

University of Theatre and Film Arts
Doctoral School

The Temporality of Theatre

Theses of Doctoral Dissertation

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2022

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In my PhD dissertation I seek to explore the temporality of time. I am interested in finding out how and why the theatre, the art of the present, can still produce a lasting impact long after the performance itself remains in the past. Contemporary theories of time in philosophy make it possible for us to see theatre history in different ways, and the concepts of time help us to reveal and describe the more elusive elements of the art of the theatre. This is the main thesis of my dissertation. The other important points are listed below.

1.

Theatrical time is static

According to static theories of time, the passage of time is not real and independent of our perception: although time appears to pass, the reality is that we move through time (as if we were moving along a path). The eternalistic view holds that all events or things exist, and can be found somewhere in the universe; we encounter them as we move, thus making past, present and future relative and local concepts.

The present dissertation also regards time in theatre history as static-eternalistic, where cause and effect relations exist as a matter of course – which means that time has a direction, events cannot be reversed – but everything can be equally and simultaneously discovered by the person who wishes to consider all the elements of time. This does not mean that the temporality of the phenomena is homogeneous, but that they can be approached with different methodologies. This approach also explains the corpus of case studies; the dissertation not only examines acting performances that I have seen performed live on the stage and which can be analyzed with the help of recordings (*Faust*, 2015), but includes a legendary performance that I have seen only as a recorded performance (*Death of a Salesman*, 1959); and a performance that is still regarded as legendary but which is available only through an audio recording (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1961-63). In addition, I have included the analysis of another memorable acting performance, the descriptions of which, apart from a few recordings, exist only in writing (Árpád Ódry, 1930s).

The historical time (the date) of these acting performances has influenced the mode of access and the methodology employed in the dissertation but it did not prove to be an obstacle to research. Each analysis demonstrates that the actor's decision to employ certain techniques in the present is not determined by historical time.

It is possible to analyze any aspect of the acting performance if the researcher concentrates on what made it particularly memorable¹ for the spectator, and if the performance is not considered as part of a closed and completed past, but observed in the way a director would observe it when he/she has something say about it from the perspective of the open future. In the discussions of the Faust scenes, Ódry's poem, and Romeo's audio recording, a “close watching” method (similar to close-reading) is employed – because it naturally demands and ensures attention – the ultimate aim of which is to understand what an actor is doing at a given moment and how he or she is making an impact on others.

2.

Theatrical time: the relationship between performance as creation and performance as an event

Interpretations of the theatre that remain within the text-performance dichotomy do not take into account the special characteristics of stage performances, such as repetitions, when defining theatrical time. Patrice Pavis describes theatrical time as dual by nature and makes a distinction between on-stage and off-stage time. By the latter he means dramatic-fictional² time. Anne Ubersfeld, on the other hand, defines theatrical time as the relationship between the temporality of the performance and the temporality of the act depicted.³

Erika Fischer-Lichte⁴ and post-dramatic aesthetics do not regard stage performance as the staging of a dramatic text, but as an event where spectators and actors are present together. Thus, if we read Ubersfeld's 1981 definition today in 2022, after Fischer-Lichte's, we can re-interpret the time of the stage performance as consisting of the temporality of the event (where spectator and actors are together) and its duration. The “temporality of the act represented”, however, composes the actual time of the drama or fiction that is now staged by the creators and translated onto the stage (i.e. the performance time that is established in rehearsals and measured by a stopwatch). In other words, it is the relation between these two performance times (performance as an event and performance as creation) which can be regarded as the theatrical time of that evening.

¹ Maurice Halbwachs: A múlt rekonstruálása [The Reconstruction of the Past]. (trans. Sujtó László), in: *Az emlékezet társadalmi keretei*, [The Social Frameworks of Memory] Atlantisz, 2018. 134.

² Patrice Pavis: *Színházi szótár* [Dictionary of the Theatre]. (trans. Gulyás Adrienn, Molnár Zsófia, Rideg Zsófia, Sepsí Enikő), Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2006. 182–183.

³ Anne Ubersfeld: *L'école du spectateur, Lire le théâtre 2*. Paris, Édition sociales, 1981. 239.

⁴ Erika Fischer-Lichte: *A performativitás esztétikája* [The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics]. (ford. Kiss Gabriella) Budapest, Balassi, 2009. 49.

This definition of theatrical time – due to the static approach of the dissertation – can be applied not only to performances of the post-dramatic era, but to any era or school. It works for all performances, text-based or non-text-based alike; they condense time, since the quality and quantity of time spent by the creators with the story or play is inherent – in Carlson's terms, time will “haunt”⁵ the theatrical creation.

3.

The actor is the carrier of time

Since the difference between the two performances (e.g. E1 and E2) of a rehearsed theatre production (e.g. E), which is performed every night, is largely due to a human factor – the actors' performance – and this difference can be, in a sense, measured in practice, I argue that the actor is the carrier of theatrical time. It is by studying the actor's acting performance that brings us closer to an understanding of theatrical time, and vice versa: the aspects of time make it easier to approach the actor's acting performance. The completely subjective transfers in Badiou's words⁶ and changes which the theatre provokes, are part of the essence of theatre. It is for this reason that theories which seek to be general and systematic have difficulty in grasping the performance of the actor, which cannot exist without the subjective moment and the subjective risk involved. The aim of the case studies in this thesis is therefore to try to describe certain characteristics of acting performances on the basis of recorded material, with particular emphasis on how the actor uses the time at his disposal. Since time is a universal framework, actors in all kinds of performances relate to it and apply it in some way. Acting, of course, can always be interpreted in relation to something, depending on the angle from which it is examined and what it is related to: static theories treat concepts of time in a like manner. An actor's performance in E2 can be related to E1, or even to E, and the formulation of the difference helps discussions about play.

4.

The actor is also making a statement with his art; his presence can be researched

In my thesis, I consider the actor's acting performance as an autonomous work of art, which is created within the specific framework of a director or writer, with given tools, but which still remains a sovereign art; in Lili Monori's words, it is an “autonomous form of language”. Even

⁵ Marvin Carlson: *The Haunted Stage, The Theatre as a Memory Machine*. Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2001.

⁶ Alain Badiou (avec Nicholas Truong): *Éloge du théâtre*. Paris, Flammarion, 2013.

if not all acting performances exhaust the possibilities lying within such “language”, in many cases it is worth approaching theatrical performances by focusing on the acting itself. In all cases, the theatre performance is the central unit within which the acting performance becomes intelligible at all.

József Timár's portrayal of Willy Loman cannot be separated from his personal tragedy, since he could have decided to give up acting when he became very ill. Instead, Timár pursued a kind of performative acting whose power and impact did not originate from aesthetic quality alone. Lili Monori created her own theatre workshop, without a director or an audience. After her comeback before a wide public in the productions of Schiling and Mundruczó after 2000, she demonstrated that she had become a decisive actor who can fundamentally shape the productions. As for Ódry and Ruttkai, they conceived their roles as a piece of art that had to reflect the whole character of the person enacted.

The actors' goals and expectations regarding their own work should not be ignored. Not only because they help us to understand their acting methods, but also because these factors, which also influence their way of life, create their techniques: for example, the constant recitation of the text at home in Mari Jászai's and Lili Monori's work was so excessive according to the sources, that – if we consider acting as a craft – we must consider it also a practice, as a form of technique.

5.

The history of theatre is preserved in the tradition of the unwritten acting performance

This thesis is difficult to prove, since in most cases we know about this phenomenon because some sources (reminiscences, anecdotes) describe it. However, only a very small fraction of the methods and techniques used in practice can be found randomly in descriptions. For example, Lili Monori's speech and her speech delivery technique are described by a critic as a practice that Tamás Major borrowed from Frigyes Karinthy: poetry must be woven into everyday speech in such a way that the listener does not feel that he is listening to poetry and does not perceive the difference. I heard the same exercise given to acting students by László Babarczy, who used to work next to Tamás Major at National Theatre; it was an introductory class and the purpose was to demonstrate to students that it is possible to recite poetry naturally.⁷ In the last scene of Dürrenmatt's *The Visit* Éva Ruttkai, who was performing her

⁷ Molnár Gál Péter: Monori meg a telefonkönyv [Monori and the Telephone Book]. *Mozgó Világ*, 2007, 33. évf. 7. szám. 105.

last role on the main stage of the Vígszínház, left the stage with her hat on and with her head raised in the same manner as Gizi Bajor said goodbye to her last role at the National Theatre half a century earlier.

Since the theatre appeals to memory and it is preserved there, actors' memories can become the source of their creative art (Stanislavsky's method). Therefore, it is important to research the impact of memory.

The poem "Sírni, sírni, sírni" (Cry, cry, cry) by Árpád Ódry and its history of influence are discussed to prove the thesis: one can detect how Ódry's interpretation still impacts the way actors interpret this poem when reciting it, even after a hundred years.

The structure of the dissertation

The first chapter ("Time as a Tool and Possibility of Thinking about Theatre") lays the groundwork for the theoretical framework of the thesis. Using the example of a director's time management technique, it briefly outlines theories of time, sets up a definition of time in theatre, and discusses the reasons for measuring time. It argues for an open future and outlines the method employed in the analysis of the act of performing, explains why Pavis's analysis of performance is not employed. This is followed by four case studies.

The chapter on "Time can Remember" is the first attempt to discuss the performance of József Timár's *Death of a Saleman* – precisely because in 1959 it was one of the earliest performances that is still remembered as legendary by those who had seen it at the time. The impact of Timár's performance is interpreted within the historical context of his career, which reveals that the actor is making a statement with his art, and also drawing attention to the phenomenon of "vox humana", or natural speech.

The next chapter is entitled "The Actor's Personal Time" because it offers further reflections on the question of the sovereign actor's statement and his/her communication through the analysis of Lili Monori's performance in *Faust*. With her radically natural performance on contemporary stages after 2010, Lili Monori also offers a way to experience the independent and neo-avant-garde theatrical practices she had become acquainted with in the early 1970s by experimenting with Gábor Bódy and later with Miklós B. Székely at the Szentkirály Atelier.

The chapter on “Inherited Time” argues that theatre history is preserved in performance tradition even when it is not recorded in writing: it discusses the history of the impact of a poem recited by Árpád Ódry and examines his performance through the keywords of naturalness, simple speech, and rapidity. It reveals what we can learn about an actor’s performance after a hundred years solely by analyzing the descriptions of his contemporaries – or by listening only to his recorded speech.

In the last chapter, “Shaping Time”, I explore Éva Ruttkai’s technique of employing and condensing time in two of her performances with the aid of a sound recording and a recorded performance serving as tools of memory.

Publications related to the subject of this thesis:

"I was Alice in Wonderland – Lili Monori's career before the Szentkirály Atelier. Dorka Porogi's email interview with Lili Monori, 5 June – 13 July 2020. *Theatron* 16. no.2. 108–24.

"Time as a Tool - and a Possibility – of Thinking about Theatre" (forthcoming)

Alain Badiou: In Praise of Theatre – translation (forthcoming)

"Acting as an Art with its own Formal Language". On the Monori-Székely B. play and three performances of the Szentkirály Atelier. *Theatron* 15. no.2. 21–41.

"On the Acting of Árpád Ódry". *Symbolon* 2021, vol. 22. 159–174.

"József Timár and the Identification of the Agent: Memory and Play Interpretation". *Theatron* 14. no.3. 2–19.