

Krizanc & Boje

Tamara Journal Interview with John Krizanc

by John Krizanc¹ Interview with David Boje²

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ABSTRACT

John Krizanc is the author of the Tamara Play, after which the journal is named. The interview explore the relationship between aesthetic and ethics, how the artist makes compromises to get a project like Tamara to appeal to an audience more interested in entertainment spectacle than socioeconomic or political commentary.

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT TAMARA Tamara de Lempicka (1898-1980) was a Polish portrait painter who lived in Russia until the Bolsheviks arrested her husband during the Russian revolution. In 1918 she emigrated to Paris, and in the 1920s and 1930s became the darling of the European aristocracy (de Lempicka Portrait Galleries on WWW: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th; Bios 1st, 2nd; 3rd, 4th, 5th; De Lempicka portraits 1st, 2nd, 3rd,)). She is recognized as the most important Art Deco painter.

TAMARA, is also a play by John Krizanc (1981/1989), first performed May 8, 1981 in Toronto. It is Los Angeles' longest-running play, a dozen characters unfold their stories before a walking, sometimes running, audience. Tamara enacts a true story taken from the diary of Aelis Mazoyer. It is Italy, January 10, 1927, in the era of Mussolini. Gabriele d'Annunzio, a poet, patriot, womanizer, and revolutionary who is exceedingly popular with the people, is under virtual house arrest. Tamara, an expatriate Polish beauty, aristocrat, and aspiring artist, is summoned from Paris to paint d'Annunzio's portrait. Instead of remaining stationary, viewing a single stage, the audience fragments into small groups that chase characters from one room to the next, from one floor to the next, even going into bedrooms, kitchens, and other chambers

to chase and co-create the stories that interest them the most. If there are a dozen stages and a dozen storytellers, the number of story lines an audience could trace as it chases the wandering discourses of Tamara is 12 factorial (479,001,600). I applied this critical postmodern perspective by looking at Disney corporate narratives, contrasting official (hegemonic) and more (corporately) marginalized stories (See Boje, 1995 AMJ).

With that introduction, I want to start the interview.

David: Okay, John, well, we wanted to ask you about the play, *Tamara*.

John: Sure

David: And what gave you the idea for the play?

John: What do you want? The long or the short version.

David: Okay. Oh, give me the longer version.

John: The genesis of it was the Toronto World Stage theater festival in 1981. Our company, Necessary Angels felt that it was important, to do a play, for this international festival. At the time, I was the buyer for the BookCellar an independent book store-now defunct.,

thanks to to the big box chains. Anyway, the Oxford University Press rep gave me a book on Tamara's art. I didn't like her art but to pad out the book the publisher Franco Maria Ricci incorporated the some of the diaries written by D'Annunzio's housekeeper Aelis Mazoyer. Her diary entries documented the the poet Gabrielle D'Annunzio's attempts to seduce the painter Tamara de Lempicka, over a perriod of ten days, commencing January 10th 1927. Reading about D'Annunzio's extravagant and decadent lifestyle I wasn't sure if I saw him as a role model or a cautionary tale for a young writer just starting out. While I was handicapped by not speaking Italian I certainly read everything I could about him. Richard Rose who would direct the play orginally agreed with me that it would make an interesting movie- sort of Visconti film that we might just be able to finance when we were old and famous. Since that was a long way off (still is) Richard suggested I start thinking of it as a play. But I felt D'Annunzio bizarre world which included a pet tortoise and functioning battleship moored in his back yard - would be impossible to capture on stage.

David: Um, um.

John: Then Richard had an idea- why not set the play in a real house? Why not use CasaLoma a castle build by Sir Henry Pellat at the turn of the century- Well it was a Sunday and we'd been drinking vodka tonics all afternoon but feeling inspired we went to the castle and arrived just before closing time.. Seeing the Great Hall we thought we'd found our set- Then, we saw the billiards room and found the secret passage to the stables-Suddenly, the whole house became a set. Our first idea was to move from room to room - to create an environmental play- we'd heard about plays done that way in Poland, and I believe Richard Foreman in New York had done something like that with the Ridiculous Theatre Company, and so had Marie Irene Forness. Now it may have

been the drink or youthful exuberance- but we were so excited by the architecture that we wanted to use it to shape the narrative. The very lay out of castle suggested this would be a play about masters and servants...Now, once you start thinking about Upstairs/Downstairs you're into a long long story - or else you end up giving the servants short shrift as Checkov did.....Then it occurred to me that in a space this big you could tell many stories, and tell them simultaneously.

David: Okay,

And we started really just sorta jamming on that idea. And, you know, later it became much more, cogent, or whatever the word is, where we developed rather pretentious theories about what began as entertainment. In interviews I'd describe the play as a critique of fascism, that gives people more freedom than they've ever had in the theater." I'm not saying that is not the case but really iit's jus retrospective wanking. You know, I always hated traditional theater. My first play was about a writer named John Krizanc, a poet, who hates the theater. It's a play within a play within a play kinda thing. I guess you'd say it's junior Pirendello. And uh, so I was always interested in form. I suspect now, that's because I was young and didn't have much to say- anyway I looked to other writers, to the process of writing itself, the self reflexive nature of it, and most importantly to role of the writer in society. At the time, I believed that writers made a difference, that they could change the course of history. D'Annunzio was part of that. He was a Byronic figure, who single handedly got Italy into world war one. Granted , that's not something to be proud of - but it is amazing that a writer ever wielded such influence, for good or ill. Recall, D'Annunzio was also the one man who might have stopped Mussolini's rise to power. That he didn't was his tragedy and ours. The question, for me, was, would I sell out to the state as D'annunzio did. The

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play was an attempt to answer that question... I fear I would have remained silent as D'Annunzio did - as Pierrendello did, unlike Pavese, and Italo Svevo.- if I was bought off in the way D'Annunzio was.

Asked how to keep D'Annunzio in his place, Mussolini said famously, "if you have a tooth that hurts, you either pull it out or fill it with gold." Basically he bought D'Annunzio off, paid for his villa on Lago de Garda, allowed him a live-in architect and a live-in string quartet, paid all his expenses, and brought out a definitive edition of his works....though he kept delaying the volume of political writings. In fact when D'Annunzio died, Mussolini flew to his house and spent two days destroying selected papers. What was in them is lost to history.

David: continue

Anyway D'Annunzio's housekeeper Aelis Mazoyer was basically his procuress. She kept him in an endless supply of women and cocaine. So, uh, I sort of thought this was like the ultimate Canada Council Grant, you know. It was the Nobel and McArthur award, and all for saying nothing against the fascists.

It's like a cautionary tale for a writer. The story of a man who allows himself to sell out. Though as Keith Richards reportedly said "It ain't selling out if the price is right." I mean his price was fairly high. And drugs and sex have kept many of us, away from our typewriters. So, I was fascinated by that. I think it was only later as I actually got the script going that Richard (ROSE/THE DIRECTOR) and I started to see the implications of, what it was that we were doing. Originally it was just a story about art and politics and I think art, sex and politics are always big themes of mine, but what was interesting here was how the form of piece evolved into an idea that's greater than its creators. Certainly the form -style of presentation - is the triumph

of Tamara. It's one of those very simple ideas that in science might be called 'elegant' It's only twenty years after the fact that I look at it- and say with 'shock and awe' -- "Man, that's a pretty good way to tell a tale."

David: about Tamara the artist. Do you feel that she sold out in the same way?

John: I'm sure even she would concede that she did. She did harbor illusions of greatness but she was primarily a society painter- She came to painting as a refugee from the Russian revolution. Arriving in Paris with no money, and no skills, she re-invented herself as an artist. She set out to make money and she did- she made the rich look like mythic figures - Aryan Supermen - and they paid her for it.

Right.

Her politics were I think very conservative. In the screenplay version of Tamara I've tried to put her in the best light - because she was very smart. She knew as soon as she saw the brownshirts in the streets of Vienna that it was time to move to America. She insisted her husband Baron, the Baron Kuffner sell all of his assets in Austria right away and get to America. And when she came to America she did a lot of good work aiding refugees escaping Hitler.

David: I didn't know that,

John: Yeah, she did some of the first fundraisers in both New York and Los Angeles in the 30s for refugee relief.

David: Oh,

John: So she was kind of interesting in that way and then she went off into this religious painting and abstract painting, I think um, but in the end, you know, when she was in Cuernavaca, she started repainting all of her famous paintings, from

the twenties, basically plagiarizing herself . It's sad really.

She was, I think she was had that art for art's sake kind of mentality you know, that she wouldn't be involved in politics.. I think, D'annunzio had that too. Sure, he was political but his politics are hard to read in terms of left and right. For instance, after the first world war he was upset about the treaty of Versaille, he felt that the Americans had gone back on their word and that Italy was not getting the territory it was promised for entering the war. So, he put together a regiment of men, and went and seized the city of Fiume. He held the town for 18 months, and the first thing he did was to write a constitution that gave woman the right to vote - But the same document also declared music the highest civic virtue-Now, where does that fall on the political spectrum. At the time, Lenin declared D'Annunzio the only revolution in Europe - but I think his refined sensibility and aesthetic led him to believe that art is of the highest importance and that is the first step towards believing the artist is better than other people. This leads to elitism and extremist politics.

David: Sad.

John: But oddly, when Tamara moved to Mexico, the maids in her house were really her only friends. She said she liked the peasants, because they were 'real and alive.'

David: Um uh,

John: On the other hand she insisted on being called Baroness Kuffner.

David: Baroness, huh?

John: Yeah, so she was full of these strange contradictions, I suppose.

David: Is that what you meant before by the art being put in the service of an elitist or extreme politics?

John: Well, I mean, you know, you just see that through out history whether it's Ezra Pound or um, D'annunzio or Celine. , I think that once you buy into that notion that art is some how not a functional activity like brick laying, that is more important than other occupations I think that uh, the allure, of the superman has a strong pull

David:Okay,

John: Because I think um, there is a certain narcissism is creating anything to begin with. We all have to believe in the idea that writing/making art is somehow special, because the world could give a shit about it. So in order to sustain yourself you naturally kind of mythologize what you're doing.

David: Now, um, let me ask a transition question. Did Tamara, the people who go to the *Tamara* play, did they get it? Do they get it that this pick this thing up as fascism?

[talk over/ inaudible]

John: No no. I certainly don't think that the wealthy folk, who have 125 dollars to pay for a ticket to a show which is limit to only 100 people a night, I don't I think they saw it as much more than a fun night out in the theatre. But that's not a defeat, it's a first step, an introduction to a different way to tell stories. But the piece is unlikely to make anyone say 'ah ha I now understand the inherently fascist nature of narrative or question how impotence political/sexual leads to the emergence of the fascist personality. They are not running out to read Reich. I just hope that it makes people want more from their storytellers. the play,

What has been the most rewarding thing for me is that people who don't usually go to the theatre who don't want to sit in rows and be told that this is good for you, so you will suffer through it, they got hooked on it. Young kids love it because it

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is sort of like TV, you know, running around from room to room is the equivalent of changing channels.

David: Sure, I love that about it.

John: Yeah,

David: Can you tell me, going back to the question, did they get the message on the opposition to fascism, some got it and some didn't ya think, or...

John: I doubt it. Certainly in America I don't think people even got that the fascists were not the same as Nazis. One thing they did seem to grasp immediately was how key the 'intermezzo' is to the experience. Intermission is where people who have been following different threads of the narrative get together over champagne and compare notes. Here, total strangers have no compunction about coming up and asking each other 'who were you following. What happen?' Now, some might say that the audience acts as the secret police, informing on the characters movements and actions....But I see it differently. To me, intermission is counterpoint to fascism. It says, this is how a democracy functions. Here, free people, discuss the choices they made, and create a new unity. It is only by sharing that a sense of the whole emerges. And there is no hierarchy of information. Each piece of the puzzle is necessary, and the bankers information is just as important as the waiters. That excites me, and so does the fact that people are actually talking about the play. Usually, it's been my experience with my straight plays that folks talk about everything but the first act they just sat through. Now, it might be that my writing sucks, and Mamet does not have this problem...but I suspect that it is also because linear narrative offers no way in, for the audience. The playwright tells them what to feel and think, and when. In Tamara, they're made to feel that the choice is theirs, that who they follow has

direct bearing on what they experience. In this sense, straight theatre is a Newtonian narrative, offering a predicable arch, and Tamara is a Quantum narrative- where the observer effects the outcome.

Now, I don't think they audience got any sense that Tamara was a comment on tradition of theater, that it sort of blew up the fourth wall entirely and turned it into this center where you can experience a drama in a 360 degree.. I mean the idea that it was an attempt to give authorship to the spectator, I don't think they saw that. Nor should they. To them it was a fun event. It's for people like yourself to have that kind of insight.

David: Sure,

John: A theoretical thing versus, you know, just wanting to run around the house and have a bloody good time.

David: I think both are possible

John: Yeah, I hope the are. You know, I, I, I think it was funny you know, like when Richard Rose directed it -- he's a very sort of serious guy and to him it was like Chekov. It was the servants and the masters, and he did it very much in that style but, the play, I mean the push of the audience, sort of has a tremendous impact on the actors because I don't care how serious, your classical training is,, if you leave a room and no one follows you as an actor-

David: Oh wow,

John: That's like the worst review in the world, right? So, like, within a couple of performances, the acting is going down hill because the actors begin to do whatever it takes to get an audience to follow them. For actors, the play is a real rush, they don't have to wait for the *Times* review; if they exit the music room with twenty people following them that's a good review. So, actors really start playing to

the audience, pandering in fact. That's depressing, but it's also human nature.

David: Gotcha. Um, okay preceding up to now, what's the responsibility of the artisan in times of Homeland Security or the Iraq war?

John: I think everybody should be struggling with that but I just don't see it happening. Maybe we're too close. Like people say it's too early to be writing about 9-11. I know that I'm just, a workin' stiff trying to who makes my living now mainly in television so I can't claim that what I do rises to the level of art. But, it's next to impossible to speak out in a medium like film and television, where things cost millions and corporations control what gets made.

David: Talk more on that,

John: Sorry?

David: Talk more about that please.

John: Well there's probably church basements where good theatre is being done. But there's we live in kind of a corporate where there's not much room for opposition. I listen to shows like *Crossfire* down and I can't tell the difference between the left and right in America.

David: [laughter] me either, I cannot either.

John: [laughter] Their wardrobe might be different, but if you go by the mass media, you get the sense that there is no opposition in America. I don't see any writers doing much, you know, politically anymore -

David: Gore Vidal, does he...

David: Yeah, I mean I guess...

David: Noam Chomsky.

John: Vidal had sort of a little pamphlet book out on 9-11. But it is so marginalized. It sure wasn't published by Random House. REM puts out a new song, so do the Beastie Boys, but they are on the web. People talk about the web as a force for Democracy, give me a break, it's the new ghetto. We'll let you speak out in a chat room, but can you get on Larry King? No. Will Fox news interview without mocking you? No. They're not on the airwaves, the peoples air waves by the way, that corporations do not own, yet you would never no it. Look at CNN the most 'trusted name in news' according to whom? They're a press release for Don Rumsfeld and company.

David: Um uh.

John: I think the writers, we all somehow get co-opted. It's a very depressing situation right now. I mean maybe Tony's Kushner is going to have something interesting to say, but, um,, when...somebody, when they can take such offense to Bill Mahr's making his comments, about 9-11, and he's immediately off the air, it's a pretty scary situation. The Dixie Chicks make one comment about the President and their CD'S are being burned, their sales tank. That tells people that the price for principals is high- too high- it is oblivion. And when the networks address the question of whether actors should be allowed to speak out, they are asking the wrong question. Susan Saradon is only speaking out, because she can- she has the TVQ to get on the air- and Joe Public does not.

David: Right

David: Uh, uh. Now your play, *Globalization*, just to talk a little bit more about that, is it, does it have a message that's counter to the corporate culture?

John: Actually, it's a mini-series about globalization and discontents, set around a

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Summit of world leaders. Like Tamara it has an upstairs downstairs...in this case, upstairs is the powers that be, and downstairs, the people in the streets.

I was talking to the network and they were saying, well of course it will have to be balanced, and I said there's no fuckin balance here, okay. You hire me, it is not gonna be balanced. It's going to be a completely one sided take on globalization. I'm not makin' any pretense for balance. I'm sort of sick of that, ...we don't see any balance on the so-called objective news side of the equation.

But will this get made? I doubt it. Certainly, not the way I envision it. What will happen is that the producers will need outside funding to come up with a budget around ten million- then the money people will have some 'problems' and I'll be fired or the project will slowly die. But right now, I'm having fun, ranting to my computer screen.

David: Yeah, I've seen it advertised, but I haven't...I'm going to go look for it today, see if I can find it in the video store. Couple of questions from our board member here that they sent in to me to ask you, if I can turn to that, is that okay?

John: Sure, whatever you want.

David: Um, to you think *Tamara* has had any lasting influences on the way people think about and approach theatre?

John: Well, I'm disappointed to say no, I mean, I think there was Tony and Tina's wedding and a few of these, I guess you could say, the murder mystery weekends have some sort of relation to *Tamara*, but uh, I think the economics of it put people off. So many people have wanted to produce it until they actually run the numbers. This is a show with ten actors and a crew of at least ten. It has the running cost of an off Broadway show but

because it is set in a real house- we can't get five hundred people in per performance. We're limited to 100. That makes the ticket price high, and even with that producers have yet to find a way to make money on it.

I think Tamara has been more influential with game designers and those kinda people who construct dramas with multiple paths. *Tamara* was probably a very early, if not the first example, of that kind of interactivity.

David: That's a good one... that's a good answer. Um, so any other plays other than *Tanya and Tina* or some of the murder mysteries that kind of follow this path?

David: One person asks how did you come up with the title for the play. I mean, you named it after the portrait painter, you could have named it differently.

John: Yeah, you know, but that was one of those...I wish I didn't call it that because in a way she's not the principle character...all ten characters are the stars of their own narrative. ...calling the play Tamara sets up an expectation which is out of whack, because everybody is waiting for Tamara. And, obviously it's named after her, so she must be important so we the audience must follow her. In the first act the most of the people wait around and follow Tamara...then in intermission they'll hear some one say "man you've gotta follow the servants" 'cause there's all sorts of shit going on down there. So it takes until the second act, for the play to balance itself.

The truth is I called the play Tamara because I liked the sound of the name.

David: I'm glad you don't say Tam-ar-a because I never said that.

John: Yeah, yeah some people say Tam-ar-a, certainly a lot of people in LA did, and I thought if that's how it's pronounced,

I would never have used it for a title.

[laughter]

David: Now when I went to the play in Los Angeles, I followed the servants, because I'm from a working class background I just went right to the basement, you know.

John: Yeah. Well, I always do too. When it first ran in Toronto, I, I used to go every night to see this one scene, just before intermission in the kitchen.

David: Oh yeah,

John We call it the Gondolier's scene, because Dante the valet takes Mario the chauffeur on an imaginary gondola ride through the canals of Venice. It's not the best writing in the play but it was always my favorite scene. Don't know why.

David: Um, uh,

John: Uh, um, I would always go down there and, and um...sort of stay down with the servants, I never went upstairs. Even though I think Louisa Baccara, is the best written of the characters. I've never followed her. So, um, it's interesting, I

don't really analyze it but I guess my heart was always downstairs for the same reason yours was.

David: What's your new play?

John: "Globalization" It is, ... -- a four hour mini-series for television-- As predicted I did get fired off the script by the producers but in an odd turn of events they've now rehired me at the insistence of one of the commissioning networks. At the moment, the SUMMIT is slated to go before the cameras in May....My latest work for the small screen airs in November on the CBC network. Written with star and producer Paul Gross the TROJAN HORSE is a political thriller that tells the story of how Canada comes to merge with the United States and how a Canadian linked to European Intelligence becomes the new President and sets about reversing fifty years of American foreign policy--- or will, if they don't kill him first."

David: Maybe one of our readers will see it and write a review. Thanks ever so much for the interview.

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