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Bigger, Better, Beautiful?

Conference on the Impact of EU Enlargement on cultural opportunities across Europe

14th February 2002

The man handing out the conference brochures is called Attila, which I find briefly amusing, until I ask myself “why”? We are after all in Budapest, Hun-gary, and Attila is a common Hungarian name. Fair enough, and an early reminder not to carry out of context and prejudicial cultural baggage with me.

I take the brochure and look eagerly into it. This is the first of these cultural planning conferences I’ve ever been to, never mind the first one organised under the auspices of the EU. Mme. Viviane Reding, the European Commissioner for Education and Culture, welcomes me at the front as Patron, along with Mr. Ferenc Madl, the President of Hungary. I wonder if either of them is likely to show up. But at least the conference is happening.

To be more precise, it’s happening in the Hungarian National Museum, and it’s late opening. No matter. I look around me for a face to recognise in the gathering throng, but don’t find one, so I go outside for a cigarette, wondering how many artists are likely to be here relative to the preponderance of cultural bureaucrats. I am however already impressed by how many people from what the EU call the accession countries are here – and it’s with an accession country such as Romania or Hungary that I’m trying to put an EU Culture 2000 application together to tour a stage play I’ve written. I hope I’m in the right place, so to speak, and if not here, then where? The foyer is thick with Slavic inflections and *mittel europa* vowel sounds.

I go back inside, and immediately see a face I recognise from ten years ago in Bucharest when a play of mine, *Propaganda Fide*, was performed there - Ion Caramitru, Romanian actor, sometime enigmatic revolutionary and Minister of Culture until very recently when his political party lost the election. He tells me he’s very relieved not to be a Minister any more. “Such a lot of work” he says, although he can list concrete achievements such as setting up the Bucharest European Cultural Centre. Now he’s back in theatre, most recently directing Shakespeare in Tokyo. Ion is as ever attentive, charming and authoritative, and he’s looking pretty fit and healthy for a man in his sixtieth year. I am as ever impressed, not least when the conference finally opens, and Ion gives the fourth and last and by far the most witty and moving speech. “To become Europeans we in Romania survived an ordeal which lasted half a century” he concludes. Romanians learnt languages, practiced theatre, to preserve “this indefinite spark of divinity within us”. “We knew culture was the only way out”.

There is a buffet, and a very good one, but I decide to leave, and find a bar where I can read the brochure list of delegates, and thus be fresh on the case tomorrow.

Mme. Reding did not turn up. Neither did Mr. Madl.

15th February

The conference proper opens at the Academy of Sciences overlooking the Danube. *I am definitely in the right place.* Everywhere questions are being asked, in the plenaries, or in the working groups that follow them. Everywhere *Europe* is on peoples' lips. How does Europe "become a power in the way it is a space?" And is it a viable space at all? Obviously, this is entirely dependent on how Europeans view themselves, and this is a cultural issue. The function of the EU looms large. Until recently, it defined itself as a purely economic and political entity, but that, most obviously with the introduction of the Euro, has profound cultural repercussions. As for the accession countries, their delegates are the most enthusiastic Europeans of all, endlessly promoting enlargement. One of them opines that "western Europe needs the East. It's own success of integration has left it bereft of new ideas". Very true. European unity, as has been said before, is like riding a bike. It can only work if you keep peddling, even if you're not sure where you're trying to get to. I say I think it's more a case of what we're trying to get away from – balkanisation, fascism, communism, the monolith nation-state etc. Everyone agrees. Everyone from Estonia to Eire or so it seems understands the notion of a *cultural* Europe acting as a counter-balance to what many refer to as the *California-isation* of culture they feel all around them.

No one ever really talks like this in England, and if I start to, people look at me as if I'm mad. Geography can be cultural too, not least the English channel.

16th February

A controversy has blown up. Did Jean Monnet, intellectual founder of the EEC as it then was (de Gaulle sarcastically called him *L'Inspireur*), ever really say "If I could start again, I'd start with culture"? Or did Jacque Lang, French Minister for Culture during the 1980s, place posthumous words in his mouth by saying "if Monnet could start again, he'd have started with culture"? The dispute is not resolvable, and so the words become apocryphal, but quite possibly no less potent for all that.

Pavel Černoč, Jean Monnet lecturer at Charles University in Prague doesn't seem to know the answer either, but he's obviously not concerned. Pavel is worth the entrance fee on his own. He's brand new, a walking representative of what Europe could be. At a guess Pavel's thirty, so his adult life is entirely post-1989. He's full of energy and wit, has spent his professional life espousing European integration and enlargement in one way or another, and is fluent in no less than 13 different languages (he was tested

on at least 8). He speaks from the floor. "We are re-inventing the idea of Europe. You can't expect Eurocrats or national leaders to do it for you. They don't have the vision". He cites the Euro, geographical mobility and disappearing frontiers. "It is a pressure for people to think in new terms. To learn English. And they're succeeding. Culture can go where politics and economics can't go. We can make this new Europe if we are courageous. We don't have to reinvent the wheel". Pavel also wants to write for this e-zine, so watch this space!

There are perhaps 120 of us here, but my count of artists has stopped at five including myself. Alan Lyddiard, director of Northern Stage in Newcastle, and one of those five, observes that the conference "is not really for us", which in one sense is true, it's for cultural planners, but surely artists have a right to express opinion on what exactly the plan should be, and we both reckon there should be more artists here simply to act as a counter-weight to any unnecessary bombast or Eurocrat-speak. We reflect on this as we also reflect over dinner how strange it is that I'm from Manchester and he works in Newcastle, but we both have to come to Budapest to discover we share a common interest in European work (he's worked with Muscovites and Parisians, I've worked in Romania). In England, these things are never advertised. It's hardly ever perceived as important.

In fact, our concern over bombast and Eurocrat-speak has other allies. Both Alan and I have of course sat through some less than exciting speeches (going to the most stimulating working group is partly a matter of luck), but anyone who thought they could get away with ill-thought out speeches full of clichés and dead language hasn't reckoned on Mary Ann de Vlieg, Secrétaire Générale of the IETM (Informal European Theatre Meeting), based in Brussels.

Mary Ann takes to the rostrum with debunking intent. She decries nationalism. "Identity is not national. It's individual, and endlessly various". She suggests that words so overused and corrupted they have ceased to mean anything be banned, and proposes *democracy*, *terrorism*, *identity* and *diversity* as four ideal candidates. Words she employs she defines, for example cultural *visibility* means "a change in culture and attitude that can be measured over time", and she questions why so many high-cultural institutions seem to have a problem with submitting themselves to such measurement. Mary Ann also proposes an end to cultural prizes and such things as dead-artist centenary years. She also thinks that Brussels bureaucrats should have to live the first five years of their retirement in the last European region they administered, and ends by suggesting that national cultural curiosity levels should be measured in exactly the same way as GDP or the national debt, and that countries whose citizens fail the test should be fined accordingly. She brings the house down. I think the English would fail.

17th February

The conference closes in the Hungarian Houses of Parliament, with some largely unnecessary speeches, and one in particular that both bores

and annoys virtually everyone, given by Vittorio Sgarbi, State Secretary to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage in Rome, who has arrived only the night before and therefore doesn't know what the conference has actually been about. Nationalism clearly isn't dead yet. Sgarbi talks aggressive Italian, expresses his loathing of English, and how much he intentionally unlearnt whatever amount of it he once learnt at school. He talks a lot about *il mondo antiquo*, and the "contamination" of culture by modern architecture, McDonalds etc. I wonder whether he would even comprehend the delegate who said that good "museums aren't museums anymore, they're places of interpretation". And his objection to the use of English as an international language by the way is the only one I met. Everyone else, through Russian to Spanish, is happy to use English as their own matter of collective choice, and after all, no one has been forced. No one is proposing scrapping their native tongue.

Sgarbi's mentality is precisely what we must get away from, the idea of culture as validated by history or pastness, or even national "greatness". As Ion Caramitru will point out to anyone who will listen, there might be a economic hierarchy of nations, but there is no hierarchy of cultures. In the end, there is nothing except so many artists and cultural operators going about their business on a daily basis, hoping their work finds a common heartbeat. And my heart beats for *Europa*.

We are taken around the Houses of Parliament, which look gothic, but which are actually only 100 years old, and then everyone says their extended goodbyes. I go to lunch at the *Iguana* with two girls, one Ukrainian, the other Hungarian, both of whom work for George Soros's Open Society Institute. Then we go to a newly opened art gallery funded by a Budapest businessman, and as I wander around this open space with them, I think how far removed it all is from the kind of brain-dead *nomenclatura* one so often had to deal with even after the Berlin Wall came down.

Maybe Jean Monnet would have started with culture after all.