

Award ceremony Goethe Medal 2014

Speech by Krystyna Meissner

(Check against delivery)

This is a huge and wonderful surprise. Huge!! I have received the Goethe Medal! It is even more amazing that I have received it for something that is the effect of my passions. But is it a passionate attitude toward life which is being rewarded? No. Is it the possession of a certain obsession which must be realized despite all obstacles which is being rewarded? Probably also not. Especially since it is a reward in and of itself to gradually achieve the effect for which one is aiming. And what was, what is that passion of mine, that great passion to which I have devoted most of my life? What have I been aiming for so insistently?

It was a search for mutual understanding with other human beings through theater. A search for fascinating experiences that one can only have in contact with another person with a deep sensitivity to the world around us. This person shows us the world in a different, considerably richer perspective. We can accept it or not. Though without doubt it arouses our astonishment, fascination and anxiety.

This situation places me in the role of a sort of mediator between the theatrical artist and the theater-goer. This mediation is of a very delicate nature: it is a suggestion to the theater-goer of what is worth seeing, what would give him or her a powerful artistic experience.

With time, if an aura of expectation and tension was created around the events I have produced, around the individual festival editions, that has given me a feeling of satisfaction, an impression that what I do is necessary and desirable. This is the greatest reward of which a festival program organizer can dream.

What was the direct stimulus for the idea of organizing first the KONTAKT theater festival in Toruń, then the DIALOG festival in Wrocław?

When I took over the directorship of the theater in Toruń, it had already for a long time been organizing a festival known as FTTP (Festiwal Teatrów Polski Północnej – Festival of Theaters in Northern Poland). The political situation in Europe was growing more and more heated and interesting. It was the beginning of all the political revolutions in this part of the continent. I knew something had to change. And then I figured out how little we know about each other – even the countries that are our nearest neighbors. And about such a peculiar field of art – about theater, we know almost nothing.

And so began that fascinating adventure. Obviously, it goes without saying that at the beginning, it was very difficult. It was necessary to make new personal connections, see for myself what is noteworthy, and what is not. It was necessary to remove the ideological dishonesty from theater (previously, the operating principle was rather ideological silence, or else a policy of so-called allusion). Thus began my journey without road signs or personal connections.

Once upon a time, this is what happened: one day, towards evening, traveling over the boundless spaces of the country which at the time proudly called itself the Soviet Union, we arrived at a crossing of two asphalt roads with no road signs of any kind. It was like something out of a nightmare. And then my inestimable driver said, 'We are aiming for the setting sun,' and at that moment it was setting. After all, Poland lies to the west of Russia. He was right. We arrived home!

Sometimes, in searching for interesting shows for my program, I made mistakes, especially where German theater was concerned: I selected shows cautiously, supported by names of Polish and Czech directors.

I don't know in what measure my predilection for German theater was influenced by Renate Klett – who was, among other things, a member of the jury rating the shows in Toruń. In any case, at the fourth edition of the KONTAKT festival, the name of Jossi Wieler appeared as the director of a superb

show from the Thalia Theater in Hamburg – Wolken. Heim. The fifth edition of the festival, in 1995, hosted Christopher Marthaler's famous presentation Murx den Europaer! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn ab! from the Volksbühne theater in Berlin.

And so it continued: almost every edition featured a German presentation – and this, because German theater turned out to be a bottomless gold mine of new and extraordinarily interesting artists, such as Stefan Pucher, Andreas Kriegenburg, Thomas Ostermeier and Rene Pollesch; as well as superb foreign directors who collaborated with the splendid German theaters in Hamburg and Munich, such as Luc Perceval and Johan Simons.

The Goethe Institute began to collaborate with the KONTAKT festival from the fourth edition onwards, continuously supporting all the visits from German theaters – they were shown first at the KONTAKT festival, then at the DIALOG festival.

But the Toruń festival did not confine itself only to making a closer acquaintance with the theater of Western Europe. Artists from Eastern, Southern and Northern Europe, as well, were more and more often beginning their international careers at the KONTAKT festival – for example, Alvis Hermanis (Latvia), Eimuntas Nekrošius and Oskaras Koršunovas (Lithuania), Elmo Nüganen (Estonia), Árpád Schilling (Węgry), Nikolai Kolada (Russia), Sylviu Purcărete (Romania) et al.

Among Russian artists, the festival has hosted Pyotr Fomenko, Sergei Artsybashev, Valery Fokin, Kama Ginkas and Anatoly Vasiliev.

Promotion of Polish theater has also been very close to my heart. It was in Toruń that the French were enchanted with Krystian Lupa's show Kalkwerk. It is also thanks to special promotion from the KONTAKT festival at the turn of the century that such Polish artists as Krzysztof Warlikowski and Grzegorz Jarzyna took their permanent place in the Western theater repertoire.

I feel like the godmother of many international careers for artists from Eastern and Central Europe. Obviously, my participation in this was small but important: thanks to the two festivals, I simply gave artists and European theaters previously unknown to each other the opportunity to make a closer acquaintance. And I can boldly say, on the occasion of being awarded the Goethe Medal, that all the collaboration of European theater would not have happened if it weren't for the riches and diversity of the individual national theaters – such as, for example, the boldness and panache of German theater, the non-traditional reading of European literature by Dutch and Belgian theater, the love for the spoken word of French theater, the brutality of Hungarian theater, the peculiarity of Czech humor in the theater of our southern neighbor, the spontaneous emotionality of Russian theater, etc. etc. etc.

In a word, immeasurably grateful for the award of such an illustrious distinction as is the Goethe Medal, I would like to thank all theater people for such exciting theater, with which they have allowed me to fall in love.

Thank you with all my heart