

To Provide, Not to Direct: Perceiving from the Position of Fragility

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The Ever-expanding Horizons of Theatre. International theatre conference. Organised by the Theatre Faculty of the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts. 25–27 November 2021. Brno.

At the end of November 2021, JAMU hosted a conference, *The Ever-expanding Horizons of Theatre*, that was originally scheduled to take place a year earlier. However, despite the uncertain situation of the upcoming autumn, continuing restrictions of international travel and the high number of abstracts received, the conference literally *expanded its horizon* from November 2020 into the following year. Until the last moment, the participants had been keenly awaiting whether it would be possible to organise the event offline. And to their immense relief it was. Yet, unfortunately, the public were not allowed to attend the conference, and so on their behalf the entire event was streamed online. Some of the speakers, who for various reasons could not participate in person, were also present online. However, the majority of the speakers could make it to Brno, and the event, despite state restrictions, turned into a much-desired, full-blooded live event, allowing participants from a wide variety of backgrounds to discuss all kinds of issues of contemporary theatre theory and practice.

To meet across the fields

In contrast to the past two biennial events – the Conference of Doctoral Studies in Theatre Practice and the Theatre Symposium Brno – this year the organisers united PhD students and practising professionals as well as a variety of other academics and researchers. This decision only strengthened the interdisciplinary character of the conference and prompted the creation of an intensive three-day programme with various approaches towards contemporary theatre: twenty speakers from different countries and continents gathered at the same venue discussed in eight sessions the changing thematic focus of current theatre projects from the perspectives of theatre management, light and sound technology, stage design and process of rehearsing or perception, among others.

The conference was opened (and interdisciplinarity foreshadowed) by the keynote speaker Eero-Tapio Vuori, theatre director, performance creator, ritual artist and teacher, who offered multiple perspectives on (not only his own) practice concerning spectator-oriented theatre in the form of a performative lecture. The audience was fully involved, and through

partial performative tasks they got to know certain strategies of this genre that have grown rapidly since the turn of the millennium. For example, the strategy of 'encounter' audience experienced in the form of an exchange of their own chosen secret with another person, written on a small piece of paper, or, in the 'ritual strategy' part any member from the audience could light a candle and say a few words about someone who died last year. At the same time, Vuori drew attention to the ethical aspects of the spectator-oriented performances, arguing there are necessary safety structures that need to be involved while preparing performance that involves any of the kinds of strategies discussed.

The themes introduced by Vuori continued to appear in the two upcoming sessions of the first day: *Immersive, Interactive and Post-Choreographic Forms of Theatre* (Eliška Raiterová, Lukáš Brychta, and Shuntaro Yoshida) and *Re-Establishment and Re-Animation Indigently for a Globalising World* (Thomas Riccio). All the contributions dealt with the position of the artist and the spectator. They articulated the strong need of the creators in contemporary theatre to involve the spectator and to change the relationship between artists and their spectators. The papers were quite critical, stressing the above-mentioned ethical questions (Vuori), two speakers focused on the anthropocentric globalised attitude resigned to spirituality (Riccio and Raiterová), and finally, the audience's attention was drawn to certain elitist aspects of contemporary immersive theatre (Raiterová).

On the second day, in three sessions of the same name the following topics were discussed: the performativity of the sound and light reflected in the work of two art-

ists (Nanni Vapaavuori and Elia Moretti), new perspectives of theatre in the digital era (Martina Mašlárová and Kenneth Siren) and theatre in times of digital and environmental challenges (Jovana Karaulić, António Baía Reis with Mark Ashmore and Attila Antal). The ethical and social issues concerning theatre in the digital age proved to be especially pressing. The questions that required attention included: What can such forms bring to the theatre? Can they attract new groups of spectators or provide a therapeutic moment necessary for people with a social disorder? One aspect of this digital theatre that the speakers were critical of was the virtual reality strategies that deliberate art by making it dependent on big industrial companies and their programmes. The day culminated in a 'digitally deranged' discussion after the last session, during which an avatar that was part of a lecture on theatre in virtual reality was responding promptly to the chat questions read by the JAMU organisers – virtuality squared, indeed. The second day also brought topics connected to the Covid pandemic and emphasised the focal moments that the pandemic revealed, such as home and privacy, or the duality of safety and danger of home.

During the third day the speakers concentrated mainly on the issues of acting and different methods of teaching. In the first session *The Teaching of Dramaturgy and Acting*, Šimon Peták introduced and compared three current ways of understanding and teaching dramaturgy in Goethe University in Frankfurt-am-Main, Theatre Academy of Uniarts Helsinki, and JAMU. Marianna Kozak spoke about the work of a Russian pedagogue and director Nikolai Demidov in the context of acting propaedeutic at the Department

of Authorial Creativity and Pedagogy at Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. The second session *How Minds and Bodies of Actors and Spectators Work* drew attention to the approaches of psychodrama (Emese Simó) and cognitive science (Ana Díaz Barriga). In the final session *A Person's Integrity*, Martina Musilová talked about theatre and actor being used as a metaphor in non-theatre branches. She also elaborated on diverse concepts of acting, proposing them as analytical tools applicable in contexts beyond theatre studies. Finally, Uršule Bartoševičiūtė introduced her study of feminism, gender problematics, and specific data of concern in theatres in Lithuania, suggesting a need to restructure the way theatre is organised and rehearsed, and using feminism as a creative strategy to help stimulate a healthy dialogue amongst the team members involved.

Staying aware

Although feminism was explicitly thematised only in the final paper, the feminist attitude permeated the entire conference as a leitmotif: the will to approach the world from a position of fragility – cautiously,

consciously, – to provide, not to direct, and to perceive the process of creating as a process of being or staying, listening, not pushing, was consistent throughout. And meanwhile as we, the participants, were analysing our own position as artists, researchers, or teachers, the questions of empathy and responsibility – How do we behave? How do we relate? – were hovering in the air. Another motif – ‘staying aware of our habitat, our environment’ – also permeated the discussions. The conference concluded that modern western society is at a turning point right now, and the Covid pandemic sped up changes that would likely have happened anyway, pointing in particular to the pitfalls of technology and the desire for live contact. The participants agreed that theatre, with its immediacy, stands, as it usually does in such situations, in the midst of changes in society, helping to intensify them and thus to name them, experience them, and understand them. The conference raised questions, highlighted problematic issues in contemporary theatre and brought inspiration to those present there. At the same time, rather than an in-depth analysis, it provided a fertile breeding ground of ideas within which questions and impulses could bubble up in various ways and germinate further reflection.



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