

Abstract: The need for classification, subordination and grouping sometimes imposes a serious task upon us, which on the one hand means forcing the performing arts into some frames and categories, but on the other hand it facilitates their interpretation, reading and decoding. Wanting to engage in one of the possible classifications, I referred to Peter Brook's cult book *The Empty Space*, in which he distinguishes different types of contemporary theatre. Starting from there, but without an attempt to rigidly apply his types of theatre, this research yielded its own internal classification. The results have shown that theatre and its functions can fluctuate considerably within each category. Both polarities within each type show dramatically different features, purposes, receptions and reactions. Each of the three types defined here are supported by a suitable scientific instrumentarium and practically validated through appropriately selected performances which have been listed in the text.

Keywords: performance, dance, ballet, theatre.

REFLECTIONS ON DANCE THEATRE: INSIGHTS AND PARALLELS

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The following text confronts the necessity to reconsider theatre and its manifestations today, in particular those that are predominantly related to dance production. Personally, I do not intend to deal with the historical past; I am, however, prepared to expose considerations, draw certain parallels and comparisons, analyse some of the established views on theatre, and try to validate them through specific works of theatre. Theatre, set in some strict aesthetic, conceptual, form- and content-wise boundaries, finds the most incredible ways to actualise standpoints that are often in collision with some form of imposed template. When reflecting upon theatre, I will refer to the situation in the dance theatre, but at the same time I will be making comparisons at several levels at the same time. On the other hand, there is an exceptional book written principally about drama theatre which I have always found thought-provoking; I am referring to *Empty Space*, written by the cult director Peter Brook. The author had tried to deliberate art by subordinating it, by giving tips and possibility for classification – but not enforced, stiffed and nonfunctional one, but very personal one. (Brook uses his own creative experiences as a starting point). This text in no way intends to relate to Brook's models and to project them onto the domain of dance (or, in the present case, ballet) aesthetics, but rather uses them as a starting point in the research of the directions in which dance should move today. The text offers, interprets, problematises and analyses three models (as opposed to Brook's four-type system), which in turn show diversity and states of permutation. The views will be commented using a number of practical examples, with a tendency to use as many examples from the Macedonian scene as possible, while keeping in mind that our scene has a much shorter history than the scenes of other European countries.

Hibernated/Museum/Deadly Theatre

“Academicism” acts as a certain paradigm for higher, elitist art genres such as opera and ballet, but, at the same time, this kind of production, due to the same reasons, belongs to the so-called group of deadly theatre² as defined by Brook. Was/is MNT³ an example of deadly theatre and how does this type function? It is theatre which, according to the author,

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² Peter Brook defines four types of theatre: “Deadly”, „Holy“, „Rough“ and „Immediate“.

³ MNT stands for Makedonski naroden teatar (Macedonian National Theatre).

leads to banality, routine and triviality, which is often associated with the economic logic of consumer societies (a position principally connected to drama performances). It is only in this first type of deadly theatre that Brook mentions opera and ballet. “Grand opera, of course, is the Deadly Theatre carried to absurdity” (Brook, 1996: 17). This also applies to the type of ballet which is in the focus of this research. This artificial dance system with strict performance rules relies on the stellar moments reached in the 19th century and strives to preserve, freeze and hibernate them by all means. Unlike the possibility of various readings of a play and its openness, the ballet score is causally linked to the scene and/or the choreographic text. In this type of theatre, as a rule, priority is given to the choreography, rather than to the play’s script. The absurdity goes so far that the music for the most famous ballet Swan Lake, when produced as a fragment only a year after the composer’s death (in 1894), it was already deconstructed for the needs of Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanovich Ivanov’s choreographic team⁴ (the complete production was choreographed only in January 1895). It is present in this altered form to this day, while the number of those who have tried to “revive” Tchaikovsky’s original score is negligible. The careful preservation of the so-called “classic heritage” is one of the priority tasks of world choreography. “The tendency to preserve the ballet heritage (of which there are only about twenty plays left in the repertoire) is present in many practitioners who advocate for its absolute immutability” (Vanslow, 1980: 107). The attitude of Amirgamzaeva and Usova goes in the same direction as they note in the section dedicated to Petipa: “...in time, the new talented choreographers will pose a task not to rewrite Petipa’s work, but with much love, to return it in its original form” (Amirgamzaeva and Usova 2002:363). All this makes this type of theatre “deadly”, “museum” and “petrified”. The idea of the final solutions later shifting to imposed matrices is noted by Brook too. “The deadly theatre approaches classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has found out and defined how the play should be done” (Brook, 1996: 14).

This is marked by a tendency for immutability, the only tools used being conservation, and the result being works that have existed on stage for more than a century. This type of theatre is always contraindicated with the desired or projected features of the new, innovative theatre. But is it really like what it seems to be at first glance; is this type not subjected to change? In one of the chapters of her book *The Body, Dance and Cultural Theory*, Helen Thomas describes possible ways to reconstruct dance, to reconstruct all missing works, including those that have been maintained but are products of times long gone. “This does not invoke the notion of ‘performance museums’, but, rather, the possibility of generating lived and living traditions... there are a range of possibilities between authenticity at one end of the scale and interpretivity at the other for reconstructing, recreating, reinventing, directing or retrieving dances from former eras” (Thomas, 2003: 144). This take already rethinks, or rather, opens up a new perspective on the revision of the

⁴ All relocation procedures and changes in the composition are described in detail in Asafyev’s book *On Ballet* (1974).

rigid attitude of “causality” or “conservation” of performances, and implies the possibility of change. Introducing certain changes is nothing new, but as we will see in the next quote, it is a useful tool. “The new staging [the 1970s – note by the author] of ‘Swan Lake’ set in the Moscow Academic Bolshoi theatre is practically preservation of classic heritage. The main goal is to preserve the best of the 1895 setting and to remove everything which is obsolete: the pantomime parts that make the romantic story perfectly meaningless and overwhelming” (Asafyev, 1974: 189). It was already in the 1970s that the central institution, the emblem of Soviet ballet culture, began to allow the suspension of certain parts and substituting them with new, modernised ones. This was necessary due to the process of modernisation, which took place even in countries with centralised, partisan and harshly controlled cultural management such as the USSR. There is an entire series of examples (mostly from Western European theatre) where the choreography, script, and performing style were gradually changing. Or was it not so gradual? Let’s focus on the 1995 production of Swan Lake (once again somehow symbolically related to where it started – exactly one hundred years after Petipa and Ivanov’s staging) – a completely reconceptualised version set by a young British choreographer. Matthew Bourne’s male swans and their emphatic modern dance aesthetics, backed by the controversial story of the royal family, including homosexuality, strained family relations and emotional erosion, delivered the final blow to the “hibernated” version of the ballet.⁵ But what happened later to Bourne’s work? Despite the abundance of debates and criticism (which by the way provided some great promotion of the production), the ballet premiered at London’s second-ranked Sadler’s Wells dance theatre. The production is still being performed after almost a quarter of a century later and it is still quite popular. It has been constantly touring, and it has even been completely restaged in several theatres, the latest one being just a few years ago on Broadway. Bourne’s creation sheds a new light on what used to be called the petrified model. This section posed several questions concerning the established notions of classic heritage, fixed choreography scripts and “museum theatre”. Is this revolutionary project slowly becoming “hibernated”? Has the audience, simply by expressing so much interest, ‘promoted’ the work to the group of “classic heritage” (something terminologically closely related to the works of Petipa, Ivanov and Fokin), thus completely displacing the existing formative constructs?

Political or Engaged Theatre

From tendency towards preservation we move on to the type of theatre which is in service to society in one way or another. In certain societies, systems or regimes, the official cultural policy or climate (meaning the one which is imposed by the needs of the politics) leads to the creation of “activist”, “agitation” theatre.

⁵ The history of ballet in the 20th century notes other versions with completely new choreographer scores too: John Neumeier’s *Illusions* –like ‘Swan Lake’ (1976), Mats Ek’s *Swan Lake* (1987) etc.; however, the analysis focuses on Bourne’s creation because it attracted an enormous interest, sparked debates and controversy.

Let us embark on a small tour on the pages of Russian ballet theatre. At a certain point in history, Russian choreographers Ivan Ivanovich Wahlberg and Adam Pavlovich Glushkovsky began creating engaged plays. Russia's war with Turkey (1806–1812) was supported by the creation of a suitable repertoire. During this period, the plays that were created strengthened “the national consciousness and patriotism.” The ballet titles themselves reveal the ideas behind their creation: *The New Heroine or Woman–Cossack* (1910), *Love for the Motherland* (1912), *Russians in Germany* (1914). Alexander Sergeyeovich Pushkin conveys the atmosphere of one of these performances in one of his texts: “when Mrs. Kolosova... wearing a Russian dress and gleaming with motherly pride, entered the stage at the last ballet, thunder-like cheering began, everyone roared” (Pushkin 1949:11). We will just mention, as part of this group, the ballets created after the October Revolution which were strictly controlled and ideologically directed by the Narkompros. The most notable choreographers in the years of communist rule would set the following works on stage: *The Slavic Marseillaise* (1921), *Red Whirlwinds* (1924), and *Whirlpool* (1927). These examples refer to purpose-built works that promote and propagate a particular attitude in the most direct manner. Political connotations can be reached also by using existing plays, text matrixes and infusing them with contemporary messages. Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins have analysed the phenomenon of Ibsen's *Nora* being enormously popular in the People's Republic of China, due to the way it was read being linked to women's emancipation and the changes in women's societal roles.⁶

The first play in MNT⁷ already indicated an ideological orientation towards the spirit of the new socialist society and a certain attempt to “educate” the audience. During this period there were a multitude of such political projects, censored works, and disciplined theatre workers. On the occasion of the opening of the new building⁸ of the National Ballet on the left bank of the River Vardar in 1983, the institution prepared the premiere of *The Legend of Love*, a work which was particularly popular in the USSR. In it, the main character Ferkhad leaves the love of his life, Princess Shireen, and joins the villagers who are digging a water canal. Even this legend of the East was reworked and ideologically repositioned, now exhibiting the power of the collective spirit. The values of socialist reality were also served to the Skopje audiences during the opening of the newly rebuilt MNT. The choice of performances was not accidental, however. They did deliver a strong message, but they greatly differed with regards to the content and intent dictated by the socio-political context. The definition of this type of theatre is directly related to its purpose i.e. to the effect it is expected to produce. In spite of the orientation towards the

6 The authors of the essay consider the different ways of interpretation and staging of *Nora* in Japan, China and Iran.

7 The first play (premiered on April 3, 1945) was *Platon Krechet* by Oleksandr Cvodokimovich Kornjchuk, directed by Dimitar Shostarov and translated by Blazhe Koneski. The drama deals with the role of the intelligentsia in the new communist society and the shaping of a new type of Soviet intellectuals.

8 The building where the Macedonian Opera and Ballet operates to this day.

classical ballet repertoire, there are examples of purposefully created cultural products authored by Macedonian choreographers. We have selected the following as examples: *The Military Story* (1971) music by Lj. Brangjolica, choreography by V. Kostikj; *That is A Man* (1981) music by Lj. Brangjolica, choreography by M. Crvenov and A. Stojanovikj; *Heroic Symphony* (1985) music by T. Proshev, choreography by A. Stojanovikj. All these works have a military or heroic theme. *That is A Man* was devoted to Josip Broz Tito, the leader of Yugoslavia, and showed episodes of the war and the victory over fascism. Even though there were not so many of these performances, their presence on the repertoire built up the already forgotten spirit and remembrance of the People's Liberation War, and of the community that was under serious threat facing a whirlwind of disintegrating ideas. However, this type of play is not strictly connected to the political system; works of this type were also part of democratic Macedonia, from 1991 onwards.

This format has one other side to it, however; it is a theatre that comments on social states, a theatre that reacts and provides commentary. The “engaged”, “political” theatre is associated with a group of German directors, including Bertolt Brecht, Erwin Piscator, etc. The idea behind this theatre is to motivate the audience to think critically. Perhaps it was as a reflection of the German cultural environment, but also as a continuation of German modern dance, that there was a very specific school/style established in the 1930s, the first products of which were the works of Kurt Jooss, and later established continuity with the productions by Pina Bausch and Johann Kresnik. The basic maxim in Kresnik's plays is that “everything is allowed”. Most of his choreographic opus was thematically centred around the political deviations of the Western society (the Holocaust, the Vietnam War, the German reunification, the years of Soviet influence, etc.). The audience is aware that when attending Kresnik's performances they will not enjoy the voyeurism, but that rather all their senses will be brutally bombarded⁹ in order for the relevant problem to be brought forth, making the spectator bitterly come back to it again and again even after the curtain falls. By staging *Paradise* (1968), dedicated to the assassination of student movement leader Rudi Dutschke, Kresnik presented his view of the event. According to him, the culprits were the derogated media system and the propaganda machine. Wishing to point his finger directly at the editors of system-controlled media, Kresnik scattered newspaper snippets on the floor in one of the assassination scenes. Dutschke actually dies from the media blow directed at him, and not from the bullet that physically murdered him.

Unlike Kresnik and his politically engaged standpoint, Pina Bausch was interested in gender relations, the degradation of women, frustrations, loneliness, and passion for power. The effect of this is that the viewer becomes activated, sometimes even directly. In *Come Dance with Me* (1977), she transcended the barrier separating the stage and the audience and brought them together, not only physically but also mentally, by imposing a dilemma on man and his social standing. Bausch explains how her works function “My

9 Judging by the effects produced, Kresnik comes very close to the concept of the Theatre of Cruelty by Antonin Artaud.

plays do not 'grow' from the beginning to the end, but inside-out" (Schmid, 11). She strips off the deepest feelings and that sometimes has a painful effect on those who can relate.

In the Macedonian dance theatre, we have but a few performances of this type. Dean Pop-Hristova and Sasha Eftimova created the play Schengen (2004), produced by "Rebis". This play brings forth the sense of claustrophobia Macedonian citizens feel in the context of the Schengen visa curtain¹⁰. Sasha Eftimova explains in an interview that "Schengen was born out of my own feeling of powerlessness because of the inability to carry out one of my ideas. When I told Gordana Dean about it, she suggested that we make a play about it" (Kolevska, 2005). The play provided direct commentary on the Macedonian reality and restricted freedom of movement. In the turbulent political period there was another very interesting example of "dance activism". During the anti-government protests in 2016, there was a segment organised where artistic production was used to defy the ongoing political events. One of the most active artists was director Zoja Buzalkovska who prepared the play Time for Fun. It incorporated speeches by the Prime Minister, recordings of wiretapped conversations (which were what triggered the start of the protests), as well as a dance piece, all integrated in plays by Harold Pinter. The dancer was Mirjana Najchevska, a human rights activist and professor at the Institute of Sociological, Political and Juridical Research. Her performance was intended to provoke reflection and reactions by the audience. She explained her performance saying that in an eroded, deviant and corrupt society with distorted values and norms, she can afford to move on to another profession and become a ballerina. This was certainly not part of the production by MNT and MOB, but it is an example of engaged, activist performance.

Brook himself, in his book *Threads of Time*, writes of some of his own attempts: "It is the uncomfortable moment of doubt that good political theatre must challenge, a suspicion that should follow us onto the streets, and if possible, keep us tormented" (Brook, 2004: 135). In the "engaged theatre" we follow a fluctuating process of engagement by the current political nomenclature until a complete change "of sides", or more precisely, a way of actualizing the deviant phenomena of modern society. Perhaps the straightforward misinterpretation of the word "political" pushes us into a trap of linking current situations and "theatre use". This type of performance should comment not only on current events but even more so on marginalised groups, situations and aspects, so it may be more appropriate to refer to it as engaged, activist rather than political. Be that as it may and however paradoxical it may seem; the examples show that this particular kind of theatre is found in dance productions as well.

Experimental Theatre

This group includes all attempts to find a new, authentic, specific form of performance through an experiment. In MNT/MOB we follow occasional attempts of experimental theatre. The task of finding new theatrical poetics was also actively pursued by authors of the Russian avant-garde theatre: Vsevolod Shmilyevich Mezherholjev with his biomechanics, and Alexander Yevkevichev Sairov with his synthesis. This group was

enriched by Jerzy Grotowski with his work in his theatre laboratory and Eugenio Barba and his research and experiments within theatre anthropology. A new theatre is always a carrier of innovation, always desirable, but not always welcome. Paths leading thereto are hardly accessible. It is theatre alchemy; some are focused and dedicated to this art, others despite their hard work fail to discover the secret and their art becomes banal, unmotivated and mannerist.

The postmodern dance movement was established in the 1960s in the United States and brought a nihilistic attitude in everything related to the theatrical act, setting experimentation as the only valid criteria for the creation of art. This group shifted the boundaries of understanding theatre, audiences, performances, techniques, schools, stages, and bodies. Yvonne Rainer excluded trained dancers and instead used amateurs and people who lacked any dance training or experience. Trisha Brown was fascinated by space; not only did she take performances outside the theatre walls, but also went a step further by placing dancers outside the natural laws of gravity. Twyla Tharp played with the indefinite duration and scope of her work. "Experimental theatre goes out of the theatre building and enters a room or ring..." (Brook, 1995: 77). Postmodern dance was not a breakthrough, but a step outside the performance conventions by conceptualizing a completely new theatrical format. It was a rebellion against the norms, against the form of modern dance, against the stereotype and degeneracy of mannerisms and conformism of routine forms.

Experimental theatre is progressive, avant-garde, always new and changing. After that incredible wave of innovation and an entirely new type of performance in the 1960s and early 1970s, following the postmodernism carriers there was an incredible departure from it and a return to conventional and even "traditional" dance theatre. Trisha Brown notes in an interview "I spent the first five years of my career outside of traditional theatre so I could decentralise space... Not even in my wildest dreams could I think that I would say that a theatre offers the opportunity to create magic like no other place does." (Brown, 1988: 267) Tharp has been continuously present in ballet companies and national houses since the 1970s. She also had numerous collaborations with the greatest ballet dancer of the late 20th century, Mikhail Nikolayevich Baryshnikov¹¹, at the renowned American Ballet Theater. In 2003, Lucinda Childs choreographed *Daphnis and Chloé* for the Geneva Opera Ballet. In May 2009 the Ballet National de Marseille prepared the *Tempo Vicino*, while in 2016 she staged *Grosse Fugue* at the Opera National de Lyon. Representatives of the most avant-garde, most authentic dance style were gradually returning to the theatre scene and its conventions. Moreover, they were engaged in large national houses (such as MOB) that are otherwise synonymous with the "deadly theatre". The last phase of these choreographers' works is a specific two-way process where they bring the new dance aesthetic to the "official" stage, clearly accepting the conditions that are governed

¹⁰ The Schengen Area visa regime for Macedonian citizens was terminated in December 2009.

¹¹ Tharp staged the following works for Baryshnikov: *Push Comes to Shove* (1976); *Once More, Frank* (1976); *The Little Ballet*; *Sinatra Suite* (1983) and *Baryshnikov By Tharp* (1984).

therein; in this context we find the profile of trained ballet dancers with their pure rigid classical technique. I find it most appropriate to conclude the story of experimental theatre with one of Brook's quotes: "Experimental is a false word. Any real process has to be experimental, even in the most conventional circumstances. Consequently, there is something artificial in opposing experimental and traditional. The true meaning of the word 'to research' is not 'to not experiment anymore', but simply to have unlimited time and not to work under the pressure that by a particular date you have to show good results" (Brook, 2004: 130).

A Few Concluding Thoughts

Once again, we reach the question: can we simply label the different types of theatre and creativity, can we contemplate and plan in advance? The obsessive need to define can sometimes trick us, resulting in entirely different examples within the "same type" of theatre.

Regardless of which type we are dealing with, there is a process of transformation and change which we can see by following the examples. The most avant-garde plays can one day become examples of museum theatre; the most validated forms of political influence through theatre can be filled with the most critical contents. It is simply not possible to make transformation with a single step, solution or decision; it requires not only contemplation of the new play's aesthetics, as well as the instruments (an adequate selection of performed works, a quality project team, the ability to present different production/choreography concepts). "Any new (different) theatre, whatever it is, is created not only by a decision/solution to its 'new' way of organisation, but yet – but by a new, different way of its artistic profiling" (Luzhina, 1996: 104).

Theatre, as it has been proven many times before, is an amazingly vital, resisting organism. Is it possible, through such a text, to give a recipe for theatre, for performance, for the format of the "real" dance performance? The answer is not clear. Theorising in this case is more of a mental provocation rather than a set of propositions and postulates for some new theatre. What is necessary is to allow the theatre, regardless of the genre, to **be free, open, plural, exploratory, and polyvalent.**

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