

About the timeless time in theater

Georgeta Simona PANDELE •

Abstract: The theater from the perspective of physical time is the theater of antiquity, middle ages, renaissance, classicism, romanticism, realism or the modern period. The primitive man's first approaches to theatrical art¹ will be realized through mimicry and in and will express man's need to assert himself through an instinctive-emotional manifestation supported by his innate gift to approach others through imitation². If in its beginnings, this creative act of prehistoric man was chaotic, in time, it became a complex theatrical manifestation, which will mirror the evolutionary trajectory of the individual in relation to the human species.

The etymology of the word „theatre” shows us its double semantic quality.

It comes from the ancient Greek θέατρον („a place for viewing”)³, from θεάομαι („to see, look at, observe”), and is both a theoretical-poetic notion and an artistic representation that will cause man to look at himself mirrored in his world, becoming a theatrical reflection of times long past into the immediate present.

Keywords: timeless, language, dance, actor, limit

Introduction

Throughout historical time, there will be countless writings or theatrical representations progressively adapted to the artistic means of expression and dramatic experimentation specific to a certain socio-cultural context that will often confuse theatrical art with human life, and vice versa.

Nothing unnatural, however, since the dramatic hero will emerge ever so subtly from the primitive man of primordial times who felt instinctively to manifest himself physically, through dance, before the unknown in magical rites, funeral or totemic ceremonies, projecting its interior „double” into the outside.

Thus, man and his double in life will become in theater, the actor and his double, the character who will find an existential justification „in the mirror” starting from the most banal gestures of mimicry or dance of the archaic man to the most complex theatrical productions in our contemporaneity.

• Doctoral student at the Faculty of Theatre, "George Enescu" National University of Arts in Iași

¹ Berlogea Ileana, *History of the Universal Theatre*, Bucharest, Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, 1981

² „the innate gift of imitation, planted in man (...)", Aristotle, *Poetica*, Bucharest, Scientific Publishing House, chap. IV, 5, p. 56.

³ <https://www.wordsense.eu/theatrum/>

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„Arthur Kutscher, one of the well-known theater researchers (...) insists on dance as the first form of theater, as the first artistic image created by man, by overcoming his natural limits and creating another world, dance being the one that revealed to man the possibility of self-transcendence, of transforming familiar and ordinary things into a source of emotion and aesthetic joy.”⁴

In support of what was written above, we will also have a definition of the word „dance” from the end of the 14th century whose linguistic explanation: „to jump or jump with regular or irregular steps as an expression of an emotion”⁵ will complete the initial picture of theatrical art.

In the case of dance, this first theatrical form according to Kutscher, it is not the dance known to us today that has fixed rules and a whole harmonious palette of physical movements. No! The dance of archaic man was a blunted act of creation as an unconscious response to a strong emotion he felt at a certain moment.

Dance, as the first artistic manifestation, will be the basis of theatrical art, being at its beginnings an emotional and physical discharge of man that helped him to repetitively approach his own inner states and to adapt to the harsh living conditions of those times .

On a metaphorical level, a dictionary of symbols tells us that: „Dance is celebration, dance is language. Language beyond words: the nuptial dances of the birds show this(...) For the dance is not only a fervent trial and a prayer, it is also theater.”⁶

Regardless of the fact that in this article references are made to an anthropology of the theater placed under its specific factors, especially in the case of theater, there will always be a defining factor, however contradictory, the „time” factor, whose quality of ephemerality through the play of the actors does not only throw it into oblivion, but makes it even timeless.

At the irreversible limit of continuous human evolution, the theater will follow its example, becoming for man the mirror of his everyday evolution through which he, looking at himself through the eyes of the actor, can „tame” his own ancestral beginnings.

Content

For a spectator, all the component parts of a theatrical performance, mime, dance, text, scenography or music, will be the living, tangible evidence of a long-gone era that will not be forgotten as long as man seeks to know himself. through art.

From the most trained playwrights to the best-known directors, all show the spectator through the play of his actors about their theater as a mirror of his own times

⁴ Berlogea Ileana, op.cit., p.9

⁵ <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=dance>

⁶ Chevalier Jean, Gheerbrant Alain, *Dictionary of symbols*, vol. 1, Bucharest, Artemis Publishing House, 1994.

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through which he can look at himself stripped of all his social masks, sheltered by the theatrical convention created . „artificial”.

„Yesterday I went to the Theater of St. Lukas to see a comedy, which gave me great pleasure, I saw an improvisation piece with masks, played with a lot of naturalness, energy and virtuosity...

Of incredible diversity, she entertained us for more than three hours, the audience also plays in the show and the crowd merges with the theater as a whole. Day by day in the market, on the shore, in the gondolas and in the palace, the buyer and the seller, the beggar, the boatman, the neighbor, the lawyer and his adversary, everything lives and stirs and consumes, murmurs and solemnly speaks, quarrels and bargains, sings and he plays, swears and rambles. And in the evening they go to the theater and see and hear the life of the day they spent, artificially recomposed, arranged somewhat more decently, interwoven with fairy tales, detaching from reality through masks, approaching it again through behavior.”⁷

How many differences can we detect between the paragraph above, written by Goethe in 1786, and today? As you can easily see, the distance of 237 years since it was written until now, it hasn't changed that much in daily human life, nor has it made the theater look very different in its last centuries.

In 2016, theater director David Esrig, who launched the volume „*Commedia dell'arte. A History of the Show in Pictures.*” in the Yorick Collection from the Nemira Publishing House, containing this part at the beginning of the article above, said in his interview at the launching of his book, something known also from other writings on theater theory that is worth remembering: „(...) the theater has a separate language (...)”⁸

Even more than that, we could say that, a „special” way in which all those who participate in the realization of the artistic act can understand the language of the theater is also depending on how they relate to the action proposed by the dramatist, also inevitably placed in a certain period of time.

As in any field, also in theater, one can talk about „a time” that at its beginnings will be represented as a quantifiable physical notion in well-determined historical periods, thus being able to talk about a theater from the ancient periods or the middle age, as can we talk about a theater from the renaissance, classicism, romanticism, realism or contemporaneity.

The „times” of the theater inevitably have a historical imprint, but also a poetical-philosophical imprint, which helps the dramatic work not to die out, as well as the creator of the artistic act to reproduce great deeds from the past of some special characters with the help of the technical means of his time, but also common facts from the ordinary life of ordinary people.

⁷ Esrig David, *Commedia dell'arte*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 2016.

⁸ <https://bookhub.ro/eveniment-editorial-commedia-dellarte-o-istorie-a-spectacolului-in-imagini-conceputa-si-coordonata-de-david-esrig/>, Book launch, October 27, Cărturești Tea House , Verona, (05.03.2023).

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Referring to the theater theory mentioned above, we will extract a fragment of text from a significant book of this field in which it is presented precisely for the indestructible connection of history and poetical-philosophical art that together will be pillars of support for the creative act, called theater.

„(...) History reproduces the accidental, particular phenomenon, which it records as a past fact, while poetry translates the universal, possible events, with a general character, thus also investing them with a philosophical significance.”⁹

Of course, the theater also has a "separate", specific language, for each of those who will actively participate in its theatrical act, but also for all the others who receive it.

The „separate” language of the theater will adapt visually and auditorily to all individual theatrical manifestations, to all forms of theater that become with the passage of time even more performant than they were at their beginnings, as there are also situations in which some of these will transform and adapt to the current social environment, but also to the public demand of the respective times.

There are many forms of theater. Inevitably time will leave its mark on each individual theatrical form, respectively both on the creation and on its creators. There is, however, a performance form that will be the closest to the public precisely because of its ability to simultaneously assimilate all other artistic manifestations, and this is the dramatic theater. It can include, within a show, the theater of: dolls and marionettes, musical, ballet or shadow theater, pantomime, circus or film precisely from this perspective of the present and historical time which becomes a mirror of the viewer's reflection .

„I could take any empty space and call it an empty stage. A man walks through this empty space while someone else looks on, and that and all that is needed for the theatrical action to begin. And yet, when we talk about theater, that's not what it's about.”¹⁰

In this article we will not develop what Brook refers to what is written above, but we will point out precisely what does not mean theater for one of the most recognized theater creators of the contemporary period whose personal reflections can become "mirror" questions for the theater man.

The theater, both as stage movement and as dramatic writing, brings consistent changes even at the level of the words in the vocabulary of a certain people, but having this ability to improve the language of a people.

Certain linguistic peculiarities that existed at the level of some words from different periods of time were also modeled according to artistic manifestations that took place in those times, for example: the performances at the courts of the kings, the ballrooms, the commedia dell'arte, etc.

⁹ Tonitza-Iordache Michaela and Banu George, *Arta Teatrului*, Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 2004.

¹⁰ Peter Brook, *Empty Space*, foreword by George Banu, trans. Marian Popescu, Bucharest, Unitext Publishing House, 1997.

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Moreover, within these artistic manifestations, language will also be an important means of human communication due precisely to the closeness between the spectators that happened during the performance, becoming thus a good opportunity for personal education of the individual from different social strata.

Theater is known to be the best keeper of the traditions, values or beliefs of a people from the most remote times to the present day.

„Before anything else it (theatre) is the domain of the word... of the word in action. It is first of all a text whose virtues are those of any written thing, but this text is played, that is, lived in front of us”.¹¹

As we know, in the case of the actor, his word in the theater will be the basis of his character, his mobile means of stage experimentation through his own presentation, which will also be the bearer of a rich temporal, spatial, cultural, social and historical arsenal.

The actor's voluntary process of understanding and rendering his own character will stand under the boundary sign of his creator.

The first limit for an actor is the inner one - or better said the limit of his individuality, and it does not speak - through the interpreted character - of the fragility of time, of the ephemerality of the creative artistic act.

The second limit for the actor is the external one that speaks to us through the words of the dramatic character, about the timelessness of the dramatic text already created before the existence of physical persons that has the ability to exist by transcending time.

In the case of dramatic art, a virtue of the word spoken on stage by the actors can also come from this timelessness of the text written by the playwrights that will withstand a test of time.

In the lines below we reproduce the directorial message of some of the greatest creators of dramatic art of all time for actors in which the ability of the word to be current even at a distance of several hundred years is reflected.

1. Classical theatre. Representative: Jean – Baptiste Poquelin, known as Molière. Excerpt from the play "Improvisation at Versailles" - 1663 (year of writing)

„Mademoiselle du Parc:

As for me, I'm going to have a really hard time with my character, and I don't understand why you've given me this crooked role.

Molière

(...) portraying a character that is so against your nature, the more you prove that you are an unsurpassed actress. So try to assimilate the character of your roles as best as possible and imagine that you are what you represent. (*Lui du Croisy*) You

¹¹ Gaétan Picon, *Panorama de la nouvelle littérature française*, Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 294 apud Berlogea Ileana, *Istoria Teatrului Universal*, vol. I, Didactică și Pegagogică Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981, p. 6.

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play the role of the poet and you have to get into the shoes of the character, bring out the pedantic air of those who are in touch with the good world, that tone of the sentences and the accuracy of the pronunciation that appear on every syllable and not escaping a single letter of the severest spelling.”¹²

2. Renaissance theater. Representative: William Shakespeare.

Fragment from the play "Hamlet" - 1601 (year of writing)

„*Hamlet: (to the first actor):*

Recite the tirade (...) gently flowing;(...) Nor cleave the air with your hands, as if you were chopping wood, but be calm in everything: for right in the midst of the torrent, of the storm (...) of the whirlwind passion, you must acquire and show temperance to give it softness. (...) Don't be too soft either, but let yourself be guided by the good sense you have: match your gesture to your word, your word to your gesture: keeping in mind one thing above all, don't exceed the measure of natural things; because everything that exceeds the measure is removed from the theater, of every sense, from the beginning and until now, it was and is to hold the mirror in front of the world (...)”¹³

Conclusion

And yet it will be a nonsense for an actor not to acknowledge to the theater its enormous freedom to traverse physical time even at a distance of centuries. Regardless of what it is called or what are its technical means of expression, we can definitely talk about theater even when it is old or new, performing or rudimentary, having classic or innovative forms.

How else, it will be an unforgivable error for a spectator not to see the theater as an immense cognitive and present potential; where all the social masks of man are presented under the shelter of the theatrical convention in which his ability to understand himself through others is reflected, making the theater the place where one can see and observe precisely this „theatre, the mirror of our time”.

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¹² Molière, *Improviția de la Versailles*, în *Opere*, Vol II, trad. de Al.O.Teodoreanu, București, ESPLA, 1955, p. 175

¹³ Shakespeare, *Opere Complete*, vol.5, trad. Leon D. Levițchi și Dan Duțescu, București, Editura Univers, 1986, p. 375

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