

Conversations with evil: Hearing Adolf Eichmann

“When I entered the room, they became scared because I was not different from them. I was just like them”. Thus speaks Adolf Eichmann in *The Hearing* by Ivan Krejčí. It is one of the productions of the festival that turn to historical memory. *The Hearing* returns to the events of the Second World War, to be more specific, the Holocaust, uncovering the faces of the “banal evil” embodied in figures of Adolf Eichmann and Hans Franck and touching upon the responsibility of the peaceful population (whether collaborating with the Nazis or passive) of Nazi-occupied protectorate Bohemia and Moravia for the elimination of the Jews. The production is distinguished by documental precision in the transmission of facts, by precise structure, and the use of easily readable clear images and unequivocal direct message. It is not so much a message or warning not to repeat historical path, but rather a statement that its repetition is inevitable.

The Hearing is the hearing of Adolf Eichmann’s case where war criminals and their passive accomplices also feature as witnesses or defendants. Playwright Tomáš Vůjtek and director Ivan Krejčí unfold before the viewer a peculiar trial of history.

The space of the stage is ambiguous. It does not come across immediately as a courtroom but resembles a railway station or a transit centre. As the furniture is changed, it gradually morphs into a courtroom and also into a metaphorical Valhalla (as authors of the production definite it) of sorts where the Nazi “heroes” meet. Who exactly is on trial? It seems that all characters are among the accused: not only the war criminals, but also the population indifferent to the fate of other people, not only those who gave orders but also their executioners, irrespectively of the amount of spilled blood, not only Nazism but totalitarianism in any form.

Nevertheless, Adolf Eichmann and the Holocaust are in the centre of the trial. Eichmann’s character, his motivation, his way of thinking become palpable through the use of documental materials that create a sort of skeleton out of which the actors and the director develop his image. Eichmann is embodied by Marek Cisovský. Psychological complexes, lack of reflection replaced by the fanatical devotion to an idea and conscientious attitude to work – such are the banal explanations of the behaviour leading to crimes and to the “banality of evil”. If you add to this the cult of discipline and spirit, the idea of the civilizational mission of the German nation you will get a set of the cliché ideas of two criminals that the play juxtaposes: Eichmann and Hans Franck. While the latter desperately tries to justify himself, the former is convinced that he is absolutely innocent and takes pride in his well thought-out smoothly running plan of the deportation of the Jewish population, and also in his “dreams” about granting the Jews the “Promised Land”. In a very expressive episode depicting the Wahnsee conference, Eichmann washes his hands and wipes with a snow white towel hinting at the Biblical image of Pontius Pilate.

The production features a lot of similar expressive – even if occasionally simplistic - means both in terms of the play itself and in terms of the scenography. The characters enter the stage

through the curtain resembling the doors of the railway cars that Eichmann used to schedule. The table is covered with red cloth, apparently to symbolize the blood on his hands. The shining cutlery on the dining table at Wahnsee evokes the images of surgical instruments and surgical table where the “diseased” and “unnecessary” bits of the old world were removed.

While in keeping in line with a documental character of the play the individual characteristics of Eichmann and Frank are preserved, the characters are not simply individual people but rather the embodiment of the topics that the production touches upon. For instance, Vlastička (Alena Sasínová-Polarczyk), wearing a fur coat that used to belong to a Jewish woman, suggests the idea of responsibility the local non-Jewish population for the Holocaust though simple means of theatrical expression: costume.

Despite all biographical details and the psychologically accurate performance by Marek Cisovsky, the case of Eichmann suggest a conversation not so much about a specific person and his responsibility or historical justice. In Ivan Krejčí's production, Eichmann is an evidence of the universal nature of evil, variety of its forms and its indestructibility.