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PERFORMING CULTURE: NEW STRATEGIES OF STAGING LITHUANIAN DRAMA

Introduction

Lithuanian theatre of the last decades has experienced a lot of changes, especially in the most important elements of theatrical performance: the text, the actor and the audience. The change of theatre's status in society suggests not only the redundancy of theatre in contemporary Lithuanian society, but also a considerable shift in the function of its aesthetics. In this article the emerging themes of contemporary Lithuanian theatre will be analysed, with special attention to recent developments that can be conceptualized as *new textuality*, by which Lithuanian theatre tries to articulate its own condition as well as the conditions of society and culture in transition.

The new forms of representation in Lithuanian theatre are closely linked to tradition as well as various influences from outside, which, in turn, form the *hybrid* character of contemporary performances. These tendencies are closely linked together and deal with the transformation of the notions of language, body and perception in contemporary culture and critical theory. As the traditional notion of *theatre* is being transformed by changing the socio-economic situation, new technologies and popular culture, theatre artists look back at the past performances, theatre and cultural history, non-classical forms of narration as well as mass media in order to investigate and challenge Romantic and modernist models of representation. Theatre reflects and deconstructs its own past; it is from itself, its own substance, that theatre proliferates by imitating, repeating, parodying, retracting its own representational devices. The Lithuanian theatre critic Audronis Liuga defines the self-reflexive nature of recent performances directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius, Rimas Tuminas and Jonas Vaitkus as an introversive play with the director's own concepts, methods and themes from past performances. According to the critic, in this way theatre doubles itself and avoids its sociocultural function. It projects only an authorial self-image, concerned entirely with "theatre about theatre" [6].

As the notion of theatre changed, the new approach to the dramatic text became extremely important during the recent decades of Lithuanian theatre. One can find a lot of critical voices in contemporary Lithuanian theatre criticism, declaring the crisis of Lithuanian drama and expressing a critique of contemporary performances, where the drama text is only a pretext for an already predetermined compositional structure, determined by the director's concept. The relationship between play and performance has been the centre of contemporary theatre theory for a long time. The constancy of the text and the homogeneity of the audience are central assumptions on which traditional literary theatre is based. During the recent decades the situation has changed, as visuality as a means of expression has become more and more important in contemporary Lithuanian theatre, replacing the traditionally dominant position of the drama text in performance. Continuing the search for distinctively theatrical means of expression that began in modern theatre, as well as trying to deconstruct the logocentric dominance of dramatic text over performance, such theatre artists as Oskaras Koršunovas, Eimuntas Nekrošius, Gintaras Varnas, Vega Vaičiūnaitė, Ignas Jonynas, Cezaris Graužinis create performances in which visuality starts to predominate over textuality, thus producing a kind of "inner" or visual dramaturgy. Of course, the levels of *visuality* differ with each artist and each performance.

The tradition of visuality has its deep roots in the poetic metaphorical tradition of Lithuanian theatre and was fostered with the emergence of *Aesopian language*. Also, as Helmutas Šabasevičius suggests, the emergence of a new generation of stage designers, which worked closely with directors in establishing a sharp visual side to performance, has influenced the turn of contemporary Lithuanian theatre toward visuality. One can distinguish at least two kinds of "visual dramaturgy" in contemporary Lithuanian theatre: performances where visual expression is clearly dominant and the meaning is produced by means of visual narration and performances, where all structural elements are placed in a non-hierarchical, equal position. An example of the first kind of visual dramaturgy is the performances of the theatre group *Miraklis* by Vega Vaičiūnaitė, where, according to the theatre critic Vaidotas Jauniškis, "the word is conquered by the image and the sound, two elements that precede the former and are more universal" [3, 62]. In the performance of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Vega Vaičiūnaitė creates visual narratives and "(re)writes" literary texts using non-verbal devices, such as large dolls, fireworks, specific spaces, music and

dance. She also employs the physical presence of the body, which is able to dominate the dramatic text, rediscovering a different kind of communication through visual images.

As examples of heterogeneity of theatrical elements, the performances *Here Be There* and *Old Lady*, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, can be considered. These performances were constructed from the texts of Russian avant-garde group "OBERIU". They produced the kind of narration that was conceptualized as "theatrical", where the performance text is produced by means of combinations and juxtapositions of all theatrical elements: images, texts, actors, music and stage design. Textuality and performativity never dominated or absorbed one another. The meaning of these images was consciously deferred within a vibrating system of theatre signification and required a different kind of perception. These performances had no fixed meanings and no privileged discourses, thus allowing the audience to concentrate their attention towards his or her own perceptual processes. However, one must note that, even if the text is placed on an equal position with other elements of performance structure, or, as in the case of *Miraklis*, it is subordinated to visual narratives, the performance retains a certain "textuality" that does not disappear and which can be defined as "performance text".

The new tendency was articulated by theater critics as "aggressive visuality" or "the negligence toward the dramatic text" [1; 5]. However, this new approach to textual and performative elements in contemporary Lithuanian theatre is closely linked with the attempt to restore the heterogeneous, harmonic relationships between the two. It simply redefines the role of text in the theatre: the text is no longer the centre and it is no longer perceived as the authoritative force that governs and structures meaning in performance. The best examples of visual performances struggle to get outside the binary logic of textual/performative or self-reflexive/mimetic, acting/non-acting. In early performances by Oskaras Koršunovas or performances by Vega Vaičiūnaitė and Benas Šarka one encounters what Umberto Eco has called the *open text*, in which audience interpretation is demanded by the text in order to complete understanding [2]. In these performances, the text is opened up to the perception of the audience in such a way that a specific theatrical situation is created that enables a variety of interpretations and a plurality of meanings. The playwright's intentions are not irrelevant, but rather this intentionally is perceived within a more complex matrix of interpretation. Ones the textual space – which used to be the exclusive

communicator of meaning – is opened, it calls upon the spectator to synthesize the elements presented. It depends on the individual director, whether the recontextualization of the literary text is successful in opening the structural framework of meaning or just in obscuring it.

Furthermore, even recent contemporary performances that closely follow the scripts of contemporary drama cannot be described as “a return to the literary tradition”, for it is no longer possible to articulate the notions of text and textuality in “traditional” terms. There is no universal agreement as to just what a text is: opinions range from the idea that anything we can read as a coherent ensemble of messages constitutes a text to the notions that all reality is textual. The text is understood as a space, where meanings are put into play with one another, rather than systematized into a hierarchy.

The contemporary drama texts of Sigitas Parulskis, Herkus Kunčius, Marius Ivaškevičius are inhabited by a different kind of textuality, rooted in intertextual cross-references, collage, polyglossia and simultaneity, so that even “traditional” staging of such plays will end up producing heterogeneous and open performance text. For example, the visual landscapes and citations from Sigitas Parulskis’ *P.S. File O.K.*, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, may look like experiments in formal utterances, but a closer reading will find them concerned with narrative frames and mental systems that subvert the traditional sense of meaning and perception.

These performances deal with mythological systems (the story of Abraham and Isaac; the myth of Oedipus) as well as contemporary “trivial” myths and does so by subverting or rewriting them, exposing the underlying power structures by giving the voice to “un-represented”, marginal subjects. In *P.S. File O.K.* the structure of mythical system is changed and Isaac sacrifices his father, instead of being saved by the grace of God. By subverting, fragmenting, (re)constructing the structural elements (narrative, visual, aural) of performance the director strives for active communication and aims to challenge traditional modes of perception by forcing the spectators to create the meaning for themselves. Similarly, *P.S. File O.K.* arouses conventional expectations of plot, character, and setting, but subsequently deforms and rescales them, causing disorientation in the audience. The characters in this play do not live in a world, which mimetically imitates our own world, but in textual worlds, which imitate other texts; they seem as if they have been transported from one textual world to another. Actors are transformed from one character to another. For example,

there is no clear separation between Mother–Teacher–Lover in Dalia Michelevičiūtė role, which also has allusions to Ophelia as well as former performances directed by Jonas Vaitkus and Eimuntas Nekrošius, thus creating performative intertextuality. The characters in *P.S. File O.K* spin in this circle of intertextuality, and the audience is forced to experience the feeling of sudden destabilization of reality. The linearity of the given system of signification is disturbed, creating new dissonant patterns of meaning. The techniques of intertextuality – closely linked with self-reflexivity, irony and autoreferentiality – are apparent in performances by Oskaras Koršunovas; Sigitas Parulskis's *From the Life of Spirits*, directed by Vytautas V. Landsbergis; August Strindberg's *Dream* directed by Jonas Vaitkus; Herkus Kunčius' *The Studio of Genius* directed by Audrius Nakas; Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* and rock-opera, *Life and Death in Verona*, directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius, just to name the few.

Another example can be Benas Šarka performances, where, one can say, reality is being constructed, rather than re-presented. In his performances, the distinction between theatre and life is blurred, since in the eyes of the audience, characters are created from different fragments of texts, experiences, myths of popular culture, archetypes, advertisements, theatrical stereotypes. The actor is an intertextual persona here, consisting of his/her own identity, body and fragments of role, being constructed and deconstructed at the same time. The ironic allusions to past performances, film, mythology, popular culture, mass media and dream multiply over the course of these performances. Nonetheless, one should note that this process of appropriation cannot be defined as learning or improvement, but rather conscious play, usage and consumption of various "texts" or "signs" from other sources that generally have a deconstructive and reflective function. It is more of "intertextual appropriation", which emphasizes a parodic reappropriation of forms of the past in order to speak to a society from within the values and history of that society, while still questioning it. For this reason, this strategy can be defined as resistance to traditional constructions of reality. It challenges inherited modes of theatrical representation in at least two ways: disturbing both the theatre's means of expression and the larger cultural assumptions about theatre.

As Hans T. Lehmann notes, if we take into account the three levels of text in theatre (linguistic text; text in wider sense of *mise en scène* as analysed by theatre semiotics; and performance text, as the specific structure of the whole theatrical event) then we can make the important observation that while the dialogue on

the stage is fading, dialogue between the stage and the audience returns with a new emphasis [4].

Conclusion

Thus, the visual performances in contemporary Lithuanian theatre can be conceptualized as examples of an attempt to abolish the absolute dominance of the text, but they do not try to eliminate text from the theatrical performance. These artists have reduced the authority of traditional dramatic text by deconstructing the established Aristotelian hierarchy of theatrical elements and putting text on an equal level to other elements of performance: actors, stage design, music. This kind of performance is neither the logocentric illustrations of the dramatic text as in traditional theatre, nor a rebellion against it, but more of an effort at strategic containment, an attempt to redefine the notion of "textuality" in performance. Typically postmodern formations of perception (quotation, recycling, pastiche, parody, simulation), present in these contemporary performances, destabilize any categories or hierarchies of difference between original and copy, spatial and temporal coordinates, live presence and recorded versions. These techniques are used to challenge the common assumptions about reality and unmediated presence, distance between performance and experience, fact and fiction, public and private. The repositioning of dramatic text in performance creates a critical interplay between text, reader, and culture. What is created by these strategies, however, is a theatre questioning its ontology (being), its means of representation, and its aura of authenticity, authority and originality.

References

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Iestudējuma kultūra: jaunas stratēģijas lietuviešu dramaturģijas uzvedumos

Kopsavilkums

Rakstā analizētas jaunās tendences iestudējumos mūsdienu lietuviešu teātrī. Nemazinot teksta nozīmi, aizvien vairāk tiek uzsvērti citu iestudējuma elementu – aktieru spēles, scenogrāfijas, mūzikas, gaismu utt. – loma. Balstoties uz konkrētiem iestudējumiem un konkrētu režisoru darbiem, autore aplūko tekstualitātes un vizualitātes attiecību dinamiku.