


# unterstadt

– story of an osijek family



Original title: Unterstadt – roman jedne osječke obitelji

Language: Croatian

Based on a novel by Ivana Šojat

Adapted for the stage by Zlatko Sviben

Translated by Valentina Marconi

The staged reading was presented by special arrangement with Ivana Šojat, Zlatko Sviben and the Croatian National Theatre in Osijek.

Supported by *Language Acts and Worldmaking*.



photography by Luca Migliore

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Apart from telling a piece of history unknown to many, this work also holds up a mirror to current events in the UK, Europe and the world. It depicts a world where people have stopped seeing each other, where everyone is trying to build a ‘simplified’ identity for themselves, denying the complexity of their culture and history. And it shows how this repression of memory can be devastating for the individual and society. Having witnessed the success of *3 Winters* by Tena Štivičić in the UK, I believe Unterstadt could equally appeal to the English-speaking audience.

– Valentina Marconi, translator





## background

In 2016 we launched our Theatre Translator Mentorship, a workshop programme for professional translators wanting to translate for the stage. The programme is based on our unique approach to working with translated play texts and our experiences of producing world drama. It was through this inaugural edition of our mentoring programme that we were first introduced to translator Valentina Marconi and the Croatian play *Unterstadt – Story of an Osijek Family*, adapted from the novel of the same name by Ivana Šojat.

Considered one of the best plays in Croatian theatrical history, the play chronicles the lives and trials of a Croatian family of German descent from the early 20th century through WW2 and through to the collapse of the former Yugoslavia.

Written in three languages, primarily Croatian, some German and Essekerisch or Esseker German (an autochthonous German dialect mixed with Croatian, Hungarian, Serbian and Yiddish, spoken exclusively in Osijek), the play explores themes of memory and legacy, cultural and linguistic identity on a personal as well as a collective level.

In 2017 we began conversations with the author Ivana Šojat and the Croatian National Theatre in Osijek, and subsequently secured the rights to work on the play text and to present a public reading with an eye to a full production at a later stage.

In 2018 we began working with Ria Samartzi (director/dramaturg) and Valentina Marconi (translator) towards a public staged reading and the first leg of our journey of bringing *Unterstadt – Story of an Osijek* family from page to stage.



# report

The multiplicity of layers presented, immediately drew us to the play and we were interested in exploring different approaches to developing and presenting multilingual theatre for English speaking audiences, and in gathering impressions and feedback in response to the multilingual elements of the play – but also the world of the play (especially the cultural and historical context).

The project provided a valuable collaborative experience, where we worked with a multicultural and multilingual cast and creative team, which included nine actors, a director/dramaturg and, of course, our translator.

We were able to present our audiences with a semi-immersive theatre experience, which went beyond a traditional rehearsed reading, offering audiences an opportunity to engage further with both the play and our process through a panel discussion and Q&A. The staged reading was presented to 60 audience members.

With the support of *Language Acts*, not only were we able to take a further step towards bringing the play off the page, but it also allowed a continued and exciting exploration of multilingual theatre.

## : creative team

Valentina Marconi – translator

Ria Samartzi – director/dramaturg

Camila França & Trine Garrett – creative producers

## : ensemble

Andrea Giordani, Anja M. Jacobsen (also German language consultant), Atilla Akinci, Aude Le Pape, Daniel Anderson, Julia Cranney, Laura Sophie Helbig, Petar Cvirn and Rebecca Dyson-Smith (also translator of the song ‘Der Schrecken von Krndia’).



## **: translating multilingualism for the stage through a collaborative approach**

From the early stages of the process, Valentina Marconi (translator) and Ria Samartzi (director/dramaturg) worked closely together on the play text and formed a strong work relationship, which became the foundation of the process. Together they identified the need for a collaborative translation and dramaturgy process that would include actors with source language skills (Croatian and German).

The majority of the characters in the play are bilingual (or multilingual) and the question of identity in particular is explored through each character's use of language (why and when they chose to speak which language), and we wanted to retain these elements, but without alienating audiences who might not understand everything spoken in the play.

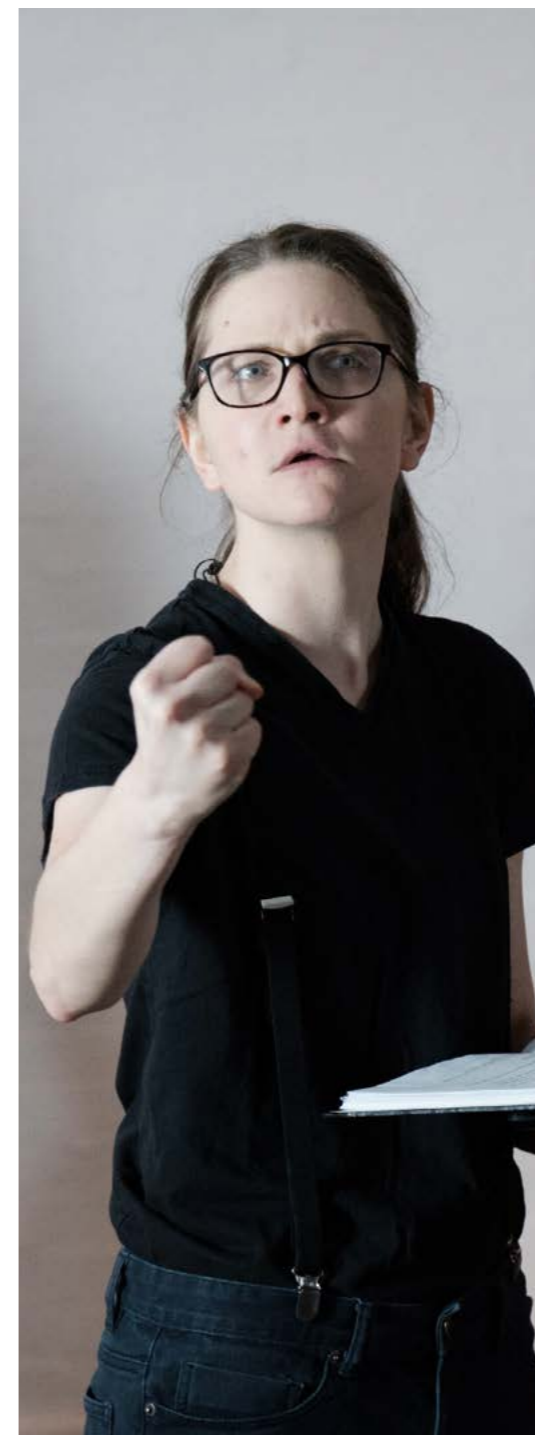
Having a multicultural cast with speakers of the source languages was key to the whole process (from table work and rehearsals through to the staged reading) in terms of contextualising history, culture and language present in the play, and it allowed for a deeper exploration and helped unlock the multiple layers of the play, resulting in a rich and nuanced play text.

The main language, Croatian, was translated into English, and the German was predominantly retained as in the source text, but with some adjustments based on input from the native German speakers in the cast. The third language, Essekerisch or Esseker German, native to Osijek but barely spoken today, was largely kept as it appeared in the source text but with some cuts to avoid repetition, and then recreated for performance using the combined language skills of the cast and creative team.

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**Valentina translated four languages, and all of the staging, and then we collectively made some choices.**

– Ria Samartzi, director/dramaturg



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It's been a tremendous journey for me, in my heart, because of my family, my home town.

– Andrea Giordani, actor

## **: discovering home away from home**

As luck would have it (or destiny perhaps), one of the cast members had a direct connection to not only the play, having in fact been cast in the original production in Croatia, but also to the stories of the play, as her family originate from Osijek.

In the end, Andrea did not take part in the original Croatian production as she decided to move to the UK to study at East 15 Acting School, but found herself years later playing the role she had originally been cast in, appearing in the first English version of the play, in east London.

## : presenting multilingual theatre

Having a multilingual cast allowed us to present the piece with the linguistic setup established in the original production: Croatian (translated into English) and some German and Essekerisch (both kept predominantly as in the source text).

Furthermore, having cast members who were speakers of the main source language (native and non-native), enabled us to incorporate some Croatian into the performance in the form of songs, adding a fourth language to our version. This allowed us to not only explore and present the multilingual aspect of the play, but it also encouraged us to celebrate the multicultural cast in its new context, adding yet another layer to the play (and its journey from novel to stage, from Osijek to London).

Firmly rooted in the company's performance practice, Ria Samartzi staged a dynamic reading, which was presented in a non-conventional theatre space in east London, providing the audience with a semi-immersive experience. Actors moved around the room, encircling the audience as the characters travelled through time and space, allowing for a physical exploration of the complexity of the non-linear narrative spanning almost a century.

The semi-immersive experience had a positive impact on the audience, who were very receptive to the dynamic staging and sense of experience, and more than 75% of the audience stayed behind to engage in the panel discussion and Q&A.

‘It felt like a proper play and not just a table read which is great.’

‘A really fascinating experience and wonderful to hear more of Valentina’s fabulous translation!’

‘Outside of these four walls in this bunker it’s quite a scary place, outside, and it was a beautiful breath of fresh air with watching you here tonight.’

## : audience impressions and feedback

The staged reading was followed by a panel discussion and Q&A with the cast and creative team, which was chaired by Co-Artistic Director Trine Garrett. Trine has directed some of the company’s most prominent productions (all in translation) and is head of learning of our professional development programmes.

The panel discussion and Q&A allowed the audience to dive deeper into the history of the play and the creative process whilst simultaneously offering insights into the audience experience, helping us to understand the immediate response to the multilingual elements and the overall story and world of the play.

We also distributed a feedback form, which provided us with specific insights in regards to the use of language (especially in terms of clarity), the characters (their relatability and/or sense of familiarity) and the multilayered narrative.

Audience verbal and written feedback was extremely valuable, as it provided both qualitative and quantitative feedback, and it showed that both the multilingual elements and the overall story and world of the play resonated with the majority of the audience.

It is worth noting that nearly 50% of the people who completed the feedback form identified as either bilingual or multilingual, which may be the reason for the positive response towards the use of different languages, and the outcome may have been different if the audience had predominantly been monolingual.

‘Yes, I loved how the languages were merged, seemed really natural.’

‘I don’t know German at all and didn’t understand what they were saying but I didn’t mind.’

‘Wonderful! I was thoroughly engaged and vocalised voices I had never heard before. Can I see more?’

‘Intense. Thought-provoking. Touching.’

‘Great play. Lots of layers! Loved that.’

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The fact that a little bit of space has been made for a different story is kind of something to take away, to have a slight enrichment of what you've seen of the stories there are in this world.

– Anja M Jacobsen, actor





# what's up next

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Our journey with *Unterstadt – Story of an Osijek Family* has opened up new perspectives and possibilities and broadened our cultural, artistic and personal horizons, and we will continue to pursue avenues that will help bring this journey to a full production in the future.

The world of the play tells stories of fragmented identity, polarization and memory that we, as migrant theatremakers, connect deeply with on a personal level. The use of language in the play and how this relates to the characters' sense of identity is something that truly captivates us on a professional and personal level.

Through our various artistic and academic partnerships and relationships with organisations and institutions such as Out of the Wings, Global Voices Theatre, Cut the Cord, University College London and University of Cambridge to mention a few, we want to continue to actively offer multicultural theatre artists more visibility, and make world drama more accessible by bringing it to the heart of communities.

We continue to work collaboratively with people and organisations – nationally and internationally – to produce and promote multicultural and multilingual theatre initiatives as a way to foster understanding, mutual respect and a sense of solidarity across borders.