

REVIEWS



Walter Puchner |

Jiří Veltruský. *An Approach to the Semiotics of Theatre*

Reconstructed, translated into English and prefaced by Jarmila F. Veltrusky with an afterword by Tomáš Hoskovec, and with a complete scholarly bibliography of the author.

Brno: Masaryk University, 2012 (Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague, nouvelle série, vol. 6). 229 pp.

This monograph of the late Jiří Veltruský (1919–1994), published by the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University and by the Prague Linguistic Circle as part of the research project *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: Context and Potency* [Český divadelní strukturalismus: souvislosti a potenciál, 2011–2015], which is financed with funds from GAČR (the Czech Grant Agency), is, in many respects, an outstanding historical document. The adventurous history of its publication is told by his wife in her prologue “The Background Story of the Book” (7–12): Conceptualized in the beginning (1981) by the

initiative of André Helbo as a historically commented text collection on semiotic theory of theatre by scholars of the Prague School for a French reading public, the study turned during the following years of elaboration into a full development of Veltruský’s own concepts of theatre semiotics, integrating and discussing the various aspects and opinions of the other scholars of the Prague Circle of Linguistics on the special case of theatre performance as well as other theatre semioticians. Health problems and the breakdown of the Socialist system in 1989 delayed the project further, as Veltruský during his whole lifetime was interested and involved in political matters and half of his writings are dedicated to this issue. In 1991 he returned for the first time since 1948 to Prague and was engaged in translating for the Theatre Institute articles by himself to Czech. The ‘French project’ kept him busy during his last years, but he was not able to finish it. After his death in 1994 his wife created a typescript of the handwritten text, as far as it was ready for an edition, corrected by a native speaker of French. It was published as “Esquisse d’une sémiologie du théâtre” in *Degré, revue de synthèse à orientation sémiologique* XXIV (1996): 85–86: 1–172 as *opus postumum*, reflecting the stage in which the final changes to the text were being made. But Jarmila F. Veltrusky realized quickly that this was a very incomplete version of her husband’s study: her attempts

to find Czech editors for a translated version in Czech failed, but the same happened with a fuller English version, produced by herself, as Jindřich Toman, who had succeeded Jiří's old friend Ladislav Matějka as Professor of Slavic Studies at the University of Michigan, did not keep his promise to publish a revised version of Jarmila's translation in English. In 2003 Tomáš Hoskovec promised to do so with a newly revised version of the text, but only in 2012 were Eva Stehlíková and Veronika Ambros (University of Toronto) able to publish the monograph, integrating it in a research programme on the Prague Linguistic Circle, specifically on *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: Context and Potency*; in the end the book was finally published in collaboration between the Prague Linguistic Circle, represented by co-editor Tomáš Hoskovec, and the research team of the Department of Theatre Studies, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University.

The rehabilitation of the historical significance of the Prague 'school' for the development of theatre semiotics and theatre theory in general in the 20th century is a necessary task for the international history of scientific thinking, restoring one of the outstanding injustices in the historical evaluation of scientific theories, as Michael L. Quinn pointed out (*The Semiotic Stage. Prague School Theatre Theory*. New York: Peter Lang, 1995. 160 pp.; cf. also my presentation in *Parabasis* (2003):

3: 302–305); Veltruský's and other Czech scholars' works on theatre theory were not received in the Western world for decades, due to the lack of translations of their publications written in one of the 'small' languages of Europe. I criticized this unacceptable interruption of the free circulation of ideas due to simple language barriers in my contribution to the Festschrift of Eva Stehlíková (Puchner, Walter. *Czech Theatre Semiotics as a Starting Point for Theatre Theory in the 20th century*. In Pavlína Šípová, Marcela Spívalová, and Jan Jiřík (eds.). *Ad honorem Eva Stehlíkové*. Prague: Filosofický ústav AV ČR, 2011: 297–305.) and earlier in Greek in the monograph Walter Puchner. *Σημειολογία του θεάτρου*. Athens: Pairidés, 1985. and in the study of id., *Η σημειολογία του θεάτρου. Ιστορική αναδρομή και σημερινός προβληματισμός*. In *Η δυναμική των σημείων*. Thessalonica: Parateretes, 1986, 253–271.

The writing style of the master narrative of Veltruský about the topic of theatre is personal and critical, with the distance of history and the mature view of an aged man looking upon his early works, not at all abstract or incomprehensible and understandable for everybody, eloquent and orientated to essential statements. In the first chapter on the Prague Linguistic Circle (13–19) he states that theatre semiotics were not really central in this research group, but Zich's *Aesthetics of the Dramatic Art* (1931) pro-

vided from the beginning the firm basis of an elaborate theory of drama, while the different scholars of theatre semiotics represented different personal methodological strategies and had different specific thematic preferences; in contrast to the linguistic and literary studies of the Circle, theatre semiotics were not seriously influenced by Russian Formalism, its scholars came from different research traditions and had different professions; moreover, the ephemeral nature of the theatrical event dictated from the beginning a different methodological starting point, without having a directly traceable material artefact to examine.

From a historical point of view, what characterizes the semiotics of theatre sketched out by the Prague School is in the first place its contribution – in certain respects a decisive one – to the effort to understand the theatre as an autonomous art, distinct from all others and governed by its own principles. Before it could do this, it had to get beyond the literary conception of theatre, carry out a critique of the thesis that it is a composite art in which all the other arts are combined, and explore the specific characteristics of the theatrical signs while recognizing their complexity. (19)

Veltruský offers a very fair and dialectical discussion of the vexed prob-

lem of the quite complicated relationship of the theatre semiotics with the general concepts of orientation of the Prague Circle.

The general contribution of the monograph is a critical and modest view of the topic from the viewpoint of historical distance by one of its main representants, developing his own concepts over a number of years and getting into discussion with the older and more recent bibliography in a moment, when semiology is rather out of fashion. This gives at some points a new insight and a different quality of spirituality beyond bombastic and abstract formalisms, and it should be considered as a significant achievement of the theatre historians in Brno to have published this essential book, saved and translated by his own wife. As it is not my intention to develop the concepts of the book in detail, I shall provide just the titles and thematic unities of chapters and subchapters with short comments in order to give the reader an impression of the fascinating style of this work of maturity and wisdom, which unifies the history of the subject with the subject itself.

The second chapter is dedicated to “Theatre and literature” (20–59) and discusses the following thematic units: 2.1 Rejection of the literary conception of theatre, 2.2 Relations between theatre and literature, 2.3 Drama among the literary genres, 2.4 Dialogic language and dramatic dialogue, 2.5 Thematic construc-

tion in drama, 2.6 The dramatic text and its performance, and 2.7 *Excursus*: Sound features in the dramatic text and in the actor's performance. This part of the study focuses on the paradoxical double-nature of drama as an independent work of literature on the one hand, and on the other as a lingual 'partitur' of scenic production, where it is just part of the intrinsic cooperation of different aesthetic expression media. Therefore this double function is evident also for ascriptions or secondary texts as stage directions, which are integral part of the drama but not of the performance. Dramatic dialogue as a basic structural factor of the dramatic genre is based on an extralingual situation, as is human communication in general, which is not only verbal (or can be also entirely nonverbal); this dialogue is embedded in another 'dialogue', the communication of the author with the reader/spectator, to whom everything on page and stage is addressed; he is not just an eavesdropping outsider, looking by chance into a chain of events, he is not concerned, but he is placed in the very centre of the dramatist's attention at every moment of the play.

The third chapter "The contribution of the other arts" (60–82) is dedicated to the interaction of the other expressions' media of performance with drama: 3.1 Critique of the "synthetic" theory of theatre, 3.2 Sculpture, 3.3 Architecture, 3.4 Painting, 3.5 Film, 3.6 Music, 3.7 Dance, and

3.8 Borrowings from other arts in relation to purely theatrical components. In this chapter the autonomy and peculiarity of theatre art is underlined, which was mostly overseen by the literary or music theories of theatre; this is done in dialogue with the theoretical positions of Zich. Theatre performance is not just a cooperation of different arts, but a specific interaction of different sign systems, taking over additional functions and losing partly their autonomy. This is demonstrated by the example of Sculpture, Architecture, Painting, etc. Unique is the art of acting, because "[t]he actor's performance is at once sign and non-sign, since he himself is an intrinsic part of the aesthetic product he creates, with the countless characteristics he possesses as a human being whose reality cannot be reduced only to the traits that serve to build up the signifier as such" (80). This double existence of the actor, "being" and "having" a body, corresponds to a specific form of reception by the spectators, which is called by Erika Fischer-Lichte "perceptive multistability", but which is rather the parallel ability of the spectator to see the actor at the same time as an actor playing a fictitious role and as a real human being. The fourth chapter deals with "Opera" (83–96) as a special case of cooperation of sign-systems: 4.1 Supremacy of music over text, 4.2 Polyphony and dialogue, 4.3 Referential potential of music in gen-

eral and in opera, and 4.4 Relations between music and space.

A central position in this monograph is kept by the fifth chapter on “Acting” (97–132); acting is in some sense the specific art of theatre and its role in the production is crucial. The chapter is divided into the following thematic units: 5.1 Separate but not autonomous semiotic system, 5.2 Beings and their actions and behaviour, 5.3 Forming the signs, 5.3.1 Distinctness, 5.3.2 Breaking down and building up, 5.3.3 Consistency, 5.4 The signifier and the signified, 5.4.1 Distinction between signifier and signified, 5.4.2 Stage figure and stage action, 5.4.3 Relations between signifier and signified, 5.5 Collective performance, 5.5.1 Stage figure. Entity: Component of structure, 5.5.2 Actor’s personal presence: Collective nature of acting, 5.5.3 Improvisation: Preparation, 5.5.4 Contribution of elements not supplied by actors, and 5.5.5 *Excursus*: One-man show. Acting as the essential art of theatre is quite often overlooked in theory, but it is not restricted exclusively to theatre, as it is an essential anthropological fact starting with every mimetic act, even mimicry.

The material of acting is the actor himself, his body with all its qualities and abilities and, indirectly, his capacity to feel, or at least to manifest, emotions which are not properly speaking his own [...] So the artist is personally present in

his work. The spectator sees him not only as the bearer of a set of signs but also as the human being he is [...] His aesthetic product is at once a sign and a non-sign, since it includes his own physical qualities independently of whether or not they are intentional, whether they are meant to signify something or whether they are there simply because he cannot eliminate or conceal them without sacrificing one or more of the virtual components that are indispensable to his performance in the particular case concerned. But they all appear to the audience as charged with meanings. (101)

But the co-presence of actor and spectator is a presupposition for creating this sort of communication which theatre performance represents:

When he acts in front of spectators, the actor does not simply present his aesthetic product to them. He creates it to a certain extent afresh in their presence, according to his own mood at the time, that of his partners and the atmosphere in the auditorium. The spectators, in their turn, take a more or less active part in the creative act which they witness. At the very least, they either stimulate or inhibit it by their presence, which is inevitably conspicuous, and by their reactions or their failure to react; but often their contribution goes very much far-

ther, taking the form of direct interference. (101)

The forming of the signs is characterized by distinctness, a constantly fluctuating breaking down and building up as well as by consistency. Very interesting are the remarks on the partial inadequateness of the linguistic concepts of *signifiant* and *signifié* in the art of acting, which in reality are hard to separate in perception. The sixth chapter is dedicated to the working hypothesis, “Theatre as a semiotic system” (134–186) and is divided into nine subchapters: 6.1 Intersubjective communication, 6.2 Double relation to reality, 6.3 Autonomous and syncretic sign systems, 6.4 Units of meaning, 6.5 Lasting and momentary signs. Context, 6.6 Modes of semiosis, 6.7 Constant structural features, 6.8 Guiding principle: Action, and 6.9 Contradiction. Here the central parts of the conceptualization of theatre art as a sign-‘system’ are presented in some new and critical light, partly relativating its strictness and contingency: part of recent Avant-Garde-theatre production cannot be described and analyzed adequately and sufficiently by this model. Veltruský is well aware of this; therefore some of the essential concepts have to regain a more dialectic way of functioning to be proper in application to recent theatre forms, a prismatic versatility they have lost in their formalistic elaboration by French Structuralism. Veltruský stresses that for

the Prague Circle theatre as a semiotic system was a working hypothesis, which “did not give rise to any attempt to describe his semiotic system in a systematic fashion” (134), as this was done later by Tadeusz Kowzan, Erika Fischer-Lichte and so many others. The discussion is moving far from formalistic abstractness. “Since the Prague School did not set out to produce a systematic semiotics of theatre, its analyses tended to concentrate on individual aspects rather than on theatre as a whole. However, when the sum of these specific studies is re-examined with the benefit of hindsight, an entire semiotic system begins to emerge” (134). This ‘system’ (I prefer to put it in quotation marks) has some dominant characteristics:

The principal features of this semiotic system are as follows: its signs are extremely diverse and heterogeneous; it is dominated by the principle of action; it negates the difference between signs properly so called and realities used as signs; it negates the difference between the animate and the inanimate; many of its signs are signs of signs; the signs are simultaneously organized in time, in space and by way of conglomeration; it tends to invest every sign with various modes of semiosis; and each of its signs is at once itself and its own negation. (134)

The essence of this chapter, as known from many studies on theatre semiotics, cannot be discussed here.

The slim volume is finished by the “Notes” (187–189), the “Bibliography” (190–205), the article “Jiří Veltruský (1919–1994): A journey through life with semiotics” by Tomáš Hoskovec (206–225), and a “Semiotic-aesthetic bibliography of Jiří Veltruský” (226–230), excluding his sociological and political writings. What is most astonishing is that Veltruský stopped his theatrical-aesthetic writings in 1942 at the age of 22 years, only to continue them at the mature age of 57 years in 1976 nearly at the same point he left off. An index of names, titles and concepts would be helpful to finish this brilliant work in an adequate way.

Veltruský’s late monograph is a unique ‘reader’ to the theatre theory of the Prague Linguistic Circle,

because it is written from the viewpoint of historical distance, personal critical revision and the maturity and wisdom of a leading exponent of the movement looking back on the theoretical work of his youth and commenting on other scholars. Veltruský did not summarize the whole of the enormous bibliography cumulated in the last decades on the topic of theatre semiotics, but his critical and essential review of the main positions of the Prague ‘school’ can very well function as a critical mirror to the whole of theatre semiotics. Despite the fact that it is loosely structured, narrative in its style, it provides in the end a quasi-systematic overview of the semiotic theatre theory developed in Prague in the mid-war period, which is most probably the first essential chapter of theatre theory in the 20th century.