
POSTDRAMATIC THEATRE WITH MINIMALISTIC DIRECTION AS DONE BY SLÁVA DAUBNEROVÁ AND EDUARD KUDLÁČ

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Abstract: We shall focus on two personages and their directorial methods: Sláva Daubnerová from the P.A.T. Theatre and Eduard Kudláč from Phenomenontheatre, whose work we could describe as postdramatic theatre with minimalistic directing and a strong inclination to performing art. The goal herein is not to deliver an exhaustive analysis, but to show some specific examples of different principles and features when compared to traditional theatrical (“dramatic”) directing in Slovakia. However, we do not consider them to be pioneers in the field of “new theatre”.

In Slovakia in recent years there have been highly critical voices directed against the current state of theatrical production (both staged and dramatic) and the state of theatre culture as a whole. The situation is not so alarming if we acknowledge the existence of “new theatre” as an art which is not subject to traditional (staging) models, the use of theatrical symbols and the generally acknowledged hierarchisation of theatrical functions. By this I mean the concrete acknowledgment of the depsychologisation of the theatre and the destruction of its logocentric hierarchy (the dethroning of linguistic characteristics) that emphasises logos and language as an essential means of sense and meaning building as well as the loss of the need for new theatre to create sense and unified meaning in a theatrical work through other extratextual theatrical components. This is not a case of wholeness being organised following traditional patterns of dramatic coherence creating a synthesis, but is rather a form of theatre which in spite of the abovementioned disturbance provides the audience with an alternative way to “read” or “understand” the theatrical work as a whole. It is a theatre that communicates using strategies from its creators that are for instance closer to the fine arts (including newer audiovisual film and new media art forms) than theatre. “This new form” of theatre may seem like a “rift” or “gulf” in theatre culture, but it cannot be ignored or negatively labelled based on solely historical and traditional views and standards of theatre and aesthetics.

I believe that we are now becoming aware of the processes of discontinuity that appeared in the staging of theatre and drama productions towards the end (or even in the second half) of the last century, and that we are trying to cope with these processes or qualities, which have also been brought about by the new century. We are also trying to find our own current sense of inner being, artistic sources and initiatives which should be strong enough to start a new tradition or at least offer something new and inventive: something which has the potential to become an item of wider socio-artistic discussion and feature in the public consciousness for a long time. This process should be seen as several parallel theatrical tendencies running at the same

time and not just as a process that tends to break down the known aesthetics, forms and poetics of theatre.

The organisers of the “Process of Development of Theatrical Direction after 1989” (Slovak: “Procesy rozvoja divadelnej réžie po roku 1989”) conference in Bratislava in 2011 have now decided (after changes in theatrical poetics, changes in dramatic text or in forms and changes of the hero in theatre and drama) to also focus their attention on the changes in current theatrical direction (and also on the processes that accompany such changes); this is only the logical outcome of past findings that confirmed the expected changes in the stated fields and that exhort the revision and naming of shifts in the field of theatrical direction.

It is necessary to point out that the “magical year” of 1989 was no landmark in the field of Slovak theatrical production that would point to a series of “radical” inventive shifts or revolutionary artistic creations. The same is true for the field of theatrical direction. The fact that we find some shifts or processes which comprise a “different” form of Slovak theatrical direction and directing principles or methods of their respective creators is more likely the result of gradual changes: e.g. in how theatrical symbols are handled (the expressional means of the theatre as an experiment). This has been noted by many theoreticians in the context of international theatre.¹

These changes logically follow the shifts in the understanding of the artistic and social potential (and functions) of the theatre² and, last but not least, the changes in theatrical communication, which require an active audience which is able to participate in the creation of theatrical performance. The German theatre theorist Hans-Thies Lehmann points out this important fact in his study dedicated to new forms of theatricality (“postdramatic theatre”):

The task of the spectators is no longer the neutral reconstruction, re-creation and patient retracing of the fixed image but rather the mobilisation of their own ability to react and experience in order to realize their participation in the process that is offered to them.³

Therefore, this is not just about participation on the experiential or emotional level but also the participation of the audience, which is involved and able to complete the theatrical art by itself and collaborate on the creation of some form of a unique and non-transferable personal experience of the present moment. We are getting closer to performing than to staging. In performing art it is no longer the mimesis of the fictional, of the representation present in staging; instead it is the co-experience of the present, a process of manifestation and an event that does not need to have a meaning, where the actors on the stage and the audience are in a state of participation and interaction.

¹ It is worth mentioning the latest Slovak versions: e.g. Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatické divadlo* (Divadelný ústav, 2007) and Richard Schechner's *Performancia: teórie, praktiky, rituály* (Divadelný ústav, 2009). In the 1940s there were already Czech theorists studying the (shift of) the theatrical symbol, like Jindřich Honzl (the 1940 *Pohyb divadelního znaku* study) and Jiří Pokorný (the book *Složky divadelního výrazu*, 1946), here Pokorný focuses on the shifts of theatrical parts (still as a synthetically viewed theatrical work) functions in the history of theatre.

² Further information in Jan Mukařovský's *Studie z estetiky* (1966), and especially his 1936 treatise *Estetická funkce, norma a hodnota jako sociální fakty*.

³ LEHMANN, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. New York: Routledge, 2006, pp. 134-135. ISBN-9-78-0-415-26812-7.

Slovakia has recently seen similar production features and methods by theatrical creators, starting with the Stoka Theatre up to the Non.Garde Theatre. We shall focus on two personages and their directorial methods: Sláva Daubnerová from the P.A.T. Theatre and Eduard Kudláč from Phenomenontheatre, whose work we could describe as postdramatic theatre with minimalistic directing and a strong inclination to performing art. The goal herein is not to deliver an exhaustive analysis, but to show some specific examples of different principles and features when compared to traditional theatrical (“dramatic”) directing in Slovakia. We do not consider them to be pioneers in the field of “new theatre” as they were not the first to bring what we now consider to be an independent theoretical category of postdramatic theatre to the stage. Following on from author’s theatre and progressively fixed production theatre, both of them represent an interesting line representing several distinct shifts, particularly on the level of theatrical aesthetics (directing with the text, the actor and his expression; space; image; time; sound and communication with the audience).

Sláva Daubnerová

Sláva Daubnerová is a director and performer rolled into one, with a strong tendency towards the theatre of introverted introspection and intellectualism. Her approach to theatrical production resembles that of a theatre as a laboratory: she likes to experiment and test the connections between the possibilities of expression of mental processes, physical and mental states and the visual and auditory possibilities of the new media or their expression through the material of her body in space. One of her primary methods is her work with the quotations of extraneous, mainly non-theatrical texts and free work with textual material – the intuitive selection of quotations and their subsequent ordering into a whole independent structure. The fragmentation, deconstruction and reconstruction of texts, personas, movement and images is typical, as it is of the scene itself, which in the end she adapts to the specific performance space. She uses principles like overlapping and the repetition of parts of text (we could even describe this as the recycling of themes within a single theatrical production as well as across the whole production) and the interruption of ranges of theme, image, sound and scene as “story” moments. Her production on the boundary of performance and staging frequently resembles some form of a personal confession (generalised to the issues of the individual and his relation to himself or his own surrounding), where direct contact with the audience and its task as a co-creator (collaborator) of a mutual theatrical experience is essential. It is quite a frequent occurrence for her work on the theatrical form not to end but to only begin after a premiere (and the mutual experience on the performer-audience axis). Despite this, it is not possible to speak univocally only about performance theatre; her production naturally mixes staging procedures (the mimetic: the actor as transformer) and performance theatre (the performer’s performance as self-presentation).

Daubnerová characterised her production for *Inspire* magazine as follows:

As I have graduated in cultural sociology, I am drawn to theoretical texts, to research. To the physical theatre, object, new media, multimedia scenography and the site-specific. [...] I am usually well prepared, but there some things that have to be searched for and found directly in [the theatrical space] and tried out. I always try to follow the text, the concept

of the performance. I mainly base everything on myself, on my body and its potential. [...] The point is the confrontation of the living performer with the environment and its objects. I consider the body to be one of the objects that performs the action and functions in relationship to the scenography, light, video and vice versa.⁴

Since 2006 Daubnerová has worked in the P.A.T. Theatre, which is also a professional platform for current theatre, dance and new media. She has mostly produced monodramatic compositions on the border between staging and performing theatre – *Cells (Cely)* (2006), *Hamletmachine* (2007), *M.H.L.* (2010) as well as theatrical productions created and based on scenic concepts such as *Polylogue* (2008) and *Some Disordered Interior Geometries* (2011), where Daubnerová performs with other actors and performers. I shall mainly focus on the first four works.

As a performance *Cells* was inspired by the work (texts – i.e. commentaries and interviews – and an art installation series with the same name) and diary entries of the French artist Louise Bourgeois, which became the basis for Daubnerová's scenic concept. The source for the performance's creation were quotes (words, sentences and coherent blocks of mental thought) as instinctively chosen fragments. Based on common thematic components that interested Daubnerová and which she identified with, she classified them into greater thematic blocks.⁵ Every block began with the sentence "So spoke my father..." (the ending of the sentence was written as some sort of motto on a wall with chalk) and was divided into two parts. The first part documented past traumas and memories (while texts connected with the past in scenic form were reproduced as an intimate recording from a dictation machine); the second part pointed to the ramification of these traumas in the present. The textual record of the scenic concept in *Cells* was published in *Kød* magazine and included the concise dramaturgical and directing explanations of the creative processes and intentions:

The individual blocks are independent enclosed units functioning as a cell structure; they are separate and at the same time connected through the key motive of the father. In every block trauma is overcome and this repeating cycle ends in the final block with a symbolic patricide.⁶

The visual concept of the production was elaborated, being based on the repetition of individual words and physical actions (which at the same time made a thematic recycling) as well as on the gradual modelling of *mise-en-scènes* through objects of glasses into geometric triangular, quadrangle and circular shapes based on an internal logic of spoken ideas and the ordering of the individual blocks into a whole. The reserved dramatic expression and the acting, which was more on the level of acting information and informing rather than representing, was completed by the simple scenography of a board, some kind of open-shelf cell, two chairs and free

⁴ HROMADA, Jano – DAUBNEROVÁ, Sláva. *One woman show. Sláva Daubnerová nezávislá herečka a režisérka* [Interview]. In: *Inspire* magazine, 2009, Vol. 3, No. 52, p. 66.

⁵ The relationship with her father, the people/environment and to herself; seclusion/isolation/alienation; the inability to communicate; identity/introspection/acceptance of herself; emotional pain; fear; anger and anxiety.

⁶ DAUBNEROVÁ, Slávka. *Cely*. *Divadlo P.A.T.* In *Kød*, 2007, Vol. 1, No. 3, p. 36. ISSN 1337-1800.

space as well as by a musical element made from repeating base sounds and sung tones, creating a sonic collage.

She also proceeded similarly when creating *Polylogue*, a theatrical production with stronger fictional representational elements which was based on the two-volume novel *Melancholy* by Jon Fosse. It was not a dramatisation but rather another scenic concept inspired by the theme of an individual's relationship to himself enriched by the theme of an artist's relationship to his creation (the inability to create); this also appears in later theatrical productions, and it appears that for Daubnerová it makes the ideal space for self-presentation.

The scenic concept of *Polylogue* arose from the cyclical repetition and modification of sentences, ideas, images, dialogues and situations happening within one autumn afternoon in 1853. Fosse's record of the artist's shattered ideas inspired the author to create a reconstruction of key events that led to the artist's mental crisis: an inability to create; I can/want/must not paint; we are/are not lovers. As no part of *Melancholy* exhibits exceedingly temporal spreading events, plotlessness and some sort of flatness are characteristic, Daubnerová focused only on those events that were key for the life and thinking of the main character, Hertervig. The textual or verbal component of the production is made up of cyclically repeating and varied sentences that actors mechanically and monotonically repeat with sporadic breaks and returns. Being economical with lexis (a highly restricted vocabulary), a deliberately stylised, hyperbolised and even mechanical movement and the repetition of the actor's action (an exaggerated imitation of walking, an affected manner of sitting down, conspicuously knocking on a door, jumping on the bed while holding one's hands close to the body and the imitation of the sexual intercourse) are the basic means of expression. This is the reason why they had opted for a cold and basically clinical scenography where abstract art symbols (the reduction of sensory stimuli) represented by a table, chair, basin, bed, suitcases and an empty metal doorframe, which are hung on metal chains, are consecutively and repeatedly lowered onto the stage in accordance to spoken words and the actor's actions and where rows of mirror panes are folded and unfolded.

Beginning with the *Hamletmachine* performance (a scenic production of the play by the German dramatist Heiner Müller and expanded by the author's rather lengthy monological quote), Daubnerová's direction proceeds to connecting new media into theatrical form, bordering on high-tech theatre which expands the borders of depiction and has substantial bearing on changes in the handling of theatrical symbols. We move on the boundary of reduction and multiplication of theatrical symbols by which we also approach the restraint and condensation of meanings.

Hamletmachine is also based primarily on text, and from its multiple layers she picked the determining theme of identity and its ambiguity as the scenic concept (the principle of the recycling of similar themes is again worth noting). She saw Hamlet and Ophelia as reduced quotes of characters which after having resigned from their assigned roles and gender classification and through their exchange (the swapping of the male-female principle and discourse) study the relationship between the individual and society. Through them she also studied her relationship to her own image – her own self (a sort of analogy with personal feelings), gender roles and the social roles of individuals. This initial personal research moved in its next phase onto a more general and interpreting level. She subsequently searched for a suitable form

of expression and connection of intimate thoughts (or mental processes) with sound and image: "Our interpretation was based on an identity play; we worked with the text in terms of pictures, sounds. We used web-cams which depicted me at different angles."⁷

She used the projected linking of several cameras at the same time, which recorded Daubnerová as the characters (Hamlet and Ophelia) and as a live object simultaneously from several angles, focusing on different body parts. Concurrently a character and an object, the performer also attracted attention by her physical presence on the stage. This is a paradox because the apparent entering and exiting from and into video spaces (and not a TV or picture frame) disrupts the naturally perceived materiality of the body on stage, whereas on the other hand the physical presence of the performer points to it. In combination with the previously recorded text as a voice played from speakers that alternates with the voice broadcasted through the micro-port and microphone (unlike the natural voice, it is an amplified voice evoking the medial effect of addressing the audience directly) the creation of the stage character was handled in a strange way. As an electronic medium, the reproduced recording, image and sound created an alienating effect which seemed to guide the audience to focus on the appearance of the performer on the stage itself. At the same time, the complex expression and content of the stage character assembled itself in the audience's mind and before its very eyes and was interpreted by the performer based on the text (we therefore see an indication of transformation). However, this image was also overpowered by the concurrent self-presentation of the performer's character. Daubnerová proceeded in a similar way in the case of *M.H.L.*, where she was able to create the portrayal of M.H.L as the first lady of Slovak theatrical directing also as her own personal analogue. To achieve such an effect, she used the overlapping, alternation and interruption of video recording (the back door as a video installation), and reproduced voice recordings and utterances through a microphone which was accompanied by the parallel usage of cameras and projection (detailed actions recorded by a CCTV camera); however, she mainly used the live image (the actor's appearance) and the speech and action of the actor on the stage there and then.

In *Hamletmachine* we once again encounter (similarly as in *Cells* and *Polylogue*) the deconstruction and gradual (although not completely identical) reconstruction process of the characters and the text itself. The theatre critic Martina Vannayová does not see this process as a solely analytical method: "Interpretation here, fortunately, does not come about by an intellectual textual analysis but rather by the disintegration of rhythm, vision and sound and the subsequent reproduction of the text."⁸

As a matter of fact, Sláva Daubnerová is inspired by the themes and content of the text as well as its form and internal rhythm. As in this case the text consists of five monologues of Hamlet and Ophelia (with a significant poetic charge), and of the author's annotations and passages in English, Daubnerová has subordinated the final scenic form to her own classification based on the alternation of monological,

⁷ ANDREJČÁKOVÁ, Eva DAUBNEROVÁ, Slávka. *Herečka Slávka Daubnerová. Občas mám chuť zazipsovať sa do spacáka* [Interview]. In: *TV oko*, 2009, 16–22 April No. 15, p. 9. Available at <<http://kultura.sme.sk/c/4390475/slavka-daubnerova-obcas-mam-chut-zazipsovat-sa-do-spacaka.html>> [accessed 18 December 2011].

⁸ VANNAYOVÁ, Martina. *Stroj Hamlet*. In *Kod*, 2007, Vol. 1, No. 7, p. 11. ISSN 1337-1800.

video-image, almost sung, considerably voiced and musically rhythmical parts. She adapted the movement on the stage to the square ground plan with a single central point in the middle of the stage – both as the object where all video projections were shown and the inside of which served as an intimate space of statement.

Even when taking into account the *M.H.L.* production, we can characterise Daubnerová's theatre as fragmental, recycling (or a theatre of repeated theme and physical action) and to some degree simple (even monotonous) with the primary goal of providing information without any false or fake emotion. Associativity, intuitiveness and an intellectual coldness appear partly as her programme, which also leads to a change in the form of stage characters. Vladimír Štefko commented on such an approach during the 2010 Critical Platform on the Touches and Connections (*Dotyky a spojenia*) festival: "Let us call these performances certain structures [...] which are in their way monolithic and lack partial tensions and deviations from the model sequence. As such the character closes itself into itself and the potential to appeal to the audience on a wider basis wanes."⁹

When creating her characters as a director and performer, Sláva Daubnerová also focuses on a simple repeated action and generally economical speech (both lexical and expressional). She abstracts the character on a basic set of symbols which are dominated by the physical side and image (independent and detected physical appearance and movement) and compact speech. There is no imitation or faking of emotional states because the sincerity of the personal statement is important. That is why Daubnerová as a basic part of her programme avoids the processes of "exhibition theatre", the theatre of aesthetical and aestheticised imitation of life/being on stage.

Eduard Kudláč

The second of the two young directors is Eduard Kudláč, who cooperated with Sláva Daubnerová on the *Cells* project. Even though this article could mention his directing work for permanent and professional theatres, it shall only briefly address his work for Phenomenontheatre, his own theatre company. Two performances in particular – *Feed the Snake on Your Chest – Part I: Stamina Report* (*Nakrm hada na svojej hrudi. Part I: Stamina Report*) and *Feed the Snake on Your Chest – Part II: Reality Report* (*Nakrm hada na svojej hrudi. Part II: Reality report*) are worth mentioning. In his work for independent theatre Kudláč tends to economise in terms of directing and acting tools, and focuses on searching for new theatrical possibilities through fragmentation, movement, nonverbal expression, action and light. He connects various layers of aggressive expression and does not shirk from authentic vulgar expression; for example, the textual material is made up of web-blogs, chat history or press releases. The theme is an analysis of a 21st century consumer on the verge of communicating with the world and with oneself (e.g. the two mentioned projects).

The director's relationship to the text is similar to Daubnerová's. Kudláč chooses nondramatic textual materials or various records in order to work freely in the creation of the scenic concept. This results in monological and monothematic performances as closed fragments which "abdicate" the story and focus more on the news

⁹ ŠTEFKO, Vladimír. *Divadlo P.A.T a Štúdio 12 Bratislava M.H.L.* In *Dekodér Dotyky a spojenia*, 2010, Vol. 4, No. 7, p. 42. ISSN 1337-1800.

(in terms of its message) that is over and between such a formal and content classification.

When working with actors, Kudláč makes use of a simple repeated movement on the stage like on a chessboard; he deliberately focuses on plain (in some places hyperbolised) gesticulation and the authentic language of the street. Characters do not engage in mutual relations and do not approach each other; they ignore each other. All three of them are present on the stage the whole time, but only one of them is in the spotlight and becomes the leader of their swearing and verbal attacks addressed to an absent participant and also to everyone at the same time. In contrast to Daubnerová, Kudláč's directing in the sphere of independent theatre is more of a theatre of exhibition and acknowledged attraction.

The empty stage is another of his typical symbols; it allows for a performance with the technical properties of light (fluorescent lighting and neon lighting) and electronic music. In the stage productions of *Feed the Snake on Your Chest I and II*, the names of various acts which were projected onto the backdrop with a spotlight being on the characters appearing in the foreground (similarly as in a show performer) comprised the sole stenographic element on the empty stage. The music is made up of the disintegration and subsequent integration of electronic sounds into a consonance of noises ("sampling"). Despite the effort to create a "theatre of authentic expression" it appears that he creates a theatre that imitates authenticity to a greater degree than is the case with Daubnerová.

Let us take a look at the works of Daubnerová and Kudláč in the context of known theoretical studies on postdramatic theatre, minimalistic direction and its characteristics as noted by H. T. Lehmann and Richard Schechner and as they have been observed and studied in the present author's own research. One realisation is that also in the case of these two directors and their works the following is true: postdramatic theatre is characterised mainly by the changed form and work with the dramatic text and production model. It continues to collide with the literary genre of drama and signalise the unending connection between theatre and text. However, it considers the text to be the material of scenic interpretation and not its master. The postdramatic theatrical text is characteristic for its weakening of the principles of traditional narration, figuration and storyline arrangement, and language gains independence. It is more of a language structure that reflects its state.

Changes also occurred in the handling of other theatrical symbols. The borders in the production field shifted to performance, which no longer tries to evoke a direct real experience of artists and audience. It no longer offers representation but evokes a view of the theatre as a conceptual art form. Characters are no longer portrayed, but there is now the artist as a person before us: the performer, here and now, face to face. Theatre becomes the act and instance of communication which acknowledges its own transience and the temporality of the theatrical situation. The performer does not focus on his own transformation; he moves, to use the words of Michael Kirby, mainly between "simple acting" and "not acting". By this he moves away from delivering an ecstatically processed reality found on the outside and rather tries to self-transform. The story is no longer important; the linking of aesthetics and the playing with perceptions, which involve auditory (reproduced voice and microphone) and visual media (various video recordings, rooms and installations) are of most significance instead. It also focuses on the physical reality of the human body as some sort

of attraction at the given time and at the given place. Movements and gesticulation do not have to carry decipherable meanings; they can be used solely due to the power of the sensual action. The category of time and space is highly flexible and a lot of overlapping, repetition or interruption occurs.

In the context of this contribution, we consider minimalistic directing as a process of the abstraction, curtailing and simplifying of the theatrical expression and form. Minimalistic directing attempts to return the form to simpler structures (even to the first structures of communication). To build actions it often uses succinct geometry shapes. It outlines the relationships through basic gesticulation and postures. Motivations often merge with the performer's self-presentation. The modulation of the voice is usually monotone and uses indicative melodic tones at various intensities. The musical component uses basic tones (the musical component is often made of connected sounds and noises). The basic principle of the whole form is the repetition of certain parts and blocks in monotone, which are only slowly repeatedly changed or supplemented.

Translated by Martin Handrlica