

• Rūta Mažeikienė

## THE OPEN ROLE: SOME REMARKS ON CONTEMPORARY ACTING

The variety of acting methods and means of expression characteristic to contemporary theatre reveals the dynamic change of traditional ways of acting and the appearance of new acting forms. Rapid vigorous transformations in contemporary acting encourage us to look into acting practice more attentively, to reconsider the traditional conception of acting and the conventional notion of the role.

Generally, we understand acting as the representation of the *other*: as the portrayal of the dramatic character or the real person, as playing an animate or inanimate theatrical object. The most usual and simple definition of the *actor's art* states that acting is a process of creating an image of a fictional character: "Acting is the work of an actor who tells the story by portraying a character written in a play".<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the term *role* in performing arts usually means "an actor's interpretation of a dramatic character" and suggests that "when the actors assume roles in a drama, they are acting "as if" they are someone else".<sup>2</sup> However, contemporary theatre practice stimulates re-evaluation of such an understanding of *acting* and *role* since there are numerous performances in which the actor is not representing the *other*; instead he/she creates the abstract score of the role or performs without pretending to be someone else. Moreover, certain roles seem to be extremely confusing and ambiguous, for

instance, when the actor is not only portraying a character but also performing different actions which are unrelated to the dramatic person or to the narrative structure of the performance. Such examples of acting invite the spectator to interpret the actor's work freely, therefore, following Umberto Eco, they can be perceived as *open works*, i.e. the works which strongly appeal to the creative reception and interpretation of the individual spectator.

Oftentimes theatre critics — when analysing complicated, open-ended and ambiguous examples of contemporary theatre practice — characterise a particular role (performance and/or drama piece) as an *open work*. However, this notion is not used as a broader characterisation describing/unfolding the specific poetics of the role. Therefore, I suggest that the notion of the *open work* can be particularly effective in explaining certain examples of contemporary acting and I propose to discuss the basic features of the *open role* in this article. The new concept of the role is based upon Umberto Eco's theory of the *open work* and supplemented with Roland Barthes' post-structural concept of the *work-as-text*.

Following Umberto Eco, it is important to specify that the openness of a certain artwork should be regarded as an intentional order proposed by the author. Thus, the notion of the *open role* may be applied only to such examples of acting which are

consciously constructed as *open works*, i.e. roles in which openness is intended and chosen as a specific artistic strategy; or, paraphrasing Eco, such roles which appeal to the active interpretation of the individual perceiver and which “are brought to their conclusion” by the spectator “at the same time as he experiences them on an aesthetic plane”.<sup>3</sup>

Referring to the conceptions of the *open work* and the *work-as-text*, one can state that the basic distinctive feature of the *open role* is that it does not have such a complete, closed and coherent form as the traditional one. Generally speaking the traditional role is a complete final *product* which has a clear, logical and definite structure, while the *open role* is a *work in process* (or a *work in movement*) which has an open-ended, disordered structure and calls for a creative collaboration by the perceiver. In other words, the spectator perceives the traditional role as a relatively complete organic whole (usually as a concrete theatrical character) whereas he/she realises the *open role* as a *field of possibilities* (using Eco’s term): the *open role* is crystallising/forming during the very act of the perceiving and invites the spectator to organise, structure the actor’s work mentally. If the traditional role usually directs the spectator’s mind towards a certain understanding of the theatrical character, the *open role* invites the perceiver to interpret it individually and allows for a great number of possible readings of it. Entering into this *field of possibilities*, the spectator can freely take his/her own point of view, choose his/her own modes of approach, create his/her own connections between the actor’s part and the other elements of the performance. So the spectator can independently perform one of several possible interpretations of the role. In Barthes’ words, the *open role* “is experienced only in an activity of production”.<sup>4</sup>

While coherency, causality, and wholeness are the basic characteristics of the conventional role, the *open role* can be distinguished by its discontinuity, indeterminacy, multiplicity and highly ambiguous character. Traditionally, the actor is representing a psychologically rounded character which has a definite function in the narrative structure of the performance. Consequently, the actor is greatly concerned about the psychological validity and continuity of the role he/she is playing and he/she is trying to integrate narrowly the different episodes of the role in order to create a plausible theatrical character. But the *open role* usually presents such an image of the dramatic character which can be described as fragmented, unstable, sketchily, and possessing weak psychological characterisations. Moreover, while playing the *open role* the actor can represent a character which undergoes radical transformations or

he/she can integrate several characters into one role, or, conversely, he/she can portray a character which is performed by different actors at the same time. That is why the *open role* is usually functioning in the *mise-en-scene* (in the performance text) not as a separate element of the narrative, but as a multifunctional component. During the particular episodes of the performance the actor can represent some dramatic person, but during the rest time of the production he/she can perform specific actions which are not related to the represented character. Thus, the actor’s movement, gesture, voice, mimicry, and posture have no representational function within the narrative and, according to Phillip B. Sarrilli; they “stand on their own”.<sup>5</sup> As a result, acting becomes multifunctional performing which combines representation of dramatic character as well as serving as a particular element of the performance text: visual component, moving figure, coloured spot, audible item, and so forth. As Philip B. Sarrilli summarises:

“What the actor or performer does on stage at the start of the twenty-first century ranges from a psychologically realist character to the sequential playing of multiple roles or personae to the enactment of tasks or entry into image without any character implications”.<sup>6</sup>

Clearly this kind of performing reveals contradictions and paradoxes of the actor’s part, underlines changes and fractures in the role’s score, allows the actor to integrate various methods of acting and different means of expression in a single role. The actor is permitted and even encouraged to combine such diverse acting modes as a psychological approach to creating a character and non-mimetic/non-representational means of expression, certain elements of physical theatre and highly codified acting or even performing in a not-acting manner. The *open role* induces the actor to merge/unify/join such episodes of the role which are stylistically different, encourages the actor to think neither about the psychological plausibility of the character he/she is representing nor about the structural unity of the score of the role. It forces the actor to step over the limits of traditional dramatic acting, make use of the very different artistic practices (for example, music, dance, circus, and pantomime, visual or martial arts). The *open work* or, as Barthes signals, the *work-as-text* “tries to place itself very exactly *behind* the limit of the *doxa*”; it is always *paradoxical* and *plural*, providing ample possibilities for its performing, understanding and interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

Although, analysing concrete examples of contemporary acting it is possible to distinguish such features of the *open role* as indeterminacy of style

and genre, plurality of form and content, intertextuality and contextual relationship with other elements of the performance, going back to the concepts of the *open work* and the *work-as-text* one can claim that the crucial feature of the *open role* is its — ambiguity. The traditional role (or other examples of so called *closed work*) usually suggests relatively univocal meaning or interpretation as it orients the spectator's mind in the direction which is more or less provided by the author. On the contrary, the *open role* offers itself as a plural, open-ended work which, as Barthes notes, protects itself "from the consumption," asks the spectator for "a practical collaboration," invites the perceiver to create possible meanings of it.<sup>8</sup> The open role is heterogeneous, contradictory, and provocative: "in this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one."<sup>9</sup>

Thereby, the *open role* stimulates the spectator to reconsider traditional understanding of acting, rethink usual modes of evaluation of the actor's art and open himself/herself to the creative proc-

ess of interpretation. The examples of the open work provoke a new kind of theatrical communication that invites a pleasant interpretational practice (not the traditionally passive, inert process of observation/consumption). The perceiver is no longer only a spectator but rather a creative participant of the performance; as not only the actor but also the spectator becomes involved in the process of role construction. In other words the heterogeneous, de-centered, and fragmented nature of the *open role* induces the spectator to become an active co-author of the role. As Barthes notes, "the more plural the text, the less it is written before I read it."<sup>10</sup>

Thus when analysing contemporary acting it is important to recognise that the role can be consciously constructed as a plural and open text the reading of which depends upon both the relationship with other elements of the performance and the individual interpretation of the spectator. Therefore the conception of the *open role* can be useful as it inspires us to consider the acting as a multifaceted and multifunctional performing which combines the representation of a dramatic character, creation of the external score of the role as well as diverse physical expression in a non-acting manner.

#### REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn>. (Accessed September 24, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Eco U. "The Poetics of the Open Work". *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, p. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Barthes R. "From Work to Text". *Art in Theory 1900 – 1990*, ed. by Ch. Harrison, P. Wood. Oxford, Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993, p. 942.

<sup>5</sup> Sarrilli Ph. B. "Introduction. Theory and the Practice of Acting". *Acting (Re)Considered. Theories and Prac-*

*tices*, ed. by Phillip B. Sarrilli. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Sarrilli Ph. B. "Traditional Western Acting". *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Theatre and Performance*, ed. by Denis Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> Barthes, *ibid.*, p. 942.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 945.

<sup>9</sup> Barthes R. *S/Z*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Rūta Mažeikienė

### ATVIRAS VAIDMUO: PASTABOS APIE ŠIUOLAIKINĘ VAIDYBĄ

#### S a n t r a u k a

Šiuolaikinio teatro aktorių kūrybai būdinga vaidmens kūrimo metodų ir raiškos priemonių įvairovė atskleidžia dinamišką tradicinių vaidybos principų kaitą ir naujų aktorinės raiškos būdų įsiveržimą. Sparčiai kintantis aktorius menas skatina atidžiau pažvelgti į vaidybos praktiką, peržiūrėti tai, kas laikytina aktorius kūryba, ieškoti naujų jos interpretavimo perspektyvų.

Tradiciskai aktorius laikomas teatro menininku, kuris teatrinio veiksmo metu reprezentuoja *kitą*: fiktyvų dramos personažą arba realų asmenį, gyvą arba negyvą sceninį objektą. Tačiau šiuolaikinio teatro

praktika kvestionuoja tokią aktoriaus kūrybos definiciją. Analizuojant kai kuriuos vaidmenis, sudėtinga apibrėžti, kokia yra aktoriaus užduotis: ar jis turi sukurti fiktyvaus personažo paveikslą, ar kreiptis į žiūrovus savo vardu, ar atlikti konkrečias plastines / vizualines užduotis, ar tuo pat metu daryti ir viena, ir kita. Galima teigti, kad šiuolaikiniame teatre išryškėja tradicinės vaidmens sampratos krizė: jei anksčiau manyta, kad aktoriaus vaidmuo yra *kito* (dažniausiai dramos personažo) reprezentacija, tai šiuolaikinio teatro praktika komplikuoja tokią vaidmens apibrėžtį. Tačiau, nors teatro teoretikai ir pripažįsta, kad vaidybos teorijai reikia naujų impulsų ir naujos terminologijos, galinčios adekvačiai įvertinti šiuolaikinę aktoriaus kūrybos praktiką, tokių mėginimų nėra gausu. Atskirose studijose teatrologai įvardija esmines šiuolaikinio teatro vaidybos tendencijas, tačiau nesiūlo naujos vaidmens definicijos, atitinkančios pastarųjų dešimtmečių aktoriaus kūrybos pokyčius.

Vertindami komplikuoatą, neapibrėžtą ir nevienareikšmį šiuolaikinio teatro reiškinių pobūdį, teatro teoretikai neretai atskirą vaidmenį, dramą ar spektaklį apibūdina kaip *atvirą* kūrinį, tačiau šis apibūdinimas netaikomas kaip platesnė, vaidmens poetiką nusakanti kategorija. Šiame tekste remiantis *atviro* kūrinio (U. Eco) ir meno kūrinio kaip *teksto* (R. Barthes) koncepcijomis bei šiuolaikine vaidybos praktika, formuluojama teorinė *atviro vaidmens* samprata. Tokia aktoriaus vaidmens traktuotė gali tapti metodologiniu aktoriaus kūrybos tyrimų pagrindu ir išplėsti tradicinės vaidybos bei vaidmens sampratos ribas. Tekste skiriami šie *atviro vaidmens* bruožai: žanrinis ir stilistinis neapibrėžtumas, formos ir turinio pliuralumas, intertekstualumas, kontekstualus santykis su kitais spektaklio komponentais, atvirumas įvairioms suvokėjo interpretacijoms. *Atviro vaidmens* samprata skatina vaidybą laikyti įvairiapuse, daugiafunkcine aktoriaus veikla, kuri apima ir fiktyvaus personažo kūrimą, ir išorinės vaidmens struktūros atlikimą, ir nevaidybinio pobūdžio aktoriaus kūno ir balso raišką.

**PAGRINDINĖS SĄVOKOS:** *šiuolaikinis teatras, atviras kūrinys, vaidyba, aktorius, atviras vaidmuo.*

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