VERSMĖ: Directly from the Scene of Drama

The Lithuanian National Drama Theater (LNDT) is launching the first stage of this year's Contemporary dramaturgy festival "Versmė" and announcing an open call for ideas. Young writers and theatre makers are invited to get acquainted with the specifics of creating documentary theater and to develop a theater piece that might become a part of the repertoire of LNDT. Those who wish to participate are invited to submit their applications by March 15. The slogan of this year's festival – "Direct Drama".

The Transformation of "Versmė": from National to Contemporary

Since 2005 the initiative of the LNDT to promote the work of young dramatists has changed its form several times: having started as a competition for plays and public readings, the project soon turned into an intensive educational process and even a dramaturgy festival. This year, with the addition of Contemporary Drama readings that used to go as a separate event, the program of the festival will not only include a competition of ideas and continue the educational program and presenting its' results, but will also invite the audience to readings of documentary theater texts.

One of the organizers of the "Versmė" festival, Viktorija Ivanova, says: "In 2017, we organized open lectures and seminars aimed at introducing Lithuanian authors to the specifics and kinds of documentary theater, and this year we will invite them to forget the theory and engage in practice. We would like to encourage them to stop thinking about such concepts as "documentary" or "documentarist" and to analyze real-life stories, and engage in a kind of direct drama – we have allowed ourselves to borrow the concept of *direct cinema* and to apply it to the documentary theater. We invite theater makers (especially writers) to "blow out the candle", by which they are waiting for muses or inspiration, turn on their voice recorders or i-phone cameras and try and capture the realities of this day."

The festival's coordinator Agnė Pulokaitė says that "...not only is the English word 'direct' *directly* connected to theater; it is also the beginning of the word 'direction'. This year, we will invite you to, first, choose the *direction*, then go *directly* to drama and, with just a bit of *directing*, present it to the audience from the stage of our theater"

Documentary is just a keyword

And if we forget the word “documentary” – what are the young theatre makers invited to create? “We’d see a theater process that combines various theatrical and interdisciplinary artistic instruments to tell authentic stories, whose means of expression are extremely broad,” says Martynas Budraitis, the head of the LNDT. “We would like to encourage the emergence of works of stage art, in which social and political realities are synthesized. We imagine it as a series of performances, whose creators have been listening and now are telling us what they have heard, using various theatrical forms and interdisciplinary arts to tell relevant and authentic stories.”

Not only actors and creative teams interact with the fabric of such theatre, but also documentary images, films, photographs, and different objects of reality. However, this theater is far from boring. To make sure, let’s look at the work of two future mentors at “Versmė” – the Polish-French theater director Anna Smolar and the director Mimi Poskitt, the founder of the British theater group “Look left look right”. A *mockumentary* play about actors of a Jewish theater, or the story of a woman whose tumor cells were cultivated by doctors, who even created the first human cell line, are analyzed on the stage using tap dancing and such characters as cancer itself. You can talk from the stage about Aung San Suu Kyi – the famous Burma’s politician and diplomat, political prisoner and Nobel Peace Prize winner kept under house arrest for 13 years. Could it be boring to listen to London’s sex industry workers, men, women, and transsexuals, who are teachers, cleaners, parents etc. by day, telling their stories from the stage by night? And the story of the Zimbabwean Diaspora’s return home from Great Britain? Can the memories of survivors of a London bombing sound artificial and monotonous?

An invitation to explore and create communities

This year young authors are encouraged to form creative groups, involving not only the authors of texts, future dramatists, but also directors, interdisciplinary artists, anthropologists, and others. Applications can be submitted by individuals, not necessarily groups, but for working with the mentors in the coming summer you will need a team and LNDT reserves the right to form a team from local theater makers. We do not guarantee to reimburse the travel expenses for foreign applicants, but opportunities will be sought.

The authors applying for the competition are invited to look for pertinent topics that can become a work of stage art, to search for acute, “socially charged” problems, to analyze, explore and discuss modern reality. In the upcoming theater season, the LNDT will try to reflect on a variety of different communities, and the first attempts have already been quite successful: the documentary performances in the theater repertoire are already stimulating discussion about various aspects of the life of refugees and immigrants in Lithuania (“Dreamland” by M. Jančiauskas), deconstructing the face of the city of Visaginas and the effects of the decommissioning of the Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant on Visaginas together with its residents (“Green Meadow” by J. Tertelis and K. Werner, at the moment J. Tertelis is also exploring the temperatures of the city

of Šalčininkai), going back to school and, along with students, wandering the corridors of different schools in Lithuania (P. Tamolė's "#noschoolbell")

Meanwhile, communities are defined not only by their geographic latitude or age: in Lithuania as well as in the world, people are forming various eco-communities, there are the new hippies (the memories of the hippies of old times are still alive. After all, Woodstock will soon celebrate its fiftieth anniversary), examples can be found both in the China-towns emerging in the southern countries, and in the Ukrainian commune in Naujoji Akmenė. We can also draw inspiration from the once large Scottish community in Kėdainiai, the facts and myths surrounding the Paulava Republic, let alone the Grand Duchy of Lithuania's colonies in Gambia and Tobago? It is no less interesting to think about the future of the Roma tabor – all this material can be used by documentary theater makers. The territory of documentary material should not be strictly Lithuania, but it is recommended to look for topics that are relevant here as well.

LNDT invites young theater makers to focus on models, experiences and stories of both more closed or more open communities, to find out what connects people and drives them to separate from others. Applicants are invited to discuss their topics with the organizers of the festival before submitting an application.

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The terms of the competition:

- Young people (preferably under the age of 35) are invited to take part in the competition;

- The contestants are asked to provide a short presentation of a documentary performance (up to 2 pages), a material collection (research) plan (up to 2 pages), a presentation of their creative work and their CV (up to 2 pages): the entire material should be submitted in English; we will assess the idea – not the grammar.

- Send your applications by March 15 to versme@teatras.lt. Write to this address if you have any questions or queries regarding the competition, its terms, etc.

The course of events at "Versmė'18":

- Applications will be accepted by March 15

- The committee will evaluate the applications and announce the results by mid-April. The selected participants will be informed and given tasks they may need to carry out by May.

- The creative workshop is scheduled for June-August; both Anna Smolar and Mimi Poskitt will come to Lithuania twice (the duration of each stay – 5 workdays). The exact dates and the schedule for additional events will be announced in spring. The winners of the Open Call will be obliged to participate in all of their designated workshops and in the subsequent rehearsing.

- September-October – the development of sketches based on documentary theater project results/plays, rehearsals

- November – public readings of plays, the mentors of the creative workshops and seminars will participate in the discussions.

More about the mentors:

ANNA SMOLAR:

Polish-French theater director, a graduate of the University of Paris-Sorbonne, one of the most interesting representatives of the new generation of contemporary Polish theater. The talented director has worked with Krystian Lupa, Jacques Lassale and as Andrzej Seweryn's assistant, she has also cooperated with Agnieszka Holland in filmmaking. Ana Smolar mostly works in Poland and France. The director says, “My recent projects have had a documentary side to them. It is very interesting to see what happens when an actor starts his or her work from meeting with a real person, and then develops a play from real life and things that have an effect on us here and now. I see the group of actors as a mirror of a certain community and encourage the actors to co-write the texts. I’m interested in their opinions, sensitivity and word choices. We are also looking for a means and a personal language that would inspire a dialogue.”

MIMI POSKITT:

The founder and the artistic director of the London-based theatre group “Look left look right”, who has presented her work at Young Vic Theater in London, the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, in Covent Garden, and many other British and foreign theaters and festivals. The theater company “LLLR” develops works inspired by the contemporary world. According to M. Poskitt, “we get inspiration from the usual and unusual places, people and real stories, so that using the theater as a medium, we can re-create experiences and memories – often surprising and always memorable.”

“LLLR” has always paid attention to voicing experiences of voiceless communities, working with non-professional actors on stage, as well as using *verbatim* theater techniques. “Engagement is at the center of our work,” says M. Poskitt, “we work with participants of the process in every stage of the process to reveal their collective ownership and tell their stories”