

WHO WRITES THEATRE?

A change in the role of the playwright in the postdramatic theatrical era

Theses:

Over the last twenty years the playwright's place and role in the process of creating a theatrical performance has radically changed. In the postdramatic theatrical era text is merely one of the theatrical means, important, but not favoured, equal in rank with all the other elements. The several thousand years old tradition which regards the performance as the stage representation of the dramatic text and the direction as the coordinator of this process has now been questioned.

In my paper I am attempting to redefine the role of the playwright of the postdramatic era in the process of creating the text and the performance itself. I am trying to examine and define the difference between the drama, which is a literary text, and the dramatic text, which is the raw material of events on stage. I am using my own creative experience as a starting point. Some of the plays listed as reference and analysed here can be found in my latest drama collection, „Cyber Cyrano” that I attached to my paper as creative work.

In the postdramatic era – „after the drama” or „after the plot” – when linear storytelling is replaced by new narratives, it is getting more and more difficult to define the notion of the author. Who writes theatre? Who is the author of that – sometimes not even dramatic or theatrical – series of events on stage in which the „order of fabula” has almost completely disintegrated, and although it uses texts in the form of monologues and/or dialogues, they come from various sources: original or verbatim texts, actors' improvisations jotted down or texts taken from other works – literary quotations or even specialized texts.

In my essay I analyse different ways of creating stage texts that I have all tried, I observe the possible connection of different creative branches, the cooperation of the playwright (or rather the stage-writer) – who has an active role in creating the performance – with the director, the dramaturg or – if the process is based on improvisation – with the actors themselves.

In the last part of my work I am attempting to methodize my writing practice, the way I create the script of the performance interacting with the company, in parallel with staging. This practice – that I named Reactive Writing Method – is described here in a comprehensible way, showing all the working phases so that it could be applied by others as well.

The method:

In the course of Reactive Writing the writer works with a partner or partners, and this collective work consists of a rhythmical series of reactions given to each other's ideas. It is

essential that it should be the writer who stands at the beginning and the end of the creative process, taking the initiative with an idea and determining the final form of the play. However, between the opening and closing gestures the writer has to let go of the material several times so that it could be formed by the ideas, desires, passions of the partners – sometimes questioning, sometimes enriching the original thought. The writer offers a scene-idea and the actors start working on it. When they are ready to improvise (after sixty-ninety minutes on average) they show their version, which we record every time. Then the writer and the director reflect on the scene they have just seen, and after a short discussion and collective thinking the actors play the scene again – this version is also recorded.

This process – a series of actions and reactions – is repeated until the writer feels he/she has been given enough inspiration. The writer withdraws, makes notes of the improvisations and based on these notes he/she creates a well-shaped, fixed text-variation. Whether this text contains a lot of original, word for word dialogues from the improvisations or not is varying: sometimes it is a concentrated record of the scene, sometimes all it has is just a few replications. To make decisions about this is one of the writer's important tasks: concentration and selection.

The steps of Reactive Writing Method:

1. Making a preliminary plan:
 - What do we want to talk about? (premise)
 - Determining the basic conflict
2. Forming the palette of characters
3. Improvisations to situations supplied by the writer
4. The writer's work with the improvisations: selection, concentration, rewriting
5. The actors improvise (react) again to the newly-written scene, then the writer takes it again and rewrites it (reacts) based on what he/she has seen. This is repeated as many times as necessary.
6. From the selected scenes – according to the preliminary plan, though sometimes departing from it – the writer constructs the play.

A great advantage of the method is that the writer is not forced to work merely from his/her own experience, vocabulary, rhythm of thought and education, while the actors can participate in the creative process much more personally, they are not compelled to assume a character that might be totally different from their own, and the role is born inside them almost spontaneously. This is why it is typical of performances created this way that their textual part (the drama itself or the script of the play) is only valid for the original performance, played by the co-creating actors, and they are rarely staged again by a different company. Another reason, naturally, is that these plays are usually centred around one particular problem and tied to everyday reality.

Reactive writing is therefore a kind of „applied playwriting“, which produces a dramatic text valid only for a particular performance, whereas playwriting in the classical sense more frequently creates long-lasting texts of real literary value. Nowadays more and more companies choose the method based on improvisation and one reason for that could be that current theatrical practice often has no clue what to do with literary or quasi-literary texts. In the age of „total theatre“ when text is pushed to the background and staging emphasizes theatrical gestures capable of producing powerful – rather sensual than intellectual – effects, there is a tension between literature and theatricality. There are less and less performances where the spoken word calls forth inner images, where the performance is created more in the viewers' imagination than on stage.

Summary:

In the postdramatic theatrical era the role of the playwright has changed. Writers can decide to ignore this change, but then they have to face the risk that their well-written – literary – text might be published at the most, but never put on stage. The other possible way is to include playwriting in the creative process, and the text is only completed when the performance is ready. In this case a premiere is guaranteed, but the text is only worth publishing or re-staging if the writer is able to preserve his/her integrity, high standards during the impulsive process of collaboration, and the play is not disarranged by all the different intentions, desires and thoughts raised by the actors and the director.

In the course of my career I have worked with both methods, I have written plays and dramatic texts as well. I mostly use Reactive Writing these days if our starting point is a concrete, confinable problem, and channeling collective knowledge is necessary while working out the topic in details. However, if I have a more hidden message, a more personal story to tell, I opt for writing the play first, as I did in the case of my latest premiere, „Cardboard Daddy“.

According to my experience there are two cases when the actors' improvisation is really useful: if we would like to react to a public content in a fresh, vivid, funny, captivating, primary way, or if we need visceral emotions, crossing the limits of physical body or mobilizing psychic energies that are almost impossible to call out on the director's instructions. On the other hand, improvisation has its limitations when we would like to see deeper, more layered contents during the interaction of two or more people, scenes, where subcontext is more important than spoken words, when we would like to see an arch between the character's former and present status (in case of a linear story). Improvisation can only produce etudes, it is unsuitable for constructing greater forms. All this means that it is impossible to improvise a structure or characteristic, poetic language. That is why some

playwrights have turned from everyday language to well-elaborated, stylized, even rhyming texts. Sometimes the power of language, the quality and originality of thought is all that writers have to justify their presence in the creative process of postdramatic theatre.