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Storytelling in contemporary theatre - Performative storytelling as therapy, critique, or search for community

One of the constants in elliptic theatre history can be found in the cyclicity of performative trends, which repeatedly move from emphasis on visual/artistic, to text/word, from aestheticism to sheer brutality of representation and back again; these tendencies always follow the broader social atmosphere, which, among other, seeks out its (current) identity in styles of general communication or ways of launching information in relation to artistic representations. Can a connection be drawn between recent storytelling trends in contemporary theatre and the absence of storytelling in today's social/informational order? The answer is a decisive yes. It seems that the increase in storytelling in contemporary performative practices speaks of at least two things: first, of a (almost imperative) call for concentrated listening to fellow humans, and second, of a criticism regarding our current informational age (blogs, tweets, short messages), which fragments analytical narrations/stories, interrupts and endangers their monumental nature. According to Kearny, "our contemporary phenomenology admits to storytelling being the one that marks, organises and explains the chronological experience, as well as to the fact that each historical process can only be acknowledged in as much as it is able to be retold" (Kearney, 2016: 117). Ricoeur notices something similar: "The importance of human existence lies not in the power to change and dominate the world we live in, but in the ability to be remembered and renewed through storytelling discourse" (ibid: 122). Film director Brian de Palma also expressed a similar position: "People don't see the world in front of their eyes, until it takes on in a storytelling form." The desire and drive to establish a story or a storytelling context lies deep among the human archetypes. Even when looking at a completely static image, explains Abott, for instance a painting, our storytelling perception kicks in and we explain the painting as a narration or a story. Our psychological reason, which is almost a reflex, makes us endow static, solid images with a storytelling time. As Abott writes in more detail, as we observe a static image, we strive not only to comprehend what it represents, but also what happened before (what is the story behind it). The image effect depends on the effort of the viewer to place what she had seen in a chronological and spatial frame (Abott, 2002: 11). The phenomenology of perception and interpretation at this point is to a certain degree definitely related to

storytelling in performative practices, as the artistic act in both cases titillates our conscious and encourages our “storytelling patterns”, where we can also find the inclination to fill certain segments (ones that have been left out or not visualised), which mainly speaks of the viewer’s intention to co-create or complement the story.

Irish (contemporary) dramatics offers another helpful focus, as it is especially inclined to choose (story)telling formats within dramatic structure, while often the entire dramatic structure is designed as a series of storytellings. This is most definitely a consequence of the fact that Irish theatre stems from folk art of storytelling in pubs and around fireplaces. Martin McDonagh and Conor McPherson, for instance, included telling of exciting, even weird (yet still believable) stories in their plays, which undoubtedly contributed greatly to their success. Their characters are given ample space to tell their stories and use them to express or give insight to their loneliness, pain, or anxiety, although the cathartic effect is often absent. Storytelling often presents as an indispensable element of Irish plays. This past season we saw *Little Gem*, a play by Irish playwright Elaine Murphy in Slovenian theatre (SLG Celje), structured as three cyclical or interflowing monologues by three women of different generations.

Story(telling) in contemporary theatre

What exactly is the role of stories in theatre in the time of advanced technologies and limitless possibilities in stage design? Undoubtedly a return to raw primordial communication with inside facing imaginative world, where experience is not acted out (or is acted out in a minimal, symbolic way), but instead detailed in words, where word takes on the role of a key performative instrument instead of the previously held auxiliary role. The storyteller’s/actor’s character is reflected in the style of telling her own or someone else’s story, her presentation of the story offers an often vulnerable insight into her thinking-emotional structure, which few are able or willing to share with the audience. Today, storytelling in contemporary theatre seems more intimate than ever, as it inhabits our conscience with its potential permanence or epic quality, it slowly seeps into it, someone else’s story becomes our own: the words spoken bring out associations and descriptions awake imagination - this is why storytelling has such an intimate effect. Because of its dependence on our readiness to “co-create”, what better stuff than the most personal, hidden or forgotten personal content there is for each of us to fill the interim (often omitted) spaces or absence of materialised situations offered by actors and actresses through their storytelling. Once storytelling takes centre stage in a performance, the focus on performer’s/actor’s voice intensifies, allowing for a specific relationship between

her body and voice to form. “The sound of voice as an aura surrounding a body, whose reality is its word,” writes Lehmann, “the voice is defined as actor’s most important instrument, it is about ‘the voice becoming’ the whole body” (Lehmann, 2002: 186).

In the time of planning my lecture I accidentally and most appropriately came upon the performance *Petty Thefts* in Stara Pošta (Nova pošta, Mladinsko Theatre), which employed structure and content to relate all the basic parameters of storytelling in contemporary theatre. Actors and actresses presented a succession of five (half-hour-long) confessional stories, based on the motives of their own intimate experiences (childhood, growing up, family relations), facing traumas (abuse, grieving), personal relation to societal anomalies (patriarchy, harassment in the workplace, issues with precarious working conditions)¹ – and, most crucially - everything was based on precisely thought out manipulative rotation between facts and fiction. Since the stories ranged from casual anecdotes and all the way to real-life traumatic experiences, it was that much harder to spot the line between “true” and “false” in the mix. Not that it was essential to do so, but the format of the performative event gently asked the audience to develop a critical distance and compassion at the same time.

Regardless of whether all of the personal confessions were true or not - they were believable.² The actors’ expressive apparatus was narrowed down and concentrated to word and storytelling only, there were minimal stage and physical interventions, the basic note underlining individual stories was not stage decor or sound/music, but rather the actor’s relation to her (own) story and her sheer presence (also the concept of presence as explained by Fischer-Lichte), one hundred percent presence and connection with the audience, placed in direct proximity. Their story matured into a portrait of themselves: their storytelling as representation of their privacy established a moment of “duplication” of stage identity, which swung from private figure to theatre character or the other way around, first the fictitious character and then the real figure. We are actually talking about a complex relationship which cannot be mutually set apart, as the first-person narration by definition entails entering a role, eliminating any chance of single-layered identity in advance. What happened in this performance (with the close proximity of performers and the audience) was not materialisation or physical interpretation of events, but rather their description, depiction, reliving the experience verbally, but also a critical reflection. Storytelling as central performative instrument took over the role of protagonist/antagonist, and the crudeness of storytelling was used as a way to replace stage props, lighting changes and sound; storytelling symbolised all the tools mentioned in its own

1 Ena temeljnih teatroloških predpostavk oziroma prepričanj je, da je vsaka »avtentičnost inherentno dramatična« (Clark v Jeffers, 2006: 3).

2 »Prvenstvena naloga pesništva ni to, da govori o dejstvih, o faktičnosti, o manifestni, razviti realnosti, kakor domneva realistična teorija umetnosti, temveč o tem, kar bi se v določenih okoliščinah utegnilo zgoditi in kar je možno glede na verjetnost ali pa nujnost« (Kalan, 1991: 6).

language, its dynamics, developmental dramaturgy and suspense of a potential redeeming end (which in most cases was intentionally absent). An extremely important role was undoubtedly played by the gesture making sure the actors and actresses stared the audience right in the eyes throughout the storytelling and even reacted to the audience's reactions (comments, facial expressions).

Intimate – personal – documentary

The essence of Petty Thefts performance took place in the minds of the audience, yet only due to the superbly formed storytelling structures which differed from one actor to the next, in accordance with their personalities. As all of their stories were based exclusively on themselves and their own lives, the risks involved with representation of adaptation of content and actuality were understandably greater. The problem of “actuality” has become increasingly alarming in the recent years with the fast increase in the presence of virtual media and the so called post factual society, which has made practically every documentary (sub)genre a questionable practice and evading effect of total belief by default. Another problematic segment is the form of general media representation itself, which performative art has sadly also fallen victim to. As Kearney notes: “It seems that the exclusive vulgarisation of intimacy and privacy in pop culture - from TV talk shows to numerous internet chat groups - is draining the basic human need to say something important in a narrative structured way” (p. 20).

Testimony as a subgenre of storytelling is a common performative procedure within documentary theatre genres. As a permanent and key segment of representation, testimony generally appears in the frame of theatre performances about the war in former Yugoslavia in the 90s, which came to light around 2010 (or roughly 15 years after the war). Performative storytelling of one's own experience of war is considered an extremely complex procedure, as memory of actual incidents in the time of war and personal tragedies are always deformed, firstly by emotions which quickly relativize the memory - and subsequently the testimony/storytelling itself - and secondly by the (subconscious) effect of mass media. Despite all the traps and challenges posed by documentary form of first-person accounts, one needs to recognise in this format the surplus value of adequate “recording” of a specific chapter in history, which should still be (although sometimes it is not) unaffected by the given political and cultural-political influences (testimonies often reach deep inside, in the heart of experience, in the human centre and vulnerability, and often refuse to heed politics or any other objective circumstances). Personal experience/narration is “adapted” in as much as the nature of memory (mostly traumatic) and adaptation to performative structure require it to be, yet this “construction” nevertheless can't be compared to the de/reconstruction of memory and recording done by the media, politics and power.

The complementary elements of ethics and aesthetics in testimonies join in the synthesis brought about by the ethical necessity to turn to the aesthetics of storytelling. The audience needs to not only be intellectually aware of the horrors of history; they must also experience the horror of this suffering, as if they were actually present in the moment. "Fiction gives eyes to the appalled viewer," wrote Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur in Kearney, 2016: 62). This is precisely what convinces Kearney that "compassion is the key function of storytelling memory". "Compassion," he continues, "doesn't necessarily mean escapism, but rather a form of identification with as large a number of fellow humans as possible - both active and suffering - in order to become part of the common moral sense (*sensus communis*)" (ibid: 63).

Problematic side of documentary storytelling

Although performative storytelling about certain important historical events must be understood as a necessary point of their affirmation and empowerment of their victims, the storytelling principle, as we already mentioned, brings its own problems to the table. These problems are rooted in both neuroscientific and social-media discourses. Regardless of the desire on the part of the storyteller to "objectively" relate her (traumatic) experience, storytelling always involves a combination of personal and collective memory factors, interconnections and overlapping of personal and cultural processes. "Traces and fragments of past events become part of memory by selection, altering, organisation, giving meaning and finding their place in an adequate narration - this makes them easy to fall victim to ideology" (Kuljić, 2012: 89). Each personal performative storytelling is integrated in the context of collective memory as perceived by the majority, in order to "preserve collective memory it is not enough to simply state testimonies, as individual memory must be constantly adjusted to the memory of others, so enough points of contact remain to allow for these events to be reconstructed on common ground" (Halbwachs and Starc, 2003: 42).

To put it more simply: no matter how prudently objective a personal story is, it is always practically impossible to discount the effect of numerous factors: emotional, ideological, political, cultural, and, last but not least, artistic (form of event which subsequently also defines the content). Yet the narration nevertheless shows immense potential in preserving stable forms of identities (both individual and collective), which have managed to slip into an extremely endangered position in the time of modern informational relativity and post-modern fragmentation. Performative testimonies which stem and oscillate in different rhythms on the (post) war themes or other socially critical events, need to be supported by a deliberate aesthetic stance, since, in Kearney's words, "historical atrocities must be served by aesthetics (aisthesis - perception from the senses), equally strong as with historical triumphs - perhaps even stronger, if it should compete for attention among the general public".

Performances created during and after the Balkan wars in the 90s often represent or relate wartime experience through testimonies, first-hand experiences, intimate confessions. Such forms which could also be understood as a recognisable and prevailing format of documentary genre (theatre verbatim), and they can often be unintentionally, despite good intentions, misled or infused with exaggerated subjectivity of understanding and experiencing war. Seventeen years after the war ended, when state history was written anew, a new culture of remembrance has emerged, which has turned notions of war, influence of political power, military strategies and international challenges into freshly formed myths of a new nation. "The principal problem lies in the inability, incapacity, powerlessness to remember certain events and later even put them into words, describe and analyze them" (Gluhovic, 2013: 158). Such are the side effects of traumatic events, where those involved refuse to relive their memories of traumas, as for some it can be extremely difficult to call to mind in the light of life they live today.

Inclusion of fascination over war images, narratives of war and other artistic depictions of war all come from the fact that "the horrible comes from the same place as the admirable. The monstrous, more terrible than fear, should be found right at the source of art, despite "art as imitation and art as imagination being joined by catharsis, purification and relaxation" (Hribar, 1990: 147, *Sveta igra sveta*). Hribar continues: "Terror is only beautiful as transferred terror: drawn, narrated, described. The beauty is in the drawing, narrating and describing the terror. In short: beauty itself, beauty not drawn, narrated or described, is insufferable beauty. Beauty is more terrible than fear" (ibid: 149). Storytelling as a consequence of traumatic experience firstly speaks of relation between mental and physical, between pain and word. Physical pain possesses no voice, and when it finally acquires one, it starts telling stories. Traumatic narratives therefore include a certain "dual narration, they oscillate between the crisis of death and the crisis of life; between a story of the unbearable nature of a certain event and a story of the unbearable nature of surviving this event" (Scarry, 2009: 7).

War and other traumatic events as event and experiential extremes, and at the same time as an agenda of a specific performance, find their solution in relating their own truth and experience in first-hand expression - narrating the experience rather than its physical reconstruction. A series of testimonies creates a dramatic form which doesn't present a major novelty or groundbreaking stage aesthetics from the aspect of theatre science³, but it still manages to enforce its power and communicativeness elsewhere: in total surrender and belief in the performative event as the media channel which will enable the intimate position

3 Pojem »verbatim« gledališče (»dobesedno« gledališče) je prvi zasnoval in uveljavil Derek Paget, in sicer v času intenzivnih gledaliških raziskav v 60-ih letih prejšnjega stoletja v Britaniji (skupaj z Johnom Cheesemanom, Chrisom Honerjem, Ronyjem Robinsonom, Davidom Thackerjem) (Gibson, 2011: 3).

(experience of war) to first reach the audience (intimate catharsis), and later the general public (social awareness). Personal testimonies turn into political gestures because of their chosen form, and even more because of their content.

Jernej Lorenci's new epic-narrative theatre

“While epic theatre changes the representation of presented fictional processes and aims to remove and distance the viewer in order to turn him into an expert, professional, political arbiter, the post-epic forms of narration are all about emphasizing the personal and not so much about the presence of the narrator relating the story. This is done in order to enhance the auto-referential intensity of this connection: for proximity in the distance and not for distancing of the one in proximity” (Lehmann, 2003: 134). Despite the fact that this was not theatre director Jernej Lorenci's first encounter with the epic genre (comp. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 2005), his staging of **The Iliad** (2016) has brought on his new directorial period, which is heavily influenced by none other than staging of epic texts or longer literary sources, which he presents with the help of storytelling methods (apart from the Iliad he directed *The Bible*, *Visoška kronika*, *Kingdom of Heaven*), or tactfully introduces storytelling passages in his own projects (*Ubu Roy*, *Learned Ladies*, *Love*, *Midsummer Night's Dream* ...).

The staging of the Iliad was influenced by the decision not to place the epic in a form, an image, but firstly and foremost reference it through its vast content and beauty of the spoken word. The staging places a spoken word, diction and narration at the forefront, with the intention to make Homer's epic achieve the highest possible level of comprehension and focus, while at the same time approach the primal communication of the refined pronunciation which should be able to use mostly words (and less the vivid situational staging) to pave its way toward drama. Since the very start, the passionate mien of the entire cast foretells a distance toward performing the epic, which is apparent not only in interrupted psychologies of individual characters, but also in the torn apart dynamics of communication among characters and the course of events. On one hand the staging stuck to the ancient context, cast performers in the function of rhapsodists, “drowned” in masses of text, and subjected to strict consistency of verse, while on the other it kept shattering this principle by a decisively alienating performative stage language (impoverished and reduced to the bare essentials), which somehow pierced and enabled the viewer to enjoy a smooth (self-evident) flow into the epic narrative.

Lorenci shows even greater directorial “purity” and lack of unnecessary stage ballast in **The Bible** (SNG Drama Ljubljana, 2017), or rather a selection of stories from the Bible, which the cast narrates and sometimes symbolically acts out. In order to encompass as wide a spectre of identification as possible, the project utilises diverse biblical themes, from those looking for the impulse in the body and sensuality (Song of Songs), to biblical teachings (Book of Job), critique of parvenuism and usurping authority (Ezekiel), and a series of psalms as performance numbers, emphasizing the individual and his personal relation to what is being said. In accordance with not only the (megalomaniac) literary material, but also with directorial principles, it is obvious that Lorenci leans toward monumentality of storytelling, which at the same time establishes an equally almighty quality of time. To take time, to open time, to pay time tribute and honour, to stretch time, to split, erase, invent “our” time, even if temporary, but that more real.

The general stance of the cast thus comes from the principle of community (all for one, one for all), which is aided by the constant presence of the entire cast on stage. They narrate/perform and at the same time observe, encircle the inner epicentre of action, almost establishing a “play within a play”, they are observers and co-storytellers/co-creators of individual biblical episodes, which unravel in the heart of the room, among them or maybe just because of them. Some of them remain in the field of storytelling, ensuring the epic quality and mostly controlled, disciplined diction, because this is after all a key parameter they manage, it is their central mean of expression. Additional physical dimensions appear here and there in the form of choreography, which layers an additional parallel non-verbal language on top of the storytelling, while more intensive role of the body and its primordality plays out at the end, when several actors’ bodies end up pushed to elements of butoh and often naked transform into a mythological image, symbol, unspeakable, a substance due to open, layer out both the picturesqueness and atmosphere of the performance.

Lorenci’s third recent staging comes from the idea of coupling stage longevity (four hours) with achieving drama through storytelling. It is an adaptation of the novel **Visoška kronika** (SNG Drama Ljubljana, 2018), determined by three historical themes; prosecution of witches, prosecution of protestants, and the 30-year war. Once again, *Visoška kronika* chooses storytelling genre as its principal performative means of expression. Static condition and minimalistic approach to stage props and stage design bring it to the brink of a reading performance, accompanied by a refined, rich instrumental inserts. *Visoška kronika* is not a typical “dramatisation” of a novel, but rather a peculiar transfer of literature to performance, often crossing into simultaneous illustration of events, while the central storytelling character remains fluid and cyclically constantly rotates among other actors and actresses, helping the performance remain gender, age and

space ambiguous. The performance could almost be characterised as a “literal” novel to stage transfer, and if the content itself might seem anachronistic from today’s point of view, it is the directorial approach which infuses it with modernity - precisely because of the freedom from gender and biological age norms, which the form of stage narration offers and enables. Let’s conclude this contribution with the definition that “the principle of negation plays a crucial role in post-dramatic theatre; theatre becomes a space for narrative acts. We are often uncertain of whether we are witnessing a theatre performance, or rather a narration on the performance on offer. In this point, theatre crosses over among stretched narrations and related episodes of dialogue. Description and interest become key components in typical act of personal remembrance and storytelling on the part of the actors” (Lehmann, 133).

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