

COULD THEATRE CRITICISM BE “POST-DRAMATIC”?

(a deliberately provocative view-point
on the role of definitions)

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In defense of theatre-makers

I fully understand the vast majority of theatre-makers who want to free themselves from critical definitions. The most obvious reason they have is that definitions are generally constricting—they simply “feel tight”. What’s more, definitions can be like uniforms—and how could we expect that a great director, for instance, would settle for being simply, say, “a post-modernist”, when there are so many others labeled in the same way?! Then, definitions—especially when they consist of one or two words—tend to be quite flat, that is, strikingly incongruous with the three-dimensional nature of theatre.

Above all, though, I’m ready to get into the shoes of theatre-makers for one reason which is usually not pointed out. And it’s not pointed out because it doesn’t belong to the sphere of rationality, therefore it’s quite vulnerable. Yet, I believe, it underlies—consciously or subconsciously—theatre-makers’ opposition against definitions. Here it is:

The unsuccessful shows, the middle-of-the-road ones and especially the temporary fashionable and the theatre with a limited-range appeal are more likely to be susceptible to definitions because they could easily be subjected to rational analysis. They, so to speak, remain on the stage and let us look at them and observe them cold-mindedly, as if through a showcase, and judge them with our brain only. Could the really great, first-class theatre be handled the same way too? This mysterious creature that dwells in the territory of the irrational and sneers at every attempt of theory to explain and put order in the realm of beauty and magic!? Of course, not! Because the really great Theatre never remains just on stage. It uses the stage as a springboard, in order to reach out over the lime-lights and kiss the Audience and become one with it and then, when the show is over, it leaves with the Audience into the night. And what this great Theatre—and who would not like to count for being one of its creators?!—want from us, critics, is to catch these moments of happiness and preserve their three-dimensionality on a two-dimensional piece of paper. Which, sure, can not be done merely through definitions.

In other words, since theatre on the whole depends on, and fulfils itself through, the rapport between the stage and the hall, it’s like in love: when things do not work, it’s much easier to be definite about why is that. (No wonder contemporary theory is more interested in that kind of art where harmony doesn’t reign supreme: disharmony propitiates dissection and deconstruction. It’s much easier to analyze disharmony.) Whereas it’s next to impossible to fully define why we do love someone. The mystery of the miracle—both of love and of the theatre—can be described but not pinned down by definitions.

Not only am I by the side of theatre-makers in their resistance to being labeled. I’d even go so far as saying that the fascination of part of critics with theory has gone to such an extreme that it has created a whole phenomenon:

Theory-VS-Theatre

Arthur Miller had a very interesting and quite famous view-point on what academic criticism meant for the development of the theatre in the '60s of the 20th c. Namely: academic criticism took away the breathless quality of criticism, brought to it pretension, and all that backfired to theatre itself. Moreover, “the academic critics, he said, suspected popular theatre while at the same time they wanted to be part of it. It was very ironical. A few of them wanted to be directors, even actors, writers. So critics came to be in competition with the artist for public recognition. On the whole, it was bad for the theatre.”¹⁷

Howard Kissel, the long-time *New York Daily News* critic, is in the same line: “During the '60s, when there was a lot of experimental garbage, he says, the audience was encouraged to see this or that because it would broaden or instruct them... Mainly these plays bored them and they stopped going to the theatre.”¹⁸ Kissel says that “we are still living with the legacy of that criticism”.¹⁹ I'd add that this legacy has been considerably “enriched” over the course of the next decades till nowadays exactly due to the characteristic disdain of academic criticism towards popular theatre and, at the same time, the unconditional backing-up of theatre with a limited-range appeal—all of which has put many people off the theatre on the whole.

The impact of the Theory-VS-Theatre phenomenon is very clearly demonstrated in, and exercised via, education. A good example is Bulgaria. Students studying theatre studies and criticism there are generally taught that writing in a readable, accessible language is not up to the profession of the critic; accessibility is an attribute of the looked-down-upon “plebian” profession of journalism. They are taught all possible kinds of theory about analysis of the performance rather than how to communicate the theatre-experience to the audience. As a result of which many of them end up talking and writing about theatre in a kind of “foreign” language, full of terminology and appropriate only for the few specialized editions. Small wonder then that the daily papers have literally expelled criticism from their pages and that no publication has a theatre critic on staff as a theatre critic only. All that resulting in the fact that theatre is not reviewed on a regular basis as in the rest of the civilized world. (Of course, there are other factors behind this absurd situation too.) Anyway, it undoubtedly has its dire consequences on theatre itself: without criticism theatre is like a person living in a flat without a mirror; about his appearances he can judge only by what his beloved ones tell him; and we all know how the eyes of love could be sometimes blind!

You may say, “At least in Bulgaria you have a solid education for critics whereas in so many other countries, where critics make or break theatre, the problem is exactly the opposite: criticism lacks depth and critics do not possess profound knowledge of the theatre.” And this is true. Yet, even in the US, where that kind of complaints are the loudest, oddly enough, it is again theory and its ubiquity that's partly at the bottom of the problem.

Here's what Michael Fiengold, the first-string critic of *Village Voice*, had to say in that respect, “.. saddest of all are the youngsters who've been poisoned by the universities into thinking art is a theoretical exercise for the intelligentsia. Jonathan Kalb [a younger critic],

¹⁷ “Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?”, Kalina Stefanova-Peteva, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1993

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.*

who's very bright, is to me a classic example of a good theater mind ruined by academia. I just can't see what he writes as having anything to do with the reality of the art; to me it's dead from the outset and so irrelevant. The pedantry in our colleges has spoiled so many young artists and critics in the last few years that I've come to regard theory—any theory—as essentially totalitarian and inimical to art.”²⁰

Not a U Turn

All that said, I'd like to underline that it would never cross my mind to deny that theory has had and has a very positive role too. There are great theoreticians of theatre and their contribution to the development of theatre studies has been immense. Without Stanislavsky, Grotowsky, and Peter Brook, for instance, theatre wouldn't have been the one we know today. And without critics-theoreticians, like Erik Bentley, for instance, our perception of the theatre would have been different—certainly poorer.

However, there's a huge difference between them and the likes, on the one hand, and those who just coin up new and new formulas while dissecting and labeling theatre, and also those who just transmit and paraphrase other people's theories and stop right there. That is the difference between real great theory and its pseudo-scientific substitute which is frequently used as a “screen” behind which there's no talent, neither a distinct own artistic face. This, I dare call it, “fake” theory has nothing to do with originality and creativity but just with memorizing.

The best encapsulation of that type of approach to culture belongs to Antoine St.-Exupery. “There's a pitiable notion of what culture is”, he says, “and this notion is based on memorizing formulas. Every bad student in maths knows all the formulas—more than Descartes and Pascal. Is he able to reach the same spiritual heights?... Life always makes formulas fall apart.”²¹

The same way as there's theory *and* theory—one which is a great point of departure and great equipment for the theatre journey, and another one which is a rather stifling factor, having nothing to do with life—there are also:

Definitions and Definitions

Which is to say that I may align with theatre-makers in their general opposition to definitions but I still think that it's our duty as critics to identify and name the new developments in the life of this oldest and yet ever-changing art—the theatre. (And this is not a U turn either!) The question is how we do that. I believe that if we do it in a, so to speak, “closed language”, understandable and of interest to few people only, we can hardly do any great service to the theatre. Because then we assume a position of an elite, of the “initiated few”, which is at odds with the innate nature of theatre as the most democratic art form.

What is this “other” type of definitions then?

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ “Terre des homes” and “Pilote de guerre” Antoine De Saint-Exupery, Gallimard

“Descriptions are more accurate than definitions,” says Matti Linnavuori²², our Finnish colleague, and I think he zeroes in on the best way we as critics could be helpful to the theatre. Namely: when we manage to define tendencies, shows, artists’ body of work, etc. via descriptions.

Because by employing description we invite life, we use its language and build bridges between what’s on stage and what’s outside of the theatre halls. Which means that we create conditions for communication, not for oppositions—communications between life and theatre. Finally, by employing description we also create images. And without images there’s no memory. Memory, on the other hand, too is part of communication—between the past, the present and the future. And criticism is the memory of theatre. It could become so, though, when it speaks the language of life and defines theatre by describing it. As British critic Irving Wardle very accurately puts it: “If criticism survives at all it will be for the descriptive content.”²³

“This doesn’t mean abandoning argument, continues Wardle. Description only comes to life when it is being used to make a point... When fact and comment coincide, words acquire power. They become thicker than the ink on the page.”²⁴

Here are two brilliant examples of that kind of “descriptive definitions”:

William Hazlitt on actors and acting: “Players are ‘the abstract and brief chronicles of the time’; the motley representatives of human nature. They are the only honest hypocrites. Their life is a voluntary dream; a studied madness. The height of their ambition is to be *beside themselves*. Today kings, tomorrow beggars, it is only when they are themselves that they are nothing. Made up of mimic laughter and tears, passing from the extremes of joy and woe at the prompter’s call, they wear the livery of other men’s fortunes; their very thoughts are not their own. They are, as it were, train-bearers in the pageant of life; and hold a glass up to humanity; frailer than itself. We see ourselves at second-hand in them: they show us all that we are, all that we wish to be, and all that we dread to be. The stage is an epitome, a bettered likeness of the world, with the dull part left out.. What brings the resemblance nearer is that, as *they* imitate us, we, in our turn, imitate them. How many fine gentlemen do we owe to the stage? How many romantic lovers are mere Romeos in masquerade! How many soft bosoms have heaved with Juliet’s sighs! They teach us when to laugh and when to weep, when to love and when to hate, upon principle and with a good grace! Whenever there’s a playhouse, the world will not go on amiss.”²⁵

Kenneth Tynan on *Waiting for Godot*: “[It] frankly jettisons everything by which we recognize theatre. It arrives at the custom-house, as it were, with no luggage, no passport, and nothing to declare; yet it gets through, as might a pilgrim from Marc. It does this, I believe, by appealing to a definition of drama much more fundamental than any in the books. A play, it asserts and proves, is basically a means of spending two hours in the dark without being bored.”²⁶

²² “Arrogance Abroad”, Matti Linnavuori, “National Theatres and the Nationalistic Theatre”, Symposium 2006, Sterijno Pozorje Festival, Serbia

²³ “Theatre Criticism” Irving Wardle, Routledge, 1992

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ “Drama Criticism: Developments since Ibsen”, ed. Arnold P.Hinchliffe, Macmillan, 1979

²⁶ “View of the English Stage”, Kenneth Tynan, Paladin, 1976

Hardly is it disputable, I think, that the above two definitions, and the likes, are not only precise, but they also provoke excitement, they inspire, they ignite the imagination, finally, they manage to communicate with both theatre-makers and the audience what they are saying. There's beauty in them along with precision. There's creativity.

Being all that, they are a brilliant proof that criticism could be an art form in its own right. Because writing about theatre is not only an intellectual endeavor, it's an endeavor of the soul and the spirit as well, as theatre itself. By saying "No trespassing" to emotions, the other type of definitions—the strictly theoretical ones—dry up the knowledge of the theatre; what's more, they detach theatre from life. While descriptive definitions, when at their best, capture the life of the human spirit and communicate it to the audience. And isn't that what great theatre is all about?!

Do New Theatricalities Necessarily Need New Criticism?

Recently I read the following statement: "... new drama requires new critique—we need to break free from the critique that observes and evaluates productions and create a new type of critics—participators, interpreters and organizers, who create the play together with the actors."²⁷ The author, Ana Vujanovic, was writing about a tendency in the contemporary Serbian drama and the reception of its productions. However, what she was saying in a way reminded me of the campaigns demanding that gay drama be covered by gay critics, feminist plays by feminist critics, black theatre by black critics, etc. Having had an extensive professional experience in South Africa, I'm very well aware of how sensitive these issues could be. Yet, I think, that the best answer to these campaigns belongs to none other but an African-American playwright, the late August Wilson:

"...since I'm a black playwright, he said, black critics feel, 'I don't care if he's good or bad, I'm going to give him a good review.' That doesn't serve anyone. You can read in the black newspapers about every black play I've ever seen, 'It's the greatest thing in the world!' That's not going to help the playwright. Someone needs to say, 'You didn't develop your characters. Go back and try again!' Unless you have done that, that playwright will never grow as a playwright, because he thinks he's already where he wants to go...[This] lowers the common denominator!"²⁸

Likewise, what the new theatricalities need in the first place, I think, is honest criticism. Criticism that tells their creators very frankly whether what they have done has substance and is of merit, whether it is relevant to the world we live in, and if it's relevant only to a fraction of the audience, which this fraction is and why the rest of the audience can or can not be expected to get interested. Part of this criticism's honesty, I believe, is to make a distinction between the new—that is, what profoundly enriches theatre and enhances its borders—and the fashionable; and to be bold enough to say when the "new clothes of the emperor" are just an unfulfilled ambition or a mere pretension, and he's simply naked.

I'm afraid, more and more we have the propensity of diluting our critical judgment, of being rather vague in our evaluation of what we see, or of easily congratulating something or

²⁷ "Stageless Drama" Ana Vujanovic, in "Scena", English issue 19

²⁸ "Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?" Kalina Stefanova-Peteva, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000

somebody on being genius, when there's not so much substance behind the façade of that something or somebody.

I think all this is a result of two phenomena. First, the fact that our world is driven largely by the myth of youth and the constant demands of fashion to always be “up to date”, which in the end of the day encourage disposability of everything, human beings and basic codes of humanity including. Second, there's the devastating impact of political correctness on our lives on the whole and particularly on us as critics. (Frankly, having lived my first 27 years before 1989 in Eastern Europe, I still can not believe my eyes when I encounter this phenomenon in any of its expressions—it's like a *deja-vu!*).

The British critic Alastair Macaulay very precisely summarizes this problem of criticism and its relation to society: “I sometimes suspect, he says, that we are moving into the next dark age. Our cultural criteria are getting blurred in all kinds of ways. Classicism, which flourished up to Stravinsky and Balanchine, has become an endangered species. New forms of cultural Stalinism—notably, political correctness—prevail. Our sense of humanity and our sense of rhythm are getting coarse... I think culture's at stake. If you don't stick up for what you think is a part of civilization, barbarism of one form or another will creep in... And when I look at some ironic post-modern productions, I feel the next dark age has already begun.”²⁹

Apart from total honesty and integrity, there's a second thing which the really new theatricalities need from us, critics. And I think, it's not so much that we speak in a new criticism's language, as it's usually implied, but that we master the new languages these new theatricalities talk in and manage to transmit them to the audience in the language of the audience. Because ours is, so to speak, a “translator's job”. Criticism translates the different languages of theatre into the language of life. We have to learn and be fluent in the new languages that theatre invents all the time but our “mother language” is the language of our readers. It's in that language that we have to bring to life the new faces of the theatre and not only make them recognizable and understandable, but also appealing to the audiences.

Theatre has a lot of means of expression and constantly employs more and newer ones. Criticism's only means of expression remains the words. It can never be post-textual—that's for sure. And, I believe, it's not a question of being old or new but of talking via words woven in a talented and artistic way—as opposed to boring and uninspiring—in order for criticism to live up to the Theatre's infinite inventiveness. Does Kenneth Tynan words of the above text sound old? Or Hazlit's—which were written in the beginning of the 19th century? Not to me!

It's that kind of criticism that the creators of the distinct new theatricalities deserve. The likes of the Latvian director Alvis Hermanis, for instance, who managed, without having his actors utter a single word in his show *Long Life*, to create an extraordinary powerful outcry against the tacit “genocide” of old people which has been carried out in several Eastern European countries in the last decade. Or the young Hungarian director Arpad Schilling whose *Black Land*—another piece of very bold political theatre—sounds like an editorial written by a rap singer with a hilarious sense of humor and a not so seemly language, and yet produces in the end an utterly purifying effect. Or the Slovenian Tomi Yanejich, who, with the company of the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad, has recently created an amazing sample of a sensuous epic theatre—a real development of that trademark of Eastern European stages!—

²⁹ “Who Keeps the Score of the London Stages?”, Kalina Stefanova, Harwood Academic Publishers, 2000

theatre that soaks in us, as if we ourselves live it, and yet makes us feel like Gods having the world on our palm and following from up above the unfolding destinies of people. Or a dozen Bulgarian directors and actors who, in the middle of the '90s, created a new symbiosis of drama and puppetry, earlier than it became *the* fashion on Broadway, and managed to change the whole face of Bulgarian theatre. The list can go on and on.

These theatre-makers have risen the bar so high that we, critics, can not live up to it by responding to their works just with one-word or two-word definitions and with critical theories only, if we do want to make their wonderful new worlds part of the life of as many people as possible.

In the beginning of the 20th c. George J. Nathan, the American arch-critic wrote: "Theatre criticism is an attempt to formulate the rules of behavior of this beloved, capricious, charming vagabond—the drama. Because the drama is an art form with a feather on its hat and with an ironic smile on its face; an art form that strolls unceremoniously along forbidden lawns and alleys, so that it could enter the hearts of those of us—children of the world—who'll never grow up."³⁰

If we manage to define the new faces of the nowadays theatre in that kind of an extraordinary artistic prose—call it old-fashioned if you will—only then, I believe, we will be of really indispensable service to, and on a par with, the Theatre, our love.

³⁰ "The Critic and the Drama", George J. Nathan, 1922