
THE TEMPORAL AND ATEMPORAL ASPECTS OF DRAMA AND THEATRE

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The issue of the temporal and the atemporal in drama and theatre might be perceived as being disconnected from time and space. With its variability, ambiguity and parallelism, it is part of all theatre cultures, particularly in Europe. In theatre, the “temporal” continuously overlaps and intertwines with the “atemporal”. The demands and preferences of the audience living in different regions change constantly. Therefore, the authors create a wide and diverse range of plays in order to attract the interest and appreciation of the audience. It would be naïve to insist on maximum artistic quality or professional perfection, or to have high aesthetic expectations before going to see a comedy in a cultural centre in a small village where your niece plays a minor role. It is obvious that theatres often present plays which are popular at that time or plays which incorporate a topic that the audience find pressing, although not of cardinal importance. This way, theatres gain a good reputation and later have the opportunity to present plays of higher quality. For instance, the author with the highest number of plays staged in Slovakia is Ferko Urbánek. However, in the history books of Slovak drama, his name is mentioned only marginally. In Slovakia, we also have rich experience with the Soviet drama of the 1980s, which was known at that time by the generalising name of “production theatre”. With these plays, Slovak theatre could cleverly avoid ideological censorship. If the plays had been written by a Slovak or Czech author, they would simply have been banned by the censors. But to censor Soviet drama in the countries of the Soviet bloc would have been much more delicate, so authors like Alexander Gelman or Azat Abdulin were performed on our stages and fulfilled their specific social function.

“It works the same way in Košice, Montevideo, Sydney or Alma-Ata. Everywhere in the world, theatre, more than any other art, reflects social tensions and changes. Everywhere in the world, actors put their heads above the parapet more often than other artists. And their heads are inseparable from the play and from the market, which is not a flea market, nor a vanity fair, nor a sensation fair. The pressure is quite strong, the dialogue between givers and takers is loud, public and accessible to anyone, but at the same time unrepeatably and unique.”

These are the words of the writer, playwright and theatre scholar Peter Karvaš, to whom a series of theatre studies conferences in Banská Bystrica was dedicated.

I consider the three mentioned cases of a living person in theatre as the first basic factor or characteristic feature of theatre. The other feature is, in my opinion, storytelling. Of course, I do realise that many authorities would disagree as they claim

theatre to be based on other elements. I do not blame them, and I admit, however blasphemous it may sound, that there might be a good opera with no story if the music is fantastic and the actors lyrically express their emotions. The reason why I believe the story is important is that the crucial part of story-telling is its moral message, which might and might not be true for lyrical expression. And the moral dimension of theatre has been the basic problem of Slovak theatre, and, according to my limited knowledge, also of European theatre since approximately the 1970s. It is very unfortunate that the trend of decreasing quality and the disappearing moral message of plays is still getting stronger.

I will now mention several plays which perfectly incorporated the strong, atemporal and ethical appeal to the public and – very importantly – were also well received by the audience. During my first year at university, we knew very well that there was a Czech director called Otomar Krejča, who had a good reputation, and we knew that he would direct a preview of Josef Topol's play *Dvě noci s dívkou aneb Jak okrást zloděje* (*Two Nights with a Girl or How to Rob a Robber*) in the Moravian town of Prostějov. While the management of the Academy of Performing Arts in Bratislava was appointed during normalisation, it has to be said that without batting an eye they provided us with a microbus so we could travel to see Krejča's production (which in the end was not staged in Prague). This was the reason why two of my colleagues and I travelled by train to the other side of the country to see his *Three Sisters* (*Tri sestry*), and after a night spent in a tent, we saw the very last performance of the banned Divadlo za branou (Theatre behind the Gate) – *Provaz o jednom konci* (*A Rope with One End*) by Johann Nestroy. Even nowadays I recite the last scene from this play to my students. In this scene the actors walked from the depth of the stage to the proscenium and collectively recited the final monologue:

“It has all turned out so well that our eyes are full of happy gleam, someone might even think that it was nothing but a dream. May we never awake from the sleep and dream the dream again and again. Than through life fully awake creep sleepwalking we'd rather remain.”

We then went to Krakow, found the manager Jan Pawel Gawlik and persuaded him to give us three tickets for Swinarski's production of Mickiewicz's literary masterpiece *Forefather's Eve*. When Gawlik met us an hour after the end of the play in front of the entrance, he was so moved with our thankfulness that he let us see Andrzej Wajda's *November Night* as well as his production of Dostoyevsky's *Demons* and Swinarski's *Liberation*. At that time I did not know Polish history in detail and I am sure that I did not understand many important things. However, despite my advanced age many emotions of those days are still fresh in my mind: the shock about the passionate interest of Polish people in their history; the sudden realisation that a person has an individual value and the power to give sense to history, that even a single individual is an important creator of the history of his country; and the passionate and expressive poetry of humiliation and revolt, sin and punishment, crime and passion, and good and evil. I have seen many productions in Poland since then, many of them directed by great directors and written by renowned authors. But never since then have I seen such a strong moral message and eagerness to influence the audience and make them better – not even in Grotowski's *Apocalypsis*. At about

the same time I was returning from Moscow confused as to how it was possible that in the suburbs at Tagan Square, in the shadow of famous and undoubtedly good theatres, Yuri Petrovich Lyubimov had shown us with a single group, not a very large one for Russia, a series of productions such as *Ten Days That Shook the World*, Gorky's *The Mother*, Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Voznesensky's *Antiworlds*. And again he confirmed my opinion that theatre can attack its audience in many different ways. He confirmed that there is a secret which can turn a solid and correctly performed production into an artistic act in which the world of creators and the world of viewers spiritually overlap using a commonly respected and defended morale.

The little Slovak village of Zeleneč can be mentioned as an extreme case. A group of amateurs with an actor from Nitra, Jozef Bednárík, found a simple but very effective means of connecting the stage with the audience when they performed Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus*, Maupassant's *Boule de Suif*, Brecht's *Mother Courage* and Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Other amateurs in the Little Theatre Studio in Košice and their phenomenal Boris Vasiliev's *The Dawns Here are Quiet* gave goose bumps even to professionals from the world of theatre. I do not want to be boring or sentimental, so I will just briefly add that I fully perceived the moral value of the artistic performance also during Budsky's and Gorin's *Til*, Bergman's *Miss Julie* and above all during Bergman's *Hamlet* and various productions by Scherhauser in the On a String Theatre (Divadlo na Provázku), Strehler's *Il Campiello*, Brook's *Midsummer's Night Dream* and Štepka's *Vygumuj a napiš (Erase it and Write it Down)* in the Radošina Naive Theatre, and Kavtaradze's *The Law of Eternity* in the Nová scéna theatre in Bratislava. I should also mention those who are still alive, e.g. Sládeček's production of *Nový život (New Life)*, Kováčik's play *Sol' zeme (Salt of the Earth)* in Prešov and Olha's production of Eugene O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten (Noc pre dvoch)* and Timrava's *Skon Paľa Ročku (The Death of Paľo Ročka)* in Martin. Many plays in Martin gave me such feelings at a certain time, such as Polák's *Dotyky a spojenia* (based on *The Dispute* by Mariveaux), Brecht's *Baal* or František Švantner's *Nevesta hôľ (The Hills' Bride)*. Maybe if I looked at my notes, annuals and an encyclopaedia, the list would be even longer. But it still would not match the long list of the productions of varying quality which I have seen and written about during the three decades of my active career as a theatre scholar and critic.

A few months ago I met various legendary avant-gardists of Polish theatre. Among other topics, we spoke about the reasons why nowadays there are no ambitions to encourage faith in Polish grandeur, extraordinariness and uniqueness in Polish theatres, as was normal in the 1970s and partially also in the 1980s. Finally, we, creatively exhausted old men, came to a sad (or just unfortunate?) conclusion: after the conflict of the state with Solidarity, Polish theatres lost the ambition to create Polish stage plays. The ambition to create plays which are profitable (in many senses of the word) became predominant, and the tradition of doing theatre as a trade or an occupation returned. Creative ambition is a disturbing element because it is risky and time-consuming. And time is money: if not in theatre, then in dubbing, television and film.

I assume that a similar activity in Western Europe brought a social change, after which the issues of ethics or morality, which determined the form of theatre in Western Europe in the times of Anouilh, Camus, Sartre, Copeau or Barrault and their

contemporaries, ceased to be a priority for society at the end of the 1960s. Until then, theatre – at least in its significant spectrum of forms – had been a respected moral institution which could clearly articulate topics that united and excited society. After the barricades in the Latin Quarter, the situation changed. Triumphant liberalism and the concentration on consumer well-being in the western part of Europe brought about the decay of Polish, Czech, Slovak, and logically also Russian theatres. I can almost hear theatre scholars in all countries protesting. What decay of theatres am I talking about in the Europe that has given birth to world famous directors, Nobel Prize-winning authors and state-of-the-art theatre buildings of various shapes?

My opinion is supported by the fact that the pragmatism of our times has driven away artistic creation and replaced it with unified production. Nowadays, theatre is losing its position as an artistic institution even though it often presents itself that way and uses many advantages connected to it. However, what has disappeared is the spirit of art and the will and power to make the audience interested in moral problems and values important for the world and culture: i.e. messages surpassing current time coordinates. Today theatre is basically a factory which supplies the market in the agreed time with goods of standard quality which are usually improved with the addition of a celebrity already known by society or active in the media. If we compare theatre to the automobile industry, there are theatres which are similar to the elegance and luxury of a Mercedes, there are theatres resembling a useful and reliable Peugeot, and there are also theatres comparable to an undemanding yet persistent Dacia. The only issue is which programme the theatre, its management or its donor can afford. The suppliers respect this.

So if European society and the inhabitants of individual cities continue to pretend that they are happy with the type of production that is available in equal standard in various cities, although with different actors and directors, they are also saying that they are happy with uniformity and a lack of creativity, and that the security and standard of McDonald's has won over the Hungarian goulash, Czech beef tenderloin and Slovak *halushki*. Obviously not everyone likes them, but at least they are different. They do not have a neutral aftertaste, and in every restaurant they taste a little different. I am poetically saying that the atemporality in theatre is determined by the ability of a particular production or play to morally affect society and at the same time I have used trivial culinary terminology to do so.

Yuck!

However, the truth is that the pressure of globalisation first shows itself in those places where it is comfortable for people. Why should we catch fish from small boats when it is more effective to do so from a large trailer? Why do we need small chocolate factories when the violet Milka creates Alpine goodness also from milk from Ukrainian cows and in a pretty wrapping? I believe that somewhere here there lies the beginning of the end of the word "temporal". Theatre always exists in a specific time and conditions and reflects them. It is a guarantee of social interest and hence the reason of its existence because the specificity of theatre lies in the fact that a theatre performance cannot exist without the presence of the audience. It is the participation of the audience and their reactions that close the communication circle and complete the process of creation together with the possibility of rare epochal and timeless works.

Man is sinful. Therefore, we are logically interested also in "lower" art, which is

about fun and thrill. Let us wonder why the author of the above-mentioned and famous play *Salt of the Earth* by Peter Kováčik, which is about the tragedy and brutality of the nationalisation of Slovak villages after the rise of communism, did not write a similar story about the tragedy of the denationalisation of Slovakia in the 1990s, which was cruel and brutal as well. Why did Slawomir Mrozek not describe the current state of Poland as vividly as he had described it in *The Police* and *The Turkey*? I think that after several years of experience the authors have understood that it is not necessary to write original stories which could be interesting for our people. They believe they should write the same way as authors do in other parts of the world. The book *New European Drama: The Great Deception* by Sanja Nikcevic perfectly describes this strange phenomenon travelling across Europe, leaving behind a unified, homogenous and globalised trail.

Pro-Europe supporters may ask: What do you suggest? A return to hatchets and horses and watching theatre performances once a year in a local pub? No, we will not go back from cities to villages, and the theatre will not go back to the state it was in in the past. But theatres can do one thing – find an individual way to reach European-ness. They can attract their audience in an original and creative way. Only then will European theatre get the chance to restore its former glory. And I am sure that the best works will receive a warm welcome in Brussels – let us only hope that no directive will be adopted. Globalisation was not born in Europe, and it does not respect the cultural patterns of the old continent. It was created in the sterile atmosphere of business. The media tycoon Ronald Lauder understood a long time ago that the Czech Republic with its population of ten million and Slovakia with half that number watch TV broadcasting several hours a day. And of course commercials on TV generate a profit, so it is worth owning a TV channel here. Theatre agencies and entrepreneurs with a global mindset have realised that our markets are also profitable in the area of theatre, obviously with government subsidies which pretend to support domestic production.

But let me return from the topic of money and uniformity to the topic of art. We live in a time of the dynamic globalisation of production and trade. We are flooded by information coming from various electronic channels. The social processes and their values are becoming unclear. All dramatic texts and productions are created to reflect the times when they were created and they describe the authentic life experience and reaction of a person living in a specific time and conditions. Therefore, it is not easy to find out why certain dramatic texts and productions are immortal. But it is necessary to create such an environment in a national culture where authors can try to write plays and productions which will not be only about temporal topics but about topics which will become generally true and timeless.

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