

John Hirsh and the American Theatre

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He gave to Canada his life, which was fruitful; his passion, which was terrifying; and his love, which he longed to believe had been returned. / He was not a reclusive man. He was aggressive, he talked a lot, usually with fury; he gave speeches at every opportunity. And yet somehow he could not be grasped. (Conlogue C5)

These are the first lines of Ray Conlogue's obituary in *The Globe and Mail*, one of Canada's leading newspapers published on August 3, 1989, two days after John Hirsch's death. One week later Diane Turbide of *Maclean's* magazine had a rather similar approach to Hirsch when she called him a representative of the "Theatre of Passion [...]" who "gave his heart and soul to the stage" (Turbide 54). Another critic, Robert Cushman simply stated that Hirsch had been "the greatest director ever to have grown up in Canada" (Cushman 68). There has hardly been any other Canadian director so frequently written about in the period between the late 1950s and 1980s and whose personality in the Canadian theatre has been so influential and controversial at the same time. There has hardly been any other Canadian director in the second half of the twentieth century who had such impressive achievements in such a short time by founding several theatres in four decades and becoming, for a while, a leading figure of the Stratford Shakespeare Festival and CBC television drama. There has hardly been any other Canadian director in the second half of the twentieth century who went to the United States to make a stage career only to be better accepted at home.

During his relatively long and basically successful theatrical career Hirsch often faced incomprehension, pusillanimity, bureaucracy and other barriers but there was never any doubt about the fact that he had been one of the most dominant personalities in the postwar Canadian theatre who may have achieved this special status by retaining his Central European,

Hungarian and Jewish identity. It is perhaps less known that John Hirsch's career was very strongly connected to the contemporary American theatre in which he also played a significant role. The purpose of the present paper is to summarize his life and work with a special emphasis on his contributions to the theatre in the United States of America.

John Stephen Hirsch (1930–1989)

John Stephen Hirsch was born as *János Hirsch* on May 1, 1930 in Siófok, Hungary. His father was a merchant, and one of his grandfather's relatives had been the famous Hungarian operetta composer Imre Kálmán who was also born in Siófok. Hirsch's parents as well as his younger brother István became victims of fascism: they were killed in Auschwitz. János escaped deportation but he and his grandfather made it to the protected ghetto of Budapest which was too much for the grandfather and it is only John who managed to survive. After the war, as a fourteen-year-old boy, Hirsch had stayed in the refugee camps of several European countries. After a while he ended up in a Jewish orphanage close to Paris. He tried to get to various different countries but finally he was supported by the Canadian Jewish Congress who helped him to get to Canada where he was adopted by a Winnipeg family in 1947. John's new parents—Alex and Pauline Shack—were left-wing, working-class Jewish people with two daughters both of them working as teachers.

After learning English and taking his final exam at high school, John Hirsch was accepted to the University of Manitoba where he studied English and Philosophy and graduated as an outstanding student in 1952. Although he gave up further studies for the sake of theatre, in 1966 he got his PhD in English Literature which was quite an achievement, given the fact that he spent most of his life in the theatre as a manager and director at the same time. It is not accidental that Ray Conlogue found it important to mention in his obituary that besides Tyrone Guthrie, the Hungarian-born director was the only intellectual among the artistic directors at Stratford, Ontario, and that the “actors complained of the mass of information that Hirsch would bring to a show” (Conlogue C5).

Theatre was almost in his genes so much so that even in one of the refugee camps he and his friend had organized a puppet show to the children there. In the 1950s in Winnipeg ‘the’ theatre was the amateur

Little Theatre which had four shows a year. It did not take long for Hirsch to get in touch with them and as early as 1954 he directed a play, Jean Giraudoux' *The Enchanted* which turned out to be his first significant stage work in Canada. After graduating from the university, he first founded a puppet theatre and then the *Touring Children's Theatre* with the help of wealthy local citizens. During this period he staged two of his own puppet shows as well as his adaptation of a very popular children's play called *Rupert the Great*.

Seven years after his arrival in Canada, he became a producer at the local station of CBC TV where he gained a lot of experience. In 1956, he decided to go to London to study acting where he became a student of the Central School of Speech and Drama. His stay in London was to have a decisive influence on his later career since it was a period when British theatre went through a radical change. On returning from England, he and his one-time fellow student Tom Hendry established *Theatre 77* which was announced immediately on CBC Radio (October 29, 1957) since after a 25-year interval Winnipeg once again had a professional company, i.e. the actors were paid for their work. In the radio interview Hirsch claimed that there were enough professional actors in the town and that he was not afraid of their leaving Winnipeg for a more attractive career because one of his aims was to make sure that talented people would have a chance for good training and stage debut in their hometown.

Next year (1958) John Hirsch suggested the merger of *Theatre 77* and the amateur *Winnipeg Little Theatre* and with the help of Tom Hendry and the leaders of the other company they created the Manitoba Theatre Centre (MTC), the first regional theatre in Canada and North America. The foundation of the MTC started a new phase in Canadian culture as a result of which—with the financial support of the newly established Canada Council (1957)—most Canadian cities began to build theatre centres based on the Winnipeg example. These institutions hosted basically professional companies, and, therefore, the launching of the MTC marks the beginning of modern professional theatre in Canada replacing the long-standing dominance of amateur companies.

The success of the MTC made Hirsch suddenly known all over the country and he received more and more invitations to direct in other theatres such as the *Théâtre du Nouveau Monde* in Montreal in 1964, the *Stratford Festival* in 1965 and the *Lincoln Centre* in New York in 1966. Then he would “commute” between Stratford (Ontario) and New York

staging major works of Shakespeare, Brecht, G. B. Shaw, William Saroyan and Chekhov.

By the mid-sixties John Hirsch had become so popular or well-known that he got into the papers even if he just turned up at a social event. From a professional point of view, however, the most important thing in this period was his being invited to Stratford in 1965 where in four seasons he directed eight shows including four Shakespeare plays, one Canadian premiere and two adaptations. Much later he recollected these years in the following way:

It was the classics who saved me from going mad and who gave a new meaning to my life. If I could not have worked with the plays of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Brecht and other masters, I might have gone mad because of my Holocaust memories for I would not have been able to work up directly what I had lived through. All these experiences can be found in the plays: in Chekhov in the disintegration and disappearance of the society or in Shakespeare's personal tragedies. While working on these plays, I meditated over my fate as well. I have always been the archeologist of my soul. The plays helped me in the discovery and I cured myself in this process. ("John Hirsch", my translation)

The appreciation of his professional achievements is well illustrated by the fact that in 1968 he was nominated as co-artistic director of the Stratford Festival with Jean Gascon. He worked in this position for two years and then, in 1970, he decided to go to New York to become famous although he could not have felt neglected in Canada since in 1967 he was among the very first Canadians to receive the *Order of Canada*, the highest civilian honour.

The theatres of New York and other American cities brought him similar success to those in Winnipeg and Stratford and he collected a number of prestigious prizes for his directions: the Outer Critics' Circle Award for G. B. Shaw's *Saint Joan* (Repertory Theatre of Lincoln Center, Vivian Beaumont Theatre, New York, 1968), Obie Award for his provocative staging of the British Heathcote Williams' *AC/DC* (Chelsea Theatre Center, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Brooklyn, 1970), the Los Angeles Drama Critics' Award for translation and adaptation of *The Dybbuk*, a classic work of Yiddish Theatre (Center Theatre Group, Mark Taper Forum, Los Angeles, 1975). He had a chance to show his talent even on Broadway where he staged the professional premiere of Joseph Heller's *We Bombed in New Haven* (1968). During this same period he also directed in Winnipeg, in Minneapolis as well as in the Habima

National Theatre in Tel-Aviv, Israel. In 1973, however, he moved back to Canada. According to some contemporary opinions he would have liked to become Artistic Director in Stratford but he had to wait almost a decade for that. After fulfilling the position of Head of CBC Drama from 1974 to 1978, he worked as Advisory Artistic Director of the American Seattle Repertory Theatre between 1979 and 1981 when quite unexpectedly and under rather strange circumstances, he was asked to take over the Stratford Festival. He accepted the offer and stayed in that position until 1985. The general assessment of the five years he spent there has been quite mixed but it is commonly agreed that he was the one who led the Festival out of the crisis. Although professionally these years do not belong to his best, the results were worthy of Hirsch. In spite of the criticism he had received during his directorship, in his farewell speech he said the following:

I am leaving this theatre, as I always leave places, with a sense of loss. Whenever we leave something behind, we are losing something, and although the immediate feeling might be that of relief, and a great sense of joy because of what's ahead, we also feel sadness. Especially when one had been as closely connected to this theatre as I have. These are very difficult times. (Hirsch [10])

After these 'difficult times' there came a more peaceful period. Though he still directed in Canada and in the United States, he was mostly involved in teaching. He accepted the offer of the prestigious Yale School of Drama and the Southern Methodist University in Dallas to teach drama history. His 'retirement' into the classroom did not at all mean that Hirsch would have grown tired or disillusioned. Quite the contrary. As a matter of fact, he continued to do what he had been doing in the previous decades: he accepted any offer coming from any corner of the continent leading to his constant travelling and working. In one of the interviews of this period he said that "the older you get the harder it is to keep bouncing around physically from one place to another, but the possibility of rot setting in is very frightening to me. You sort out priorities, and for it's always been a matter of going where the most interesting work is. What would I do here? Sit for twelve months and do a play or two?" (Friedlander 2)

The most influential stage work of his last years was a production of Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* in San Diego. The reason for emphasizing this performance is that it was a worthy end to his life-work.

I worked on it for six months and I believe the production touched the ordinary American who has undergone Irangate, and the Reagan years. It awakened audiences to the problems of leadership, the nature of democracy and the role of the media in politics today. The approach I took can be termed 'radical Shakespeare' in that I unashamedly shaped the play in a certain way." (Friedlander 2).

This is 1988 and the presidential election is coming to the end (finally won by George W. Bush) so it is not surprising that "the audience arrives to confront two huge banks of television monitors flashing footage of tanks in battle, urban squalor, Senate hearings on the Iran-Contra scandal, commercial advertisements, and snippets of *Wheel of Fortune* and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*" (Shewey). Later Hirsch related that the reason for him to insert these elements in the production was not sensation or misinterpreted modernisation but the idea that he wanted "to communicate the heart of the play which is profoundly ambiguous" (Friedlander 2). Whatever the explanation for the success of this production of *Coriolanus* is, it has been considered as one of the most memorable Shakespeare-directions in the history of the San Diego Festival as well as in the life of John Hirsch. Ray Conlogue who regards this Coriolanus-production Hirsch's last great achievement wrote that the performance was "so powerful that the shock effects from it are still registering in the U.S. theatre community" (Conlogue C5).

A few months after the premiere Hirsch fell seriously ill which turned out to be fatal. After long suffering he died on August 1, 1989 in the Mt. Sinai Hospital in Toronto. His funeral was attended by thousands of people and his friends and colleagues organized a memorial evening in his honour in the St. Lawrence Centre in Toronto.

John Hirsch's Directions in the USA

In the third volume of the *International Dictionary of Theatre*—which contains the names of significant actors, directors and designers—John Hirsch seems to be the only Canadian director representing his country. "Hirsch was the first Canadian director to demonstrate not only the possibility but the positive values of a career that combines US and Canadian influences ..." (*International Dictionary* 355). Even though there were other talented and remarkable directors on the Canadian stages, Hirsch's theatre work may be regarded as much North American as purely Canadian both in a geographical and a cultural sense. With the

exception of a few short years, he was travelling between east and west, north and south as if always looking for something more challenging or for something much better. This 'mobility' may have contributed to his rich career.

Hirsch's connection with the American theatre started in *New York's Lincoln Center*. Between 1966 and 1971 he directed seven productions at the newly opened Vivian Beaumont Theatre and an additional one at the Ambassador. Each of these productions had more than 40 performances, a good run in a repertory theatre. The selection of the plays clearly illustrates the fact that while Hirsch was basically attracted to classical works and favoured European drama, he regarded the stage as a world theatre with no restrictions on genres. His directions at the Lincoln Center included premieres as well as revivals. His first stage work in New York was a brand new translation of Federico Garcia Lorca's *Yerma* in 1966 (first performed in the US in 1947) while the first production of Joseph Heller's *We Bombed New Haven* on Broadway was also directed by him. (The original production of the play—quite understandably—had been staged by the company of the Drama School at Yale University, New Haven a few months earlier.) From among the five major European plays Hirsch directed in the US between 1966 and 1971—*Yerma*, Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, *Saint Joan*, *The Playboy of the Western World* and *Antigone*—the greatest critical success proved to be G. B. Shaw's modern historical drama for which he received the New York Outer Critics' Circle Award in 1968. The production was also notable from the point of view of American theatre history because it was the first time that the title role was performed by a black actress, Diana Sands who had become very popular after her portrayal of one of the main characters in the film version of Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* co-starring with Sidney Poitier.

A note must be made of Hirsch's connection with the National Theatre of the Deaf in Waterford, Connecticut. The theatre was established in 1967 with the help of state subsidy in order to organize national tours of productions with and for people with impaired hearing and to train actors and other professionals needed for such a special venture. As early as 1969, Hirsch was invited to direct *Tyger! Tyger! and Other Burnings*, a stage piece based on a collection of poems by William Blake, Lewis Carroll, Robert F. Panara and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The unusual production was part of a travelling show using the sign

language of the deaf which was presented, among others, in the Longacre Theatre on Broadway.

1970 was a very busy but certainly prolific year in Hirsch's career. In addition to directing George F. Kaufman and Marc Connelly's *Beggar on Horseback* in the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York, he also staged Brecht's *Man Equals Man* in Winnipeg only to be asked to direct the same play in the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis the same year. And this is not all. It was also in 1970 that his award-winning production *AC/DC* written by British poet, actor and playwright Heathcote Williams was on at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the same year found him in the Habima National Theatre in Tel Aviv where he directed Chekhov's *Seagull*.

It has already been mentioned that in 1966 Hirsch resigned as Director of MTC but he retained his connections with the theatre he had founded. It was true for this "American period" when he regularly returned to his second birthplace, Winnipeg. In 1971, he directed Joe Orton's hilarious comedy *What the Butler Saw* to be followed by the American musical *Guys and Dolls* two years later. The greatest artistic achievement of this period, however, was his own highly successful adaptation of the famous Jewish mystic play called *The Dybbuk* which he produced in Winnipeg in 1974, and later in Toronto and Los Angeles.

The Dybbuk, or Between Two Worlds is a play written by a White Russian Jewish anthropologist under the pseudonym S. Ansky in 1914. He collected the folklore sources of the story for years and when he showed the final Russian version to Stanislavsky who liked it very much, the famous director asked him to translate the text into Yiddish saying that it would be more authentic if it was performed by a Jewish company. In 1920, however, S. Ansky died and the premiere of his play was held a few weeks after his death—in Warsaw. *The Dybbuk* was an immediate success soon making it to New York while in Moscow it was performed in Hebrew by the Habima company directed by Vachtangov. Later it became a national symbol of the Habima Theatre but it was also successfully presented by other theatres including the Royal Shakespeare Company. In 1937 the play was adapted for the screen by a Polish director, the music for a ballet version was composed by Leonard Bernstein whereas in 2008 the play was made into a multimedia Canadian opera with an international cast later shown in many American cities as well as in Germany. (It even had a few Hungarian-language productions,

most recently under the title *White Fire, Black Fire* in the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj in 2002.)

It is not accidental that a play like this raised the interest of Hirsch who had always been seeking for new works that he could use to express his inner world. The title-giving “dybbuk” is a malicious little spirit, a wandering soul of a dead person who enters the body of a living person and captures her. During the plot it turns out that the dybbuk captures the soul of a bride who lost her lover and is now forced to get married with another man. The spirit, however, cannot be driven away from the girl who is probably united with her lover after she dies. The play explores not only the relationships between the living and the dead but also touches upon such issues as the cosmic order and eternal truth. This mystic element was put in the centre of Hirsch’s production and turned into a kind of superhuman force. Writing about the performance, Martin Knelman remarked that “watching it, one could feel that John Hirsch had poured his entire life into this one production, finding the links between religion and theatre, between the old world and the new. *The Dybbuk* was his tribute to the vanished world that propelled him, and it was a beautiful embrace” (Knelman 23). The success of the special piece was well illustrated by the fact that he was asked to direct the same play in the St. Lawrence Centre, the most prestigious theatre in Toronto, and that a year later he was awarded for the Los Angeles version of *The Dybbuk*.

The facts and the published interviews and articles clearly show that John Hirsch considered the American theatre scene almost as important as that of his own chosen second country. Canada and the United States for him did not really constitute two different worlds but rather one and the same cultural “market”. In return, American theatre critics and the public appreciated his contribution to the same extent as he had been recognized and admired by the emerging and strengthening Canadian theatre profession and its grateful audience.

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