

Theatre and Continental Philosophy

Editorial

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The interrelationship between philosophy and theatre has a long history. Plato encouraged an anti-theatrical prejudice by emphasizing the danger of imitating bad character, while Aristotle's theory of drama inspired French playwrights from the seventeenth century and continues to inform the conventions of much television drama today. Nietzsche influenced George Bernard Shaw and Eugene O'Neill, while Wittgenstein inspired Thomas Bernhard and Tom Stoppard, and Deleuze underlies much of the work of Romeo Castellucci. In turn, certain theatre artists have had a major impact on philosophers, such as Wagner on Nietzsche, Brecht on Benjamin, Beckett and Carmelo Bene on Deleuze. Moreover, philosophers such as Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Alain Badiou have used drama to express philosophical concepts, and dramatists from Aristophanes (*The Clouds*) to Brecht *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, to Tom Stoppard (*Jumpers*) have represented philosophers in their work. Recently, Castellucci dramatised the second part of Spinoza's treatise on ethics as *ETHICA. Natura e origine della mente* (Ethica. Nature and origin of the mind), which is illustrated on the cover of *Nordic Theatre Studies'* current issue. He has described the production as a "philosophical fairytale", and has also been planning to adapt the other four parts of the book, which he considers to be "a tool for life" (Castellucci 2017).

In the last fifty years, theatre scholars have grown more interested in philosophical aspects of theatre, such as semiotics, phenomenology and aesthetics (Bennett 2016). What particularly motivates the current issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* is the way in which continental philosophy has significantly impacted theatre and performance studies in the last two decades. From Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital to Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, from

poststructuralism to posthumanism, theatre and performance scholars have used a variety of approaches to explore the relationship between theatre and philosophy. Such overviews as Timothy Murphy's *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought*, Freddie Rokem's *Philosophers and Thespians*, Martin Puchner's *Drama of Ideas*, the book series on "Performance Philosophy", edited by Laura Cull, Alice Lagaay, Freddie Rokem and Will Daddario, and the newly established professional association of Performance Philosophy, with its own journal and a worldwide network of more than 2,500 scholars fostering many articles and monographs, attest to the wealth of recent research in this arena.

This issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* on "Theatre and Continental Philosophy" brings together articles by Nordic, Baltic, and international researchers who reflect on the importance of specific aspects of continental philosophy for theatre and performance studies. The authors use a variety of approaches such as focussing on a concept developed by a philosopher to explore a specific work, company, artist, or art form, or applying a philosophical concept to develop a new approach to theatre practice. Scholars in this issue engage with such philosophers and cultural theorists as Hegel, Heidegger, Deleuze, Guattari, Foucault, Bourdieu, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Benjamin, Adorno, Horkheimer, Althusser, Barthes, Braidotti, Habermas, Agamben, Butler, Haraway, Rancière, Honig, Sjöholm, and Žižek.

It is appropriate that Freddie Rokem, one of the most influential figures in this recent scholarly trend, should begin this issue by reflecting on Walter Benjamin's engagement with Bertolt Brecht. Beginning with an epigraph from Hamlet about welcoming the stranger, Rokem digs into Benjamin's analysis of epic theatre by exploring the example of the interrupting stranger as a feature of *Verfremdungseffekt* (the effect of making strange). Rokem shows how Benjamin revised his essay on this topic at least twice with subtle differences, emphasizing the importance of the sudden appearance of the stranger as one of the key notions of Brecht's epic theatre as well as a topic that Benjamin pursued in his critique of other writers. Rokem notes the increasing violence in Benjamin's rendition of the supposedly typical dramatic scene that paralleled the political situation in German society, and ironically comments that such a dramatic scene rarely, if ever, actually occurred on the stage.

The next three articles apply new philosophical concepts to theatre. Like Rokem, Audronė Žukauskaitė could also have quoted from Hamlet's welcoming of the stranger. She explores the experimental world of bioart, a controversial art form that negotiates hybrid interactions between biology and performance to create new forms of biological assemblage. Applying the ideas of a wide variety of philosophers, including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of "unnatural participations", Donna Haraway's use of "sympoiesis", and Giorgio Agamben's theory of *kairos*, or messianic time, Žukauskaitė analyses three examples of bioart that offer new arrangements of time and space as symbiotic forms of cohabitation, proposing that they create unique moments of bio-presence, "when the artist literally becomes the host and the hostage of the other and thus creates a singular act of ethical responsibility." In pointing out the

collaboration between human artists and non-human animals that feature new heterogeneous assemblages, Žukauskaitė stakes out a posthuman position, showing the links between what were formerly considered distinct species, and introducing the novel concept of “bio-performativity”, which calls for a new ethics.

Martynas Petrikas applies Bourdieu’s notion of field to theatre criticism in an innovative approach that depicts theatre criticism as a separate and hierarchical field of social practice. After mapping out Bourdieu’s concepts of *nomos*, *doxa*, *illusion*, and symbolic violence that influence social behaviour and sustain the status quo, Petrikas shows how theatre criticism is defined by the tension between the opposing interests of theatre and the market or political power, and that theatre criticism is subject to similar control mechanisms that impede innovation. Using a case study from the Lithuanian theatre, Petrikas demonstrates how the social field of Lithuanian theatre criticism had been constructed during Soviet times and how the postmodern work of the theatre director Oskaras Koršunovas presented new difficulties of interpretation. As a result, it took time for certain parts of the social field to legitimize the artistic practice of this young director and its “aesthetic relevance to the international milieu.”

Wade Hollingshaus discusses the work of Erkki Kurenniemi, a Finnish hoarder of “physical artefacts of his daily life”, who intended to leave behind a virtual presence of himself with the aid of future advances in computer technology. Kurenniemi was a leading figure in new media and music in the 1960s who believed that, as artificial intelligence progressed, art, computers, and humans would gradually coalesce “into a new amalgamated whole.” He assembled a mass of material, estimating that computers in the future would be able to construct a virtual representation of his consciousness from his archive of assorted video and audio recordings of himself, as well as photos, writings, and random items: “everything from tram tickets and receipts to body hairs.” Hollingshaus views Kurrenniemi’s life after death project as a literary work in which the artefacts that he assembled already express much about him without the aid of computers: “they are already a performance of Kurenniemi’s consciousness.” In analysing the project, Hollingshaus applies Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “aesthetic regime of art, an historical period (our period) in which all objects, significant or not, are potentially perceived as art,” a period that has already existed for a century. According to Rancière, in the regime of art, anything has the capacity for expression, which he calls “silent speech”. Hollingshaus argues that Kurenniemi’s archive is historical and literary, and in that way is similar to other archives that depend on the analysis placed on their artefacts. In Kurenniemi’s project “every remnant, even the most detrital, and perhaps even particularly the most detrital, can be transformed into something of grand, even literary value.”

The next three articles explore how theatre has advanced notions of social and national identity. Eva-Liisa Linder applies Habermas’ theory of the public sphere to recent theatrical performances in Estonian theatre. She considers three periods in recent Estonian history: the Soviet era when theatre served as

a political and ideological tool, which could be subverted through anti-Soviet nuances in performance; the early twentieth century during which such groups as NO99 used the public sphere in highly ironic political performances such as *Unified Estonia*; and the more recent performances about national identity that posit nationalism against globalization (Organic Estonia versus e-Estonia), and Estonian-speaking against Russian-speaking communities. Perhaps the most sensational use of the public sphere occurred when NO99 created a fictive political party called Unified Estonia, attracting the support of 25% of the electorate. The theatre company demonstrated the mechanisms of political manipulation in organising a rally of 7,000 people in the largest indoor arena in Estonia, getting its artistic leader elected as leader of the new party, and then telling the audience that they didn't need a new leader: that they should trust themselves. Linder shows how NO99 has frequently opposed government policies in their shows, confronted government ministers who have attended their performances, and influenced one to resign over a financial scandal. She also discusses more recent productions that use the theatre as a space to confront social issues involving questions of national identity such as the falling birth rate, the rise of emigration (with 20% of the population going abroad since joining the EU), the dwindling Seto culture, and the integration of Russian-speakers into Estonian society.

Zane Radzobe also addresses questions of identity by applying Foucault's notion of counter-memory to recent Latvian performances. According to Foucault, memory is a discourse that can be challenged by counter-memory, acting as a form of social resistance to "regimes of truth". She points out that in the 1990s, Latvian theatre revised the earlier Soviet control of national history by presenting a counter-memory that developed into a new official discourse about a historical understanding of the past that had been suppressed. By contrast, recent Latvian theatre artists, who operate in a "post-dramatic, post-soviet and post-memory" as well as post-colonial era, have reversed this process with new counter-memory discourses in "national, cultural and individual identities." Radzobe examines several performances that illustrate the construction of memory and question grand narratives of history: *The Legionnaires* directed by Valters Sīlis in 2011 that examines the position of Latvian soldiers conscripted by the Nazis to fight against the Soviet forces during the Second World War; *The Last Pioneer* directed by Dmitry Petrenko in 2015 that focuses on the Russian-speaking population in Latvia; *The Father – Hero '69* written by Inga Gaile, and directed by Dāvis Auškāps in 2016, based on the writer's grandfather, a Latvian KGB officer, and demonstrating sympathy for him as a collaborator with the Soviet regime; and Vladislav Nastavshev's autobiographical performance of *The Lake of Hope* in 2015 that shows his coming out as a gay man. As Radzobe argues, all of these plays "demonstrate the uses of counter-memory as a tool of questioning the dominant discourse, rather than promoting marginalized memory discourses in their own right."

Julie Rongved Amundsen employs Slavoj Žižek's theory of ideology and his term of "failure" to assess the work of Norwegian folk epics such as *Spelet om Heilag Olav*. According to Amundsen, annual amateur performances of

Norwegian *spels*, which are place specific, aim to reinforce notions of identity through historic folk drama which, in Victor Turner's terminology, is a liminoid practice that resembles ritual but is voluntary and playful rather than obligatory. While purporting to convey national history and a sense of authenticity, such performances, according to Amundsen, reinforce myths about national heroes and feelings of solidarity or *communitas* instead of attempting to verify historical facts. Applying Roland Barthes' notion of mythology as a "second order semiotic system, Amundsen suggests that the mythology and folk history used in *spels* have a "naturalizing function" which is reinforced by conservative staging aesthetics such as normative Medieval costumes, and that the authenticity invoked by the event is an ideological fantasy.

The last two articles use philosophical discourse to develop new approaches for theatrical production. Daniel Johnston applies Heidegger's lecture on "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" to the rehearsal room, suggesting ways in which actors can use Heideggerian theories for a production of Ibsen's *The Master Builder*. Johnston provides a close reading of the play, and indicates how a phenomenological process can lead to uncovering aspects of the text for building the environment and the roles. Johnston points out, as the work by Ibsen is about a builder, it is particularly apt for this type of approach. He explores specific rehearsal techniques and questions that the actors might ask themselves, for example, in relation to Heidegger's notion of the Fourfold, that could be useful in preparing a production.

The final article by Kristina Hagström-Ståhl focuses on Hegel's exegesis of Sophocles' *Antigone* that has incited recent theatre scholars because of his paternalistic interpretation. Hagström-Ståhl suggests that there are moments in the play that Hegel and many others have overlooked regarding the relationship between Antigone and Ismene. In preparing for a future production of the play, Hagström-Ståhl employs the work of Bonnie Honig, Peggy Phelan, and Cecilia Sjöholm to argue that Ismene could be placed more centrally into the drama by recognizing her solidarity with and assistance to her sister. As Honig has suggested, Ismene could have committed the first burial act of their brother in secret to protect her sister from harm, but that unfortunately Antigone was caught in reburial of her brother. This interpretation goes against Hegel's dialectical approach of two equal protagonists (Antigone and Creon) unilaterally confronting each other, and it introduces a more nuanced representation of the two sisters as working together to achieve a desired end. Moreover, Ismene, who remains alive at the end of the play, normally disappears from the action, but Hagström-Ståhl provocatively asks what Ismene's role could be. In thinking about a forthcoming staging of *Antigone*, Hagström-Ståhl not only calls attention to the patriarchal discourse that has played such a dominating role in the philosophical and psychoanalytic interpretations of the play, but also suggests the possibility of a more radical interpretation focusing on the solidarity of the two sisters.

The articles in this issue demonstrate how ideas from continental philosophy help to illuminate certain aspects of theatre theory and practice. The concepts applied here -- *verfremdungseffekt* (Rokem), bio-performativity (Žukauskaitė),

field theory (Petrikas), aesthetic regime (Hollingshaus), public sphere (Linder), counter-memory (Radzobe), *communitas* (Amundsen), phenomenological approach (Johnston), and sororal affinity (Hagström-Ståhl) -- show the wide variety of possible strategies for deepening our understanding of the theatrical arena. At the same time, together, they indirectly inform the ongoing debate about the relationship between theatre and philosophy: whether, for example, theatre *and* philosophy are a natural combination of terms (such as “performance philosophy”) or whether they represent independent fields of enquiry that complement and inform each other but do not belong together in a single discipline. Martin Puchner (2013, p. 543), in reviewing the two, has provocatively argued, “What makes the study of theatre and philosophy interesting, even thrilling is the very fact that they [sic] two are so utterly and irreconcilably different.”

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