

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 48, No.3 - Fall 2002

Editors of this issue: Violeta Kelertas

ISSN 0024-5089

Copyright © 2002 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.



NEW REPRESENTATIONS: THE LANGUAGES OF CONTEMPORARY LITHUANIAN THEATRE

JURGITA STANIŠKYTĖ
Vytautas Magnus University

Introduction

In recent decades, Lithuanian theatre has experienced a lot of changes, especially in the most important elements of theatrical performance: the text, the actor and the spectator. In this article, several emerging themes in contemporary Lithuanian theatre will be analyzed, with special attention to recent developments that can be conceptualized in the frame of postmodern and post structural theory. Extensive debates about the influence of poststructuralism in the performing arts are still taking place in theatre criticism, focusing mainly on the transformation of the theatre from a marginal art form to a cultural metaphor, widely used by cultural theorists across disciplines. The question remains, though, as to how this proliferation of theatrical and performative metaphors challenges the traditional definition of "theatre" or "performance." Theatre's change of status in society, together with the theatricalization of everyday life, as well as the mediation of culture by new technologies suggest not only the redundancy of theatre in contemporary Lithuanian society, but also a considerable shift in the function of its aesthetics.

The transformations of contemporary Lithuanian theatre, especially the changes that occur after the shift in the socio-political situation, have been discussed in various articles, but the emerging modes of representation still lack articulation within the framework of poststructural theory that can provide useful insight into emerging trends. The image of Lithuanian theatre as "A Theatre Injured by Time:¹a theatre which has lost its privileged status in society and become a marginalized art form governed by the vision of authoritative directors, is still wide spread among Lithuanian theatre critics. This article will outline the "new languages" by which Lithuanian theatre tries to articulate its own condition as well as the conditions of a society in transition. The new forms of representation in Lithuanian theatre are closely linked to tradition as well as various influences from outside, which form the "hybrid" character of contemporary performances.

In this article, I would like to address the emergence of new modes of representation in contemporary Lithuanian theatre that can be conceptualized as *self-reflexivity*, *new textuality*, and *postrepresentational body*. These tendencies are closely linked and deal with the transformation of the notions of language, body and perception in contemporary culture and critical theory. To define the term "contemporary theatre", I cite Theodore Shank, "...'contemporary theatre' refers to the work of those artists (...) who are creating unique forms of theatre to express what it is like to be alive today."²

Self-Reflexivity

At the end the twentieth century, after the declared crisis of traditional mimetic representation,³ theatre as an art form has been pushed to a marginal position, its modes of expression and representational devices are put into question by critical theories and cultural practices. As a group of young artists, who called themselves *Gerosios blogybės* (The Good evils) (Aidas Bareikis, Julius Ludavičius, and Žilvinas Kempinas, stage designers of such performances as "Here to be There," "Old Lady II," "Hello Sonia, It's the New Year," "P.S. File O.K." and "The Flying Dutchman") puts it, there is nothing new to

be discovered in art, everything has already been done before. Innovation is no longer the driving force of artistic representation. Thus, the apprehension of the impossibility for innovation as well as the limits of traditional means of representation force contemporary theatre creators to question and to rediscover the status of theatre in post-Communist society.

As the traditional notion of "theatre" is being transformed by the changing socioeconomic situation, new technologies and popular culture, theatre artists are looking back at the past performances, theatre and cultural history, "nonclassical" forms of narration as well as mass media and popular culture in order to investigate and challenge Romantic and modernist models of representation. Theatre reflects and deconstructs its own past; it comes from itself, its own substance. Theatre proliferates by imitating, repeating, parodying, retracting its own representational devices. Lithuanian theatre critic Audronis Liūga defines the self-reflexive nature of recent performances directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius, Rimas Tuminas and Jonas Vaitkus as introversive play with the director's own concepts, methods and themes from past performances. In this way, according to the critic, theatre doubles back upon itself and avoids its sociocultural function. It projects only an authorial self-image, concerned entirely with "theatre about theatre."⁴ While analyzing the new tendency towards self-reflexivity in Lithuanian theatre, however, one has to move away from formalistic labels to the more complex sociocultural contexts that influence these transformations as well as acknowledge the complex dialectic of disruption/reinvention, produced by these performances.

One can trace two dimensions of self-reflexivity in contemporary Lithuanian performances: *the critical*, executing the ideological function and *the playful*, executing the aesthetic function. Examples of the latter can be found in such performances as *Masquerade* directed by Rimas Tuminas or the rock-opera *Life and Death in Verona* directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius. However, it is important to discuss the possibility of maintaining the critical function in performances that at first sight may appear formal. For example, the visual landscapes and citations from Bernard Marie Koltes's *Roberto Zucco* and Sigitas Parulskis's *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 (the real story of serial killer Roberto Zucco), and does so by subverting or rewriting them, exposing their underlying power structures by giving voice to "unrepresented" marginal subjects. In *P.S. File O.K.* the structure of the mythical system is changed, and Isaac sacrifices his father, instead of being saved by the grace of God. In *Roberto Zucco* the boundaries between guilty /innocent, victim/murderer are blurred by confronting the visual and textual messages. We see the text on the screen stating "Murder of Mother", but the actions on stage resemble suicidal acts, not murder. 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 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 that 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 spectator is forced to experience a sudden destabilization of reality. The linearity of the given system of signification is disturbed, creating new dissonant patterns of meaning. Another example can be Benas Šarka's performances, where, one can say, reality is being constructed, rather than represented. In his performances, the distinction between theatre and life is blurred, since in the eyes of the spectators, characters are created from different fragments of texts, experiences, myths of popular culture, archetypes, advertisements, and theatrical stereotypes. The actor is an intertextual persona here, consisting of his or her own identity, body and fragments of role, being constructed and deconstructed at the same time. The techniques of intertextuality—closely linked with self-reflexivity, irony and autoreferentiality—are apparent in performances by Oskaras Koršunovas; Benas Šarka; Sigitas Parulskis's *From the Life of Spirits*, directed by Vytautas V. Landsbergis; August Strindberg's *Dream* directed by Jonas Vaitkus; Herkus Kunčius's *The Studio of Genius*, directed by Audrius Nakas; Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* and the rock opera, *Life and Death in Verona*, directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius, just to name a few.

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 an "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 questioning it.

For this reason, self-reflexive 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. In fact, one may claim that these performances challenge any false claims to the stability of referential discourse. They construct a new reality and thus move beyond a formalistic "autoreferentiality." They

are not deprived of "content" or "substance," but are submitted to an imaginative transformation on several levels. Lithuanian theatre critics have been slow to recognize the critical importance of self-reflective techniques, discussing them as formalistic exercises, rather than ideological/critical responses to the crisis of credibility suffered by the theatre in the last two decades. As Linda Hutcheon puts it, reflectivity is compatible with a politically significant artistic stance interested in denaturalizing and revising existing cultural power systems.⁵

New Textuality

As the notion of theatre changed, the new approach to the dramatic text became extremely important during 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 was the center 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 recent decades the situation has changed, as visuality as a means of expression became more and more important in contemporary Lithuanian theatre, replacing the traditionally dominant position of 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 and 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.

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 the structural elements are placed in a nonhierarchical, 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 theatre critic Vaidotas Jauniškis, "the word is conquered by the image and the sound, two elements that precede the former and are more universal."⁶ For example, in her performance of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Vega Vaičiūnaitė creates visual narratives and "(re)writes" literary texts using nonverbal 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 of *Here to be There* and *Old Lady*, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, can be considered. These performances were constructed from the texts of the Russian avant-garde group "OBERIU." They produced the kind of narration that was conceptualized as "theatrical," where performance text is produced by means of combinations and juxtapositions of all the 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 spectators to concentrate their attention toward 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*, is subordinated to visual narratives, the performance retains a certain "textuality" that does not disappear and which can still be defined as a "performance text."

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. This new tendency was articulated by theatre critics as "aggressive visuality"⁷ or "negligence toward the dramatic text."⁸ 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 center 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/no 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.⁹ 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. Once 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 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 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 notion 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 dramatic texts of Sigitas Parulskis, Herkus Kunčius, and 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 texts.

As Hans-Thies Lehmann notes, if we take into account the three levels of text in theatre (linguistic text; text in the wider sense of *mise en scene*, as analyzed 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 stage and audience returns with a new emphasis.¹⁰

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 illustration 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.

The Post-representational Body

Another emerging "new language" of contemporary Lithuanian theatre, closely linked with its self-reflexive character as well as redefinition of the role of text in performance, is the use of the actor's body as a culturally coded sign. Although Lithuanian theatre for a long time has been a "director's theater", where the director's concept dominated all other representational elements in performance, the role of actor was always important as well. Especially during the Soviet period actors were perceived as prophets, performing sacred and mysterious rituals of transformation or even sacrifices on stage. As new tendencies of self-reflexive theatre, exploring its own representational devices, became more and more evident, the new approach to acting, which dealt more with presentation and not representation of reality, appeared on Lithuanian theatre stage. The turn towards visuality also demanded a different kind of acting, as the traditional psychological approach was no longer able to capture the complexity of contemporary theatre reality. In fact, there is a type of staging that has emerged in contemporary Lithuanian theatre, where the human figure is treated as an element of performance landscape. The status of actor has changed and the use of his or her identity and body to produce different kinds of representations has become more and more evident.

Some recent movements in Lithuanian theatre toward the separation of the actor from the role has led to the recognition of the actor's body as cultural text. In order to escape a logocentric position, theatre theorists and practitioners are turning their attention to the actor's body and identity as an alternative way of self-reflexive acting. The attention to body in theatre performances is influenced mainly by poststructural ideas on the socially and culturally coded body, unable to overcome ideological encoding. If modern performance theory subjected the actor's body to the discipline of a dramatic text or a text of archetypal psychic impulses, repressing its materiality, the postmodern actor acknowledges ideological and cultural codes and deconstructs its representation with the help of self-reflexive acting, or displaying the materiality of body. The exposure of the material body on stage or the use of nonacting techniques, when nonprofessional actors are used as signs on stage, can be traced in various performances: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Othello* by Eimuntas Nekrošius, Bernard Marie Koltes' *Roberto Zucco*, Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, Marius von Mayen-burg's *Fireface*, William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* by Oskaras Koršunovas; Sarah Kane's *Blasted* by Jonas Vaitkus or performances by Benas Šarka, among others. Such exposure of the materiality of the body or the "real body" in theatre as well as juxtaposition of acting (representing the role) and nonacting (just "being" on stage) raises critical questions about the nature of acting itself, or on a larger scale, the nature of *presence* in theatre. The notion of live presence is also being challenged in the performances that employ the new technologies in order to juxtapose "presence" and "absence," "live" and "mediated" performance.

There are many ways to rethink the notions of theatrical presence and representation. Usually, such developments start to shift theatrical ideas into the realm of performance art, where the identity of the performer is the primary source of narration. In fact, in light of postmodern identity theory, the notion of performance itself is refrained, the assumption of roles, the conscious presentation or construction of self, the idea of the body as a culturally produced object, and the idea of a fragmented, schizophrenic subject embodying numerous contradictory subject positions and impulses runs counter to the realistic acting tradition, urging contemporary theater creators to look for alternative ways of embodying theatrical meanings. More often, through actions, choreographies, or even speech the performers are seen as sharing a constituency of texts in which their own part or parts must be worked out, or in which their role is fluid, that is, subject to play and change. For example, in the performances of Benas Šarka the spectator is confronted with the deconstruction of

the traditional notion of "character," as the identity of the actor is subsumed into different roles, constructed and deconstructed in the eyes of the spectator. Or, for example, the presence of the brothers Viktoras and Jonas Baubliai on the stage of *Othello*, directed by Eimuntas Nekrošius, disturbs the audience's expectations about traditional role play since it is impossible to draw the thin line between acting and being on stage. Oskaras Koršunovas doubled the main character, Roberto Zucco, with a nonprofessional performer, exposing the artificiality of theatrical representations in his production of *Roberto Zucco*. In various ways, these performances employ a strategy of hyperrealism, their spatial, narrative and technological design exaggerates the simulational dimension of reality by suggesting that realities, identities, subjectivities and bodies are merely constructs, duplicated by the representations of theater. These developments are less of a departure from the mimetic tradition (realist or poetic metaphorical), than a reworking of it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one can say, that, in many instances, the developments discussed in this article can be thought of as postmodern, because of their tendency toward a deconstruction of the process of theatre production and its inherent technologies of representation. 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. Self-reflexive techniques and intertextuality are both 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. Exposure of the body deconstructs the notion of theatrical presence. The intention is to expose dominant discourses, theatrical conventions and genres as constructed, as logocentric and sometimes perhaps it is just deconstruction for its own sake. 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.

1 Audronis Liūga, "Theatre Injured by Time," *Teatras*, No. 1 (Vilnius, 1997), p. 11.

2 Theodore Shank, "The Multiplicity of British Theatre" in Theodore Shank, (ed). *Contemporary British Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1994), p. 3.

3 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).

4 Liūga, op. cit., p. 11.

5 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 61.

6 Vaidas Jauniškis, "Dabar: anuometinio miesto ilgesys," *Teatras*, Vol. 4 (Vilnius, 1998), p. 62.

7 Audronis Liūga, "Agresyvaus vaizdo teatras," *7 meno dienos*, August 2 (Vilnius, 1996), p. 2.

8 Ingrida Daunoravičiūtė, "Kas slypi už vizualumo triumfo," *Kultūros barai*, p. 29.

9 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1979).

10 Hans-Thies Lehmann, "From Logos to Landscape: Text in Contemporary Dramaturgy," *Performance Research*, Vol. 2 (1) (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 58.