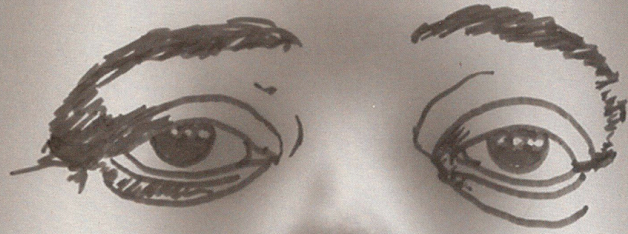


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### An American in Bulgarian Fog

HERE Arts Center, New York City “Lyubo” (Bulgarian “Luboslovieh”-roughly “Love of Words”)

Karen Rosenberg

A photo-copied paper, handed out at the entrance to the hall, explains the historical background of this piece. From 1924 to 1926, a certain Philip Sweetbriar, who was the representative of an American railroad company, sent letters to his young daughter in Arkansas. The political situation was chaotic and confused at the time, and Sweetbriar apparently did not manage to receive protection from any of the clashing splinter groups. Eventually he found refuge with an elderly Bulgarian woman; then, however, while on a search for her runaway horse, he was lost in the fog and no more letters came.

This is an actual occurrence, which fell on the ears of Chris Green, American director of “Lyubo,” during one of his trips to Bulgaria. And it is common knowledge that, in this day and age, American businessmen try to conduct business deals in politically unstable countries, while always remaining careful not to end up in the cross-fire themselves.

In Green’s staging, Sweetbriar is a character with a soft voice and sense of humor, who himself becomes a little clouded before he disappears in the fog. In his monologues- mainly excerpts from the letters to his daughter- he sometimes seems to not be in Bulgaria, but rather with her in Arkansas. The piece therefore achieves a dreamlike atmosphere in which live music of various styles mirrors Sweetbriar’s (deteriorating) mental condition. The music was nearly all written by Green, who is as much a composer as a puppet-theater creator.

Yet the word puppet seems to me to be too narrow to encompass the various techniques Green employs to illustrate the approach of Sweetbriar’s confusion and longings. With an excellent feel for timing, switching between objects, cut-outs, drawings, and figures, the staging surprises again and again with new indications of Sweetbriar’s precarious situation. Especially effective is the portrayal of the main character’s inner demons as two drunken, dancing, farting vaudeville characters. They call up laughter as well as sympathy for Sweetbriar, who, in Eastern Europe, seems so out of

place. In anticipation to the question of whether he is a revolutionary or a communist, he prepares this excuse: “Darnit, I’m an American Southerner- I can just play dumb.” However, to his self-accusations of being a bad father, he has no slick answer. A snake swirls in the air in place of the words that fail him.

Like a number of other current puppetry productions, “Lyubo” is choreographed, (as indicated) by Lisa Gonzales and Deana Acheson. The dancers and the often-visible moving puppeteers add to the tension with their presence. Their red gloves and a red neck scarf indicate bloody violence: Sweetbriar’s death was already announced in 1923, after an attack by one of the Bulgarian splinter groups on the cathedral in Sofia. No, he was fine, he wrote his daughter. Yet the underlying feeling of danger on the stage does not weaken. The tone increased in relation to a sense of danger as, instead of the runaway horse, red hooves and a red run hauntingly in place.

The uncommonly harmonious collaboration of surprising plot and layered images make “Lyubo” an exciting theatrical experience. The piece was partially developed in Sofia with the puppet theater collective “Theater Nobodies,” graduates of the National Academy for Theater and Film Arts. It was produced at HERE Arts Center in Manhattan as a commission of the Dream Music Puppetry Program founded by Basil Twist, who incidentally studied at the French Ecole National de la Marionette in Charleville-Mezieres. The Dream Music program, whose purpose deals in the area of “puppetry for adults with live music,” found in Green a considerable and promising talent.