

## ***Maria Blut* or On the Lost Charm of Theatricality**

Aurelian BĂLĂIȚĂ\*  
Călin CIOBOTARI\*\*

**Abstract:** The present article aims to observe the new formulas of theatricalization of the show, starting from an eloquent example in this regard, the Natives of Maria Blut (*Die Eingeborenen von Maria Blut*), an adaptation after Maria Lazar, directed by Laura Bihler. The discussion about theatricality, one that marked the middle of the 20th Century, returns increasingly relevant in the context of increasingly visible attempts at de-theatricalization, which appeared especially against the background of the unprecedented expansion of technologies on theatrical stages. Dramaturgy and story-telling, sets and costumes, chromaticism and psycho-physical organization of the stage space, the multiple role and the deep recalibrations of the theatrical convention, the mask and its force to produce a certain type of atmosphere – all these become so many major milestones in -a discussion of what theatricality was and has become.

**Keywords:** theatricality, Maria Blut, Laura Bihler, Theatertreffen

The entire history of modern theatre can be analysed in the light of the interest or disinterest in what one calls theatricality. Theatricalization, retheatricalization, detheatricalization, metatheatricalisation<sup>1</sup> have always accounted for the concentric circles of the various means of conceiving and making theatre. A creator's originality frequently coincided with the originality of a definition of theatre, and a theatre era's profile, regardless of whether this "epoch" was a decade or a generation, was determined by opting for a certain type of theatricality.

---

\* Aurelian Bălăiță, Professor PhD, "George Enescu" National University of Arts Iași  
\*\* Călin Ciobotari, assistant professor PhD. "George Enescu" National University of Arts Iași

1 An inventory of definitions of theatricality is given by Nicolae Mande in his book *Theatricality, a Contemporary Concept [Teatralitatea, un concept contemporan]*, UNATC Press, Bucharest, 2006.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

The first quarter of the XXI<sup>th</sup> Century, as configured today, has been tempted to perceive *theatricalization* as a useless complication. The quotidian realism, different from the psychological one of the previous century imposed theatre, now more than ever, a topic of “filterless” mirroring. One speaks on stage as they do in life, one acts on stage as in real life, an agenda of immediate, factual everyday problems is created. The great topics, all the more, crumbled into a plurality of sub-topics or micro-topics, and the dramaturgies felt, in turn, the temptation of becoming... of the everyday<sup>2</sup>.

Another crisis of modern theatricalities came by the route of the unprecedented development of stage technologies. Where does the theatricality of a video projection begin, and where does it end? What is a hologram character’s theatricality made of? What theatrical horizon delivers the sensation, that, in the long term, seems to have set the intention to replace the emotion? What are the theatricality effects of the headset voice and how does one relate to the increasingly complex relations between the audible and the visual?

Intimately connected to questions and dilemmas as the ones previously mentioned is the question of simplicity in theatre. Formulated by Peter Brook<sup>3</sup> in the ‘70s, occasionally described as being the very essence of theatre, simplicity seems to not feel very comfortable in the century we are passing through. This is the reason why many contemporary theatre makers see theatricalisation a complication, rather than a simplification. And they strive to avoid it or, if not possible, to only formally touch upon it. Theatricality no longer obeys to simplicity, the latter seemingly giving no more major satisfactions to the ever more sophisticated audience member, who has a progressively hybridised reception system, already accustomed to searching for the hybrid in the detriment of the pure.

This is why, when one nevertheless encounters such theatricalities, endangered theatre species, they understand that something crucial has been lost in the complicated labyrinths of the relationship between the contemporary human and art. *The Native People of Maria Blut (Die Eingeborenen von Maria Blut)*, an adaptation after a novel lost for several decades by Maria Lazar<sup>4</sup>, adapted for the stage by Laura Bihler (Burgtheater,

---

2 The effect was relevant for the post-dramatic theatre in its entirety: “Postdramatic theatre has come closer to the trivial and banal, the simplicity of an encounter, a look or a shared situation.” (Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby, Routledge, London, New York, 2006, p. 181.)

3 Peter Brook who, in *The Empty Space*, amongst others, also touches upon the risks of simplicity; he makes a distinction between a “simple answer” and the risks one faces when they aim, by all means, to “be simple”(Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Touchstone, New York, 1996, chapter “The Deadly Theatre”).

4 Details about Maria Lazar and her works, rediscovered and reconsidered in the

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Vienna), represents such an attentive and delicate reevaluation of the means of creating stage theatricality. Invited to the prestigious Theatertreffen Berlin<sup>5</sup>, as one of the best theatre productions of the year 2022 from the German-speaking European spaces, the production, which we had the chance to watch at the Haus des Berliner Festspiele<sup>6</sup>, excels precisely through the science of constructing delightful layers of theatricality within a story that provides the audiences, equally, with discomfort and emotion, incursion in the traumatic past, and reflection from a yet to be healed present moment. An attentive observation of these levels of theatricality is needed.

### *Dramaturgy and Storytelling*

A first level of theatricality originates from the framework that the director applied when reading Maria Lazar's novel. It is not a reading that seeks to update or to trace visible connections with the present, but rather one that is placed in the heart of the '30s, in a factual topos, a settlement near Vienna, which it reveals and observes simultaneously. Laura Bihler carves out characters, configures relevant situations and assembles stage actions subordinated to the narrative logic. She aims to deliver a tense graduality of the conflict between the religious traditions and the new philosophies asserted by the incipient nazism. Frequently, she turns to storytelling as means of delivering the text. But this is not done just anyhow, but overlapping the text of the "storytellers", each placed in a corner of the stage, with the relations between certain masked characters that only seem to be talking to each other, gesturally playing the dialogue. The effect is all the better, as it emphasises the duality, the substantive duplicity of some of the characters. Various figures are born and evolve from the status of typological character into a consistent, personalised one: the lucid doctor, the helpless and hypocritical pastor, the venal businessman, the femininity serving the nazism, the innocence that is

---

past couple of years, can be found on  
<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/buecher/nazidaemmerung-in-oesterreichs-provinz-ld.1081717?reduced=true>

5 Details about this year's edition of the Festival can be found on  
<https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/theatertreffen/programm/2023/gesamt/termine.html>

6 The two authors of the present text traveled to Berlin between the 22<sup>nd</sup> and the 25<sup>th</sup> of May 2023, within the framework of the project titled CNFIS FDI – 2023 – F – 0142 unage.net Internationalisation Mechanisms for the Master's and Doctoral Education/Graduate Studies at the "George Enescu" National Arts University Iași Through Connections to the International Education and Research Networks [CNFIS FDI – 2023 – F – 0142 unage.net Mecanisme de internaționalizare a educației masterale și doctorale din Universitatea Națională de Arte „George Enescu” Iași prin racordarea la rețelele internaționale de educație și cercetare].

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

looking for metaphysical solutions, the frustrated man who finds solace in violence and destruction etc.

The tone of the dramatisation is an objective one, with clearly delimited planes (through black-outs reminding of the flashes of ancient photo cameras), oftentimes crossed by humour, nevertheless constantly operating with tension currents that keep the spectator on constant alert. The entire construction of the production, starting from the playwriting, has the ability to pass you successively through the interior and exterior of the world depicted on stage, in the intimacy, and, simultaneously, the distant observation of the characters, in the most secluded meaning of the text you hear, but also listen to, as to an account about something remote and neutral.

One by one, a series of answers to the production's great question - Why was there such an irrational trust people had in Hitler? - takes shape: the poverty, the naivety, the feeling that the divine is indifferent to people's crises, idiocy, the lack of perspective, excessive goodness, personal hatred that needed an aim, the attraction towards a seemingly luminous promise.

### *Set, Costumes, ... Theatricality*

A second considerable layer of theatricality is provided by the set design. Evoking opera sets, still, translated into a theatrical space, Jessica Rockstroh's proposals fully exploit the space's suffocation effects. An immense statue of the Virgin Mary, accompanied by two angels, also of considerable sizes, dominates not only the stage, but also, through the formidable theatricality they exude, the entire hall. Mary has to be immense, as the faith those people have in her is immense as well. The set is ostentatiously theatrical not only in terms of dimension, but also in terms of intense chromatics, naive, lively, crude painterly features: the hues of red (Madonna's garment) and of blue (the angels' clothing) will enter a very skillfully conducted dialogue with the pink worn by the native people of Maria Blut.

The dissolution of the set is one more notable solution. One by one, the great structures collapse, other divinities, human this time, replace the old gods, taken out of the stage piece by piece by the company's technicians. The human has replaced the divine, and the descent of one of the characters from high above the stage ironically alludes to the ancient *deus ex machina* formulas.

Victoria Behr's costumes are a spectacle in themselves. Besides the allusions to the traditional Austrian clothing, they also make use of that metaphor, frequently used in theatre, asserting that the costume is "the character's skin". The Viennese actors get in and out of their characters by putting on and taking off leather and oilcloth pieces, added to their base

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

costume. The plus of theatricality thus obtained is remarkable. Other accessories, intelligently applied to the costumes, enrich the visual-theatrical offers, discreetly emphasising various character typologies.

By far, however, the masks convey the highest degree of theatricality. The creators of the production return to this venerable theatre formula - the mask - recovering and perfectly integrating it into a world where people cease being who they are. The mask conceals, but it also protects, anonymises, and disturbs through the artificialisation and the immobilisation of the face. The ones used here are head masks, with similar features, only discreetly delimiting the masculine and the feminine, and build in a manner that reflects childhood. The inhabitants of Maria Blut who wear such masks have, as it is conveyed, not only the innocence and recklessness of a child. They function as a collective character pushed to the limit of the grotesque, amusing, yet giving rise to new feelings of repulsion.

### *Multi-roling and the Theatrical Convention*

Laura Bihler seems to have used an army of actors to highlight the unusual and significant events happening in Maria Blut. There are several moments in the production when there is the feeling that great agglomerations are crossing the stage. In reality, there are only six actors (Stefanie Dvorak, Philipp Haus, Jonas Hackmann, Robert Reinagl, Dorothee Hartinger, and Lili Winderlich) who, for two hours, take on different characters, different costumes, different missions within the production. The pragmatism of the construction is exemplary, and the effort of the cast is remarkable. There is also someone else who, quietly, joins the actors on stage: the Convention, a mark of theatricality by excellence. Once publicly assumed, the convention makes the impossible possible or, as the same Peter Brook once said, “makes the invisible visible”.

Laura Bihler’s production is not only a very precise, lucid, and intelligent research on the past, mediated by literature and by historical facts; it is, at the same time, an exercise of perfect control over theatricality. And a plea for the astounding charm of simplicity in theatre...

### **Bibliography**

- Brook, Peter, *Spațiul gol*, traducere de Monica Andronescu, Editura Nemira, 2014  
Lehmann, Hans-Thies, *Teatrul post-dramatic*, traducere de Victor Scoradeț, UNITEXT, București, 2009  
Mandea, Nicolae, *Teatralitatea, un concept contemporan*, UNATC Press, București,

# THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

2006

## **Web pages**

<https://www.nzz.ch/feuilleton/buecher/nazidaemmerung-in-oesterreichs-provinz-ld.1081717?reduced=true>, date of download 10 September 2023

<https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/theatertreffen/programm/2023/gesamt/termine.html>, date of download 9 September 2023