

ALL THE WORLD’S... VERTEP

The Holocaust Tragedy as shown in two Shows:

"Everything will be alright" (Kyiv, Ukraine) and "Friedl Dicker" (Hamm, Germany)

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Work on this article began on 15th of July 2022, the day when in the author's hometown Mykolayiv, Russia bombed two of the greatest Ukrainian universities - the Admiral Makarov National University of Shipbuilding and the Mykolayiv National University named after the Ukrainian pedagogue Vasyl Sukhomlynsky whose words were placed on the universities front entrance: "I give my heart to children".

This quote also reflects the guidelines of the professional and human activities of the two main characters of the shows discussed here: the Polish pedagogue Janusz Korczak and the Austrian artist Friedl Dicker-Brandeis.

Introduction

The tragic theme of the Holocaust has been, is, and remains a deeply touching and sensitive one for world history and culture. The shocking realities of the persecution of the Jewish people during the Second World War were a subject in numerous theatrical productions, among others. In recent theatrical seasons, Ukrainian professional, amateur and independent theatre groups have created several productions and projects that in one way or another reveal the profound tragedy of this human catastrophe.

Most of these Ukrainian productions and projects can be characterized as documentary drama, since the dramaturgical base are memoirs, archival documents, or written memoirs of eyewitnesses and surviving Holocaust victims. Playwrights nowadays emphasize the reconstruction and reflection of historical events rather than building fictional narratives. Following the logic and chronology of real facts, experiences and impressions, the communication of performers and audience unfolds through direct narration with elements of theatricalization.

The productions "Everything Will Be Alright" (1994) by the Kyiv Municipal Academic Puppet Theatre on the Left Bank of the Dnieper (directed by Serhii Yefremov) and "Friedl Dicker" (2022) by Helios Theatre in Hamm, Germany (directed by Barbara Kölling) fit organically into the palette of theatrical reflections on the horrific Holocaust events. Both shows, put into context with each other, build a peculiar "diptych" of puppetry performances that were created by dissimilar stage directors – unfamiliar with each other's work – from

different periods and diverse cultural paradigms, that distinguish them from other performances. Both shows are synonymous in their theme and in their concept of meaning, which is reflected in the artistic and scenographic solutions.

To analyze the stage-settings and the visual images built in "Everything Will Be Alright" and "Friedl Dicker", it seems obvious to refer to the Ukrainian vertep theatre. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the semantics of its architecture, to consider the law of separation of the vertep stage in two floors, to analyze the basic principles of (scenographic) composition of the vertep chest and to explore the features of sacred and profane dichotomy of the vertep puppetry plays.

Janusz Korczak and Friederike Dicker-Brandeis

Before we proceed to the analysis of the mentioned performances, it is advisable, to give a brief historical reference about their main characters - we are talking about Janusz Korczak and Friederike Dicker-Brandeis, whose tragic fates were artistically reflected in the works discussed in the following.

Janusz Korczak was an outstanding Polish educator, doctor, and author of Jewish origin. He was famous for his wide philanthropic activities. In 1911, he founded the Home for Jewish Orphans in Warsaw. In 1942, hundreds of Jewish orphans were deported to Treblinka extermination camp. Even though he could have saved himself, Korczak insisted to accompany the children in his care to the camp, following his conscientiousness as a teacher and although he knew that it meant death for him. He did not leave his children to face death alone.

Friederike (Friedl) Dicker-Brandeis was a famous Austrian Jewish artist, costume, and stage designer. She studied and taught at the Staatliche Bauhaus in Weimar, collaborated with theaters in Berlin and Dresden, and successfully ran an atelier and art studio. In 1942, given the opportunity to escape, she did not leave her husband and was deported with him to the Jewish ghetto in the Czech town Terezín. There, she worked with round about 600 pupils on the children's artistic expression, giving drawing classes to protect and distract the children from the horrors of being locked up and the expectation of death. In 1944 the artist died in Auschwitz with almost all her pupils. Before Dicker-Brandeis was deported to the concentration camp she packed the nearly 5000 drawings of her pupils in suitcases. They were hidden and later given to the Jewish Community in Prague. It is because of her that these testimonies survived.

Creating documentary Performances

The heroic fates of Janusz Korczak and Friederike Dicker-Brandeis are worthy of the attention of historians and artists. Puppetry performances "Everything Will Be Alright" and "Friedl Dicker" are vivid testimonies to the relevance of reflections of the Holocaust's tragic realities.

These performances present not only external features of synonymity (the tragic destinies and the historical context of the main characters, and the documentary nature of the narrative),

but also much deeper artistic and imaginative parallels, which turned out to be in the poetic metaphors and metamorphoses that occur with the objects and the stage design.

Let us turn to the setup of the stage: both performances are characterized by Iryna Uvarova and Krista Burger minimalist, almost primitive, approach. The directors and artists intentionally surround the actors with only few objects, which, during the performance, are played by the performers and, accordingly, are transformed semantically, obtaining new visual images.

This approach to the creation of plays is characteristic both for the Kyiv Municipal Academic Puppet Theatre's early period and for the Helios Theatre. According to theater historian N. Smirnova, director S. Yefremov's creative handwriting is different in that he "simply cannot work illustratively", the puppeteer has built a "theater of metaphor" (Yefremov & Boiko, 2013: 35). K. Hoffman, the leading playwright of children's theater in Germany, makes a similar summary of the creative practice of Helios theatre, emphasizing that the creators and producers of Helios instead of ordinary puppet techniques chose "the art of metamorphosis" (Springer, 2014: 39).

"Metaphors arising from objects" (Yefremov & Boiko, 2013: 34) - this is the concept into which the scenographic solution of the performances "Everything Will Be Alright" and "Friedl Dicker" fits. The choice of minimalist design of the performances is logically explained by the life background of the main characters.



In the case of the artist Friedl Dicker, her time at Bauhaus are years of successful experiments with form. For the artist, who faithfully adhered to her alma mater's principles, the process of developing ideas and creating solutions for new architecture, everyday objects, and theatrical costumes was not only an applied, but also a conceptual act. In doing so, Dicker combined constructive, visual, socio-philosophical aspects. Her professional and creative experience is reflected in the scenography of Helios Theater's performance. Clear geometric shapes dominate here - "rings," square "textile dividers," rectangular "drawings on wide rolls of paper. All these elements "speak the constructive language of Bauhaus" (Springer et al., 2014: 9).

Figure 1 Friedl Dicker, Helios Theatre, Photo: A.-S. Zimniak

The minimalist design of the play "Everything Will Be Alright" in the context of the biography Janusz Korczaks can be explained by the fact that for him, as an innovative pedagogue, the principles of material asceticism and richness of the spiritual beauty of human were important. The years he spent in the Warsaw ghetto were a period of active storytelling by the writer. In his arsenal were common household items, from which, thanks to the imagination of the master and children's fantasy were born wonderful stories that have already become chrestomathy.

All the world's in a suitcase – Vertep stages

To reveal the theme of the article we should also characterize the main specific features of the architectural construction of the vertep stage and clarify the philosophical basis of its sacred and profane dichotomy.

As we know from the history of puppetry art, vertep is one of the oldest forms of theatre in Ukraine, known since the 17th century. According to O. Kysil, Ukrainian vertep represents "a spectacle, which was played out in a wooden chest by puppets" (Kiselev, 1915: 3). From the very beginning vertep was based on the Biblical story of the birth of Jesus Christ. The nativity scene, the story of herod and the massacre of the innocents are central narrations in vertep theatre.

The famous Ukrainian scholar and educator S. A. Smelyanska emphasized that the Ukrainian vertep "in a simple and visual form" represents "the theatre, which yesterday was a temple." (Smelyanskaya, 1980: 6). Numerous theatrical studies prove that the structure of the chest of the Ukrainian puppetry vertep is an almost exact architectural replica of the classical Christian Basilica. The Christian church architecture as a semantic model for the form of stage is the optimal space-composition, able to provide decent conditions for placing the central character of its drama - Jesus Christ - half-god, half-man.

Researcher O. Freydenberg noted in her theoretical developments that the stage of a usual vertep performance represents a closed stage structure, associating the architecture of the vertep with a room or niche (cf. Freydenberg, 1988: 34). In fact, in the studies of Ukrainian and foreign scholars, both past and present, the form of the vertep is looked at similarly. The range of descriptions goes from buildings to more tiny settings like suitcases or boxes that can be summed up as a closed "cubic form" (Freydenberg, 1988: 34).

It is important to note that the classical architecture of the vertep assumes a binary structure, that is, the distribution of the cubic space into two floors. There is a deep philosophical idea in this delineation of the floors – the sacred world is at the top, the secular world is at the bottom; salvation and hope are at the top, death and bloody justice are at the bottom. The Virgin Mary and the newborn Jesus "are raised to the second floor, as if in the palm of God, closer to the angels, away from the sinful earth," while "below worldly power rules - the city, the soldiers [...] the forces of the hostile world rush in: Death and the Devil," (Uvarova, 2012).

The starting point of the scenographic concept of the performances "Everything Will Be Alright" and "Friedl Dicker" is also an object of closed cubic form – a suitcase. At first glance, the presence on stage of this object of everyday life is dictated by the circumstances

of the lives of the main characters: the deportation, the road to the concentration camp. It can be assumed that the use of the suitcase means to solely increase the emotional pressure on the audience, to elicit empathy and sympathy for the victims and, later, the tragic deaths of the protagonists.

Partial confirmation of this thought can be found in the joint monograph by I. Panchenko and K. Gamarnik "In love with the theatre": the Performance "begins with the fact that Korczak-Foerberg [the surname of the performer] appears on the stage with a suitcase" (Gamarnik & Panchenko, 2019: 231). The actor "lives through" a special plastic sketch with it, which helps to reveal the internal state of the character - distraction, crushed, lostness. The effect is strengthened by a smooth noise from the sounds of the railway station and the chaos of the deportations of Jews.

In "Friedl Dicker," however, the suitcase appears near the end and marks the tragic culmination of the performance. In the hands of the actress is a roughly chipped wooden box in white accompanied by an increasing explanation: "Fifty kilograms. Fifty kilograms per person. We were allowed to take not more than fifty kilograms". The choir of three of actresses explain to the audience that Jews were allowed to take only fifty kilograms with them to the ghetto near Terezín.

People chaotically grabbed clothes, valuables, and necessities. But Friedl Dicker's made a different choice that can be heard in a short, sharply monologue by M. Pardo: "The children in the camp need materials for creativity. Papier, scissors, paints. I need papier, scissors, paints. Children at the camp are painting. I will show them how to paint". These short, over-extended phrases sound unapologetic, higher, and faster than the usual rhythm - punctuated and testify to the ingenuity of Friedl Dicker's reconsiderations.

Considering the visual correspondence of *vertep*, we want to speak not only about the similarity of the external characteristics and technical parameters of the suitcases, but in the first place about their semantic totality. In the named performances the suitcase as a model of circumscribed space with attributes of the foreground, pre-war and professional, life of Janusz Korczak and Friedl Dicker, is a symbol of non-silence, non-overpower. In the shows,



Figure 2 Friedl Dicker, Hleios Theatre, Photo: A.-S. Zimniak

the suitcase-vertep becomes a kind of portal to another world — the world of hope, the world of salvation (although not physical).

The Verteps meaning in "Everything will be alright"

H. Pavlenko notes that "the basis" for the play "Everything Will Be Alright" by Kyiv Municipal Academic Puppet Theatre on the Left Bank of the Dnieper "was an old suitcase", which during the action of the performance "was transformed into vertep chest" (Pavlenko, 2020). The joint of the suitcase and the vertep chest in the play is also stated by Ukrainian theatrical expert I. Zapolska: "Just a wise storyteller in a small cube [...] played out the old vertep story about the murder of the children" (Yefremov & Boiko, 2013: 152). To use, actor Foerberg, playing Janusz Korczak's role is performing New Testament stories for his foster-children, condemned to death. And in this intense atmosphere of upcoming tragic finale, so masterfully interpreted by the actor, scenes of canonical stories ("the birth of Jesus Christ",

"about greetings him from the Magi", "the little Jesus being saved from the cruel King Herod" and the "three young men in the torturing furnace" (Gamarnik & Panchenko, 2019: 231)) were told.

In the same manner of theatrical impromptu, the actor handles the stage made of a simple suitcase. At a certain moment in the action, he stops to use it as the every-day life object, by "placing the suitcase on the table", or "opening it like wardrobe", in such a way that overcome the aesthetic aspect of the scenery. The suitcase functions as a self-built vertep: "two tiers, covered with light curtains, behind which stood the puppets" (Gamarnik & Panchenko, 2019: 230). The actor also creates the vertep's characters, adapting children's toys, which he found on the bottom of the suitcase, draping the figures with a piece of cloth or adding other elements. These puppets differ technically from vertep puppets, who have a special wire or rod, which is attached, usually, to the leg or back to help the puppeteer control all actions and movements of the puppets.



Figure 3 Everything will be Alright, Kyiv Municipal Puppet Theatre on the Left Bank of the Dnieper, Photo: Archive

The setting of vertep Christmas theatre was not chosen by stage designer I. Uvarova and director S. Yefremov by chance. The technique of metamorphoses of the object was "born of the artist's and director's desire to lay bare the essence of things", "to find the sophisticated in the simple, the poetic in the everyday" (Yefremov & Boiko, 2013: 35). In rejecting direct illustration, the director associated the suitcase not as the attribute of a Nazi ghetto prisoner, but as an image of the Christian world, because both the performance and the chest of the vertep are semantic divided into two parts, two floors, the sacred and the earthly. This is the embodiment of the eternal conflict – the struggle between good and evil, and at the same time the inevitable victory of the first. The realization "after darkness necessarily comes light"

(Pavlenko: 2000) is the well-considered idea of the performance "Everything Will Be Alright," which is fixed even in the title of the production. All the monologues and improvisational texts of Janusz Korczak's Biblical "tales" are saturated with these ideas.

This same realization is reflected in the scenographic concept of the production - in the clear vertical "hell - heaven". This vertical line shows clearly that all evil will end in hell, which is located under the first floor of the vertep. All those who are good would certainly go to heaven, which stretches over the second floor of the vertep chest. To confirm this idea, Uvarova added an improvised puppet "angel" - a toy with blond curly hair and homemade cardboard wings. This luminous image hovers over the second, sacred floor of the suitcase-vertep, announcing the indispensable victory of good over evil.

In this scenographic concept, the idea of the dichotomy of the vertep works very strait. The wise teacher wants to prove to his pupils: you, as innocent victims, will end up in heaven, while all the offenders will sooner or later go to hell.

Dualism of the two Suitcases in "Friedl Dicker"

Let us now turn to the play "Friedl Dicker". At first glance, the theory of the identification of the suitcase, which is used almost episodically in the production, with the theater of the vertep type, may seem off the line. Because in the play "Everything Will Be Alright", the Kyiv puppeteers consciously used the synonymity of the space of the suitcase with the architecture and semantics of the vertep theatre and the actor Foerberg partially played the well-known plot of the vertep Christmas drama. Let us assume that this connection exists, and that it is of a semantic nature.

In the play "Everything Will Be Alright" the suitcase directly illustrates the idea of the theater of the vertep – the dualism of the universe, fixed in the division of the suitcase into two floors, while in "Friedl Dicker" this idea of the "binary" of the world is received somewhat differently.

It should be said that the Helios theatre production uses not one, but two suitcases, which semantically can be equated with the two floors of the vertep – the cruel, profane and the miraculous, the divine – with their inherent meaning. As noted above, in the German puppeteers' production, when informing the Jews about the package limitation to fifty kilograms, the actresses speak of a suitcase, holding a wooden box where Friedl Dicker plans to put paper, scissors, paints for the children of the ghetto.

The suitcase, or rather the makeshift box, is a symbol of the first floor of the vertep, where acts of unprecedented inhumanity and unprecedented atrocities and corporal torture take place. In the play, as in the vertep, there are soldiers of the Nazi regime who appear before the eyes of the audience not as puppets, but as flat shots of historical newsreels. German journalist W. Spiralke notes on this subject: "Original film footage from the appalling era of National Socialism is a particular highlight. Initially reduced to translucent screens, on which the with the shadows of the actresses are projected, it is then magnified almost explosively across the entire width of the stage, only to collapse into a black nothingness that lasts for several seconds" (Spiralke, 2022)). The newsreel shots (successfully selected by A. Kolling) project onto different surfaces and backgrounds, diversifying the mise-en-scenes and enriching the relief of the scenography.

The fate of Friedl Dicker herself as a character is a paraphrase to the tragic fate of one of the main characters in the vertep drama, Rachel, who had to endure the Massacre of the Innocents, the killing of children ordered by Herod after Jesus birth. Friedl Dicker, for her part, witnesses the massacre of Terezín's children. She offered the children a mental escape from misery through creativity and art. One of Dicker's pupils, who survived in Terezín, recalled: "Friedl taught us to draw what we like to do, what we dreamed about. She transported us to another world" (Wix 2009: 154)

The image of the other, better world – meaning the second vertep-floor – emerges into the performance "Friedl Dicker" with the second suitcase, an old-fashioned, visually almost identical replica of the suitcase with which Janusz Korczak appeared on stage in "Everything Will Be All Right". This second suitcase appears in the last minutes of the play. It is carried out by the actress B. Sadafi. Slowly, she opens the suitcase, takes out children's drawings made in different techniques - watercolor, drawing, mosaic. Actresses M. Kim and J. Raschke explain to the audience that Friedl had packed the drawings of "her children" just before departure for Auschwitz.

The artist handed the suitcase to someone she trusted – caretaker Willy Groag, who has hidden the suitcase in the attic, and gave the children's drawings to the Jewish community of Prague after the liberation of Terezín.

Director B. Kölling constructed the finale of "Friedl Dicker" as follows: in the center of the stage is an open old suitcase, over which the actresses, kneeling, hold precise copies of colored drawings of Friedl's pupils. A single beam of light slowly picks out the individual fragments of the children's art crafts from the darkness. "The first exhibition of children's drawings from Terezín immediately became a sensation", sounds actress Sadafi's last remark. A single beam of light stops at one of the children's drawings. In complete silence, the light gradually fades away.

The second suitcase is a silent witness to the torture and torment endured by the Jews of Terezín, and a solemn monument to Dicker's achievements. At the same time, it appears as an unconditional symbol of the triumph of life, its victory over death, the eternal continuation of the circle of life. Similarly, to the second sacred floor of the vertep, where, according to strict religious canons, only members of the Holy Family and the Magi could be found, the second part of the performance became the abode of the souls of the innocent children and their teacher, teaching not only drawing, but also the unceasing struggle of life – Friederike Dicker. Their lives were tragically cut short but immortalized in static mise-en-scenes of primitive children's drawings, preserving the priceless historical memory of the tragedies of the 20th century. Like a vertep story, it is an act of unprecedented victory of good over evil, of light over darkness; a victory at the cost of the lives of the innocent children of Bethlehem, Treblinka, Auschwitz, Terezín, but an undeniable victory.

References

"Friedl Dicker" – Helios Theatre, Hamm

Premiered: January 22, 2022

Directed by Barbara Kölling

Play: Minju Kim, Josephine Raschke & Bahar Sadafi / Marilyn Pardo

Stage: Krista Burger

Lightdesign: Jan Leschinski
Assistance: Dennis Schiwe
Further Information: <https://www.helios-theater.de/repertoire/friedl-dicker>

“Everything will be Alright” – Kyiv Municipal Academic Puppet Theatre on the Left Bank of the Dnieper

Premiered: 1994
Directed by Serhii Yefremov
Play: Charle Foerberg
Stage: Iryna Uvarova
Assistance: Eleonora Smirnova
Further Information: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/puppet-of-madame-ester-rohl-from-the-mono-play-everything-will-be-all-right...-iryna-uvarova/FwH7li3V-eQW-Q?hl=uk>

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