Slovakia, what's the story mum?

KATJA DREYER

A story worth telling

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In Katja Dreyer's 'Slovakia, what's the story mum?', the foyer is rich with historical and cultural references. In the raw, post-industrial space of Kaaistudios, the niches that line the brick walls are filled with drawings, books, maps, and posters of the 1960s Czechoslovak avant-garde movie *'Daisies'* by Vera Chytilova. The contrast with the minimalist stage—two chairs and a white curtain draped from the ceiling that will fan out to outline a large depiction of present-day Slovakia—sets the tone for a performance that oscillates between personal narrative, Slovakian history, language, and a deconstruction of a diasporic identity that searches for firm ground.

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From the outset, Dreyer invites the audience into a fragmented emotional landscape striving for clarity. The performance begins with the declaration that only one phrase matters for a German-speaking daughter who never learnt her mother's native tongue: 'Ich verstehe nicht' ('I don't understand'). This fundamental distance between mother and daughter becomes a lens through which Dreyer explores the fragmented nature of memory, both personal and collective. Since her mother can't (or won't) relive the past, it is Peter Savel, Dreyer's Slovak-born collaborator, who becomes the medium, embodying the experience, the language and the flesh of her mother.

Dreyer and Savel are dressed in plain grey socialist-era uniforms, an attire that evokes the image of forgotten lives and a way of life lost in time. Savel places a wreath on his head, alluding to the iconic image of '*Daisies*', a film that critiques the absurdity of life under communism. In one of her many didactic monologues, Dreyer explains that this 'masterpiece' of the Czechoslovak new wave was instantly censored. The performers use the film's surrealist spirit to

filter their own stories, swinging between absurdity and tragedy. The show overflows with historical narratives and countless descriptions of life under communism, offered with the painstaking detail and conviction one might rather expect in the House of European History at the other side of the city. In addition to that, it features playful, childlike scenes —clapping hands and knees, while making silly squeaking noises. All of this against a background of red light and dissonant sounds. At the beginning, one of them declares, 'Everything is rotten'. The suggestion of decay, both physical and ideological, recalls once again 'Daisies's' satirical treatment of a world steeped in ludicrous contradictions. But are they, too, rotten?

As the piece moves on, the timeline jumps back and forth between 1970 and 2024. Dreyer's search for her mother's homeland and language becomes a central thread. The bouffon humour that runs through the performance, often rooted in language games but also in body movements becomes a means of coping for those, like Dreyer, who were severed from their cultural origins. These comic exchanges, light on the surface, soon give way to darker reflections on censorship, alienation (referred as 'inner emigration'), and the constraints imposed by totalitarian regimes. They touch on the horrors of the Spring Revolution, the fleeting promise of change, and the repression that followed. Yet, these reflections get hardly developed, leaving the audience with a sense of incomplete thoughts, as though there was just too much to say for them to really make their point.

Ultimately, this piece is a meditation on trauma.

At one moment, Savel starts singing 'Cherries' ('Ceresne'), a song of the Slovak singer Zuzana Kronerova. The song, nostalgic and sentimental, is a direct reference to Slovak youth and longing. As Savel sings the song, Dreyer struggles to replicate its melody, her efforts underscoring her inability to fully master the language of her mother and, by extension, her heritage. In this moment, Dreyer's vulnerability fully shows. It is an embodiment of the diasporic experience—the feeling of not fully belonging, of being forever disconnected from the language, culture, and history that should define you. Dreyer exists in this constant 'in-betweenness', as Homi Bhabha would put it. The song, emotionally evocative, also serves as a reminder of the violence that historical rupture inflicts on individuals: language becomes both a weapon and a source of trauma.

The story of the chair Dreyer's mother bought with her first salary lies at the heart of the performance. This chair, a symbol of individuality in a conformist regime, carries a deep personal meaning. Dreyer and Savel mimic actions such as smoking cigarettes, channelling memories of Dreyer's mother, whose habits become a ritualized commemoration. However, these gestures are often ambiguous, their meaning obscured by the fragmented nature of the performance, which shifts rapidly between moments of tenderness, absurdity, and even aggression. Dreyer and Savel's repetitive, rhythmic physical movements—running in place, lifting knees, childlike marching—bring to mind the disciplined bodies of youth in socialist regimes. Initially playful, the movements gradually darken, becoming more synchronized and mechanical, mirroring the totalitarian impulse to control even the most minor forms of personal expression.

Ultimately, the piece is a meditation on trauma. For someone like me, born in Eastern Europe, Dreyer's performance strikes a particularly resonant chord. It speaks to the shared experience of growing up in the shadow of war, occupation, and propaganda. The trauma is never fully healed, never fully understood—it persists, echoing through the generations, shaping who we are and how we relate to the world. As famously said by James Joyce, 'History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake'.

Yet, Dreyer doesn't always seem convinced that we'll truly understand what she wants to say. At times, the performance veers too much into didacticism, with moments of exposition that feel heavy-handed or overly explanatory. Finally, the critique of contemporary Slovak politics, though timely, also feels underdeveloped. The commentary on censorship and corruption does not provide any new revelations. Yet, at its core, the performance is a powerful exploration of memory, language, and the burdens of history. It does not offer easy answers or neat resolutions. Instead, it invites us into a fragmented, unsettling world where the past and present collide in ways that are both painful and absurd.

In the end, there is a sense of both relief and unease. As the bodies of the audience and performers shake together in a final unified expression of resistance, the release of tension feels cathartic. Dreyer and Savel exit the stage, and my mind (inevitably) goes to the present state of the world. Can we break free from the past, or are we doomed to repeat it? I can't imagine extravagant chairs will save us this time, but maybe I'll take a trip to the local second-hand shop. Just in case.