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A Fresh Approach to Old Issues

Maya Tångeberg-Grischin. *The Techniques of Gesture Language – a Theory of Practice*. Helsinki: The Theatre Academy Helsinki, 2011. 434pp.

In the context of a Structuralist approach to the theatre, treating hand gestures as a language can be considered one of the most relevant topics. Although the monograph by Maya Tångeberg-Grischin is not – certainly not openly – Structuralist-based, it provides a complex contribution to the Structuralist thought on theatre. It is worth noting that from the perspective of theatre theory the author goes further – by claiming to have treated the issue from a cognitive perspective.

Maya Tångeberg-Grischin's study is based on more than 40 years of theatrical practice – mostly of a performer, director and teacher. Her research is based on a long-standing study of European pantomime and classical Indian theatre forms Koodiyattam and Nangyarkoothu. In treating the topic, Tångeberg-Grischin puts together her rich acting and directing experiences and theoretical background in the field of theatre studies.

In her study the author understands gesture as “meaningful movements of hands and arms” (15) and more precisely “as movement of hands and arms without the spoken word” (16). From today's perspective this point of view represents a rather classical proposition.

Tångeberg-Grischin's study main hypothesis consists in the claim that “there are similar basic expression techniques found

in both pantomime and Koodiyattam which can be applied to a new kind of gesture language.” (20) By the expression “new kind of gesture language” the author aims at the possibility of treating the topic from the cognitive perspective. She wishes “to establish a method to connect the outer techniques of gesture language with the inner acting techniques (the use of imagination and thought processing), the cognitive process of the actor on stage.” (21)

The book consists of five main chapters dealing with the topic, and three additional chapters including appendices, bibliography, and glossary.

In the first introductory chapter the author describes her research, the aim and structure of the study, and the methodology. She also introduces her hypothesis based mostly on recognising the gesture as a (sign) language, and on the cognitive approach to theatre as mentioned above.

The second chapter outlines the history of gesture languages and compares European and Indian traditions. In the first part of this chapter the author deals with the so called ‘kinetic codes’ of European tradition and with their changes during history. For example, she deals with the Baroque époque and the later rejection of its conventions, and with François Delsarte whom she sees as a very important contributor to the theories of movement and acting (75). The second

part of the chapter describes the Indian acting tradition with special interest in acting techniques of Koodiyattam (focusing mostly on the very attractive topic of ‘*pakarnattam* technique’, multiple character representation and character transformation) as well as in the authoritative *rasa* theory introduced in *Natyasastra*. It seems that the author leads the reader through the European history of pantomime acting to show him how to appreciate the still living Indian theatrical gestures language, which provides a complex sign system. Of course, the author goes further and emphasises the complexity of Indian acting – with special interest in its cognitive aspect applied, e.g. while dealing with emotions. The reader can feel the author’s compunction about treating European pantomime as a living genre. According to the author “if we want to understand pantomime as a living, more complete art form, we have to turn to the Indian tradition” (85).

In the third chapter Tångeberg-Grischin analyses gestures and their creation from different perspectives. She discusses the pathway from the gestures as applied in everyday life to artistic practice. In this chapter, she touches more upon the cognitive aspects of the topics while discussing, for example, time and spatial features of the gesture. Above all, she elaborates on the topic of the emotion creation process. Interestingly, in doing so, she emphasises the *rasa-bhava* concept.

The fourth chapter concentrates on the understanding of gestures as a language with particular qualities and features (e.g. linguistic categories such as ‘nouns’, ‘verbs’, syntactic rules, etc.). In this chapter the author also interrogates narrative functions of the gestures. It is worth mentioning that

this chapter includes a very interesting subchapter that deals with music and rhythm with a special interest in the relationship between the performer and percussionist in Koodiyattam performance.

In the conclusive chapter (the fifth chapter of the book) the author evaluates the results of her research, revises her research questions and tries to formulate the answers. She explains the core of her study (expressed in the title of the book) – the ‘theory of practice’ approach. She compares and fuses the results of her practical and theoretical long lasting study by remarking that,

during [...] rehearsal, I was not able to advance much with my theoretical studies, but afterwards [...] I took them up again, I felt enlightened through practical research. To again apply theoretical knowledge that I have extracted from practice, was difficult and took a long time. Knowledge had ‘to reach the backbone’ first and had to become new acting skills. (294)

It is worth noting that she touches upon the recurrent problem of searching for balance in the ‘Western’ scholarly approach to the ‘Asian’ theatre topic.

While discussing hand gestures by comparing two different acting traditions the author revives Jacques Lecoque’s crucial question of whether the gesture is universal (298). Tångeberg-Grischin answers the question with special attention to the broader context:

The technical basis of gesture language seems to be more or less universal and there seem to be ‘universal’ laws that govern aesthetic

expression. However, the understanding of gesture language depends on cultural, temporal, ethnical, educational and gender related factors, as well as on the preconceived ideas of the audience. (298)

Maya Tångeberg-Grischin as a pantomime actress and as an actress trained also in the Indian classical theatre is a true connoisseur of the issue. It is significant that she dedicated her book to Indian Nangyarkoothu and Koodiyattam actress Usha Nangiar. While reading the book, the reader can feel her appreciation of Indian theatrical art and her fascination of Indian acting techniques and styles. The *hastabhinaya*, hand gesture acting, is an especially tempting issue for European scholars. The structural school of thought on theatre has quite often reflected on the Asian acting styles and their particular techniques – including the unique topic of Indian mudras or more broadly *abhinaya* (acting). Nowadays, it seems that the time has come to broaden or re-visit our point of view of the issue. I am also a scholar who focuses her research on the hand gesture language. I've realised that the Structuralist approach is definitely not sufficient in this area of theatre studies. Maya Tångeberg-Grischin's attempt to treat the topic (also) from cognitive perspectives is obviously promising and proves that the author is up-to date in contemporary theatre studies methodology. I especially appreciate the attempt to deal with the rasa theory from cognitive perspectives. In analysing different aspects of the rasa theory together

with her meticulous descriptions of Indian acting techniques the author seems to prove the verity of the rasa theory – and perhaps also its progressive fundamentals. Moreover, it seems that the Indian culture with its rasa theory doesn't even need the 'invention' of a cognitive approach. By contrast, it is us – European theatre scholars – who can be inspired by Asian theatrical cultures in building our theoretical thought.

I would hesitate to claim that Maya Tångeberg-Grischin's book on gesture language is solely a contribution to the cognitive approach (in places – in particular the chapter concentrated on the linguistic qualities of the hand gestures – I find the method based rather on Structuralism than on Cognitivism) but it offers a way of complementing and (in doing so) upgrading the Structuralist approach to dealing with the topic. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that the author also treats the issue from the perspectives of theatre anthropology. As in the case of other approaches, she deals with the topic with respectable erudition. She is able to treat the particular topic from the most suitable perspective she has at her disposal, and with sensitivity.

Maya Tångeberg-Grischin's book provides a very interesting and valuable treatise on European pantomime, Indian acting style and on theatrical acting techniques in general. Her approach based both on her own rich acting (and observing) experience and on careful theoretical research has come together resulting in a very interesting and ingenious monograph.

