

REVIEWS

Guna Zeltina and Sanita Reinsone

Text in Contemporary Theatre: The Baltics Within the World Experience

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE: CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS PUBLISHING, 2013, 230 PAGES

In 2013, Cambridge Scholars Publishing published a book *Text in Contemporary Theatre: The Baltics within the World Experience*, edited by Guna Zeltina and Sanita Reinsone. A compound title of the book prompts readers' expectation of double research. On the one hand, the contributors pledge to investigate the multiple links between text and performance in contemporary theatre. On the other – to present contemporary theatre of the Baltic States. Nineteen articles by theatre researchers from the Baltics as well as other countries not only discuss a variety of examples of the functioning of text in today's theatre, but also introduce the reader into the field of theatre in contemporary Baltic States, presenting the most interesting artistic experiments of theatre artists from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

In "Editor's introduction", Guna Zeltina points out that the editors of the publication are interested "not only in the dramatic and postdramatic theatre, but also in performative practice over the broadest spectrum" and proposes a few possible analytical approaches towards the functioning of the text. According to the editors, the research of the text-performance relationship should address such issues as "role of the text in contemporary theatre compared to other structural elements", "sources of the texts used in contemporary theatre", and "what are the kinds of functionality of the text?" (p. 1). The investigations of these and other similar questions by the contributors of the book are arranged into three major groups framing the structure of the book.

The authors of the first part of the publication, called "Traditional Texts in Contemporary Thea-

tre", analyse different directors' interpretations of the variety of texts and discuss such issues as how contemporary directors treat text and how traditional texts or plays are interpreted in contemporary theatre? The articles of this part naturally bring about the question of what do the theatre researchers understand as "traditional text": is it a classical drama, any drama text or eventually any literary text? The authors of the articles investigate not only different stagings of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or Tennessee William's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (noteworthy comparative analyses by Alexey Bartoshevich and Edīte Tišheizere) but also stage interpretations of the texts that do not belong to the canon of classical drama (such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) or even non-dramatic texts (for example, Paul Auster's *Mr Vertigo*). However, even without a sharp definition of the scope and meaning of "traditional text", the reader is offered various examples of the functioning of literary text in performance, confirming, once again, what has been a prevalent thesis in theatre studies for some time now that in contemporary performance text is but a pretext.

In the second part of the book "New Plays and Playwrights: Director and Actor as a Text-Writer" the authors focus on the search for new texts and analyse the new ways of the production of dramatic texts taking place within the contemporary theatrical world. Certain authors (Charlotte Neuhäuser, Ieva Struka) discuss different new ways of promoting new drama, such as foundations of special Playwright's Grants or the national drama competitions, which are a frequent occurrence in the field of contemporary theatre, especially in the

Baltic States. Other researchers (Jurgita Staniškytė, Nomedā Šatkauskienė, Benedicts Kalnačs) point out the contemporary theatre practices where the traditional function of a playwright as the producer of the verbal text of a performance is taken over by other members of the creative group: actors, directors or theatre group working on a collective basis. In their analyses of how the passing over of the playwright's functions to the other members of the creative team affects the creative process and aesthetic choices, the authors conclusively show that in contemporary Baltic theatre (for example the productions by Latvian stage director Alvis Hermanis, Estonian theatre NO99 or Lithuanian theatre movement No Theatre) the collective creation has become increasingly important. It stimulates "creating and constructing the production's narrative texture in the process of rehearsal" (Kalnačs, p. 120) and contests traditional ways of creating a role. At the same time, theatre researchers claim that collective memories and narratives (mostly presented in a playwright's text), which used to dominate earlier Baltic theatre, is being gradually pushed out by personal histories, autobiographical narratives, "real storytelling situations" or real time events that prompt the theatre artists to "emphasize the interplay between reality and fiction" (Staniškytė, p. 137) and change the traditional patterns of the perception of performance.

The researchers in the third part of the book "Reality and Text in Post and Post-Postdramatic Theatre" focus on the productions of artists from different countries (from *My Life after* by the Argentinian artist Lola Arias to Irish Corn Exchange Theatre Company's *Freefall*). They examine further the new ways of producing postdramatic dramaturgy or performance text, analyse upcoming new forms of the actor's art and investigate the complex relationship between performance art and theatre, confirming altogether the "irruption of the real" which was pointed out by Hans-Thies Lehmann as one of the characteristics of contemporary theatre.¹

Although the concepts of "post and post-postdramatic theatre", used in the title of this part, raises expectations of a discussion about the difference between postdramatic and post-postdramatic theatre, or at least how to define post-postdramatic theatre, the authors do not, however, approach this issue. In fact, the term "post-postdramatic theatre" is never used in the texts of this part. On the contrary, most of the authors (from the opening text by Rikard Hoogland to the last chapter by Stephen E. Wilmer) analyse the productions of their choice applying the term "postdramatic" theatre as defined by Lehmann and highlight the creative characteristics of contemporary theatre that are linked to the postdramatic strategies as delineated by Lehmann. Consequently, the concept of "post-postdramatic theatre" remains obscure and the reader is forced to make a personal judgement as to which of the great number of examples of theatre productions described in the articles can possibly be defined as post-postdramatic and why. The introduction of this provocative concept is not unfavourable *per se*. However, as in the studies of the Baltic theatres the usage of new concepts is not firmly defined and thus, from time to time, gives rise to miscommunication among theatre researchers. The definition of such concepts is therefore advisable.²

In "Editor's introduction", Zeltiņa claims that "one of the aims of this collection of articles is to provide a wider insight into the small theatre cultures of the Baltic states, their processes and the personalities leading them" (p. 3). As there are almost no publications in English concerning contemporary theatre in the Baltic states the aim of the editors is commendable. After all, apart from single articles by individual theatre researchers (such as Staniškytė³ or Zeltiņa⁴) a few books introducing the work of the top Baltic stage directors (like Eimuntas Nekrošius⁵ or Oskaras Koršunovas⁶) and review publications describing the theatrical processes in different Baltic countries (*Estonian Theatre*⁷, *Lithuanian Theatre*⁸, *Theatre in Latvia*⁹) there is only one book, published five years ago by Jeff

Johnson, *The New Theatre of the Baltics. From Soviet to Western Influence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*¹⁰ that offers a general (and subjective) survey of the theatre in the Baltic states. The articles by theatre researchers from the Baltic and other countries published in this book allow the reader to contemplate the theatrical landscape of the Baltic countries from different perspectives. The publication not only continually refers to the names that are well known in an international context such as Eimuntas Nekrošius or Oskaras Koršunovas from Lithuania, Latvian Alvis Hermanis and Estonian Tiit Ojasoo, but also introduces the artists and theatre companies that represent the most recent theatrical developments.

The book includes a number of articles unrelated to the Baltic theatre. On the one hand, articles discussing, for instance, contemporary Chinese theatre (Peng Tao) or Irish theatre practices (Wilmer) risk distracting the focus on the Baltic region. On the other hand, however, these texts allow acknowledgement of the common developments in contemporary theatre and prompt reflection of the Baltic experiences in a broader theatrical context. Altogether, the publication presents a polyphonic collection of theatre research, introducing both the analyses of innovative practices of linking text and performance and a multiple field of contemporary theatre in the Baltic States.

Rūta Mažeikienė, Vytautas Magnus University

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdraminis teatras*, Menu spaustuvė, Vilnius 2010, p. 150.
- 2 The importance of clear definitions and assimilation of different concepts in local discourses can be proved by the discussion about the case of Estonian director Ivar Põllu, presented in the book by theatre researcher Anneli Saro. Her article “The Birth of New Authorship in Contemporary Estonian Theatre” presents the artist as “author of the term ‘author’s theatre’” although in the broader discourse of theatre research the term ‘author’s theatre’ has different connotations than presented in the definition by Põllu (see, e.g., the definition of *auteur théâtre* by Patrice Pavis, in Patrice Pavis, *L’analyse des spectacles: théâtre, mime, danse, danse-théâtre, cinéma*, Nathan, Paris 1996, p. 192).
- 3 Jurgita Staniškytė, „Performing History, Staging Identity: Strategies of Contemporary Theater in the Baltic States“ in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2009, pp. 537-44.
- 4 Guna Zeltiņa, “Baltic Theater 1995-2005: Processes and Trends” in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2009, pp. 531-6.
- 5 Liudvika Apinytė Popenhagen, *Nekrošius and Lithuanian Theatre*, Peter Lang, New York 1999.
- 6 *The Theatre of Oskaras Koršunovas: Interviews and Articles*, Rasa Vasinauskaitė, ed., Baltos Lankos, Vilnius 2002.
- 7 Jaak Rähesoo, *Estonian Theatre*, Estonian Theatre Union, Tallinn 2003.
- 8 *Lithuanian Theatre*, Gintaras Aleknonis, Helmutas Šabasevičius, eds., Institute of Culture, Philosophy and Art, Vilnius 2009.
- 9 *Theatre in Latvia*, Guna Zeltiņa, ed., Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia, Riga 2012.
- 10 Jeff Johnson, *The New Theatre of the Baltics. From Soviet to Western Influence in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, McFarland & Company, Jefferson, North Carolina, London 2007.