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Between East and West: Intercultural Challenges and the Problem of Authenticity in Contemporary Lithuanian Theater

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Abstract

After the shift in the sociopolitical situation, Lithuanian theater began searching for sources of renewal, turning to both the history of the national theater of the interwar period and to the new experience of Western theater. At the same time, directors tried to recycle or deconstruct the prevalent theatrical tradition of Stanislavsky's 'authentic' emotions. The new generation of directors making their debuts at that time mixed the traditions of Lithuanian theater with new local trends and global tendencies. They created a complex hybrid, linking and juxtaposing the premodern tendencies of Lithuanian national theater, modern aesthetics from the Russian and Polish theaters, and Western postmodernism. Using concrete examples and case studies, the article discusses strategies of intercultural communication and the problem of understanding the notion of authenticity in contemporary Lithuanian theater.

To use the term of French theater researcher Patrice Pavis, Lithuanian theater can truly be called "theater at the crossroads of culture."¹ Since the establishment of professional theater in Lithuania it has always existed in between or on the intersection of two different and powerful theatrical traditions – the prewar modern Russian theater school and the Western tradition of theater art. After the shift of the socio-political situation, Lithuanian theater began searching for sources of renewal, turning as much to the history of the national theater of the interwar period with its romanticized notions of theatrical poetics as to the experiences of Western art, modern European theater in particular. At the same time, the creators of contemporary Lithuanian theater were trying to recycle or to deconstruct the theatrical traditions from the East, which in the Lithuanian case were most widely represented by the system of acting techniques and the notion of stage realism developed by the famous Russian theater director, actor, and theoretician Constantine Stanislavsky. His methodologies of theater work and aesthetics were especially fostered and imposed onto Lithuanian theater culture during the Soviet period. The new generation of theater artists who made their debuts after the redeclaration of Independence attempted to mix the traditions of Lithuanian theater with emerging local and global tendencies, thus creating a hybrid character for contemporary Lithuanian performances, where nostalgic concepts of the premodern national theater of the interwar period, modern aesthetics from the Russian, Polish, and French theater schools, and Western postmodernism are linked together or juxtaposed.

These characteristics of contemporary Lithuanian performances in many ways represent the challenges that contemporary Lithuanian theater was forced to face after the shift in the sociocultural situation. The most visible underlying theme of these transformations can be called the challenge of transnationalism, which was created by the myriad of changes that Lithuanian theater, and culture in general, has faced since the declaration of independence. At least several modifications of these transnational challenges can be named: first of all, implementation of the European dimension, which affects the institutional models of cultural and art organizations in Lithuania; and the increasing proliferation of media and information technologies that transcend national and geographic boundaries. The decentralizing discourses of pop or mass culture, together with the emergence of a new culture of consumers and the multiplication of urban life styles, contests and transforms notions of identity, representation, and location in the contemporary cultural mindscape. This in turn affects notions of reality and fiction that foreground every theatrical representation.

There are a lot of aesthetic strategies in Lithuanian theater that explicitly or implicitly deal with the intercultural or transnational level of our contemporary cultural landscape. Here I would like to outline two of them. The first can be defined as formal interpretation of the intercultural dimension. Examples of such interpretation can be found in the works of the young Lithuanian directors Oskaras Koršunovas, Gintaras Varnas or Agnius Jankevičius. The mix of different signs from various cultural contexts presented in these performances can be called postmodern collage. If we look at the language of modern performances directed by the older generation of Lithuanian theater directors, such as Jonas Vaitkus or Eimuntas Nekrošius, we can see that visual metaphors are usually formed from local and clearly recognizable signs, symbols, and materials that are familiar to local audiences. In the works of the younger generation of theater directors, we can see that the visual layer of performance is formed from the flow of signs from totally different cultural systems. For example, in performances by Oskaras Koršunovas, *Playing the Victim* (by the Presniakov brothers, 2005) or *Roberto Zucco* (by Bernard Marie-Koltes, 1998), the figurative, performative, and musical quotations from different cultural sources are juxtaposed in a collage of signs: the shapes of classical architecture, figures from western popculture (cartoon characters from *South Park*), songs from Russian trash-pop, pastiches of Chinese and Japanese cultural signs, and citations from Lithuanian theater history flow in an open mise-en-scène. Elements from both local and foreign cultures are ripped from their original contexts. One might view such productions as products of a networked and interconnected postindustrial society so crisscrossed by the flood of disconnected moments of communication that it is no longer able to bring together any meaningful or unified communication of signs. However, in this paper I would like to address another strategy of dealing with the intercultural: playing with or manipulating the notion of the real or authentic, which was closely linked with the Stanislavskian theater tradition, by using the strategies of postmodern aesthetics, which can be attributed to the western tradition of thought. In other words, this strategy can be defined as dealing with the legacy of the Eastern (Russian) tradition with tools produced by a western mentality.

In Lithuanian theater, the field where the confrontation of the modernist Stanislavskian and postmodernist notions of authenticity is most visible is the identity and the body of the actor, as well as his or her attitude towards the role, as these notions are closely linked with the representation, as well as with the problems of realism, mimesis and fiction in theater. The actor's body is always multi-coded; it serves as a tool of representation, but at the same time, always remains just a human body. As Roland Barthes puts it, an actor's body is a real body, with its physical nature, and a formal body that functions as an artistic object on stage.² In the Stanislavskian system, the body of the actor is always defined by the codes of the dramatic text and/or the symbolism of the performance. The system tries to conceal or transform the real body of the actor according to the shapes of fictional character. We can say that realistic theater directors are always willing to transform or even replace the material physical body of the actor with the ideal, or as some theoreticians put it, with an impossible body, in order to achieve a perfect realist representation on stage. The body of a Stanislavskian actor should be capable of constant transformations in order to achieve the effect of reality.

In Western Europe and the United States in the sixties and seventies, the performances of the historical avant-garde declared a different desire, to free the body of the performer, as well as the spectator, from the constraints of the Stanislavskian logocentric theatrical tradition and acting system that were structured to discipline and to repress the real body. As Philip Auslander puts it in his seminal book *From Acting to Performance* (1997), they acknowledged that an actor's body is socially determined, but believed in the possibility of eliminating the signs of the social from the actor's body, as if it were a mask that can be simply removed, thus uncovering the real, primary body, void from social inscriptions.³ A body freed from social constraints was thought to be the source of an authentic presence. However, this corporal presence here and now, right in front of the audience, acted as a guarantee of the authenticity of the stage event. This was an effect of consciously employed strategies, not a provoked intrusion of reality. In the light of postmodern theories, and quite against the manifest declarations of the artists themselves, they managed to create not so much a true reality, but rather the effect of reality, which was produced with the help of certain consciously employed strategies, just as typically realistic productions were.⁴

Both of these strategies were well known in modern Lithuanian theater. The first, the Stanislavskian notion of authentic emotion, dominated the Lithuanian theater stage, because the practices of western avant-garde performance existed only on the margins of Lithuanian theater, and were more popular among performance artists. However, in contemporary Lithuanian theater, this long-existing division between acting real emotions and just being oneself onstage, as well as between reality and fiction, are revised anew. As Elin Diamond writes, "realism is more than an interpretation of reality passing as reality; it produces reality by positioning its spectator to recognize and verify its truths".⁵ The young generation of Lithuanian theater directors are not trying to abolish the differences between real or fictional theater and life, or the real and the ideal body of the actor, but to investigate the binary oppositions on which theatrical representation has been based, in order to expose the underlying assumptions and reveal their fictionality. The play with the notion of the real body of the actor, the use of no acting techniques, and the casting of non-professional actors can be traced in various performances in Lithuanian theater. These strategies can be interpreted as a way of dealing with the legacy of the Stanislavskian notion of presence in theater, or on a larger scale, with the notions of authenticity.

In a performance of William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* by Oskaras Koršunovas (1999), through the interaction of the actors' real bodies, one more dimension of the performance – the physical drama of the body – is displayed. The semantic and physical are juxtaposed as the spectators' attention is driven towards physical action and its outcomes on the "real" body. The actors interact only through real physical and seemingly painful actions. In this kind of performance, the materiality of the actor's body is staged against textual symbolism, thus forming an additional layer of

corporeal drama. Removed from the natural environment, the actor's body operates in a cultural, symbolic space, but is displayed as an object telling its real story with its own words – traces of sweat, scars, and sores. The spectator is confronted with the trampled, pushed, suffering, falling, stumbling, sweating body of the actor, but in a clearly theatrical frame, in a staged and carefully designed environment. Although the identity of the actor is concealed beneath the character, his or her body is revealed as a real physical entity fighting the field of symbolic representation.

Another example lies in the works of Benas Šarka. His performances can be called an extension of the tradition of the physical theater of the avant-garde, where the real body of the actor exists in a permanent state of risk: the spectator is not only able to observe from very close-up the bodily tension, fragility, and vulnerability of the actor's body, but to enter the dangerous zone of risk himself. The part of the dancing actor; the blowing of the ashes; the sounds of metal clanging and drops of water; the playing with fire, knives, and broken glass; and the performative and figurative transformations form the basis for Šarka's performative dramas. The self-manifesting close corporeality of Šarka's performances demonstrates that the actor's body in the theater cannot be rendered as neutral or hidden under the symbolic layers of meaning. At first glance, it can recall performance art practices; however, it plays with the notions of authentic and real by staging and controlling the boundaries of reality and fiction, real or staged risk. An actor smokes a cigarette dangerously close to a gasbag; burning paper clips fly very close to the faces of spectators; knives, broken glass, and bricks are thrown; and a large sword is whirled around just above the heads of the audiences, pushing the boundaries of theatrical reality to the extreme and provoking the spectators to wonder how real can it get. This balancing on the edge of reality and fictionality is very thin, since spectators have no way of knowing whether the danger is real or just a theatrical trick. The spectator is left on his own to decide whether to recognize or verify this situation as real or fictional. As a result of such strategies, the spectators and their perceptual experiences become an essential part of the performance, demonstrating that the reality effect is in fact the staging of certain circumstances or an environment that induces particular sensations or experiences in the spectator. Ironically, I should note that the unfortunate accident that occurred during one of Šarka's performances, when an actor was burned over 40 percent of his body, can serve as a clue to spectators in the future that the risk is or can indeed be real.

Lithuanian theater's use of nonprofessional performers or people known in other social or cultural contexts can also be interpreted as a strategy of questioning the notion of authenticity on stage. People off the street in the performances of Eimuntas Nekrošius and Oskaras Koršunovas, rock singers performing Romeo or Hamlet in the Shakespearian productions of Nekrošius, skateboarders doubling the main character in Koršunovas' productions – these are just a few examples of employing nonprofessionals on the stage of big mainstream productions. In this case, the dynamics of social and theatrical identity are actualized on the theater stage, exposing the interaction between acting (fiction) and social identity. There are several ways of interpreting these tendencies. One that is important to my argument, however, is the urge to investigate the thin line that separates social and theatrical role-playing. These nonprofessionals serve at least several functions: they open up the referential space of the performance and at the same time reveal the theatrical nature of every identity. The boundaries between theater and life are reflected, demonstrating the fragility of such a division. The scenic presence of rock singer Andrius Mamontovas, who plays Hamlet, or ballet dancer Eglė Špokaitė, who plays Desdemona, are visibly different from the other actors in the production. They not only represent the meanings of dramatic text or the symbolism of character, but direct the audience's interpretations towards other sociocultural contexts. The stage personas produced by these nonprofessional performers consist of traces of their real presence, their sociocultural identity, and fictive theatrical character. The significations produced by these conflicting layers of stage identity can obscure, disturb, or clarify the performance. However, the decoding or interpretation of all these layers can only be activated by the spectator.

In some performances, nonprofessional actors exist in the stage landscape as self-referential signs, referring only to themselves. We won't find many examples of this kind of nonacting in contemporary Lithuanian theater. In a production of Roberto Zucco, director Oskaras Koršunovas doubled the main character, Roberto Zucco, with a nonprofessional actor – a skateboarder. This performer did not create the fictive character onstage, the "performer" was just being himself, a regular skateboarder, only entering the symbolic field of performance signification from time to time. Together with the fictive characters, he existed in an artificial stage space as a part of contemporary urban iconography, and in some scenes even became the central axis of the visual *mise-en-scène*. Formal, but real at the same time. Of course, the presence of nonprofessional actors disturbs the audience's perceptions and expectations about stage acting, as they explore the thin line between acting in the theatrical environment and the theatricality of any social interaction.

To conclude, we can state that the reality effect in theater is born when the inability to reproduce the real is disclosed, while the audience is made aware of their role as coproducers of the image of reality. We should also state that, although contemporary Lithuanian theater became more and more transnational, as the most famous directors or playwrights are financially or institutionally linked with international organizations and try to cater to the needs and tastes of international audiences, at the same time, the representations of Lithuanian theater continue to be haunted by the tradition of the Stanislavskian notion of real or authentic emotions onstage. Contemporary Lithuanian theater creators are trying to deal or play with these notions by using the strategies offered by postmodern aesthetics, and in doing so raise fundamental questions about the nature of the real and the fictional in the theater. Intercultural exchange is no longer a question of dialectics between text and context, it is a mediation between different cultural backgrounds, traditions and methods of acting.

Notes:

- 1 Pavis, Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture.
- 2 Barthes, "Theater and Signification," 29 – 30.
- 3 Auslander, *From Acting to Performance*, 91 – 92.
- 4 Borovski, ed., *Fictional Realities / Real Fictions*, 9.
- 5 Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, 4.

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