

Canned Chess! Recollections on the Genesis of Zenita Komad's "Operation Capablanca"

Gerald Matt

"The wealthy tenant ... withdrew his chess game from the pocket of the despised suit, blithely took up his place and went on to win a lightning game against himself. 'Were you the Capablanca', he yelled at himself, 'I'd have already beaten you by six games within the same time! In Europe this is what we call killer chess! Go and beg with your nose! Do you think that 'I fear' myself? One, two, and you're finished. You Americans! You paralytics!'"

—Elias Canetti *

Even the opening move was unorthodox. The three curators, who, with their "outside gaze", had scanned the Vienna art scene on site so as to make a selection for the exhibition "Lives and Works in Vienna II", had again long-since toured New York, Tokyo and Warsaw. They had taken with them the three remaining figures in the pre-selection box, since an agreement as to which of these three should move into the Kunsthalle show had yet to be reached. Endless e-mails had been exchanged between Asia, Europe and America, before the decision was made: Zenita Komad was in the game! This was surprising, since, had a minimum age limit been set (the curators had fixed an upper age limit: 40 – with one exception) then the artist, 25 years of age at the time, would have doubtless never have been able to make her move. This move, though, was to transport the coming "exhibition game" into an unanticipated dynamic. This was owing to Zenita's not having turned up with pictures, objects and installations, which we could then pass on to the curators in disc form during the return flight, but with the staging of a chess opera. Chess opera? As a dilettante – even though passionate – chess player, the only thing occurring to me in connection with this word was the name Paul Charles Morphy, who played a brilliant game against the Duke Karl von Braunschweig and his advisor Count Isouard, in 1858, during a performance of the "Barber of Seville".

However, we are not concerned here with this particular trio but rather, as Zenita auspiciously announced, the 1933 game (no less famous) in Los Angeles played by José Raoul Capablanca and Hermann Steiner. The artist, though, could not - or did not wish to? - reveal anything else to me at the time, which was just a few months prior to the exhibition opening. Thus, one was to expect a "work in progress", in theory just the kind of thing that we, as makers of exhibitions, love – though in practice must watch over with eagle eyes; in view of the realisation, everything must be – also with respect to the budgetary framework – concisely planned. And in the cultural business operas are not among the most inexpensive of productions. In this case, though, it was clear to me: Zenita Komad is not only Zenita Komad, she is a nodal point of a network of distinguished and no less ambitious individuals, and this network is called "Zenita City". "Zenita City", says Zenita, "accommodates heart- and soul-friends, freaks, thinkers, the enlightened, word specialists and thought doctors, patrons of friends, architects of castles in the air, inventors of jokes, masseurs of the laughing muscles, Gesamtkunst workers and many others – and not to be overlooked: Zenita City is originally from Loveland and Niceland."¹ I told myself that as their prima magistra, with the help of these magic people, she will also win a chess game, at the beginning of which not 32 figures will be on the board but, at most, a few pawns. She had, indeed, made a number of these: objects about one meter tall, whose form was easily recognizable as an inverted chastity belt.

In the prelude to “Operation Capablanca”, as the chess opera was to be called, the “real” figures finally began appearing: first the Grand Master Lothar Schmid, who had just been elected chess umpire of the century by the World Chess Association FIDE, in 1972, and who in the hottest period of the Cold War knew how to diplomatically direct the world championship between Spassky (USSR) and Fischer (USA) such that the opponents battled out the tournament to the end in spite of frequent threats to break off the game. With Zenita Komad, Lothar Schmid was the Librettist of the chess opera, and together they selected the Capablanca-Steiner game from 1933, commented on the moves – and the sequence of announcements in conjunction with the moves (in international notation) and their commentaries comprised the text, which was to be carried out in song and in spoken word.

By whom? As confirmed, Zenita City is a meeting point of big personalities: the White Queen Maria Harpner, the superb soprano, was to brilliantly accomplish “her part, alternating between speaking, shrill shrieking and song” (2), whereas “a hugely prominent figure of German-speaking theatre” (3), the Burgtheater actor Ignaz Kirchner, as the Black King was to take on the loser’s role, without speaking a word and yet with great dignity. And so the list in the “Who’s Who” of the exquisite music- and theatre-scene went on: Bernhard Lang and Nadir Gottberg provided the compositional aspect, Herbert Klapfer was on piano and Johannes Reichert was countertenor – that rare species of singer, since castratos no longer exist – the prologue, narrating the legends of the chess game, was superb. Through him, we learned that Shihiram, the inventor of the game of chess, is the black – losing – king, since his wish for reward was unable to be fulfilled. In itself the opera was not enough for Zenita. Written on one of her pictures from this time were the words “L’echecs, c’est moi!”, meaning something along the lines of: chess is my essence! Among one of the numerous overtures to her opera, which, as we were to later learn, incarnated “the power and powerlessness of the human being”, (4) chess playing actors and curators, such as Christian Ludwig Attersee, Erwin Wurm, Ingried Brugger along with my own modest self and advisor Ernst Strouhal, were challenged to a competition against blindfolded Grand Master Regina Pokorna (in the end we graciously accepted her offer of a draw); in the rooms of the “Video Space” and under the direction of the chess- and science-journalist Stefan Löffler, a Grand Master tournament took place with an international group of players; and in spite of this, outside in the Museumsquartier, declared by bureaucratically subservient authorities as the “forbidden courtyard”, a lightning tournament was taking place between the audience and professionals. Moreover, inside, in the exhibition hall, there took place a high-calibre symposium on the theme of “game theory”. This was able to take place using Zenita’s chessboard with a full field measuring 8 x 8 meters.

For the chess opera “Operation Capablanca”, however, there was no premiere. The first performance was simply the first performance. Zenita had choreographed a great deal, though quite intentionally not everything: “Most likely the hidden strategy is to find the right people and then to inspire them. I had a fabulous cast and a wholly fantastic team. The rest was hard work, stamina and the strict dismissal of doubt”. (5) And so also is Zenita’s work in progress “until the final checkmate on the fields B4/C5, was enthusiastically celebrated by the Viennese public”. (6)

*) From: Elias Canetti, *Die Blendung*, part two. Vienna: Herbert Reichner Verlag 1935 (Frankfurt M., Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag 1995)

1) Interview with Zenita Komad, in: Gerald Matt, *Interviews I I*, Verlag Walther König, Cologne, 2008, p. 144

2) Peter Vujica, “Das Schachbrett als Kunstfaktor”, in: *Der Standard*, 3rd/4th September, 2005

3) Culture Minister Claudia Schmied conferring the title “Kammerschauspieler” on Ignaz Kirchner on 16th April, 2008 in Vienna

4) Johann Werfring, “Kunst trifft Schach in Wien”, in: *Wiener Zeitung*, 27th August, 2005 5 Cf.

note 1, p. 143

6) Lothar Schmidt, Eloge, 2006, in: www.zenita-city.at/texte/text11.html