

Theatre and Displeasure *An Introduction*

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The matters of theatre and pleasure have a considerable body of research. In her seminal book, *L'Ecole du spectateur*, Anne Ubersfeld lists numerous sources of pleasure available for spectators in theatre: the pleasure of seeing and hearing, the pleasure of bricolage, the pleasure of memory, understanding, invention, transgression and so on.¹ Audience research shows that performance attendees are indeed motivated mainly by the possibility of enjoying emotions, entertainment and experiencing self-fulfilment.² Consequently, the idea of theatre as a pleasurable event has inspired many researchers and scholarly analyses. The pleasure, however, is made possible and highlighted by its opposite – in a curious compound, it is not possible if displeasure is absent. Providing the audience with the latter dates back to Aristotelian fear and pity. The unpleasant effects have inspired many artists, creating a rich and entangled history. In every period of theatre development, one can definitely find instances of an offended audience, be it Aristophanes and his comedies or Rodrigo García and his unrest-provoking pieces. For George Bernard Shaw, his “unpleasant plays” were such because “their dramatic power is used to force the spectator to face unpleasant facts.”³ The source of offence can also be theatre refusing to be “theatre”. This is

¹ Ubersfeld 1981, 330–42.

² Cuadrado & Mollà 2000.

³ Shaw, 30.

evident in Artaudian and Grotowskian theatre as well as in works by contemporary authors such as Romeo Castellucci, Milo Rau, and Angélica Liddell.

The current issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* traces negative theatrical experiences in the form, content, and context of contemporary theatre. The contributions are dedicated to the displeasure or discomfort caused by textual, performative, visual, and other dimensions of theatre production. The first two essays deal with displeasure caused by aesthetic means and strategies where displeasure becomes an integral part of the poetics of performance. In her essay, Kadri Liis Rääk explores tactile interaction and experiential engagement with art. Her analysis based on practice-based research aims to reveal how tactile encounters with artworks potentially disrupt conventional sensory hierarchies, and can provoke perceptual shifts and challenge normative ideologies. Touch, notably absent from the mainstream theatre experience, is highlighted as a provocative and essential element in creating an inclusive and layered sensory experience.

Tomaž Toporišič analyses the tactics of two innovative European theatre directors, known for their provocative and challenging style: Romeo Castellucci and Oliver Frlić. The author argues that displeasure works for both directors as a theatrical tool for political ends. Their productions tend to destabilize the spectator's vision of the world, whereas theatre becomes a specific producer of truth in Alain Badiou's sense.

The following essays explore a displeasure that is contextual: the memory of unsavoury historical developments, criminal activities within the theatre milieu, or external trauma that needs healing. Thomas Rosendal Nielsen analyses the indirect complicity of the present-day White European in the atrocities of colonialism. His reading of the 2019 performance *Dark Noon* by the project theatre Fix&Foxy reflects the links between colonial oppression and the entertainment industry.

In their essay, Carmen Pelegrinelli and Laura Lucia Parolin bring back traumatic experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their research suggests Applied Theatre is a way for communities to heal their traumas. The community of health professionals from Turin, Italy, and addressing the trauma of violent early experiences of the pandemic, are a case in point.

An essay by Ann Werner and Isak Benyamine concludes the thematic section. The scholars

discuss silence about power, sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination in performing arts in Sweden. Building on feminist theory, the authors address sexual harassment and its negative effects, challenging the myth of suffering as a proper way to create art.

Essays by theatre researchers in the Nordic and Baltic countries and all scholars writing about theatre and performance related to these countries are presented in the open section of the journal. Jaak Tomberg and Joosep Susi, dwelling on Fredric Jameson's notion of affect, analyse two Estonian productions: Renate Keerd's *Pure Mind* (Tartu New Theatre, 2013) and Karl Saks' *Planet Alexithymia* (Kanuti Gildi SAAL, 2020). The authors explore the bodily presence of the audience, which is being put forward and favoured by the productions over language and meaning in two very different ways. In the final essay of the issue, Mischa Twitchin addresses the cultural and political implications of "mnemonic care" (Mihaela Mihai). His study of a recent play by the Estonian-Russian theatre maker Julia Aug, *Mum, Is Our Cat Also a Jew?* points to the capability of theatre to offer a particular form of civic space where the past and history can potentially be remembered differently.

In the book section of the journal curated by Riina Oruaas, three reviews of recent books are published: *Reconstructing Shakespeare in the Nordic Countries: National Revival and Interwar Politics, 1870–1940* edited by Nely Keinänen and Per Sivefors (2023), *Life in the Posthuman Condition. Critical Responses to the Anthropocene* edited by S. E. Wilmer and Audronė Žukauskaitė (2023), and *Performing The Eighteenth Century: Theatrical Discourses, Practices and Artefacts*, edited by Magnus Tessing Schneider and Meike Wagner (2023).

References

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