

# THE IDEA OF TIME IN POSTMODERNIST THEATRE TEXTS

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In philosophy, the idea of time is linked to the concepts of spirit and matter. According to Jean-François Lyotard,<sup>1</sup> true spirit is memory and history, uninterrupted time. This memory remains local, limited to a single viewpoint. Only God has – or is – the memory of the whole and its programme. Absolute memory, which is simultaneously an intemporal act. The individual monad does not have a “viewpoint” immanent to space because it is also immanent to time, lacks sufficient memory, is not capable of sufficient concentration. Viewed in space, each monad is a mass point in relation with every other mass point. The whole world is reflected in each mass point. In other words: the difference between spirit and matter is merely one of scale, due to the ability to concentrate and conserve. Spirit is matter which remembers its interactions, its immanence.

If we turn to the concept of time in theatre, we will see that here too time is registered through the intersection of various viewpoints, each with its own memory and at the same time correlating to the awareness of a universal space of “uninterrupted time”. In drama, time is present as the character’s memory, which is his or her view-

point in time and it drives the action in the present moment – the time frame chosen by the author. The collision of viewpoints, which is what the conflict is, is in this sense a temporal category.

As for time in a theatre show, it is the sum of time used to create the play, that is, the time the author needed to write the work, and its specifics have impacted on the work itself. Then there is the time used to create the show, the hours the director spent working on the text by himself (and with the author, present through the play), with the different co-authors (concerning set design, music, etc.). And the time spent working with the actors – the rehearsal period. The moment of the show’s actual time on stage, which is provisionally assumed to be the present moment, contains in itself the memory of all other moments plus memory of the time in which the characters act and the play takes place. The time in which a fiction plays out, the unreal, “fantasy” time, is at the same time completely real – to the extent that the actor is acting in front of the spectators in a moment provisionally accepted as present – the moment of watching the play.

In the course of action each new reveal burdens the character with ever new information and expands the volume of her memory. At the start of the play, Shakespeare’s Gertrude (*Hamlet*) has knowl-

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<sup>1</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991 [*L’Inhumain: Causeries sur le temps*. Paris: Galilée, 1988].

edge of Hamlet within herself. As the narrative progresses, new “intelligence” is added to her memory – now she knows that Hamlet is “playing” insane, understands what he is accusing her of, and that Claudius is plotting her son’s death. All of this complicates her motivation and influences her decisions. In drama, time is an essential component which determines the relationships between the protagonist and the action, between the different characters’ viewpoints, and between the written text and the staged text. The connection between the making of the performance and its reception depends on time. The very presence of theatricality in the dramatic text has a temporal dimension.

In contemporary drama the playwright is freer to make shifts in chronology, to tear and cut up the different “segments” and challenge the whole. In fact, this disruption of the whole and of the idea of time started with the Modernists who tore up the causal relationship – which reflects an objective viewpoint – in the narrative arc, supplanting a new logic – the logic of the internal monologue, of the inner rhythm of a subjective present’s flow. The Postmodernist author freely plays with time, crossing it with space and dissolving it in it.

If we juxtapose Euripides’s *Medea* with Heiner Müller’s text *Despoiled Shore (Medea Material) Landscape with Argonauts*, we will see the difference in the two texts’ approaches to time. In Euripides’s work, time is shown through the chronological progression of the action. In her monologues Medea recalls past events, discovering them as motivation for future acts. The episodes from the Golden Fleece myth are brought into the dramatic text by the narrative through which the Ancient Greek tragedy introduces the spectator to what

happened before the time of the play’s events. Euripides’s Medea feels betrayed, a woman scorned, and socially she is at the brink of losing her privileged status that her marriage to Jason afforded her. Her wounded pride turns against her and drags her into the act of monstrous revenge. And even though he uses the generalised, symbolical language of Greek tragedy to create his character, Euripides justifies her psychological state of mind. Medea turns into a monster, which was already introduced as an image of her in Jason’s lines and as a state of insanity, based on the nurse’s reports. Euripides breaks down the separate stages of past and present and traces the phases of her passion for revenge. Back in Colchis, she was also a monster – to her own tribe and family, but she did not realise it in the haze of her passion for Jason. Now another passion is pushing her to the monstrous transformation – the passion for revenge. We would be right to say on her behalf: “I became a monster because I was made one.”

Heiner Müller chooses three time fragments for the appearance of the mythological figure of Medea as a spectre in three peak moments of her life: during the devastation of her homeland and the brother she offered as sacrifice for the man who rendered her blind with passion; on the eve of Jason’s marriage, who has abandoned her, while the monstrous decision to take revenge was ripening inside her; and then when the world is in ruins and the man witnesses the universal catastrophe He and She had caused.

Heiner Müller’s Medea is presented in her self-realisation as scum. She is exacting furious vengeance, but not for her betrayal. Heiner Müller places the motivation emphasis on the fact that she herself was

made a traitor. And while the plot structure in Euripides's tragedy exists because of the character of Medea, which serves as its centre, in Heiner Müller's postmodernist work the character of Medea dissolves into the structure. *Medea Material* is a fragment of a short trilogy which visits the mythological motifs of the Argonauts' quest and the following story of Jason and Medea's marriage, the next marriage he plans for himself, and its fatal outcome. *Despoiled Shore*, the first fragment, is a paraphrase of the Golden Fleece quest: a scene of violence, sexual excess, destitution and ruin. A scene painted through a collage of quotes – elements of the myth and elements of the nightmarish visions of a modern reality of mass devastation: all-consuming waves, a catastrophic sequence of sex-betrayal-violence. Through the paths of the irrational, the accumulating images of the familiar visions associate the destruction of Colchis and Medea's betrayal, who carries in her arms the brother sacrificed for her passion.

*Medea Material* places Medea's monologue in Ancient times – in the specific moment of the eve of Jason's marriage, when she is telling the nurse what is about to happen and experiencing the revenge through her tale. Revenge for having already seen Colchis's destruction, for having caused the ruin and death of her kin, for having been made into a creature who renounced else in her life – into Jason's "bitch". She gave Jason the life of her beloved brother, and in exchange Jason gave her their sons. Medea goes back to trace the logic of this exchangeability and wishes to restore the disrupted order – to bring the children back into nonexistence, as if that would bring her brother back to life,

as if it would exchange her wrong choice for a right one.

The last fragment, *Landscape with Argonauts*, rounds off the triptych of betrayal and violence with the encompassing long-distance view typical for landscapists. This is how the scene of total world ruin emerges. One worldview has failed and so the whole world collapses. This final fragment of the triptych is in itself an eschatological myth of the end of the world driven by the previous two time fragments. Each fragment in the triptych drives the next, and the circle is closed in a scene of total devastation. The failure of the human in the individual man's destiny causes the collapse of the world. *Landscape with Argonauts* provides the male point of view to the narrative motif. Following the chronology of events in the plot, after the decimation of Colchis and Medea's sacrificed brother, after Jason's sacrificed sons, Jason "enters stage" – now it is his turn to assess the grim disintegration of the world.

The mixing of realities in the Golden Fleece myth quote and the mythological motif of Medea the child killer creates a simultaneity of the "ago" and "now" strata. These are situated in Boeotia in Ancient times, on the one hand, and nowadays, on the other, when empty cigarette packs roll around the despoiled shore of the lake near Strausberg along with dreams and aspirations – in the place where "a monstrous copulation in Chicago" is taking place. At the same time all of this is happening in the time after the catastrophe, the human universe is collapsing.

When talking about a modern interpretation, we would have to account for the material role it plays in a postmodernist author's text. The collage-like structure allows for putting the quote next to the

other fragments in the play. This in turn leads to a free approach to time: the added fragments bring with them their own logic – different and yet commensurate with that of the others. The author combines monologue as the character’s perspective “to myself” with the perspective to the world of the subject who is “distant from themselves”.

In another of his theatre texts – *Macbeth*, Heiner Müller gradually takes over the text of Shakespeare’s work, inserting his own point of view in the seeming whole of the interpreted tragedy. And while in the triptych after *Medea* he adds the interpretations of the myth to his own structure, in *Macbeth* his peculiar “camouflaged” presence allows him to go into the quote itself and “deform” it from within. The Shakespearean theme of human history being an endless string of savagery and massacres, so thoroughly developed in his histories, is taken to its extreme and literal interpretation in *Macbeth*. Violence causes violence, one begets the other – all are drivers and victims of the killing machine kept going by all, together, in a continually restarting cycle. Macbeth alone reflects on what he does, on its causes and effects. Reflection gives rise to visions – reflection on the deed. In contrast, Lady Macbeth’s visions are born of the unconscious, of a blind horror taking place deep in the subconscious, even as the mind refuses to rationalise the deed. Heiner Müller quotes Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in his *Macbeth*, transferring a great deal of the logic of Hamlet’s monologues and lifting direct quotes from them. This is exemplified in Macbeth’s monologue where he says, like Hamlet in *To be or not to be*, regarding his fear of death and the frightening mystery of the beyond, that “from

whose bourne no traveller returns”. Everything seems to be happening beyond the specific time of human civilisations, in an atemporal, eternal circle of violence.

In *Top Girls*, published in 1982, Caryl Churchill rearranges the chronology of her play on two levels. The modern character Marlene – the typical emancipated, very ambitious businesswoman – is celebrating her promotion at a restaurant where she has invited several iconic female figures from different periods in history. This is how they are described in the author’s remarks:

*ISABELLA BIRD (1831–1904), who lived in Edinburgh and travelled abroad extensively between the ages of forty and seventy;*

*LADY NIJO (b. 1258), Japanese, who was an Emperor’s courtesan and later a Buddhist nun who travelled on foot through Japan;*

*DULL GRET, who is the subject of the Brueghel painting – Dulle Griet, in which a woman in an apron and armour leads a crowd of women charging through hell and fighting the devils;*

*POPE JOAN, who, disguised as a man, is thought to have been Pope between 854–856;*

*PATIENT GRISELDA, the obedient wife whose story is told by Chaucer in “The Clerk’s Tale” in “The Canterbury Tales”.*<sup>2</sup>

Even though the dinner party takes place in our times, each of the characters “lives” in her own and by telling her story, lays her period on top of the present moment. The author is keen to put the stories of the various women on the same axis and compare them, in the following scenes, to events in the lives of the modern heroines.

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<sup>2</sup> Churchill, Caryl. *Top Girls*. Bloomsbury, New York, 2012, p. 14.

By disrupting the sequence of events Caryl Churchill creates a reverse perspective to the main episodes dealing with the child abandonment theme. This theme runs through the tales of each character in various versions of the “taken child” and “unwanted child” stories. By switching the places of the episodes, the playwright reveals the outcome before the preceding and driving events, and so the focus is no longer on what will happen, but how and through what inner motivation. At a certain point the dialogue deviates from the specific events to turn to the trend, prominent in the 80s and later, of English drama’s marked interest in social and political issues, and the extensive exploration of feminism.

It is interesting to see how the unconstrained approach to time is utilised in another English play, written about ten years later – *Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard. In it, playing with time and space is the conceptual core of the play. Stoppard is constantly moving the action between historical periods, alternating scenes from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century with ones from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, within the 19<sup>th</sup> century setting, too, he makes references to an earlier era. And while the modern char-



*Arcadia* by Tom Stoppard, Duke of York’s Theatre, London, 2009.

acters are discovering phenomena from Byron’s time, Thomasina’s genius is searching for the solution of a theorem, following clues left much earlier by its creator. Stoppard disrupts our ideas of time and space. What connects the separate time periods is not just the clues to the puzzles – mostly completely false and misleading – but also the tortoise named Plautus who is later called Lightning, as well as the objects remaining from the action in one period and then are seen again in the other. This creates the eerie impression of a parallel world. The mystical breeze intersects with the rationally constructed model of the world through the prism of our modern concept of time.

Jean-François Lyotard, one of the greatest philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has named *Time Today* one of the chapters of his book *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*.

*The title “Time today” is not without paradox. Today is a time designator, a deictic indexing time in the same way as ‘now’, ‘yesterday’, etc. Like all temporal deictics, it operates by referring what it designates to the sole present of the sentence itself, or to the sentence only in so far as it is present. It temporalizes the referent of the present sentence by situating it exclusively with respect to the time in which this sentence is taking place (avoir lieu), which is the present. And without at all having recourse to the time in which the sentence could in its turn be located, for example by means of a clock or a calendar. [...] When the time of presentation is glossed, and we reach the conclusion that ‘each’ sentence appears at each time, we omit the inevitable transformation of present into past, and we place all the moments together on a single diachronic line.*<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Lyotard, Jean-François. Op. cit., p. 58.

The stage directions in *Arcadia* are in fact the most important part of the text in terms of the idea of time and space used in the play. At the end of Scene Two, which takes place in the present, Gus offers Hannah a freshly picked apple with a few leaves on the twig. In Scene Three, where the action returns to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the apple is still “present” at the table.

Septimus *picks up the apple. He picks off the twig and leaves, placing these on the table. With a pocket knife he cuts a slice of apple, and while he eats it, cuts another slice which he offers to Plautus.* Here time and space align, Tom Stoppard using a careful system of symbols. The apple, which he unequivocally links to the conversation about Newton from Scene One, and the tortoise, which through its association with slowness remains as a symbol of the fusion of space and the idea of time’s unilinearity. The same issue is examined in the dialogue between Thomasina and Septimus. The topic of their conversation is the philosophical perspective on the concepts of space and time, which finds its scientific rationale in Newton’s law of motion. Septimus emphasises the correlation between this law and free will by bringing up the ever painful question of man’s predestination in a “higher plan” that has allotted him limited time in the infinity of the world. Time’s irreversibility brings us closer to the inevitable end, and the awareness of it makes any effort meaningless and the idea of free will, an illusion. Thomasina goes beyond this conclusion. She allows it to be within human reach to devise a formula for the future, which relates to the idea of a synthesis between the separate monads constituting the integrity of time. Here Tom Stoppard enters the intersection between the field of modern

avant-garde trends in physics and philosophy in their radical notions as to the phenomenology of time. Under such philosophical hypotheses, the integrity of time referred to in *Arcadia* can only exist in a single monad, called God.

If we now go back to Lyotard’s reflections quoted above: *God is the absolute monad to the extent that he conserves in complete retention the totality of information constituting the world. [...] For the absolute memory of God, the future is always already given. We can thus conceive, for the temporal position, an upper limit determined by a perfect recording or archival capacity. As consummate archivist, God is outside time, and this is one of the grounds of modern Western metaphysics.*<sup>4</sup>

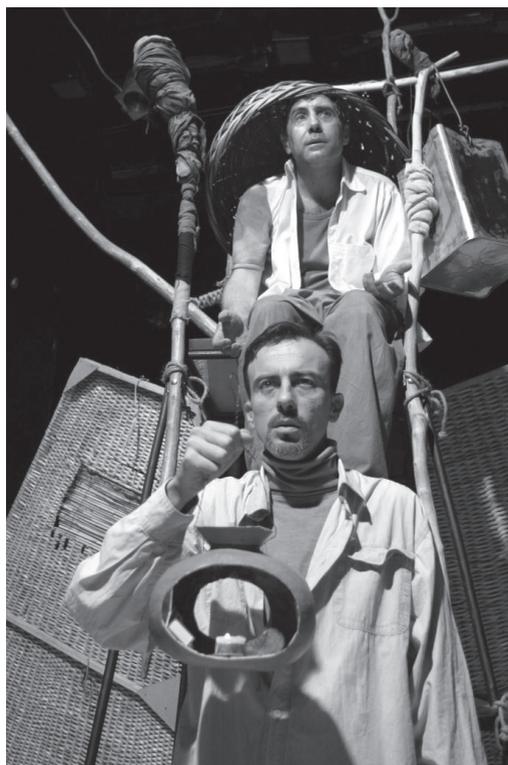
In *Arcadia* Tom Stoppard, using theatre’s unique means of visualisation, makes an unambiguous and current conclusion. According to Lyotard, contemporary physicists tend to think that time emanates from matter itself and that it is not an entity outside or inside the universe whose function it would be to gather all different times into universal history. The author of *Arcadia* implements this idea through the overlap of the separate time monads and their mutual penetration precisely via the intervention of the material. Objects not only “jump” from one period to the other, but also, as is the case with the apple, one object can exist in its various projections repeatedly in time, out of sequential order. If this is true of objects, or nonliving matter, then it is obviously also possible for living matter, such as Plautus/Lightning the tortoise. It would make sense for it to apply to humanity, too – in both its material, intellectual and spiritual emanations.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 60.

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In Bulgarian drama, before the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century playwrights generally had a rather conservative approach to the concept of time. Among the exceptions I would single out *January* (Януари) and *Lazaritsa* (Лазарица) by Yordan Radichkov and Konstantin Iliev's play *Kutsulan, or Valcha Bogoroditsa* (Куцулан, или Вълча богородица). The cyclical movement of time as a conceptual and structural mark sets Yordan Radichkov's texts apart, especially *Lazaritsa*, in which the author draws a parallel between the four seasons and the main stages of life. Here, cyclicity importantly underscores the coalescence between the notions of space and time. By confining his character to the crown of a tree, Radichkov constrains him and at the same time matches space up to the scale of the "whole" world, where the laws of the human microcosm and the universal macrocosm are analogous. Lazar remains physically immobile in the tree, but time is in motion. The different time periods are marked by the changes in the scenery around him and in him, but motion is aligned with cyclicity in the parameters of space, too. The space Lazar is confined to is a smaller circle in the bigger one (a play on the idea of a loop) of the "whole" world. And there is an even smaller circle within it – the metal container, in which the tortoise clatters around. Locked in this situation by the man, who in turn is locked (in the immutable cycles of his "tree of life") by a higher power: the cosmic law of the never-ending cycle. But while cyclical motion may look infinite, time is finite and being aware of it makes Lazar's situation tragic unlike the tortoise's, which does not carry in its mind the knowledge of its inevitable end.



*Lazaritsa* by Yordan Radichkov, National Theatre – Sofia, 2004.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that there is a tortoise with a special symbolic function in both Tom Stoppard's and Yordan Radichkov's plays that I have analysed here. The tortoise is an emblematic figure as regards the concept of time in both texts' systems of signs. It is also a reckoning of sorts with the modern awareness of the adjustment slowness and speed undergo in the world's progress towards entropy. Is that progress really irreversible?

*Published in Homo Ludens 2002/No. 4–5.*

*Translated by  
Yoana Stefanova*