

Evocations of the 'Believable' on Stage. Mechanisms of Perception

Alexandra DIACONIȚA*

Abstract: It is not possible to say with precision where the need to look at a theater performance through the lens of the 'believable' comes from. Whether this fact is a reflection of contemplative consciousness, carried by the echoes of a "probable" and tempted by questions launched to unknown horizons, or it represents a way of resonance with the scenic act, it is certain that, over time, reason has dictated the reiteration of the search for and the rediscovery of credibility on stage. In an attempt to follow a thread of some mechanisms of perception, we will analyze to what extent the need for verisimilitude circumscribes other needs, with a significant amplitude. The present approach also takes into account relations to the concept of truth, reality and scenic reality, sensoriality, as well as the role of scenic temporality with regard to the creation of the illusion of truth. If, as George Orwell says, "reality is only in the mind, nowhere else", how does the viewer's perception of the perceived object, in this case, stage reality, act on the perceived object?

Keywords: theater, believable, real, stage

Perspectives of approaching and distancing from stage reality

Theater as an objective entity is a lie, a world that functions, from a distance, as a construct of the false, and which convention, the magic language of the theatrical phenomenon, removes from the effect of the methods of representation of the lie, long before they become visible. In reality, as a spectator, recognizing the theater as a lie is a waste of time, because the spectator's voluntary presence in the theater is proof that he or she is prepared to receive the lie as truth. To constrain the reality of the stage by setting up a mental check to make us distinguish the real from the unreal, the lie from the truth, inevitably leads to an (unforgivable) failure to reach those horizons that no barometer for detecting truth and lies can suspect. To want to define theater in terms of the concept of truth is to place oneself in a position that allows a

* PhD - George Enescu National University of Arts, Iasi

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

level of inner intimacy strong enough to make the immaterial reality beyond the stage perceptible. Theater is not only about physical closeness to the stage and the actors, but above all it invites us to inner, visceral closeness, linked to the mystery of the specific elements of the stage, which evade the duality of lie-truth, because its objective is not limited to it. Therefore, performance art is not moral, ethical lying, it is lying as the liminal state of truth. Of course, the theater functions as truth in the form of convention, and through it it reaches numerous other stages, which the viewer's perception charges with meaning: the credible, the authentic, the false, the veridical, etc. They are both landmarks in understanding the stage conjunctures and ways in which the spectator resonates with the theatrical space and forms his or her aesthetic preferences. From a distance, the impression of the theater veers in the direction of falsehood (we know that what is presented to us is not real), but under the effect of a closer approximation to the stage reality, that impression comes closer to truth (at least, to the sensation of truth). And in the theater, we sometimes look at the stage not necessarily from the point of view of truth, but through the prism of truth, which helps to create an impression of credibility. And yet the spectator is not in the theater to negotiate the meaning of theater on the terrain of truth or falsehood; his or her presence reaffirms both an aesthetic experience and the need to connect with what eludes immediate visibility - metaphors, symbols, ideas. What is not real in theater can be suspected, however, as truth. "The actor knows that on stage what seems true does not have to be true, says Nietzsche"¹. The believable is the currency of the real on stage. It is not necessary to bring the stage situation close to the real in order to make it truthful. Not the world in itself, but the potential of the world, not the immediate reality, but the intuition of one that pulsates among images, forms, words and ideas. When we are beholders of the theatrical act, "not only is the world, with its shrillness and madness, left behind, but the ordinary man becomes witness to a mystery. It is an act of transformation, perhaps even involuntarily, a passage from the real to the metaphysical, from the profane to the sacred"².

¹Octavian Saiu, *Efectul Tartuffe. Fascinația teatrală a imposturii*, Editura Paideia, București, 2019, pag. 203.

²Octavian Saiu, *Arta de a fi spectator*, Editura Nemira, București, 2021, pag. 5.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Theater does not seem to have ever come to assume the attempt of any definition for truth (perhaps not even in times when it was "necessary" to be spoken on stage, against the background of censorship), but it has made sure, in one form or another, to assume the status of a reflection of the present society, approaching the concept of truth through the effect of credibility, by associating a scenic microcosm with a macrocosm of objective reality. The efforts involved in constructing the scenic situations, the characters, the more or less aesthetic effects, all converge towards a recurring necessity: credibility.

Image and word, the pillars of credibility

It cannot be said that performing art manipulates perception, but it does target it, stimulate it and, to a certain extent and in certain contexts, shape it. What the theater will always have as its fundamental principle is the working of the senses, a process from which impressions and sensations will emerge, and as a result of which the pulse of the stage world will be established, more or less consciously or unconsciously. Whether we voluntarily or involuntarily refer to the verisimilitude of the scenic act, it is certain that our mind searches for it, either in a string of words in a character's speech, in an invisible symbolism, possible through correlations and associations, or in an action or gesture that influences our perception. Without approaching the approach from a purely speculative perspective, the universe constructed on stage has a weave whose finesse we sometimes attribute to the impression of truth that it emanates. There are two ways in which the spectator can relate to what appears to him or her as plausible - the image (actions, situations, relationships, the actor's body, etc.) and the word (the text, the rhythm of the speeches, the actor's voice, etc.). In fact, they both merge on stage, but depending on the aesthetic register of the performance, the power ratio between word and image varies. In the word we are able to perceive glimpses of the credible in the same way that we suspect it in images. In other words, the viewer is tempted to translate the scenic truth by the effects exerted on him or her by visual or auditory stimulation. Although, for a long time, theatre was considered to be an art of the spoken word (which cannot be far from the truth), the current trend is towards a visual monopolization of the stage. However, do not the images that unfold, either in turn or simultaneously, in a theatrical performance reflect certain conditions of construction similar to those involved in the structuring of verbal language, conditions that refer to the factors of rhythm and time? In other words, the image is interwoven, in order to emphasize its meanings and

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

symbolism, with an axis of time, developing progressively like words in a speech. The stage images are not like photographs, which also exude a certain tense given by a rhythm beyond their static representation; the image in theater contains the rhythm of a seed that wants to grow. However, unlike the word, visual language is loaded with multiple meanings and invites us, with considerable speed, into a multi-sensory world that we cannot ignore. "Image is the universal idiom that language cannot equate (...). The image - if it is not encrypted, if it does not lend itself to lengthy decoding and deciphering, which is increasingly rare - needs no translation. And this is how everything seems to reconfigure itself in the permanent dynamics of inter-human communication, to the point where a simple photograph becomes more important not just than a thousand words, but than any number of words"³. We cannot but question the following question: is the claim of verisimilitude in the scene a matter of visual or verbal language? In other words, do we see or hear stage truth? In any case, theater cannot be just a series of images or just an audible story, it circumscribes the dimension where both possibilities come together. Whether we are talking about a theater of momentary effects or a theater of long-term effects, it is certain that, for some and for others, stage art mediates encounters with the moment, or encounters with a series of moments. Likening it to photography, the theaterologist Octavian Saiu sees in theater the moment as an image: "in ideal, almost inexplicable cases, photography approaches theater through the same ambivalence: it offers a veridical, real or hyper-real spectacle, it attracts the attention and arouses the emotion of the discoverer, but at the same time offers the chance of detachment"⁴

When exactly can we determine that what happens on stage is believable? Regardless of how plausible visual and verbal language may be for the spectator, one thing can still be said, and that is that the impression of believability is often punctuated by the temporality of the scene: the duration of a gesture, an action, a situation, a silence... Is it appropriate to say that the illusion of truth is believability in itself? No. The illusion is an interface whose purpose is to fundamentally resist the reality it represents. The believable, on the other hand, refers to a possibility, a kind of potentiality, a world not yet

³Octavian Saiu, *Clipa ca imagine. Teatru și fotografie*, Editura Nemira, București, 2017, pag. 38.

⁴*Idem*, pag. 73.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

revealed, but which, through the immediacy of the theater, undeniably manages to become an almost palpable experience.

Bibliography

Saiu, Octavian, *Clipa ca imagine. Theater and Photography*, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 2017

Saiu, Octavian, *Efectul Tartuffe. Fascinația teatrală a imposturii*, Paideia Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019

Saiu, Octavian, *Arta de a fi spectator*, Editura Nemira, București, 2021

Petran, Iuliana Cristina, *Henri Bergson și experiența conștientă a timpului*, Buletin Științific, seria A, Fascicula Filologie, vol. XXIV, 2015