectators have to accompany the actors into a kind of City jungle and into the stories connected to it. "How do you find your way in alien cities" is one of the questions asked. The title Radio may seem a paradox, but goes back to the idea that broadcasts are really a kind of Babel's wireless telling of stories with reference to "Radio Babylon". Babylon is the symbol of the first ancient city where communication is disintegrating and people left to them selves and their own survival. The atmosphere of the production may resemble a Yiddish cabaret not the least due to its musical character. The scenography consists of a series of white-painted cubical box elements that are built up, torn down and used as dividing lines in the frontally arranged room.

### **Cabaret dramaturgy and folklore in border regions**

Teater Arabesque, in the direction of Svitlana Oleshko, has been producing theatre between East and West, between the earlier Austrian-Hungarian province of Galitsia-Vienna-East Ukraine with its tartaric Khozak-traditions. Arabesque also has projects together with Poland, which Galitsia or West-Ukraine was part of in 1918-1945. Worth mentioning is especially the cooperation with the theatre group Gardzienice from the Lublin-region in today's South-eastern Poland, a group that also had projects in cooperation with Norway with Teater Beljash in the 1980s. These projects worked in a dialogical, ritual and popular-vernacular space.

By help of a method that focuses on exchange within dialogic spaces in geographical and cultural contexts, you will be able to analyse theatre productions as well as other forms of visual artistic expressions. Hereby it is also possible to create a panorama over folklore-inspired theatre and contemporarily investigate how they have affected mainstream theatre in the former Soviet Union, Russia or even Scandinavia, such as Sami theatre or Leif Stinnarbom's Vestanå Teater in Sweden. Making our historiographical basis borderland problems and historical theatre forms like balagan and vertep this has become possible.

Such a panorama will also indicate that such theatrical and artistic expressive forms especially cover the Finno-Ugrian, East-Slavic and South-Slavic culture area in the Balkans. In addition the Tartaric-Mongolian and Arabic dimension may indeed be added to it as we include countries such as Iraq and Syria. Along a North-South axis we may find examples from Barentsburg at Svalbard with its folklore-coloured tourist shows via Sami theatre to the Albanian theatre in Skopje, Macedonia. Along an East-West axis we may draw a line from the Central-Asiatic republics to Azerbaijan, Iran and Turkey and to folklore-inspired theatre groups in Southern Europe and Northern Africa. The regional theatre festival in Istanbul was an example of a festival seeking to gather these converging points (Arntzen 2005: A and B).

Geographically Ukraine is a converging point for many such axes, while contemporarily Ukrainian theatre is a paradigmatic example of a borderland theatre. In force of its reference to the term “arabesque” the Teater Arabesque says something important about a theatre and a form of art that is drawing up lines that are constantly crossing each other in many directions. Truly this is a good metaphor for the complexity of borderland cultures.

### **Bibliography**

---

- Arntzen, K.O. (2000): “From Cabaret Dramaturgy towards a new Theatre Text. The Dramatist as Theatre Worker”. *Dramaturgische und politische Strategien im Drama und Theater des 20. Jahrhunderts* (eds. K. O. Arntzen, S. Leirvåg, E. N. Vestli, St. Ingbert: Röhrig Universitätsverlag.
- Arntzen, K.O. (2012): “A metaphorical View on Cultural Dialogues: Struve’s Meridian Arc and Reflections on Memories in Eastern and Northern Borderlands”. *The Borders of Europe. Hegemony. Aesthetics and Border Poetics*. H. V. Holm, S. Lægereid, T. Skorgen (eds.). Århus: Aarhus University Press.
- Hirniak, I. (1954): “Birth and Death of Modern Ukrainian Theatre”. *Soviet Theatre 1917-1941*, M. Bradshaw (ed.). New York: Research program on the USSR, Studios on USSR, nr 7.
- Ibn Fadlan (1981): *Vikingerne ved Volga*. Ibn Fadlans rejsebeskrivelse, translated into Danish and commented by Jørgen Bæk Simonsen, Højberg: Wormianum.
- Kornienko, N. (1969-2005): *Rezisserskoe iskusstvo Lesja Kurbasa. Rekonstrukcija (1887-1937)*, Kiev: Gos. Cent rim. Lesja Kurbasa.

- Münz, R. (1979): *Das andere Theater. Studien über ein deutschsprachiger teatro dell'arte der Lessingzeit*, Berlin DDR: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft.
- Jarka, H. (1984): *Einleitung*, in *Jura Soyfer. Szenen und Stücke* (H. Jarka ed.), Wien-München-Zürich: Europaverlag.
- Picon-Vallin, B. (2008): "Les modalités du récit dans le théâtre interculturel de Mehmet Ulusoy". *Formes du narrative dans le théâtre*, A. Candan (ed.), Colloque 26-27 Mai 2006 Istanbul: Yeditepe Universiteti.
- Picon-Vallin, B. (2010): "Meyerhold et Kurbas". *Modernism in Kiev*, I. R. Makary, V. Tkacz (eds.), Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Soyfer, J (1937): Artikel in *Wiener Tag*, 21.2., Wien.
- Soyfer, J. (1984): "Astoria". *Jura Soyfer. Szenen und Stücke* (H. Jarka ed.), Wien-München-Zürich: Europaverlag.