

FOREIGN INFLUENCES VERSUS LOCAL PRACTICES:  
POSTDRAMATIC TENDENCIES OF CONTEMPORARY  
LITHUANIAN THEATRE



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Over the last twenty years Lithuanian theatre has experienced particularly dynamic transformations that have been brought about not only by political and social changes but also by the radically altered relationships with foreign theatre. It started to change fundamentally at the beginning of the 1990s when theatre artists were trying new ways of expression in order to reflect on the situation, function and place of theatre in the transforming socio-cultural context: they were reviewing the traditional values of their art, turning back towards the legacy of historic avant-garde and post-war neo-avant-garde theatre, which was not practiced during the Soviet period, and welcomed the most recent experiences of contemporary Western theatre practice. When the Iron Curtain was lifted and intercultural exchanges became more active, the reality of Lithuanian theatre changed considerably. Lithuanian theatre, which had been out of touch with international theatre processes for several decades, has become an active participant of contemporary international theatre practices. These include tours of Lithuanian theatre troupes abroad, co-productions of our theatre artists with theatres from other countries, and introducing the most interesting contemporary theatre troupes and artists to our audience during festivals and artistic actions taking place in Lithuania. Such situation encourages perceiving contemporary Lithuanian theatre as an integral part of contemporary Western theatre practice which requires introduction of the interpretative strategies suggested by postdramatic theatre theory. The characteristic features of postdramatic theatre as well as some postdramatic aspects of contemporary Lithuanian theatre have been discussed in several articles written by Lithuanian theatre scholars Nomeda Šatkauskienė<sup>1</sup>, Rasa Vasinauskaitė<sup>2</sup>, Jurgita Staniškytė<sup>3</sup>, and

<sup>1</sup> Šatkauskienė N. Teksto problema teatre. *Teatroliginiai eskizai*. T. 1. Kaunas, VDU leidykla, 2000, p. 141–175; Šatkauskienė N. Postdramatiskais mūsdieniu lietuvių teatru: dramos interpretacija, refleksija un noliegums. *Postdramatiskais teatris: mits vai realitate*. Riga, Latvijas Universitate, literaturas, folkloras un maksklas instituts. 2008, p. 84–90.

<sup>2</sup> Vasinauskaitė R. Kalbos problema šiuolaikiniame teatre. Referento kazusas. *Menotyra*, 2003, No. 4, p. 35–39.

<sup>3</sup> Staniškytė J. Postdramatiska rašanas, definešana un interpretacija Lietuvas gadījumus. *Postdramatiskais teatris: mits vai realitate*. Riga, Latvijas Universitate, literaturas, folkloras un maksklas instituts. 2008, p. 27–34.

Rūta Mažeikienė<sup>4</sup>. However, contemporary Lithuanian theatre practice and the emerging new theatrical language still lack articulation within the framework of postdramatic theatre theory and practice. While analyzing and comparing the performances created by different Lithuanian theatre directors, this article aims to discuss the relationship between contemporary Lithuanian and foreign theatre practice and to delineate the postdramatic tendencies of contemporary Lithuanian theatre.

#### TOWARDS THE POSTDRAMATIC *MISE EN SCÈNE*

The generation of theatre artists (directors, actors, playwrights, stage designers and composers) that debuted in the 1990s is particularly exceptional for their experiments in artistic language: they have demonstrated a non-traditional approach to diverse components of theatrical art, new ways of forming theatrical action and image, and have introduced different forms of theatrical communication. Such performances as those of S. Parulskis' *P.S. File O.K.* (The Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, 1997) and B.-M. Koltès' *Roberto Zucco* (The Lithuanian National Drama Theatre, 1998) directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, B.-M. Koltès' *Night Just Before Forests* (The State Youth Theatre of Lithuania, 1998) and A. Ostermaier's *The Making of B.-Movie* (The State Youth Theatre of Lithuania, 1999) directed by Ignas Jonynas, S. Kane's *Crave* (Oskaras Koršunovas Theatre, 2002) directed by Povilas Laurinkus or J.-L. Lagarce's *Distant Land* (Kaunas State Drama Theatre, 2000) and T. Dorst's *Devastated Land* (Kaunas State Drama Theatre, 2004) directed by Gintaras Varnas show that a new way of artistic communication has been brought to Lithuanian theatre. It aimed at reducing the exceptional status of dramatic text among other components of a performance by using a non-linear development of action, experimenting with the organization of theatrical space and time and encouraging new forms of acting. Works of the aforementioned directors reveal that artists of the younger generation feel the pulse of contemporary art very well and are looking for a new theatrical language that would correspond to the reality of present life. In general, the productions of younger artists confront with the style of the Russian psychological-realistic theatre that had influenced Lithuanian theatre for a long time, they also question the tradition of the poetical metaphorical theatre cherished by older theatre artists and clearly respond to practices of contemporary Western theatre. In the aforementioned productions one can recognize the general tendency of *postdramatic* (*postdramatique*,

<sup>4</sup> Mažeikienė R. Postdraminis būvis: dar kartą šiuolaikinės teatro teorijos klausimu. *Kultūros barai*, 2007, No. 2, p. 24–26; Mažeikienė R. Postdraminio teatro linkme. *Lietuvos scena*, 2006, No. 2, p. 56–58; Mažeikienė R. Postdraminio teatro vaidybos principai ir jų sklaida šiuolaikiniame Lietuvos dramos teatre. *Teatologijos eskizai*. T. 2. Kaunas, 2002, p. 149–185.

*postdramatisches*, H.-T. Lehmann)<sup>5</sup> theatre which proves that dramatic text is no longer the omnipotent ruler structuring and determining the way the other components of a performance should be used. While leaving the logocentric tradition, Lithuanian directors disrupt the hierarchical structure of theatrical action and form a theatrical discourse where the traditional categories of order, cause and purpose are no longer valid.

The new theatrical poetics no longer believes in the classical ideals of harmony and synthesis, refuses to maintain the logical structure of a performance and connections between separate elements based on the principle of subordination. It is dominated by the technique of parataxis, collage and montage, unstable and paradoxical combinations of different components of theatrical action. The image of the stable and coherent whole characteristic of traditional performances is replaced by multiple actional structures that demonstrate the changing, unstable relationships between different elements of a performance. Such a seemingly chaotic structure of theatrical action creates the image of a decomposed and fragmented world and draws blurred outlines of the transformed reality. On the other hand, the non-hierarchical relationships between diverse elements of the performance permit us to reveal unique qualities of various components of the director's language, and the general theatrical situation depends on how the director uses the most important components of theatre: *text*, *space* and *time* and *the participants of theatrical action*, i. e. actors and scenic objects.

#### THE USAGE OF THE TEXT

An analysis of the aforementioned productions allows discerning a couple of rather remarkable tendencies in the usage of text: in the first case (for instance, *Roberto Zucco* directed by Koršunovas or *Night Just Before Forests* by Jonynas), the dramatic text is reduced in respect of other components of the performance; in the other case (*Devastated Land* directed by Varnas or *Crave* by Laurinkus and Koršunovas), the dramatic text is given a comparatively larger space. However, in both cases the text does not direct the performance, but is one of components in the multifaceted theatrical discourse. These quite different strategies in using text reflect similar tendencies in Western theatre of the last few decades. From today's perspective it becomes clear that the first wave of postdramatic theatre – *Visual Theatre*, *Theatre of Images*, and *Theatre of Mixed-Means*<sup>6</sup> – has minimized radically the use of ver-

<sup>5</sup> Lehmann H.-T. 2002. *Le Théâtre postdramatique*. Paris: L'Arche.

<sup>6</sup> Marranca B. 1984. *The Theatre of Images: An Introduction*. In B. Marranca, *Theatre writings* (pp. 77–82). New York: PAJ Publications; Kirby, M. 1974. *The New Theatre: Performance Documentation*. New York: New York University Press; Kostelanetz, R. 1970. *The Theatre of Mixed Means: An Introduction to Happenings, Kinetic Environments and other Mixed-Means Performances*. London: Pitman Publishing.

bal text and developed *a visual kind of dramaturgy*<sup>7</sup>. This aesthetical tendency that dominated Western theatre in the 1970s – 1980s still influences contemporary theatre, and certain elements of the poetics of visual theatre can be also recognized in the productions of Lithuanian drama theatres during the last decade. Meanwhile, the second tendency of postdramatic theatre, which has emerged in the 1990s, shows that the dramatic text is, in a way, returning to the scenic practice. And although theatre theorists maintain that the dramatic text has never been “turned out” or “withdrawn” from the field of theatrical expression<sup>8</sup>, directors have demonstrated recently an increased interest in dramatic plays. However, in order to estimate this tendency of comparative return to drama one should take into account several essential changes concerning texts and their use. We should acknowledge that the turn towards the dramatic text is closely related to the emergence of the new drama<sup>9</sup>. Since contemporary dramaturgy transgresses the traditional dramatic conventions, dramatic texts open various possibilities of *mise en scène*. If traditional drama claims, in a way, to control the *mise en scène* (or, at least, powerfully suggests a possible version of theatrical production), then playwrights of the new generation not only reject the authoritarian rules of genres but also take into account the changed status of the dramatic text in a performance. “Everything is components in theatre: set design, music, movement, dramaturgy and actors,”<sup>10</sup> states one of the most interesting contemporary Lithuanian playwrights Sigitas Parulskis. While saying that he writes not dramas, but only “texts for theatre,” this author admits that text is considered to be not the most important element in contemporary theatre, but only one of the components of the scenic discourse. Thus, in contemporary theatre, we encounter not only a *new* dramatic poetics but also *different* ways of using text.

#### THE ORGANIZATION OF THEATRICAL SPACE AND TIME

While abandoning the conventions of traditional theatre, directors pay comparatively greater attention not to words, but to sounds and images; that is, the semantic aspect of theatrical action often becomes less significant than the acoustic and visual one. Considering that verbal signs are gradually perceived in *time* (the way of a consistent,

<sup>7</sup> Arntzen K. O. 1990. A Visual Kind of Dramaturgy: Project Theatre in Scandinavia. In C. Schumacher & D. Fogg (Eds), *Small is Beautiful: Small Countries Theatre Conference* (p. 45). Glasgow: Theatre Studies Publications.

<sup>8</sup> Lehmann H. -T. 2002. *Le Théâtre postdramatique*. Paris: L'Arche, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> I have to notice that all the aforementioned productions by Lithuanian directors have been also based on contemporary dramaturgy.

<sup>10</sup> Vasinauskaitė R. 2002. Pjaunu šaka, ant kurios sėdžiu: pokalbis su S. Parulskiu. *7 meno dienos*, 1 March, p. 1, 6.

chronological experience), and visual as well as acoustic codes are perceived in *space* (a rather more synchronic and simultaneous perception), naturally, the issue of theatrical space becomes very important to contemporary theatre. On the other hand, the problem of mastering space is important not only to the theatrical practice of the last decades. It is an old truth that by choosing one or another kind of space, controlling and forming it during the theatrical action, the creators of a performance manipulate the process of the audience's perception. Since artists of contemporary theatre have been looking intensively for new possibilities and forms of theatrical communication, they focus in particular on the issues of the scenic space: they reconsider the possibilities of using the traditional stage (*scena all'italiana*) and look for non-traditional, alternative architectural spaces (*site-specific*) that help not only to dismantle the traditional 'scene-box' effect, but also to create new relationships between the stage and the audience.

Traditional logocentric theatre privileges average spaces, more comfortably controlled and easy to take in for the audience because they help to create a contingent image of the fictional world and an integral structure of theatrical action<sup>11</sup>. Thus, theatre artists often avoid such spaces that could destroy the system of theatrical representation: for instance, a large-scale heterogeneous space divides the attention of the audience and does not allow focusing on the continuous structure of the action. On the contrary, a chamber space puts the audience too close to the actors; it allows perceiving the scenic action almost physically and often destroys the illusion of the scenic, i. e. *other*, reality. Meanwhile, the turn of contemporary theatre from the representation of reality towards the creation of *possible worlds* (E. Fischer-Lichte<sup>12</sup>) encourages using spaces that provoke new ways of theatrical communication. Thus, in contemporary Lithuanian theatre as well, we increasingly encounter enlarged *de-centered* spaces or small *centripetal* places of theatrical action. For example, in the performance *Devastated Land* stage director Varnas has created a simultaneous, divided into separate planes and constantly changing theatrical landscape that splits the audience's gaze and complicates the process of perceiving the performance. Or, on the contrary, in the performance *Distant Land* the same director uses a chamber space of non-traditional shape where the distance between the actors and the audience is diminished so much that it destroys the illusion of a fictive reality and creates physical proximity between the actors and the audience as well as the effect of a shared (common) experience.

The approach to the organization of theatrical time in contemporary theatre changes in a similar way. Again, it may be emphasized that whereas traditional theatre operates most often on the level of fictive time, i.e. it realizes the logic of the flow

<sup>11</sup> Lehmann, H.-T. 2002. *Le Théâtre postdramatique*. Paris: L'Arche, p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer-Lichte E. *Avant-garde and Postmodernism: Theatre between Cultural Crisis and Cultural Change* // Fischer-Lichte E. *The Show and the Gaze of Theatre: A European Perspective*. Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1997, p. 262.

of time suggested by the dramatic text, the creators of *postdramatic* theatre organize the experience of time in varied ways: they experiment with the perception of real time, provoke alternative strategies to perceive time and suggest the forms of divided, slowed or accelerated time. The temporal dimension of theatrical action is particularly closely related to the principles of using *text* and *space* discussed before. The aforementioned examples show that if the importance of the dramatic text is reduced and the forms of the visual as well as acoustic language dominate, the model of *decentered* space and various techniques *deforming* the theatrical time are used (time loses its usual characteristic of continuity; slowing or accelerating techniques are employed; repetitions are emphasized or the effect of fragmented time is created). Meanwhile, if the dramatic text preserves relatively stronger positions in productions, and theatrical action is structured as an act of narration, the *centripetal* chamber space is used and the *continuity* of time is emphasized (then the development of the story being told in time becomes important, as well as its rhythm, duration, coincidence or discrepancy with the real flow of time).

#### PARTICIPANTS OF THEATRICAL ACTION

Breaking from traditional dramatic conventions the creators of contemporary theatre expand the notion of theatrical action and change their approach to the actor as the most important participant of a performance. As Hans-Thies Lehmann has remarked, contemporary theatre directors increasingly refuse coherent action (a continuous narrative), collision and conflict, but emphasize the change of a certain 'state of mind', 'situation', moment or image<sup>13</sup>. Thus, the traditional conception of dramatic action is replaced by the *scenic dynamics* formed not only through the conversations or actions of actors / characters, but also by using all means of theatrical expression. In such performances as *P.S. File O.K.* and *Roberto Zucco* by Koršunovas or *Night Just Before Forests* by Jonynas, we can clearly see how a traditional action is being replaced by intensive theatrical dynamics: the movement of situations, states of mind, images, acoustic and visual elements. In these productions there are many episodes when the actors *do nothing* if considered from the point of view of the old conception of theatrical action (for instance, they sit in a car, smoke and listen to music for several minutes), but other means of theatrical expression (music, props, lighting) form and support the dynamics of the scenic action. Thus, directors create such a structure of performance where both the characters played by actors and the multiple links of different elements of production are equally important.

<sup>13</sup> Lehmann H.-T. *Le Théâtre postdramatique*, p. 104.

While treating all components of the performance on equal terms, directors question the status of the actor as the most important agent. Although in some performances (for instance, *Distant Land* or *Devastated Land* directed by Varnas) the actor enjoys a far greater significance than other elements of the production, differently from traditional theatre roles are as if installed into the multifaceted structure of the performance. On the other hand, in such performances as *Night Just Before Forests* directed by Jonynas the actor's role is reduced: he or she has not so much to create a separate character than to perform various plastic, acoustic, visual tasks. Differently from traditional productions of drama theatre where the actor is the centre, the axis, the main agent of theatrical action, here he or she is treated as a part of the production, a fragment, a detail. Since there is neither a coherent narrative nor specific characters, the relationships between characters are not as important as the relationships between the actor's body and other scenic objects.

Therefore, the directors of contemporary Lithuanian theatre experiment with the structure of parataxis where various components are arranged next to each other without creating clear relationships of subordination or dependence. Theatre theorists suggest treating and evaluating such a directing strategy as an *installation*<sup>14</sup>: the director guides, but does not control, coordinates, but does not unify, arranges, but does not synthesize separate components of the performance. He or she simply brings different scenic practices into one place, puts separate elements one next to each other and creates a complex spatial work of art: an intertextual field where none of the elements perform the role of the centre of attraction. Thus, the performances of contemporary theatre not only provoke varied reactions of the audience, but also remain open to manifold interpretations.

To sum it up, contemporary Lithuanian theatre is largely affected by the general tendencies of contemporary Western theatre. While looking for a new theatrical language and new ways of artistic communication, Lithuanian theatre directors not only stage the most recent contemporary dramaturgy, but also experiment with directing strategies of *postdramatic* theatre discussed here. In this sense, works of artists from our country have obvious similarities with the creative projects by directors of a similar generation from other European countries (for instance, Grzegorz Jarzyna, Krzysztof Warlikowski or Thomas Ostermeier). Thus their performances can be analyzed and perceived as an integral part of a global postdramatic field.

<sup>14</sup> Pavis P. *L'analyse des spectacles: théâtre, mime, danse- théâtre, cinéma*. Paris, Nathan, 1996, p. 193.

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IŠORINĖS ĮTAKOS / VIETINĖS PRAKTIKOS: POSTDRAMINĖS ŠIUOLAIKINIO LIETUVOS  
TEATRO TENDENCIJOS

## Santrauka

Per pastaruosius penkiolika metų Lietuvos teatras patyrė itin dinamiškus pokyčius, kuriuos lėmė ne vien politinės ir socialinės permainos, bet ir iš esmės pasikeitęs santykis su užsienio teatru. Esminiai poslinkiai prasidėjo XX amžiaus paskutinio dešimtmečio pradžioje, kai, apmąstydami teatro situaciją, funkciją bei vietą kintančiame sociokultūriniame kontekste, teatro menininkai išmėgino naujus meninės raiškos būdus: peržiūrėjo tradicinius kūrybos principus, atsigręžė į sovietiniu laikotarpiu neišnaudotą XX amžiaus pradžios modernistinio teatro ir pokario neoavangardo palikimą, įsileido naujausią pastarųjų dešimtmečių Vakarų teatro patirtį. Atsidarius geležinei uždangai ir suaktyvėjus tarpkultūriniam mainams, akivaizdžiai pakito ir Lietuvos teatro realybė. Keletą dešimtmečių egzistavęs izoliacijoje nuo pasaulinių teatro procesų, dabartinis Lietuvos teatras ne tik atsiveria užsienio teatro patirčiai, bet ir pats tampa aktyviu šiuolaikinio teatro praktikos dalyviu: Lietuvos teatrų trupės gastroliuoja užsienyje, mūsų teatro menininkai realizuoja bendrus projektus su kitų šalių teatrais, Lietuvos festivalių ir meninių akcijų metu žiūrovams pristatomi ryškiausių dabartinių teatro trupių bei įdomiausių teatro menininkų kūrybiniai projektai. Tokie šiuolaikinio teatro mainai daugiausia lemia pliuralų ir dinamišką šiandienos Lietuvos teatro pobūdį.

Naujos meninės kalbos paieškomis ypač išsiskiria XX amžiaus paskutiniame dešimtmetyje debiutavusios teatro menininkų kartos kūryba, atskleidžianti netradicinį požiūrį į atskirus teatro meno komponentus, teatrinio veiksmo bei vaizdo formavimo būdus ir skatinanti kitokias teatrinės komunikacijos formas. Analizuojant šios kartos režisierių Oskaro Koršunovo, Gintaro Varno, Igno Jonyno, Povilo Laurinkaus spektaklius šiame tekste ne tik diskutuojama apie ryšį tarp Lietuvos ir užsienio teatro praktikos, bet ir nužymimos postdraminės šiuolaikinio Lietuvos teatro tendencijos.