

Linda Keprtová on Foerster's Eva

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We are now in the auditorium of the National Theatre in Prague where Eva was premièred in 1899. For decades, the opera had been regularly produced, but then it completely disappeared from the repertoire of Czech and Slovak theatres. What exactly was behind the rediscovery of Eva by the F. X. Šalda Theatre Liberec?

Keprtová: I must say that the rediscovery of *Eva* in Liberec was more or less by chance. Two and a half years ago, I worked on Jules Massenet's opera *Don Quichotte* in Liberec with Martin Doubravský, the head of the opera, who conducted the opera, and he asked me for further cooperation. We already knew each other well, and he actually gave me free reins to propose what I wanted to direct, what theme excited me and what I found interesting.

I had known *Eva* only as an encyclopaedia entry, but not in detail. I had never actually heard the music at all, I was sure of that. However, one day I was walking up the hill in Liberec and suddenly the association rose up in my mind – *Gazdina roba* and *Eva*. Since I had only known the opera from books, I looked it up and started familiarising myself as well Martin Doubravský with it.

We were also lucky that 2014 was the Year of Czech Music. So we focused on those Czech works that are not commonly staged. We were also considering the opera *Debora* as well as other works. But over the course of time, I really fell in love with *Eva*, stuck to it tooth and nail and didn't want to give it up.

What can Eva offer to a present-day director?

Keprtová: It can offer the potential of its characters. I think nothing has changed over the years because the relationships described can work both in the second half of the 19th century and in the 21st century. Each of us could have been *Eva* in a certain moment of our lives, as well as *Mánek* or *Samko*. I have definitely been *Eva* and *Mánek*, as well as *Samko* in my life. I think this principle is clearly given – what the opera can offer to the director.

And Foerster's music adaptation is highly inspirational. After I listened to it one hundred and fifty, one hundred and eighty times and then during rehearsals, when I really thought I knew it, I still kept finding things I had never thought about. The way some of those movements, some of those ideas, pains, worries, and joys are set to music – in a completely different way than one would expect.

And there is also Foerster's wisdom in it or sort of a detached view over the situation. To be specific, I can mention the part when Eva decides to leave her husband for her love, Mánek, and says to Zuzka, the housemaid: "I shall go to the Meľjanýs, I am determined". This situation can be interpreted in several ways: we can guess she is happy because she has made the decision, because there is a nicer future awaiting her. But Foerster set it to such quiet, painful music that I consider it to be very wise: although she goes to meet her new life with her love, she leaves here some grief and starts to build her happiness on someone else's unhappiness. I think this is very clever, the way Foerster perceived the character and the story.

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The characters which Foerster introduces in Eva always react to each other naturally. There is no superficial brilliance in their behaviour. Truthfulness, purity and nakedness are their very typical features. Do you fancy this credibility in Eva?

Keprtová: Yes, I think in *Eva* Foerster showed that nothing is black and white and that our motivations can sometimes be much simpler, or much more complicated, than it seems on the face of it. And my ambition with *Eva* was to make sure the audience would not even notice there is a director at all and would think the characters react to each other naturally, those reactions are natural, resulting from life, and the boundary between the theatre and life starts to fade away.

And the nakedness shown by all is something I consider extraordinary in opera. We have become used to beautifying and colouring opera a little. Some works suggest themselves to this, but what I found tempting in *Eva* was the chance to dive deep into some truthfulness without needing anything at all. The only thing you need is another person willing to collaborate with you in this way.

Does the versed libretto not slow down the drama of the story?

Keprtová: Obviously, from the vantage point of the present time, we can find some minor imperfections in the libretto, but we must bear in mind that we see it through the eyes of the 21st century people who have read much more poetry, modern poetry, than Foerster did. And we perceive it as people who know Janáček's *Jenůfa* and *Káťa Kabanová*. And I also think Foerster does not deserve to be permanently compared to Janáček and be blamed for not believing in the crudeness and nakedness of Preissová's story. And for wrapping it up a little in poetry.

I am the last one to blame him because at his time versed librettos were quite common. And I would not blame him either that he didn't have the distinctiveness in perceiving the text as did Janáček, who managed to masterfully set versed librettos to music. Some of those verses seem obviously cute and old, but there are not so many of them and they have no significant effect on the opera as a whole. On the other hand, I am not sure whether I would have fallen in love with *Eva* if I had known only the libretto but not the Preissová's story. I can't say because first I got acquainted with Preissová and then with *Eva*.

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You like using symbolism. One of the main elements of expression is clay.

What does clay symbolise in Eva?

Keprtová: Clay is a matter which can incredibly help you to express some feelings which you see in the character. Clay is something we have seen many times, it is no innovative idea. Together with the stage designer, we saw and felt the clay, smelled it from the very beginning because, for me, the story was also a story of day-to-day toil, day-to-day work, of mud formed in rain. But also of something that can grow from the clay.

And Eva strives intensely all the time, strives very much to put her life into some basic framework, she strives to form that “garden bed” where she could plant something. An important fact for me was that Eva is an orphan with no background at all. When you have no firm ground under your feet, formed thanks to your family, thanks to those roots and family relations when you know you have a place where you can go back any time when you are in hot water, you have the ground you can walk on and endure the problems in your life much better than when you don't have the firm ground.

That is why Eva gives the impression or reacts very impulsively, even hysterically. She had completely different starting conditions than the others.

So that's why we used clay and a wooden plank floor as a symbol of a fate which one resists and keeps striving to change it. This is the way the stage designer and I defined it; and the wave formed from the floor – Eva got actually killed by her inability to reconcile herself to the life she had been given. It happens that you can't live with the one you love or that your child dies. These are strokes of fate I can't even imagine. I can only speculate how such a person feels. Anyway, Eva has such an appetite for life, which she wants to live happily and fully, that in the moment she realises she cannot live it that way, she decides to end it.

In spite of everything, Eva makes her peace at the end of her life and dies in catharsis.

Keprtová: Yes, she does.

Why did you decide to leave the disabled Samko on the stage for the whole time? What is the symbolism?

Keprtová: I had the feeling that Samko is not so much physically disabled as feeble-minded. And this should be pointed out at the end, when he gets up and only passively places the stool in the direction where Eva is dying to look at

her grave (this was my intention). But until then, he does not get up from the stool. He proposes marriage to Eva at the moment when she is very weak. When their child is ill, he does not call a doctor. When she decides to leave for Austria, he does not run to the station to catch the first train to persuade her to go back to him, not to leave him. He just keeps sitting and passively receiving everything. This was feeble-mindedness for me, not a physical disability. Suddenly, we can see he can get up from that stool, but only when he wants to. And then he sits down again. He just changes his point of view.

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Do you think this opera is attractive to foreign audience?

Keprtová: Surely, it is. Moreover, a foreign audience will have no problem with the versed libretto which – as already mentioned – could be a weak point of the opera. A foreign audience, not being connected to the Czech text, will be able to enjoy the story and music more.

Have you ever asked yourself why Eva has been so rarely staged?

Keprtová: I have never found an answer to this question. For me, it is a mystery. However, I would not attach any serious reasons to it. I think it was more or less coincidence that the opera got somehow forgotten and stopped being staged. But I don't see any fatal reasons in it.

So there is going to be revival of Eva?

Keprtová: We shall see. [laughs]

Interview: Jana Gajdošková
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