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Legacy of the Emigrants

Gregorij von Leitis stages works by Jewish artists:

“I cannot allow them to die a second time”

by Helmut Zeller

“And everything will be well,” wrote the Jewish writer Ilse Weber in her “Emigrants Song” in Theresienstadt. In October 1944, she is murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Viktor Ullmann composed 21 works in Theresienstadt. „The Lay ov Love and Death of Cornet Christoph Rilke” for speaker and orchestra or piano is the last composition which Ullmann finished, before he, too, was deported to Auschwitz in October. Decades later, Gregorij von Leitis performed this piece in more than 20 cities. The theatre director of Lithuanian descent has staged the works of Jewish composers and writers since 1997. But for Gregorij von Leitis Jewish Humanism is the cultural heritage of a Europe which disappeared with the Shoa, and for which he longs. Not only on the stage he lives in yesterday’s world.

An air of dandyism accompanies his charming appearance

With his polished manners, the man, 69 years old, give the appearance of having emerged from a European novel that’s situated at the threshold of the decline. He wears his scarf casually around his neck. A silk handkerchief is visible in the breast pocket of his elegant jacket. Rings sparkle on his hands, which are constantly gesticulating. A touch of Boheme, a bit of something dandy-like accompany his charming appearance. That’s not an attitude, that’s a statement. He looked for Europe in New York, and found it in a group of emigrants who, decades earlier, had been able to flee the slaughter. His friend the writer Hans Sahl wrote in his memoirs something which also applies to Gregorij von Leitis: “Now ... the opposite desire drives me: to free them from their past, to give them back their identity...”

It started in the 50’s in Germany. A good-looking young man, born in Wuppertal in 1944, dreams of a stage career and tries to break away from the spiritual narrow-mindedness of the Adenauer era. Then one day he hears Rock’n Roll. Elvis Presley, says von Leitis, liberates him, like so many others of his generation. In 1965 he moves to Munich, studies art history and theatre science at the Ludwig Maximilian University, and acting with Helen von Münchhofen. With Herbert Mensching he studies privately.

But he feels like a stranger in Germany. He says: “I grew up during the great silence about the Shoa.” This silence was broken in 1963 by the Frankfurt Auschwitz trials. He asks questions about the past of his country and his family. It is time to say good-bye, but many years and the student revolt pass yet. George Tabori pushes the hesitant man. Gregorij von Leitis leaves for the United States in 1978. People there, he says, are not driven by envy and jealousy, but are open. They receive the emigrant with openness. But New York is a difficult place. In 1983, Gregorij von Leitis found Elysium Theater Company, with which he successfully brings German productions to American stages. For his staging of Bertolt Brecht’s “Jewish Wife” he receives the New York Theatre Club Prize; he is the first non-American to get this award. In the world metropolis most newly-founded theatres last about

two years. Elysium, threatened by financial ruin several times, moves from one season to another.

Today von Leitis lives in Berlin, Munich and New York, where he found his home among the emigrants who fled Hitler. In December 1985 he met Maria Ley Piscator, the widow of Erwin Piscator, the founder of the political, epic theatre. "She personified the old Europe, which encompassed so much: forms of conversation, mutual respect and courtesy for each other, an attempt at inclusivity, an internationality which one doesn't encounter any more today in spite of all our mobility." He succumbs to her spell, which he is able to cast upon others. "Art has only one purpose: to contribute to the improvement of mankind." This sentence by Piscator becomes von Leitis's leitmotif. In 1985, he founds the Erwin Piscator Award Society which annually presents an award in order to keep alive Piscator's legacy. Gregorij von Leitis institutes a theatre program for homeless people. After each performance, the actors distribute food and clothing to the visitors.

Germany has changed a lot, when Gregorij von Leitis returns in 1990. He becomes the Artistic Director of the State Theater of Mecklenburg in Neustrelitz. But the old small-mindedness is still alive. After differences of opinion and tensions with the ministry of culture, Gregorij von Leitis finds himself the subject of a witch hunt. But he wins his lawsuit. The court of Neubrandenburg cancels his dismissal as ineffective. He says: "My trust in Germany was shattered." He can't and doesn't want to work any more in this atmosphere. He directs at the State Theaters in Linz and Bregenz, and produces Kafka's "A Report to an Academy" in London. Back in New York he produces Viktor Ullmann's chamber opera "The Emperor of Atlantis" which had been composed in Theresienstadt. He stages "What Price Confidence?" by the exile composer Ernst Krenek, whose works were prohibited after 1933, at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. In 2005, he stages the world premiere of the opera "Dante in Exile" by Egon Lustgarten.

Gregorij von Leitis thinks of himself as an outsider in the theatre business – at least today he doesn't care about the success on large stages. Together with his partner, the essayist and Piscator specialist Michael Lahr, he has also made the small town of Bernried in Upper Bavaria into a place of commemoration. Since 2004 the Elysium Festival has taken place there. Their non-profit-organisation Elysium – between two continents wants to act against racism and anti-Semitism. For this endeavour, German Federal President Johannes Rau honored Gregorij von Leitis with the Federal Cross of Merit – a late bow to the man, who was never quite able to feel at home in Germany.

In his Munich apartment, he has a large part of the collection of the "Lahr von Leitis Archive & Academy": photographs, letters, books, diaries, manuscripts – the heritage of writers, composers, and intellectuals who had been driven into exile, or were murdered by the Nazis. The archival boxes fill a shelf the width of the wall up to the ceiling. On their labels are names like Oskar Maria Graf, Bertolt Brecht, Viktor Ullmann, or Hans Sahl. The host amiably offers tea and pastries. Then he tells about life in exile, as if he himself had lived it. But in his search for the lost Europe, Gregorij von Leitis is himself a kind of emigrant. "I cannot allow them to die a second time," he says about the Jewish artists. In their humanism he sees the promise of a better future and he pours more tea.

(Translated into English by Christine Schurtman)