

## The Condition of Instability: Performative Turn and Contemporary Lithuanian Theatre

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the new strategies of representation that emerged in contemporary Lithuanian theatre under the influence of socio-cultural transformations that can be attributed to the umbrella notion of “performative turn.” With the help of three case studies, the article investigates how certain codes of “aesthetics of performativity” as described by Erika Fischer-Lichte are circulating in contemporary Lithuanian theatre, what processes and agencies facilitate their emergence, and what possibilities as well as challenges for performative practices they entail.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7592/methis.v22i27/28.18445>

**Keywords:** disability in theatre, documentary theatre, experience-based theatre, embodied life-stories, Lithuanian theatre, performative turn, performativity, participatory performance

A major issue that the analysis of the aesthetic development of Lithuanian theatre of recent decades needs to address is the definition of the transforming principles of representation and their relation to the developments in contemporary socio-cultural landscapes as well as theatre cultures in Europe. The futuristic narratives of the impact of “digital turn” on the ontological, aesthetic and institutional character of theatre art dominate the most recent debates about the condition of (post-)pandemic Lithuanian theatre. Having that in mind, the question whether contemporary Lithuanian theatre is radically transforming, or on the contrary reproducing and continuing the established forms of artistic language and entrenched models of interpretations of reality, is becoming even more pressing.

Undoubtedly, the transformations of Lithuanian theatre of the last decades – whether named performative, post-postmodern, post-dramatic or participatory – are most visible in the reconfiguration of the main structural elements of scenic practice: image, text, body and space. This shift, in turn, is connected to and can be best articulated with the shifting notions of representation and perception in contemporary cultural and critical theory. The article discusses the new strategies of representation that emerged in contemporary Lithuanian theatre under the influence of socio-cultural transformations that can be attributed to the umbrella notion of “performative turn.” With the help of three case studies (the immersive performance *Republic* by Polish theatre director Lukasz Twarkowsky, the documentary production by Jonas Tertelis *The Green Meadow* and the performance *Superpowers*

by theatre director Karolina Žernytė (Theatre of Senses) the article investigates how certain codes of “aesthetics of performativity” as described by Erika Fischer-Lichte are circulating in contemporary Lithuanian theatre, what processes and agencies facilitate their emergence and what possibilities as well as challenges for performative practices they entail.

### **From anti-theatrical sentiment to performative turn**

“Performative turn” can be generally described as paradigmatic transdisciplinary shift where performance as a form of knowledge making is confronted with representational forms of knowledge. Tantamount to a tectonic shift in the humanities and social sciences, performative turn encompasses various theoretical aspects and is developed, argued or critiqued by many scholars. In her seminal article “The Politics of Discourse: Performativity meets Theatricality” Janelle Reinelt (2001) summarises the usage of three terms – performance, performative and performativity – at the same time highlighting their interconnectivity as well as delineating their cumulative effect on the rise of performative turn.

The first term, “performance,” according to Reinelt (2002, 2021), is linked with what came to be known as “anti-theatrical sentiment” embedded in practices of modern avant-garde theatre as well as performance art. Emphasizing “singularity of live performance, its immediacy and its non-repeatability” (Reinelt 2002, 201) avant-garde theatre and performance artists revolted against referentiality, logocentrism, inauthenticity and the authoritarian nature of traditional theatre practices. According to Reinelt, “This understanding of performance leads to valuing the processes of signification in performance, and to radical scepticism about the presence or truth of any metaphysical claim within performance” (Reinelt 2002, 202).

The meaning of another notion – “performative” – is related to the field of performance studies that initially emerged as a cross-disciplinary approach towards various performative aspects of culture. Firstly, this approach encompasses anthropological objects of analyses – cultural performances, such as rituals, carnivals, sports, games, etc, that together with theatre and performance art form a plateau of performative cultural forms. Secondly, various aspects of the post-industrial society of spectacle, such as social roles, political stagings, theatres of history, communication dramas, the theatricalization of everyday life, position performance as a model for various forms of social interaction. The famous distinction proposed by Richard Schechner between what “is” performance and looking at something “as” performance, means that “any behaviour, event, action, or thing can be studied “as” performance and can be analyzed in terms of doing, behaving and showing” (Schechner 2002, 32). This all-encompassing notion of “as performance”

expands the field of “performative” almost infinitely. As Philip Auslander pointedly remarks, performance in the context of performance studies functions as a “paradigmatic starting point,” which “can function as a lens through which to examine almost anything” (Auslander 2008, 2–3).

The third important influence, or, so to say, the third elephant on the back of which the universe of performative turn is foregrounded, is the poststructuralist notion of “performativity.” The works of J. L. Austin, John R. Searle and their critique by Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler together with poststructuralist and postmodern critique of the notion of representation (sign, meaning, object/subject) developed further the idea of “performativity” as a constant deferral of meaning, the constructed nature of all kinds of knowledge, and radical autonomy of representation. The notions of performativity of gender, race, identity, law, knowledge had an unquestionable impact on performance theory and practice. According to Reinelt, the response was isolation of “performative processes in order to subject them to a de-representation and a close scrutiny for lingering traces of the theological stage – the text-dominated, logocentric stage of European theatre and culture” (Reinelt 2002, 205). In this sense, performativity is connected to postmodern theory and postmodern theatre aesthetics.

While pointing towards intrinsic similarities between performance and the postmodern, Nick Kaye observes that “perhaps performance may be thought of as a primarily postmodern mode,” for “the condition of ‘performance’ may be read, in itself, as tending to foster or look forward to postmodern contingencies and instabilities” (Kaye 1994, 22–23). Indeed, postmodernism in theatre can be defined as a shift from hierarchic relationships to heterogeneity of textual, visual, aural elements. Postmodern performance is self-reflective, it deconstructs its own foundations and acknowledges the discursive nature of the actor’s body, perceiving subject and representation, thus disclosing their embedded performativity as “a constant state of flux or transformation that is unstable and difficult to repeat” (Salter 2010, 27).

In conclusion, the performative turn initiated by modernist impulses of historical avant-garde performances and performance art practices transferred into postmodern territory via cultural studies and post-structuralist theories and at present occupies the discursive area of post-postmodern realities. Present academic debates about “performative” encompass science and technology studies (STS), arguing for an antirepresentational stance in various areas of scientific or even non-human activities. According to Chris Salter, “what performance as method/worldview suggests is that there is not a reality pre-given before one’s experience but rather that the world is enacted or actively performed anew” (Salter 2010, 26). As authors of *Performing the Digital: Performance Studies and Performances in*

*Digital Cultures* argue “human bodies and technological apparatuses enter into a relation of performativity, therefore ‘performative turn’ in digital cultures urgently needs to be analysed and conceptualised” (Leeker, Schipper and Beyes 2017, 11).

It is obvious that in the situation, then, “performative turn not only highlights performance as artistic practice, but theatre as a model for various social, scientific, human and non-human acts of post-industrial society,” the question about its impact on contemporary theatre practice and aesthetic transformation becomes extremely important (Salter 2010, 21). In other words, when every aspect of human and non-human behaviour can be understood as performance, how does theatre art react and respond to this condition of heightened performativity.

In her seminal book *Transformative Power of Performance: a New Aesthetics*, Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that it is of the utmost importance to bring the debates about “performative” back into the realm of arts, particularly theatre and performance art practice (Fischer-Lichte 2008). She observes that the key aspect of performative turn in art, music, literature, or theatre can be described as “the transformation from a work of art into an event” (23). According to Fischer-Lichte, “Instead of creating works of art, artists increasingly produce events which involve not just themselves but also the observers, listeners, and spectators. Thus, the conditions for art production and reception changed in a crucial aspect” (22). In a recent contribution to the debate about performative theatre, Annamaria Cascetta similarly defines a list of major characteristics of performative theatre – non-hierarchical systems of representation, collective engagement of artist and community, author-actors, audience involvement, etc. – that can be summed up as a major shift in the modes of production and reception in theatre (Cascetta 2021).

Indeed, the question about transformation of production and perception processes in contemporary theatre as well as various forms of recalibration of its main elements (text, image, body, sound) and spectatorial practises lies at the heart of the most important debates in theatre studies, be it post-dramatic, postmodern or performative theatre. In the Lithuanian context these debates first came into the focus of theatre research and criticism almost two decades ago, when postmodern strategies of constructing meaning and perception became increasingly visible on the Lithuanian theatre stage.

At the end of the 20th century the performative in Lithuanian theatre discourse was understood as a binary part of the performative / logocentric dichotomy. The constancy of the text and the homogeneity of the audience that interprets were two central assumptions on which traditional literary theatre was based. The specific character of relations between the dramatic text and stage imagery, usually described as re-writing of drama text by performative tools, where literary text still

remains the primary source of meaning, became the trademark of Lithuanian stage directing.

There were several attempts at building a performative theatre in Lithuania even before the 21st century: Benas Šarka's Gliukai theatre and the Miracle theatre of Vega Vaičiūnaitė. In the context of Lithuanian theatre practice, the productions by Šarka and Miracle have opened up new possibilities for the existence of body and place independent of the dramatic text. Body and space (place) are two important elements of theatrical structure and fundamental factors that form a subjective identity. The creative activities of Šarka maintained performative and changing corporeality and the body as performance, while the projects by Vaičiūnaitė sustained the understanding of the place as a mobile and dynamic text, revived and made sensible through performative action (Staniškytė 2019, 99).

During the first decades of the 21st century, the changing relationship between text and image, word and action, meaning and effect, repetition and event-ness, acting and non-acting became more and more visible on the Lithuanian stage. These relations have gradually been turning non-hierarchical, their dominant patterns have often been shifting even within the framework of one performance towards a more image-centric or action-centric position. It is possible to state that the turn from logocentric to performative theatre had been gradually taking place on the Lithuanian theatre stage, particularly in productions of the young generation of theatre artists as well as within the framework of international collaborations.

### **Techo feedback loop: the (im)possible theatre of *Republic***

*Republic* – the first immersive and durational performance in Lithuania created by Polish theatre artist Łukasz Twarkowski and his team in 2020 for the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre – was described by its creators as a new performative experience of space and time. In the Lithuanian theatre milieu Twarkowski was already known for his production of *Lokis* (playwright Anka Herbut, 2017, LNDR). In the Lithuanian theatre context, *Lokis* was exceptional due to its autonomous, self-contained, and detached visuality, fragmented narrative, choreographic ambience, non-acting techniques, heterogeneous structuring of theatrical elements and decentered modeling of the stage space.

De-hierarchisation of theatrical means in *Lokis* reduced the authority of logos, producing multidimensional narratives that proved to be quite difficult to grasp even for a Lithuanian audience that had been for a long time treated with allusiveness of metaphorical representations. Nevertheless, one of the many enthusiastic interpreters of this performance, playwright and theatre critic Dovilė Statkevičienė proclaimed in her review: "The main driver of this performance is not dramaturgy but rather

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aural and visual constructs, which constitute a flawless audiovisual architecture [ . . . ]. Finally, we can talk about theatre as ambience, as dynamics of stage structure, as scenic landscape” (Statkevičienė 2017). Even though in Lithuanian theatre criticism *Lokis* was interpreted mainly as a form of post-dramatic performance, many of its features come quite close to the definition of performative theatre.

The second production of Łukasz Twarkowski – *Republic* – came even closer to performative aesthetics. Twarkowski described his performance as a composition of shifting multidimensional narratives, which should be experienced sensually and subjectively by every audience member. To rephrase Fischer-Lichte, Twarkowski constructed open-structured environments as “conditions for the experiment” in order to explore the specific function, condition, and course of interaction between actors and audiences. Precisely “the feedback loop as a self-referential, autopoietic system enabling a fundamentally open, unpredictable process,” described by Fischer-Lichte as the main characteristics of performative aesthetics became the defining principle of Twarkowski’s *Republic* (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 39).

The initial thematic idea of *Republic* – the building of an alternative community that would exist beyond conventional social and economic structures, becomes the cornerstone for its infrastructural and formal model. In the hangar of Vilnius Film Cluster the production team erected multi-spatial constructions, modeled after the



Figure 1. *Republic* (2020, director Łukasz Twarkowski, LNNT). Photo by Andrej Vasilenko / LNNT.

house in the woods that the creative team inhabited during the initial stages of experiment while devising *Republic*. This installation became the situated mechanism, an engineered environment for community building rituals of performance. Audience members were able to freely roam the space with two view platforms, a small kitchen, solar lab-room, lounge, confession room, dance floor – stage, chill zone, small stage, sauna, shower, small waterfall, two bars. Each audience member received instructions and was warned several times not to try “running around trying to see everything.” Confronted with the notification that it is impossible to see everything that is happening in *Republic*, audience members could freely choose what they wanted to see, what stories to connect or disconnect from, and at what points in the six-hour performance they wish to remain spectators or to engage as participants – members of the emerging Republic.

Construction of a particular community in *Republic* is enabled not only by a specific space configuration that provokes multidirectional nomadism of the spectators; the creation of communality requires mutual acts and joint performances. According to Fischer-Lichte, “the creation of a community out of actors and spectators based on their bodily co-presence plays a key role in generating the feedback loop” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 51). In *Republic* the common cultural performance that integrates audiences and performers within theatre production is rave. In the beginning of *Republic* Twarkowsky addresses the audience with promise: “I hope we will dance together at some point.” The creators of performance offer synesthetic experience on the dancefloor to the audience members as a means of being together and sharing experience.

Indeed, the main trope of *Republic* is reconstruction, sharing or rather engineering of the experience. A group of actors, together with other creators of the performance, have spent several months living in the house in the woods while discussing various topical issues: climate change, basic income, political and social tensions in society and utopian visions of alternative communities for the future. They also organised rave parties and played DJ sets. In *Republic* they want to reconstruct that “primary” reality, at the same time self-reflectively raising questions about the (im)possibility of generating common experience in theatre.

One of the actors utters this question during the performance: if you want to reconstruct the situation of the “original group experiment,” how can you share the experience by the means of performance? Particularly if that experience is subjective and difficult to articulate. Can you build a model for generating experience, a machine that would re-construct situations and mediate stories, ideas, and feelings? And if theatre can be interpreted as such a machine, why it is not always working? *Republic* self-reflexively questions and tests the very basis at the heart of per-

formative aesthetics, it feeds on the tension between impossibility and urgency to reproduce and share the experience in theatre or, on the broader scale, the (im)possibility of representing reality.

Utopias are fragile and unstable, especially in the fragmented world of permanent crisis. Therefore *Republic* seems to suggest that utopias can be imagined and felt rather than narrated and rationalised – it is an event rather than a thing in itself, process, performance rather than fixed definition. This stance embedded in *Republic* confirms the notion expressed by Karen Barad, that “agency is a matter of intra-acting: it is an enactment, and not something that someone has” (Barad 2007, 235). Indeed, the agency in *Republic* is embedded in movement, in performance. *Republic* exhibits this anti-representational stance very boldly: actors and spectators move through space, fragmented narratives overlap, recorded and live images alternate on screens, selected fragments of reality are being reconstructed, techno loops overflow the space – there is no narrative to follow but rather the ambience of the event to immerse oneself in.

By subverting, fragmenting and (re)constructing the structural elements (bodies, spaces, text, image, sound) of performance, Twarkowski strives for active communication and aims to challenge traditional modes of perception by forcing the spectator to co-create the meaning of *Republic*. According to Fischer-Lichte, in performative aesthetics “what applies to the feedback loop’s autopoiesis in general also applies to the generation of meaning: everyone contributes to it and is influenced by it but no one controls it” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 154). The distinction between performance and reality in *Republic* is blurred, and any hierarchies of difference between original and copy, spatial and temporal co-ordinates, live presence and recorded versions, acting and non-acting are disrupted. The linearity of a given system of signification is disturbed, thus creating new dissonant patterns of meaning. “It thus becomes difficult to speak of producers and recipients. [. . .] Through their actions and behavior, the actors and spectators constitute elements of the feedback loop, which in turn generates the performance itself” (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 50).

Indeed, the performative multiplicity of *Republic* offers spectators one of the major roles in the theatrical production. He or she no longer needs to decipher the visual subtext of the *mise-en-scène*, to synchronise it with the imaginary or real dramatic text or emphatically follow the psychological line of the character. Audience members can try to thrust a tangled body of the performance into a more or less comprehensible story or use the elements offered on stage to produce an experience of event, an agency of movement. You can repeat the structure of the situation and architectonics of space in *Republic*, but you will not be able to repeat the experience of its flow – it will be different every time for each spectator. *Republic*



is a performance-event, not so much concerned with authenticity as modern performance art events but rather with inter-active agency of performative. This liberation of multiplicity may consequently be interpreted as both a constructive process revealing positive aspects of cultural otherness and a destructive disruption of the totalitarian structures, including the totality of the artistic production itself.

### **Performing authenticity or taking control: embodied life stories and aesthetic mediation**

Another important area of impact of performative aesthetics is acting, or relations between performer and role in theatre as well as in any performative situation. If performative turn can be defined as a shift from representational forms of knowledge to performative ones, questions of embodiment and presence come into focus in theatre arts, forcing us to rethink anew the relations between representation and presence, repetition and authenticity. If everything that we do can be interpreted as "restored behaviour" what should acting in theatre look like? If performative acts construct our bodies and identities, what constitutes the self onstage? Subsequently, do we really need a mediating presence of professional actors to tell someone's story, or can maybe only first-person narratives secure authentic experience in theatre? These questions connected to the notions of performativity come into focus in an emerging number of productions of contemporary Lithuanian theatre.

„Tired of acting? Come to theatre" – that was the slogan of the Sirenos international theatre festival in 2014. Ironic as it is, this message indicated that contemporary theatre exists (or at least strives to become) an exceptional place of authenticity, where one can indeed experience reality or encounter the real, no longer available for us in the "society of spectacle," where an abundance of social roles, political staging, TV spectacles and language games disguises or even cancels reality as such. Sirenos' marketing message seems to suggest that in performative reality the only place of authentic experience can be found in theatre. At the same time, it perfectly embodied the notion of acting as something artificial, repetitive, hypocritical and indeed theatrical – the ideas embedded in modern performance art. The implications of this slogan point directly to the sphere of post-acting, when the reality effect becomes the central attraction of contemporary theatre and this passion for the real multiplies in various forms of participatory or engaging performance, documentary or site-specific theatre, experience-based or confessional performance. Furthermore, it unavoidably raises questions about the nature of relations between reality (person) and acting (character) in the context of contemporary theatre.

The fracturing of the links between character and actor were becoming increasingly visible already in modern Lithuanian theatre. The leaders of Lithuanian stage

directing (Eimuntas Nekrošius, Oskaras Koršunovas) all created their own individual methods of working with actors, departing one way or another from realistic psychological understanding of character. After the shift in the socio-political situation, the urge to transform the ways the actor exists onstage and communicates with a “new” audience increased. Theatre creators acknowledged the need for authentic communication: the fall of the Soviet regime was perceived as an end to hypocrisy and simulation; audiences in post-Soviet Lithuania were looking for the “real thing.” Furthermore, the young generation of actors who graduated from theatre schools in post-Soviet Lithuania was more eager to play with distances between their identity and role, more flexible and able to employ various acting techniques and styles, and more suited for “open texts,” fragmentary characters, post-dramatic theatre practices or non-acting techniques.

Furthermore, performative turn not only brought back the idea about acting as giving voice to a real and authentic self but also complicated the general notions of “real” and “authentic” in theatre. Performance of social roles such as conscious presentation or construction of self, the concept of a culturally conditioned body and identity as negotiation of subject positions contradicts the Stanislavskian acting tradition based on binary subject/object, urging Lithuanian theatre creators to look for different ways of embodying and communicating meanings.

One of the best examples of the new approach towards the relations between performance and reality are the examples of the so-called experience-based drama and embodied life-stories. A number of performances focusing on first-person narratives represented by non-actors emerged on Lithuanian theatre stage during the last five years. One of the first was production *The Green Meadow* (stage directors Jonas Tertelis and Kristina Werner (2017, LNDR) – a devised performance based on interview sessions and workshops conducted with present and former workers of Ignalina nuclear power plant as well as people connected with negotiations about its closure.

Mixing personal experiences, family stories with historical, political, and popular discourses, the narrative focuses on the decommissioning of the Ignalina nuclear power plant and the consequences of this decision on the lives and identities of the residents of this mono-industrial community. These stories are retold and embodied onstage by the “real people” – local residents of Visaginas and Helene Ryding, an independent energy consultant from the UK, who was involved in the negotiation process between the EC and Lithuanian government (Staniškytė 2020, 69). *Green Meadow* is performed in three languages: Lithuanian, Russian, English, as each person speaks his/her native tongue. According to director Jonas Tertelis, the important task was to introduce the spectator to utterly real, non-acted persons

(Ribačiauskas 2018, 11). Indeed, embodied life stories and first-person narratives onstage invite spectators to experience a specific effect of reality, since appearance onstage of the very subjects of narrated life stories redoubles the urge for authentic presence embedded in the very nature of documentary theatre.

However, in the case of *The Green Meadow* stage authenticity, and the promise of an unmediated presence is treated uncritically and therefore encounters challenges similar to many attempts at “theatre of the real.” Firstly, even if theatre takes on confessional performance with its subjects addressing the audience directly, according to Carole-Ann Upton (2011), the very claim to authenticity on the basis of non-performer status in theatre is paradoxical. “By virtue of repeating a rehearsed series of actions onstage before different audiences, real people become real actors” (Upton 2011, 213). Indeed, the first-person narratives in *The Green Meadow* become something of a marketing strategy similar to that of *Sirenos*, implying the promise of “the real reality” at the same time as if declaring the replacement of “the creative interplay between the real and imagined with the evidentiary force of the empirical” (Upton 2011, 213). It seems that performance is based on the phantasy of transparent medium or rather a possibility to avoid mediatisation in order to overcome artificiality in the theatre.

However, even though collected during group sessions with local residents and based on their firsthand experience, the script of *The Green Meadow* went through the process of dramatisation, and the manner of theatrical framing influenced the effect of performance. The initial life stories of Visaginas residents were selected, edited and molded into linear script, following the romanticised model of the eternal human quest for progress and happiness, rather than disclosing the conflicts, power struggles and ideological complexities of the socio-political story behind the rise and fall of this Soviet industrial utopia.

The model of narrative construction as well as the presence of “real” people onstage in *The Green Meadow* requires affective rather than critical or dialogical engagement from the audience. According to the report by Mary Moynihan, it is much easier for spectators to challenge or critically engage with narratives uttered by characters rather than “real” people re-presenting their subjective experience onstage. A character “provides an opportunity for the audience or participants to challenge the words or actions of a character that they simply would or could not do with a ‘real’ person. In short, the character provides a safe space to challenge” (Moynihan 2008, 22).

Secondly, the very idea about unmediated presence falls right into the paradox at the heart of performance theory, which itself is based on the exploration of the limits of representability. If meaning is continuously fluid and demarcation lines

between former binaries (subject/object; re-presentation/presence) are constantly shifting, it is possible to think about authenticity in performance as a moment of conflict or tension between mediation and reality. According to Carol Martin, “Performance of the real can collapse the boundaries between the real and the fictional in ways that create confusion and disruption or lead to splendid unplanned harmonies in the service of the creation of meaning” (Martin 2013, 10). However, *The Green Meadow* fell right into the trap of the “myth of authenticity,” while choosing to dismiss self-reflexivity towards the processes of its creation. One way to avoid that “trap” would be “to openly treat autobiography as a process in which personal stories are ‘dressed’ in the specific *mise-en-scène*’s in order to retain ‘credibility,’ to demonstrate the process of construction of the conceptual self” or in other words to disclose the tensions between fiction and reality embedded in a performative situation (Staniškytė 2020, 70–71).

Undoubtedly, *The Green Meadow* did expand understanding of the possibilities of acting in contemporary Lithuanian theatre. However, an uncritical attitude towards first-person narratives onstage that portrays representations as neutral and devoid of any conflict dismissed the possibility of critical or political perception in theatre.

One of the possible positive outcomes of public re-enactment of one’s own personal stories can be described as specific social impact. In performance theory performance is often celebrated as a tool for socio-political activism that provides a possibility to narrate and embody stories of individuals and communities that were denied the voice or were misrepresented. In these instances, the right to speak for themselves without the mediating presence of professional actors can indeed be significant as a practice of taking control of one’s own narrative.

An example of first-person performance as a form of agency can be found in the production *Superpowers* (stage director Karolina Žernytė, Kaunas Chamber Theatre, Theatre of Senses, 2019). Three “women with superpowers” Aistė, Irma and Ernesta, with the help of various performative genres – storytelling, dance, pantomime, stand-up, film – tell the stories of their lives with disabilities. Deeply personal, infused with humour, addressing the audience directly, *Superpowers* talks about the social realities of being invisible in a society that denies certain groups opportunities for representation. At one point in the performance, Irma tells how she was denied admission to the professional acting programme because “the stage is not the place to see the invisibles.” Indeed, according to Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, in daily life “disability becomes one of the most radical forms of performance art, ‘invisible theatre’ at its extreme,” which attracts heightened attention in everyday life situations but lacks representations that would challenge not only



Figure 2. *Superpowers* (2019, director Karolina Žernytė, KCCT / Theatre of Senses).  
Photo by Viktorija Lankauskaitė / KCCT.

stereotypical cultural scripts about disability but also aesthetic conventions in professional art (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 2).

According to Sandahl and Auslander, “the notion that disability is a kind of performance is to people with disabilities not a theoretical abstraction, but lived experience” (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 2). *Superpowers* self-reflectively touches upon the subject of always being on display but at the same time being invisible in a double coded manner: as a story line brought forward by Irma about always being watched as if metaphorically being onstage and as a formal *mise-en-scène* of being in the limelight. Similarly, artist Petra Kupperts notes that “the physically impaired performer has [ . . . ] to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorisation” (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 4). Being aware of the complexities of disability representation, *Superpowers* balances the thin lines between empathy and voyeurism, humour and seriousness, interactivity and distance, narrative and physicality, body and identity, always trying to embrace both and not treating them as binaries.

According to disability scholars, traditionally disability is understood as difference, as “something out of place” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000). Therefore, to locate one’s place onstage, to claim it as a space of conscious performance on your own terms signifies the reclaiming and realisation of agency. The need to take control of the forms of representation of disability and “to become an active maker of meaning rather than a passive specimen on display” is at the heart of the formal and narrative structure of *Superpowers* (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 3). Aistė, Irma and Ernesta are in very close proximity to the audience, they tell and embody their own stories that are not polished or thrust into closed narrative structures. Stories are fragmented and non-linear, there is no climax or stereotypically modelled ending, the stage directing is sensitive yet feels almost non-existent. At each point of the story performers ask the audience if they have any questions, they are eager to interact, constantly approaching audiences with the performative agency. The performance takes place in a climbing club, Sleeping Elephants, a place of physical activities and sporting enthusiasts, not stereotypically associated with disability. At the end of the performance, instead of narrative conclusions, three girls climb the climbing wall clearly enjoying themselves, while being cheered by audience members. Indeed, rejecting stereotypical scripts in order to share one’s own experience of disability enables “transformation of potentially stigmatizing experience into an act of empowerment” (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 3).

*Superpowers* was received quite moderately in Lithuanian theatre discourse. One of the few reviews, written by disability scholar Jonas Ruškus, underlines the importance of this performance as a conceptual shift in audience perception of peo-

ple with disability (Ruškus 2019). Indeed, *Superpowers* productively contributes to the transformation of the representations of disability, demonstrating its unstable and shifting meanings in different cultural contexts. It displays performative understanding of disability as a matter of transforming agencies as well as a matter of performative relations between identity and context. This shift in perspective indeed activates performative modes of knowledge rather than representational ones. According to Sandahl and Auslander, “to think of disability not as a physical condition but as a way of interacting with a world that is frequently inhospitable is to think of disability in performative terms – as something one *does* rather than something one *is*” (Sandahl and Auslander 2005, 10). In this sense, the embodied first-person narratives in *Superpowers* effectively activate the transformative power of performance.

### Conclusions

New formations of meaning and *mise-en-scène* (visual dramaturgy; disassociation/deconstruction of theatrical elements; intertextuality) that emerged in contemporary Lithuanian theatre destabilised modern categories of production and perception. Although they can be interpreted as a characteristic of postmodern or post-dramatic aesthetics, they clearly fall under the definition of the performative turn. Their main features – open structure, fluid and multilayered circulation of meaning and perception as negotiation, exchange and co-creation – can be best understood in the framework of performative aesthetics.

Similarly, performative understanding of subjectivity and identity as an effect created within intersubjective exchange influenced the processes of acting and particularly the relation between actor and character in contemporary Lithuanian theatre. However, the resulting willingness to renounce the mediating presence of professional actors to tell someone’s story does not necessarily entail the post-representational understanding of the role and more often comes quite close to the practices of modern performing arts. Nevertheless, in some instances, as exemplified by the performance *Superpowers*, re-presenting one’s own life story onstage not only allows taking control of narrative and challenging stereotypical portrayals but also displays performative understanding of disability as a matter of transforming agencies.

At least two strategies can be observed in contemporary Lithuanian theatre as a response to the proliferation of performative acts and metaphors underlying the performative turn. First, the return to mimetic representation, or such artistic forms as documentary or verbatim theatre, can be interpreted as a desire to simply mirror onstage the theatricality of contemporary social realities at the same time

avoiding the artificiality and referentiality of traditional forms of theatre. As demonstrated by the example of the documentary performance *The Green Meadow*, by simply re-creating “authentic” reality theatre becomes its double, repeating and re-enacting performative aspects of human behaviour. However, such repetition rarely assumes a critical posture and quite often merely multiplies stereotypes and images of the “society of spectacle.”

Self-reflexive theatrical practices, in which performance as a model of contemporary reality construction is analysed on stage, turning performative metaphors into artistic realities, can be described as another way of analysing the effects of performative turn. In its best examples, such theatre can become the meeting ground between theatre and society, where by perceiving one (theatre), we understand the other (society). By deconstructing and de-mystifying the apparatuses of performance representation, by disclosing the (im)possibility of re-constructing experience, by giving power to perceptive multiplicity, such artistic strategies as seen in *Republic* strive to disrupt social conventions that govern everyday perceptions and behaviour.

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S U M M A R Y

**Ebastabiilsuse seisund: performatiivne pööre ja Leedu nüüdisteater**

*Jurgita Staniškytė*

**Võttesõnad:** puue teatris, dokumentaalteater, kogemuspõhine teater, kehastatud elulood, Leedu teater, performatiivne pööre, performatiivsus, osavõtuteater

Viimastel aastakümnetel Leedu teatris toimunud muutused – olgu need siis performatiivsed, post-post-modernsed, postdramaatilised või kaasavad – on kõige nähtavamad lavastuspraktika peamiste struktuuri-elementide: kujundi, teksti, keha ja ruumi kasutuses. See nihe on omakorda seotud ja kõige paremini põhjendatav representatsiooni ja taju tähendusvälja muutumisega nüüdisaegses kultuuri- ja kriitilises teoorias. Artiklis käsitletakse uusi representatsioonistrateegiaid, mis tekkisid Leedu nüüdisteatris sotsiaalkultuuriliste muutuste mõjul ning mille võib koondada katsumõiste „performatiivne pööre“ alla. Võttes aluseks kolm juhtumiuuringut (Poola lavastaja Łukasz Twarkowsky immerstiivne lavastus „Vabariik“, Jonas Tertelise dokumentaallavastus „Roheline niit“ ja Karolina Žernytė lavastus „Supervõimed“), uuritakse artiklis, kuidas Erika Fischer-Lichte kirjeldatud „performatiivsuse esteetika“ teatud koodid levivad nüüdisteatris, millised protsessid ja agentsused soodustavad nende tekkimist ning milliseid võimalusi need loovad performatiivsetele praktikatele ja milliseid väljakutseid esitavad.

Leedu nüüdisteatris esile kerkinud uued tähenduse loomise ja lavastamise vormid (visuaalne dramaturgia, teatrielementide eraldamine/dekonstrueerimine, intertekstuaalsus) destabiliseerivad nüüdisaegseid lavastus- ja tajumiskatgoriaid. Kuigi neid võib tõlgendada postmodernistliku või postdramaatilise esteetika tunnustena, kuuluvad need selgelt performatiivse pöörde määratluse alla. Nende põhijooni – avatud struktuur, voolav ja mitmekihiline tähenduse ringlus ning taju kui läbirääkimine, vahetus ja ühislooming – saab kõige paremini mõista performatiivse esteetika raames.

Leedu nüüdisteatris võib täheldada vähemalt kahte strateegiat, mis on tekkinud vastusena performatiivse pöörde aluseks olevate performatiivsete tegevuste ja metafooride levikule. Esiteks, tagasipöördumist mimeetilise representatsiooni või selliste kunstivormide juurde nagu dokumentaal- või *verbatim*-teater võib tõlgendada soovina peegeldada laval tänapäeva ühiskondlike reaalsuste teatraalsust, vältides samal ajal traditsiooniliste teatrivormide kunstlikkust ja referentsiaalsust. Nagu näitas dokumentaallavastuse „Roheline niit“ analüüs, lihtsalt taastootes „autentset“ reaalsust, muutub teater enda teisikuks, korrates ja taasesitades inimkäitumise performatiivseid aspekte. Selline kordamine võtab aga harva kriitilise hoiaku ning sageli lihtsalt taastoodab „vaatemänguühiskonna“ stereotüüpe ja kujutlusi.

Eneserefleksiivseid teatripraktikaid, kus laval analüüsitakse etendust kui nüüdisaegse reaalsuskonstruksiooni mudelit ja muudetakse performatiivsed metafoorid kunstilisteks reaalsusteks, võib kirjeldada kui teist viisi performatiivse pöörde mõjude analüüsimiseks. Parimatel juhtudel võib selline teater saada teatri ja ühiskonna kohtumispaigaks, kus tajudes ühte (teatrit), mõistame teist (ühiskonda). Dekonstrueerides ja demüstifitseerides etenduse representatsiooni aparate, paljastades kogemuste taasloomise võimalikkuse (või võimatuse), andes võimu tajutava paljususele, püüavad sellised kunstilised strateegiad, nagu on näha „Vabariigis“, häirida sotsiaalseid konventsioone, mis reguleerivad igapäevaseid arusaamu ja käitumist.

Samamoodi on performatiivne arusaam subjektiivsusest ja identiteedist kui intersubjektiivse suhtluse käigus loodud efektist mõjutanud näitlemise protsesse ning eriti näitleja ja tegelase vahelisi suhteid.

Sellest tulenev valmisolek loobuda professionaalsete näitlejate vahendavast rollist kellegi loo jutustamisel ei tähenda aga tingimata postrepresentatsioonilist arusaama rollist. Üsna sageli sarnaneb see hoopis modernistliku etenduskunsti tavadega. Kuid mõnel juhul, näiteks lavastuses „Supervõimed“, võimaldab laval oma eluloo taasesitus lisaks narratiivi kontrollimisele ja stereotüüpsete kujutuste vaidlustamisele ka näidata performatiivset arusaama puudest kui ümberkujundavast agentsusest.

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