

THEATRICALITY BETWEEN ARTIFICIALITY AND AUTHENTICITY

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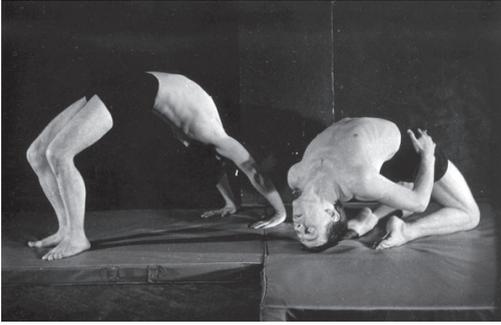
"The theatre, like other arts, should not fear the intervention of extra-theatrical realities"
Tadeusz Kantor¹

A possible point of reference, which could place under a common denominator the various theatrical searches and styles during the XX century, could be the introduction of the problem about the language of performance. It passes like a red thread through all the avant-garde and neo avant-garde, early-, late- and post-modern theatrical tendencies and styles, no matter the similarities, differences or sharp conflicts among them. For example, it is possible to view the explosion of the avant-garde tendencies from the beginning of the XX century (Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, Constructivism, Bauhaus, Surrealism) as a necessary (to avoid saying "natural") development of the modern revision of the language of drama, which, with some considerations, might be said to have started from the late XIX century. What draws closer the four emblematic modern dramatists, outlined by Peter Szondi in his *Theory of the Modern Drama* (Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, Anton P. Chekhov, Maurice Maeterlinck) is

namely the suspicion in the language of the traditional drama. The themes of the irreconcilable conflicts between the sexes (Ibsen, Strindberg), the intense and full of dramatic life *pauses* in Chekhov's plays, the symbolic imagery of Maeterlinck can all be seen as symptoms of a crisis of the verbal, after which drama cannot remain the same. The doubting of the language of drama, the need to discover its "gaps" soon shifts to the territory of the theatrical performance itself, which also begins to consider itself as having a specific language, which needs to be emancipated and independent. In later theatrical ideas and tendencies during the XX century, and here I will mention only the most prominent: Erwin Piscator's political theatre, Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, Antonin Artaud's "theatre of cruelty", Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre" (which later stops being called theatre at all, but branches out into two artistic and research practices – "art as presentation" and "art as vehicle"²), the theatre anthropology of Eugenio Barba, the combining of cultures in Peter Brook's "holy theatre", Living Theatre's happenings,

¹ Kantor, T. *The Impossible Theatre*. In: *Twentieth-Century Theatre – a sourcebook*. Ed. Richard Drain, Routledge, 1995, p. 64.

² *Homo Ludens*, 2004/10, p. 321.



Training at Jerzy Grotowski's Teatr-Laboratorium.

the visual theatre of Robert Wilson – in all those examples we come across descriptions of a theatre, which is more and more disconnected from literature and is focused on itself and its own language. In all cases we see conceptions in which theatre is more independent and constantly re-thinking and re-evaluating itself.

This landscape – i.e. the totality of theatrical ideas and practices of the XX century – allows for the emergence of the problem about the specificity and essence of theatre as an art form. It is refracted through the lens of the various intuitions and ideas about how, on one side, to move beyond the syncretic understanding of theatre (i.e. as an art form, which essentially is a combination of other art forms), and on the other side, to overcome theatre's dependence from literature, and especially from drama. In other words – a need to rethink and emancipate the understanding of theatricality appears. Theatricality begins to be seen as a basic characteristic of theatre. What is curious here is that the differing viewpoints of all the theatre practitioners and theoreticians of the XX century with their original approaches, conceptions, projections and, after all, inventions of theatricality, in fact come very close to each other, because above all

of them, as an antipode, constantly hovers the shadow not of literature, or cinema (or any other art form, which might seem as a threat to theatre's identity), but of life itself.

In some way, as if in counterpoint to the notions of "antirealism" and "antinaturalism", the manifestos of the avantgarde movements are filled with ideas about some form of repressed vitality. A vitality that has been suffocated in the stereotypes and limitations of culture. And part of that culture is also the classical theatrical heritage. As a clear example we could use the words of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (founder of Futurism), Emillio Settimelli and Bruno Cora: "*It's stupid not to rebel against the prejudice of theatricality when life itself (which consists of actions vastly more awkward, uniform, and predictable than those that unfold in the world of art) is for the most part antitheatrical and even in this offers innumerable possibilities for the stage*"³. The negative understanding of classical theatricality is obvious here. Futurism attacks it for its detachment from life, for its inadequacy towards its actual context. Ironically, from contemporary point of view, nothing could be more detached and inadequate to reality than a futurist synthetic play. And yet, behind the sheer arbitrariness and total simultaneousness of the futurist synthetic play and performance, one can sense the desire of the authors to capture the high intensity of real life. Here is Enrico Prampolini: "Perhaps scenographers believe it is absolutely necessary represent this reality? Idiots! Don't you understand that your efforts, your useless realistic preoccupations have no effect other than that of diminishing the intensi-

³ Marinetti, F.T., E. Settimelli and B. Cora. *The Futurist Synthetic Theatre* (1915). In: *Twentieth-Century Theatre – a sourcebook*. Op. cit., p. 20.

ty and emotional content, which can be attained precisely through the interpretive equivalents of these realities, i.e., abstractions?"⁴. We can also remind ourselves of Tristan Tzara's explanation of "Dada": "Dada is our intensity..."⁵. Or we can turn to Apollinaire who writes in *The Breasts of Tiresias*:

"Because who would have built us
a new theatre...
To the exercise of our own
modern theatrical art
Which often with no apparent link
Just as in life marries together
Sounds gestures colours cries noises
Music dance acrobatics poetry painting
Choruses actions
and multiple settings."⁶

For the representatives of the early avant-garde, the creation of a new theatricality was connected with the total and ruthless destruction of the old one, which has been labeled as tautological, clumsy and dead. And what is worse – it is deemed harmful as it destroys the vitality of the theatre art. It is obvious that this is about a negative definition of the old theatricality (understood as basically part of an old tradition, which needs to be done with) as the opposite of life. There is also the striving for the creation of a new, "abstract" theatricality, which, at least in its level of

⁴ Prampolini, E. *Futurist Scenography* (1915). In: *Twentieth-Century Theatre – a sourcebook*. Op. cit., p. 23.

⁵ Tzara, T. Speech from *The First Celestial Adventure of Mr. Antipyrine* (1916). In: *Twentieth-Century Theatre – a sourcebook*. Op. cit., p. 25.

⁶ Apollinaire, G. *The Breasts of Tiresias* (1917). In: *Twentieth-Century Theatre – a sourcebook*. Op. cit., p. 29.

"intensity" should be close to the experience in real life. Similar is also the attitude in the texts of Gordon Craig, who defines the art of theatre as wavering in its means of expression between natural and unnatural, and in order to solve this contradiction he suggests the idea of the Über-Marionette actor.

The logic of this dialectical relation "life – theatre" could be broken to smaller oppositions such as "real – theatrical", "spontaneous – artificial", etc. This same logic can be found also in the works of the neo avant-garde artists from the second half of the XX century. I shall point out here only the most radical one who in the end rejects everything theatrical: Jerzy Grotowski. In his work with the actor he introduced the idea about the impulse and the reaction and it was his aim to make the theatrical gesture (or the actor's gesture on the stage, to be more precise) into the smallest possible shortcut between the two. "The authentic reaction begins inside the body. What shows on the outside – a gesture or a detail – is only the end result of that process. If the reaction had not started from inside the body, then it is a fake one. It is dead, false, artificial."⁷ In this sense no other gesture from the stage could be called authentic. Perhaps it is for this reason that it has been often said that it was Grotowski who had in fact realized the theatrical utopias of Antonin Artaud and his desire for a pre-verbal theatre, a theatre free of the power of logos. In the chapter "The Dream – a Semiotic Window" from his book *Culture and Explosion* Juri Lotman defines the separation between impulse and reaction as one of the main

⁷ Гротовски, Й. Упражнения. – Театър, 1999/3–4. [Grotowski, J. *Exercises. – Theatre*, 1999/3–4.]

stages of the creation of culture and language: “The moment a temporary space (the pause) between impulse and reaction appeared represented a turning point in the history of consciousness... A fundamentally new stage occurs with the appearance of a temporary break between the receipt of information and reaction to it. This state, above all, requires the development and improvement of memory. Another important result is the transformation of the reaction to an immediate action into a sign.”⁸ In this sense it could be said that both Artaud and Grotowski define traditional theatricality in negative terms and suggest another one in its place, which should be closer to the instinct than to culture.

The aim of the text so far was to demonstrate how the understanding of theatricality during the XX century had been trying to find and fix its own definition in the tension between two opposite poles. So if we can imagine the theatre space as a magnetic field, then its “plus” and “minus” side, would be respectively “authenticity” and “artificiality”. Elizabeth Burns posits two types of conventions, which are needed in order for theatricality to take place. On one side these are the “rhetorical” conventions, that is the conventions, which guarantee and direct the relationship between viewers and players. It is thanks to



A Futurist Evening – caricature of Umberto Boccioni, 1911.

them that the actors are able to create the fictional world of the theatre performance and the spectators to perceive it exactly as fiction. These are the conventions, which provide the artificial element in the theatrical experience. While the second type of conventions are those, which guarantee “authenticity” and they are concerned more with the relationship between the performers themselves. Modelled on the type of social interactions, they are being transferred to the specific time and place of the theatrical action. Their aim is to make convincingness and to suggest the connection with the outer (not-theatrical) world: “The actor has to try to convince the audience rhetorically that this is the way in which he, given such a situation, at such a time, could behave and at the same time to transmit to the audience the conviction, that such behaviour is taking place in a coherent, credible world and is socially authentic”⁹. Hence the negative defini-

⁸ Lotman, J. *Culture and Explosion*. Transl. by Wilma Clark. Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin, NY, 2009, p. 142.

⁹ Burns, E. *Theatricality. A Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*. Longman, London, 1972, p. 32.

tion of theatricality towards life: “‘Theatricality’ in ordinary life consists in the resort to this special grammar of composed behaviour; it is when we suspect that behaviour is being composed according to this grammar of rhetorical and authenticating conventions that we regard it as theatrical. We feel that we are in the presence of some action which has been devised to transmit beliefs, attitudes and feelings of a kind that the ‘composer’ wishes us to have”¹⁰.

It could be said, that what theatre had discovered during the XX century is the self-awareness of its own paradoxical being as a specific language that is simultaneously both – artificial and alive.

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¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 33.