

FROM WRITTEN DRAMA TOWARDS A DRAMATURGY OF PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: As the Prague structuralists put it as early as in the 1930s and 1940s, the drama is a literary text of its own but there are “gaps” in it, which the future staging is called upon to fill. This theoretical view that attempts to see drama as an intermediate state between literary and script essence, in fact vindicates the stage performance and anticipates the revolutionary changes that were to happen in theatre. With the appearance of the post-dramatic theater forms, figuratively speaking, the pendulum that swings above the text-performance opposition gradually gets to the other extreme: in many cases the theatrical performance is the essence of the creative act while the text for theatre is a mere occasion for it or is created especially because of its happening. Now, we are speaking about the dramaturgy of the performance and not about the dramaturgical composition of classical or modern drama.

Today in theatrical practice coexist principles of dramaturgical construction from different temporal strata. Whether there is something new, a completely new trend that sneaks behind the hybridity of our age, behind the quotations and parodies of genres and discourses from the past? For in the beginning of 21st century we can see how the dramaturgy begins to realize itself again as a value on its own, however it no longer claims to be the founding substance of the entire theatre practice. The new texts for theatre could also be thought of as a continuation of the logic of autonomous development of drama outside the postmodern stage experience. But also as a turn of the already post-dramatic stage to some extant ready dramaturgical forms in literature, cinema, documentary chronicles, etc.

Key words: Drama. Text for theatre, Dramaturgy of performance, Classical drama, Modern drama, Post-dramatic theatre, Performative dramaturgy

The literary status of drama presumes, as the Prague structuralists put it as early as in the 1930s and 1940s, that it is a literary text of its own but there are “gaps” in it, which the future staging is called upon to fill. Although “gaps” can be found in every text, they are substantially inherent to drama and are deliberately left by its author.

This theoretical view that attempts to see drama as an intermediate state between literary and script essence, in fact vindicates the stage performance

and anticipates the revolutionary changes that were to happen in theater. Until then the theatrical performance was perceived as merely a derivative of the dramaturgical principle; Aristotle even argues that "...The spectacle, though an attraction, is the least artistic of all the parts, and has least to do with the art of poetry" [Aristotle: 1993].¹ Aristotle's view has had, directly or indirectly, a decisive influence on poetics and aesthetics in terms of the explanation of the relation between theatrical phenomenon's two main parts, drama and performance, right until the emergence of the structural-semiotic strategies.

Traditionally drama was explained by its generic literary characteristics and its genre varieties, by the principles it employs to build simulation (mimesis) of life and world. But these explanations fail to answer the question: what connects, for example, Shakespeare's Hamlet written in a strict compositional sequence and in verse, and Beckett's *Not I* in which there only fragments of speech, pauses and instructions about insignificant actions.

The answer in the structural-semiotic view was based on Roman Ingarden's famous definition in *The Literary Work of Art* [Ingarden, 1973]² that the specifics of drama lies in the simultaneous construction of fiction by two parallel texts: the one that imitates the speech of Dramatis personae and the other that gives directions to the author as to who is speaking and (possibly) under what circumstances he is speaking. Thus, performativity is seen incrustated into the very drama. Of course, such an answer may crystallize in the understanding that along with its fictional world drama also offers a ready staging matrix that should be simply reproduced on the stage depending on the skills of the creative team and the cast. It is surprising that such prejudice is still shared at times.

But such a view can also provoke the emancipation of the performance from the written drama. And as a matter of fact the stage practice of subsequent decades shows an endless number of possibilities and options for filling the "gaps" in dramaturgical text.

How effective such approach to the quest for a universal definition of drama is the problem is that it remains only at its superficial discursive level. In this sense, all analyses built upon Ingarden's view clarify the question of how the stage is present as an abstract principle in the texts we call "dramas" much more than they reveal how and to what extent the world and the experiences of Shakespeare's characters or Beckett's figures fit into our concept of drama.

Is it possible at all to find the answer to that question outside the cultural and historic context? The research in the spirit of historical materialism, such as Georg Lukács's *The Sociology of Modern Drama* [Lukács, 1989]³ and Peter Szondi's *Theory of Modern Drama* [Szondi, 1990]⁴, have managed to clarify drama as an expression of subjectivity, which, however, is directly dependent upon the objective social practice and historical consciousness. In the beginning of the

¹ [Aristotle. 1993.]

² [Ingarden, Roman. 1973.]

³ [Lukács, George. 1989.] In: Dimitar Zashev (Ed.). *Haos i formi*. Sofia: Nauka i Izkustvo, 19-136.

⁴ [Szondi, Péter. 1990.]

20th century, Lukács would conclude that “Modern drama is the drama of the bourgeoisie; modern drama is bourgeois drama” [Lukács, 1989], while in the middle of the same century Szondi would define the birth of the drama through the need of Renaissance man “to express and self-determine himself” [Szondi, 1990] and would also point out its crisis in late 19th century as a result of “... the forces that push people out of the interpersonal relationships in a state of isolation” [Szondi, 1990]. One cannot object to such perspective to drama – the world of the characters is somehow always a projection of the socio-cultural attitudes and historical situation. And yet, the drama and the dramatic, when viewed from this theoretical angle, remain much more socio-historical categories than categories of human existence, and to a much greater extent related to literature than to theater at that.

The first half of the 20th century bequeathed us these basic strategies of understanding of drama, further enriched over the subsequent decades by a number of hermeneutic studies of concepts related to the dramatic principle dating back as early as Aristotle such as “catharsis,” “tragic and comic,” “compassion and fear” etc., while for the preceding 19th century it was much more important to formulate the very essence of dramatic experience as a particular happening in the drama; we can rather say phenomenological than historical. Undoubtedly Hegel is the one who summarized the theoretical heritage accumulated since Aristotle: “[...] In drama the subjective feeling issues at once in expression in action” [Hegel, 1969]⁵ – this view of drama as a subjective expression, an echo of some violation and facing unsolvable moral dilemmas, we call “classical.”

As the “modern” in drama can be explained by Kierkegaard’s speculations about the tragic: “[...] The stage is inside, not outside; it is a spiritual stage.” [Kierkegaard, 1991].⁶ Kierkegaard offers us a view of the running drama as a pain of the soul that is not sharable with others, an “esthetic pain” as he would put it while differentiating “sorrow” from “pain”.

Besides, it is not only the modern understanding of the tragic that would form new concepts of drama: in the very end of the 19th century, in 1899, Henri Bergson published in *Revue de Paris* three essays on laughter, in which the comic is seen in relation to some “eccentricity” of the purely “human” – “society will therefore be suspicious of all inelasticity of character, of mind and even of body [...] A gesture, therefore, will be its reply. Laughter must be something of this kind, a sort of *social gesture*.” [Bergson, 1996].⁷ It is not difficult for us to see the similarity with the tragic – it only suffices to change the point of view: the convulsions of the benumbed body are the symptoms of a suffering caused by the repression of every “eccentricity” of subjectivity by the society but in comedy, in contrast to tragedy, the right is assigned to the society. It seems that Chekhov appears to have sensed best this overlap of the tragic and the comic in that historic period when he called his melancholic texts for theatre “comedies”.

The metaphysics of the suffering of the soul had its peak in the 19th century insights, namely in Friedrich Nietzsche’s views of the tragic. Nietzsche paints

⁵ [Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1969.]

⁶ [Kierkegaard, Søren. 1991.]

⁷ [Bergson, Henri. 1996.]

the images of intoxication and ecstasy of the singing and dancing tragic chorus associated with the Dionysian principle: “This process of the tragic chorus is the original phenomenon of *drama*...” [Nietzsche, 1990].⁸ In Nietzsche’s visions there is much performativity, they already foretell the modern stage and the dancing satyr would be a wonderful metaphor for the whole theatre avant-garde in the 20th century. But behind the festive exaltation lies a “lethargic element” in which “what is horrible and absurd in being” sinks into oblivion. [Nietzsche, 1990] In that modern return to performativity, the drama has carried from its very outset (*δράμα* means precisely *action, doing*), the dramatic experience is visible through the influx of energy in dance and ecstasy. Here we no longer imagine the dramatic as an unspoken inner monologue but as a sublime/parodical vital sense outside the *logos*. („...the *sublime*, whereby the terrible is tamed by artistic means, and the *comical*, whereby disgust at absurdity is discharged by artistic means.” [Nietzsche, 1990].)

Thus, the “modern” turn in the development was initially anticipated philosophically. It also has its brightest landmarks in dramatic practice: Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Maeterlinck. For these authors drama happens in the lonely life of the soul – this life, not permeable up to the hilt, remains a metaphysical reality that can be presented only by analogies with the physical feeling of pain, of suffering, of agony. The drama presenting itself as supra-historical through the masks of tragedy and comedy, found, in late 19th century and early 20th century, a hypothesis unknown until then – the dramatic experience cannot be spoken, cannot be really shared, it crawls on its own into the silence, the quiet, the pauses in speech and automatically performed insignificant actions.

The mistrust of spoken language, the realization that it is problematical, becomes the dividing line between the “classical” and the “modern”. From then on drama starts to be thought in these two modes: either as possible or as impossible exteriorization of the convulsions of the soul through language. The two basic concepts of drama have dominated the public attitudes for generations: Hegel’s vision of dramatic feeling, which is revealed through the words spoken by characters and urges action; Kierkegaard’s and Nietzsche’s concepts of the lonely life of the soul (of the modern soul, *l’âme moderne*), which happens before it is made sense of in terms of spoken language. Common between the classical and the modern versions of the dramatic experience is that the *Dramatis personae* could be likened to receptacles that contain and carry the drama with them.

There is also a second late-modern (maybe even early post-modern ?) turn in drama, which happened in the middle of the 20th century. The lonely life of the soul is deconstructed by showing the absurdity in human existence and reducing it to elementary physiological reactions and incoherent speech acts; this happened in the texts of Beckett and the absurdists in general. Or it is completely ignored in favor of the epic narrative of the community; undoubtedly Brecht is the one who substituted the dramatic form of theatre with an epic one and the existential gesture with a socio-allegorical *gestus*.

⁸ [Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1990.] In: Passy, Isaac (Ed.) *Razhdaneto na tragediyata I drugi suchineniya*. Sofia: Nauka i Izkustvo, 67-186.

In a sense this is the limit to which the development of the drama gets after its two modern transformations: its breakup with spoken language and with the metaphysics of the soul.

After the end of the modern era one of the greatest philosophers of the coming post-modernism, Jean-Francois Lyotard in his study “The Tooth, the Palm”, when writing the obituary of the modern theatre by criticizing Artaud and Brecht, anticipates the principles of a new, performative theatre – “energetic” as he puts it. “An energetic theater would produce events that are effectively discontinuous...” [Lyotard, 2002].⁹ Lyotard argues and this is indeed a dream of pure performativity of theater. In this philosophical view, which later crystallized in a series of theatrical practices, drama finally loses its determining role with respect to theatrical performance and dramatic experience leaves the intimacy of the character only to metamorphosize into thousands of sensations, movements, words, gestures, phenomena in physical and social space.

From that point on, one would speak of post-dramatic theater [Lehmann, 2006].¹⁰ The term introduced by Lehmann as well as other similar concepts¹¹, have played a significant role in the historicization of a process of theatre stage’s detachment from both the classical dramaturgical form and the pattern of modern drama. (Lehmann is aware of the fact that the presence of post-dramatic forms does not terminate the existence of dramatic theatre; they co-exist simultaneously but dramatic theatre becomes synonymous with mainstream). According to Lehmann the distinguishing feature of post-dramatic spectacle is performativity, which is not deducted through interpretation of the written drama. “At the same time, the new theatre *text* (which for its part continually reflects its constitution as a linguistic construct) is to a large extent a ‘no longer dramatic’ theatre text.” [Lehmann, 2006].

In fact theater semiology had long abandoned the generic term “drama” and had replaced it with the functional description “text for theatre”, while trying to find the adequate term, unencumbered in literary and historical terms, for the primordial basis of theatrical performance. And the stage practice itself, mostly in theatre avant-garde and neo-avant-garde in the 20th century, has provided much proof that the text for theater is not reduced to written drama (Brecht, for instance, looks at the whole dramaturgical heritage as mere “gestus material”). In some cases it does not come to a written text (literary or not), but about a composition of non-discursive elements (rituals, dance, photography, etc.).

Historically, Lehmann situates the post-dramatic theater after the 1960s when the Western societies started to become post-industrial and post-modern. By the growth of simulative realities produced by the strongly medialized public space the mistrust towards them also increases. And what drama, like drama-based theater, offers is precisely simulative realities.

⁹ [Lyotard, Jean-Francois. 2002.]

¹⁰ [Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 2006.]

¹¹ [Georgieva, Angelina. 2014.] Transformations of Dramatic Form. Theories and Practices in German Dramaturgy after 1989. (Unpublished dissertation). National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts Krastyo Sarafov.

At the same time a radical change is made to the very theatrical process, which is quite typical of the 1970s and 1980s when the stage director assumed to a considerable extent the playwright's functions. The auteur director's theater goes through overinterpretations¹² (most often of classical dramas) by means of assemblage of heterogeneous texts, while also allowing itself to interweave director's subjective "voice" into the performance, and ultimately the whole performance is signed as entirely director's own work.

Figuratively speaking, the pendulum that swings above the text-performance opposition gradually gets to the other extreme: in many cases the theatrical performance is the essence of the creative act while the text for theater is a mere occasion for it or is created especially because of its happening. The text born out of creative energy of performance (if at all fixed on a tangible medium) in fact does not have a life of its own and does not serve for subsequent stage interpretations. We can argue that by the emergence of post-dramatic texts for theater, which are often merely script foundations, collages of texts and non-discursive material, simulations of colloquial genres or fragments of elapsing life, although it is paradoxical in view of their substance as "raw material" it is precisely the "gaps" typical of classical drama, which suggest the future staging, that are gradually being effaced. Or we can argue the opposite: the "gaps" are opened to such extent that the logocentric projection of world and life, which has relied beforehand on classical drama's firm categories such as fabula, dialogue, conflict, etc., is completely lost.

Now, we are speaking of performative dramaturgy which is manifested in the expressivity of bodies and voices, in the tense moments of movement, in the very co-presence of the participants in theatrical action and its spectators, etc. When summarizing the new types of dramaturgy Patrice Pavis cited as examples the devising theater (collaborative theater), the actor's dramaturgy, the dramaturgy of visual images and dance, the spectator's dramaturgy, etc. [**Pavis, 2015**].¹³ In a sense, all of them reinstate the role of the dramaturge in theater but now it is all about dramaturgy of the performance and not about the dramaturgical composition of classical or modern drama.

As all these radical changes are carried out over a relatively short historical period we should realize that today in theatrical practice coexist principles of dramaturgical construction from different temporal strata: classical and modern dramas, auteur director's performances, new performative dramaturgies, experiments on the borders of language and stage...

Whether there is something new, a completely new trend that sneaks behind the hybridity of our age, behind the quotations and parodies of genres and discourses from the past? For in the beginning of 21st century we can see how the dramaturgy begins to realize itself again as a value on its own, however it no longer claims to be the founding substance for its future stage performance. [**Nikolova, 2011**].¹⁴ The new texts for theater could also be thought of as

¹² [**Eco, Umberto. 1997.**]

¹³ [**Pavis, Patrice. 2015.** *Homo Ludens*. 18: 79-86.]

¹⁴ [**Nikolova, Kameliya. 2011.**] Промени в отношението текст - представление в българския театър след 1989. [Промени в отношението текст – представление в Bulgarskiya teatar]. *Homo Ludens*. 15: 115-135.

a continuation of the logic of autonomous development of drama outside the postmodern stage experience. But also as a turn of the already post-dramatic stage to some extant ready dramaturgical forms in literature, cinema, documentary chronicles, etc. Both answers, of course, could find their evidences. But the question is not just where the “gaps” were left – whether in the text for the performance or in the performance for the text. The real question now is to find how these “gaps” hold simultaneously knowledge of the past and anticipation for the future of the theater.

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