

Theatre – a Building, a Company, an Art Form: Terminology versus Reality

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A hundred years ago, in 1906, the first two professional theatre companies were established in Estonia: the Vanemuine Company in Tartu and the Estonia Company in Tallinn. Five years later, in 1911, the Endla Company in Pärnu would follow. “In each case,” writes Jaak Rähesoo in “The World Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Theatre”, “the buildings were financed by nation-wide, public campaigns reflecting the close connection between the country’s arts and its people.” (The World... 1994: 236.) Stated here are two important aspects of the founding years of Estonian theatre – the significance of the establishment of theatre companies and the erection of theatre buildings as visible signs in the process of building a nation – even 12 years before Estonia achieved the status of an independent state, can hardly be overestimated.

The next sentence in Rähesoo’s account of Estonian theatre history marks an equally important dimension of these early theatre enterprises: “In their artistic aims, these theatres, especially the Vanemuine under the leadership of Karl Menning (1874–1941), followed the major artistic trends of their time, early on focusing on realism, psychological insight and ensemble acting. Ibsen, Björnson, Hauptmann, Suderman and Gorki quickly became staples of the repertoire.” (Ibid, 236.) August Strindberg is not mentioned in this list of naturalist writers but he was also performed in Estonia during the period. On the Swedish side of the Baltic Sea, Strindberg had been propagating the same artistic trends – naturalist drama and psychological realism (although the latter term was not used at the time).

In 1906, Strindberg was busy establishing his own theatre, his third attempt to get access to a stage of his own. He had met the young August Falck and together they started planning for the Intimate Theatre, which opened in Stockholm in November 1907. In 1908, Strindberg volunteered as a stage director. He not only produced his own play “The Father”¹, but he also wrote what he called a “Memorandum to the members of the Intimate Theatre by the director” (Strindberg 1908). Although the “Memorandum” was aimed at the young actors of his company, he published it in a form and idiom accessible to the general public. Once we understand the significance of Strindberg’s ideas, we can see that it became one of the toughest manifestos of modern theatre, which are symptomatic of the artistic trends in European theatre at the beginning of the 20th century.

¹ It was “cinematographed” in 1911 and this 25 minutes silent movie can still be seen.

In the following, I will summarize some of Strindberg's ideas and subsequently show to what degree these concepts have dominated the public perception of how we can speak and write about theatre. In the end the question arises as to whether such Strindbergian ideas still describe the theatrical reality of the 21st century.

Strindberg's concept of Theatre

Three aspects of Strindberg's concept of the theatre are especially striking in my view: first, his emphasis on drama, privileging the dramatist and the director; second, his devaluation of the acting profession; and third, the demands he makes on his own audiences. Together, these claims define the term *theatre* in an entirely new way, and in this new concept one will easily recognize the dominant European view concerning theatre in the subsequent decades.

Before going into further details, the complicated history of the word *theatre* over the centuries deserves some attention. Although the term *theatre* seems to be something ancient and reliable, in the past it has seldom, if ever, been used to describe an art form. In ancient Greece, the word *theatron* designated the seating area of the audience – a place for looking. This is also clear from the etymology of the word, which is closely related to the word *theoreia*, theory – a way of looking. The Romans sometimes spoke about *theatrum* as a building, and during the Middle Ages the word *theatre* was not used at all. When the Latin form *Theatrum* reappeared in the Renaissance, it had little to do with theatrical performances: we find it in book titles like *Theatrum orbis*, which was a book on geography, or in the expression *Theatrum Mundi* – the world as a stage – or applied to a *Theatrum Anatomicum*, a lecture hall for clinical anatomy. Not before the 18th century did the term *theatre* refer to comedies or spectacles, but then only as a description of the stage. In a German encyclopaedia from 1893, Theater is still defined as *Schauspielhaus* or *Bühne* (playhouse, stage), alternatively the *Gesamtheit von dramatischen Dichtungen*, the corpus of dramatic writing of a country (Meyers 1893).

When Strindberg writes about his Intimate Theatre – spelled with a capital T – he meant more than the place that had opened its doors in Stockholm. In his “Memorandum”, he emphasizes theatre as an art form: “If one asks what an Intimate Theatre wants, and what is aimed at in chamber plays, I will answer like this: in a drama we seek for the strong, significant motive, but with limitation. We avoid all glitter, all calculated effects to be applauded, star roles, solo parts. No distinct forms should impair the dramatist, because the form follows the content.” (Strindberg 1908: 13.)

Strindberg was, of course, inspired by the small theatres that had spread out over Europe in the last decades of the 19th century: Otto Brahm's *Freie Bühne* in Germany, André Antoine's *Théâtre Libre* and Lugné-Poë's *Théâtre l'Oeuvre* in France, and the least Max Reinhardt's *Kammerspiele* in Berlin, which had opened just the year before. He follows their focus on

the dramatic work, and he tells his young actors that in the art of the stage, the spoken word means everything. Once an actor has understood the meaning of the dramatist's words, all other stage expressions will follow automatically: gestures, facial expressions, deportment, positioning etc. (Ibid, 17.) Strindberg also underlines the superiority of the dramatist and the director: they know the entire play best, and the actors need to follow their instructions, just like musicians have to submit to a conductor. In any discussion about their roles, the director will have the casting vote.

It is hardly a surprise that as a dramatist Strindberg emphasizes the superiority of the dramatic work and that now, as a newly appointed director, he adds the overall responsibility of the stage director for a theatrical production. This order is easily recognizable, because it has prevailed throughout the 20th century. First and foremost we have the dramatic writer, who provides the text – and without a text there is no theatre for Strindberg. This not only implies that the highest rank is given to the dramatist, but it also means that theatre, as a term and as a concept, is defined through the text. Anything that is not based on a literary text will – from this point on – not be called theatre.

When defined as an art form, theatre becomes an exclusive term. It is no longer a place where all kinds of theatrical performances are presented – operas, operettas, revues, cabarets, melodrama, circus, vaudeville, music hall entertainment, and so on, are no longer counted as theatre, since they lack the literary text. At the beginning of the 20th century this is a new distinction, and Strindberg actively contributed to establishing this order.

The next step in his argument is a ferocious denunciation of the actor. In the passage quoted above, we have already heard that Strindberg will not provide the actors with any glamorous effects, soliloquies, or other spectacular pieces of dialogue that the audience could applaud in the middle of a performance. Strindberg hated the acting stars of the 19th century, who would deliver a fierce exchange of dialogue or a dramatic monologue in such a manner that the audience would take up a spontaneous applause. These beloved stars even came back onto the stage, bowed to the enthusiastic crowd, flowers were thrown to them, and the entire performance came to a halt. While Strindberg would refuse to write such dramas, he went on to argue in even more theoretical terms in his "Memorandum": "In aesthetics, the art of acting is not accounted for as an independent art, but as an attached one. It cannot move on its own, without the text of an author. An actor cannot do without a writer, but the writer can, if necessary, do without an actor." (Ibid, 15.)

Here, Strindberg establishes a clear hierarchy of the theatrical professions. The actor is pronounced the servant of the dramatist. So far, Strindberg has spoken of the dramatic writer, the stage director and the actors – in that order. However, the last link in this chain is missing: the spectator. Strindberg's view on the matter of the audience is quite ambiguous. On the one hand, the box office income was crucial for a theatre with only 161 seats; on the other hand, the audience had to learn

to behave properly. The spectators were supposed to sit quietly in the dark auditorium, concentrating on the play. Strindberg even made various attempts to reduce the stage decorations, so as not to distract the spectators from the spoken word. Intermissions were to be avoided in order to maintain the concentration and the atmosphere of the play. If an intermission was considered necessary – and not all of Strindberg’s plays were short enough to be performed without one – then the audience of the Intimate Theatre was released into quiet rooms: an octagonal smoking lounge for men, while the female members of the audience could relax in a salon, dominated by a bust of August Strindberg himself. Alcohol was banned from the Intimate Theatre, although the sales of spirits were a major source of income for other theatres. The idea of having more or less intoxicated spectators return for the second act was appalling to Strindberg.

While 19th century theatre audiences exhibited openly interactive behaviour with respect to the actions on stage, the new strategy was to pacify the spectators. Over the centuries, theatre venues had been a place for social gatherings, for conversations and contacts, for pleasure and emotional engagement. One could admire actors and actresses – whether they were famous stars or making their first appearance – and laugh about the misfortunes of comic fools and weep about the fate of tragic heroes. A visit to a theatre had multiple functions and they were all equally respected. But Strindberg was not alone in his ambition to reduce the spectators’ experience to one major focus: the play. In February 1908, just before the new house of the Royal Dramatic Theatre was opened in Stockholm – the Marble Palace at Nybroplan, where the company still resides – the management of the theatre put a notice in the newspapers requiring the audience to refrain from scene applause. As mentioned before, Stockholm audiences were in the habit of applauding their favourite performers whenever they thought it worthwhile. Now the spectators were explicitly asked to wait until the end of the act, when the curtain came down. Indirectly they were told to concentrate on the play rather than on the playing. This is, indeed, a paradigmatic shift in the history of theatre.

Reversal of hierarchies

This new concept of Theatre – with a capital T, and now thought of as a particular art form – was, as mentioned above, strictly hierarchical. Speaking in theoretical terms, this hierarchy can also be expressed as a series of steps, generally considered to be necessary to accomplish a theatrical production. At the beginning there is the dramatist and the written text. The next step is the director, who is responsible for the staging of the play; the director chooses his or her collaborators, namely stage, costume and light designers, composers, choreographers, and so on. After a long period of preparations, just before the rehearsals begin, actors will be engaged. When the rehearsal process is finished, the production can be presented as a product, a so-called work of theatre art. Hopefully some spectators buy

tickets and some critics will write reviews, but these matters are thought of as secondary effects of the production process.

Strindberg was contemporary with a whole generation of dramatic writers, many of whom became the classics of the 20th century. Just to mention a few: Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, Henrik Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, Maxim Gorki, Anton Chekhov, and certainly Minna Canth from Finland and August Kitzberg from Estonia. All of these writers together had a strong and lasting impact on dramatic writing: the basis of what from then on is understood as theatre. This hierarchy was firmly established and remained dominant throughout the 20th century.

Strindberg died in 1912, so he never experienced the advancement of the stage director on the European stage. In the ensuing decades, theatre history is crowded with famous directors: Max Reinhardt, Leopold Jessner and Erwin Piscator in Germany, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Nikolai Evreinov and Alexander Tairov in Russia, the *Cartel des Quatre* in France, August and Per Lindberg in Sweden. All of these and many other directors from the first decades of last century contributed in major ways to the establishment of Theatre as an independent art. They demonstrated convincingly that Theatre really was an art form in its own right, heavily depending on, but also different from written drama. This was necessary to have Theatre accepted as an aesthetic category, which consequently also required a new type of professional criticism.

Theatre criticism has developed along several different and sometimes opposing lines. The newspaper critics mostly adopted the new paradigm of theatre and also became specialists. Rather than reporting on a premiere of a new play, as had been the case in the 19th century, the critic of the 20th century became an informed interpreter, analysing and evaluating the production. The above mentioned hierarchy is easily recognizable in many reviews even today: first the dramatist and the play are presented, then the director's work is identified and assessed; sometimes the stage design is mentioned, and last we find some short remarks on the actors.

To see what academic scholarship has to say about theatre, one can visit a bookshop that holds a reasonable selection of theatre books. Most books will be on dramatic writers, from Shakespeare to Ibsen to Brecht to Heiner Müller and Jon Fosse. The next category on the bookshelves will be on directors, both those from theatre history and those at the peak of their productivity today. Looking for books on actors, one will find memoirs and biographies, mostly written by journalists, which deal with the lives of actors and actresses, but hardly with their art. Scholarly books that seriously discuss acting as theatre art are rare. Concerning the spectator, it is not even worthwhile to start looking: few theatre scholars even mention the audience, let alone deal with them in more detail.

The extent to which this hierarchical – let me call it “Strindbergian” – model of theatre as an art form is a theoretical construction, became manifest to me when I started to investigate

more thoroughly audiences and their ways of perceiving theatre performances. There were strong indications that this hierarchical picture of theatre is extremely one-sided. Among the many items that we investigated, there was the crucial question of what – exactly what – determines whether or not a spectator likes a performance. What is it that decides the overall evaluation of a theatrical presentation from the spectators’ point of view? The results were as convincing as they were amazing: irrespective of the individual background of the spectator in terms of age, gender, education, and theatre habits, and equally valid for all theatrical genres – spoken drama, music theatre, dance – there is one constant relationship. The overall estimation of a theatrical performance always coincides with the appreciation of the leading actors. In other words: a performance cannot be better than its performers. Drama, stage design, choreography, or the musical score might be highly appreciated or given a low grade, but, in the end it is the performer who decides the outcome of an evening in the theatre. (Sauter et al. 1986.)

Most managing directors know that the success of a production depends on whether you have found the right performer for the right part. Commercial theatre enterprises are very aware of this – unless they have found the right star performer for the leading role, they would rather not stage a certain play. And this has been known for a long, long time. I would like to quote from a script from 1565, written by the Italian director of a theatre group at the court of the Gonzagas in Parma. His explanation is as follows: “It is far more essential to get good actors than a good play. To prove the truth of this it is only necessary to call to your mind the number of times we have seen a poor drama succeed and give much pleasure to the audience because it was well acted; and how often a fine play failed on the stage because of a poor performance.” (Somi 1927: 251.)

This is Leone di Somi speaking to us from more than 400 years ago. To follow his argument, we need to accept a new model of theatre and theatricality, which runs contrary to the Strindbergian hierarchy. The concept of the Theatrical Event provides a useful alternative.²

The nucleus of a theatrical event is the encounter between performers and spectators, the interaction that actually takes place during a performance, the kind of Theatrical Playing that happens in a theatre. At the same time, Theatrical Playing is part of a more general Playing Culture that includes many other forms of playful encounters between audiences and performers, from sports events and political rallies to religious ceremonies like weddings and funerals. These playing cultures are closely related to the Cultural Context, i.e. the political,

² The Theatrical Event as a scholarly concept has been presented in Willmar Sauter’s book “The Theatrical Event – Dynamics of Performance and Perception” (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), and was subsequently elaborated upon in the IFTR/FIRT Working Group’s publications “Theatrical Events – Borders, Dynamics, Frame” (Ed. by V.A. Cremona et al., Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2004) and “Festivalising! Theatrical Events, Politics and Culture” (Ed. by T. Hauptfleisch et al., Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007).

economical and ideological conditions that exist in a certain society. Without the political consent and the approval of the public, especially public media, neither theatrical activities nor public cultural institutions can survive. The particular cultural context of a society also determines what kind of theatrical enterprises, organisations and genres will flourish and be maintained within the sector that I call Contextual Theatricality, i.e. what is and is not counted as theatre. (Sauter 2006.)

Today we see New Circus, Stand-up comedy, mixed media, site-specific performance, and other new genres, as well as an aesthetisation of politics, sports, civil ceremonies and everyday environments such as commercial galleries, fashion shows or video games – all crowding into the arena of theatre studies. The scope of theatre studies is again widening towards all kinds of stage appearances. But it will not be enough to broaden the range of objects that fit into theatre studies. Through the model of the Theatrical Event it is possible to focus on the cultural encounter between performer and spectator that is manifested in many ways in today's theatrical world.

In this respect, the theatre history of the last 100 years can be seen as a parenthesis around the narrow outlook at theatre as the text-based art form represented by Strindberg, as well as by early Estonian theatres. In retrospect, the domination of the dramatic text might stand for the “modernity” of last century, beginning with the wordy naturalists and ending with the silence in Samuel Beckett's late plays. Nowadays, we feel the need to include many other forms of performances and to put emphasis on the communicative aspect of the theatrical encounter. In this sense, maybe we should remember the attitude of 19th century theatre-goers, who spontaneously applauded excellent acting and experienced theatre as part of their social environment. At the end of the day, what theatre of all kinds and genres has to offer – more than any virtual games or electronic screens – is the direct, physical and mental presence of the performer, right in front of the living spectator, in order to bring about a Theatrical Event.

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Teater – maja, trupp, kunstiilik: terminoloogia versus reaalsus

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Sada aastat, mis eesti kutselised teatrid on eksisteerinud, langeb kokku ajalooperioodiga, mille jooksul mõiste *teater* tähendus jõudis mitu korda muutuda. Kuigi me mõtleme mõistest *teater* kui millestki iidsest ja usaldusväärsest, kasutati seda varem väga harva kunstiiligi tähenduses. Enne 19. ja 20. sajandi vahetust *teatrist* isegi ei mõeldud kui esteetilisest kategooriast. *Teater* vastas tänapäeva tähenduses lavale ning esines enamasti trupptide nimedes, nagu näiteks Kuninglik Teater või Rahvusteater – nimedes, mis olid kasutusel paljudes lääneriikides.

August Strindberg, kes avas oma Intiimteatri Stockholmis 1907. aastal, mängis suurt rolli selle mõiste ümbermõtestamisel. Tema jaoks ei olnud *teater* enam lihtsalt maja, vaid teatud tüüpi draama, mida esitati teatud tingimustel. Seega hakkas Strindberg propageerima sellist hoiakut *teatri* suhtes, mida manifesteeriti samal ajal üle kogu Euroopa. *Teater* eristus teistest etenduskunsti žanritest nagu ooper, operett, tantsuteater, rahvalik komöödia, revüü, kabaree jne. Teatrit peeti eriliseks ning nõuti nii näitekirjanikelt, näitlejatelt kui publikult erilist tõsidust.

Max Reinhardt kasutas mõistet *teater* selleks, et esile tuua antirealistlikku lähenemist teatrietendusele. Kuigi Strindbergi inspireeris Reinhardti Kammerteatri idee, siis Reinhardt ise laiendas teatri mõistet režiikunsti kui selliseni: teater kui lavastaja kunst. See idee avaldas väga suurt mõju teatriuurimisele, noorele distsipliinile.

Teater kui kõrgdraama ning samuti lavastamise kõrge kunst jäi domineerima kogu 20. sajandiks. Sajandi lõpu poole aga hakkasid levima uued ideed: teater häbimärgistati kui vanamoodne euroopalik kontseptsioon – midagi võrreldavat keelpillikvartetiga –, samas kui pead tõstis uus distsipliin – etendusuuringud. Etendus haarab siin enda alla kõikvõimalikke tegevusi, alustades rituaalidest ja lõpetades paraadide või jalgpalli ja ooperiga.

Need erinevad teatri-mõisted – selle materiaalsus või kontseptuaalsus, väljasulgevad või ühendavad perspektiivid, uuenduslikkus või vanamoodsus – on sügavalt mõjutanud distsipliini(e), mis on loodud selle esteetilise ja sotsiaalse fenomeni uurimiseks. Antud artikkel demonstreerib, kuidas meie huvi teatriloo vastu varieerub vastavalt eelhoiakutele ja sellele, milliseid teadmisi me väärtustame, aga see omakorda sõltub sellest, kuidas me tajume teatrit: on see trükitud näidend, dramaatiline ettekanne, performatiivne ilmum, teatraliseeritud pilk – teater kui toode, kunstiteos või sündmus.

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