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Theatrical Mind: From Tradition to New Frontiers

Tereza Turzíkóvá

Fifth EASTAP Conference *Theatrical Mind: Authorship, Staging and Beyond*. European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance, Piccolo Teatro di Milano. 23–27 May 2022. Milan, Italy.

The fifth event in a series of conferences organised by the European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance was hosted in May 2022 in Piccolo Teatro, right in the heart of Milano. Stretching over the course of five days, the conference introduced many international speakers, including theatre theoreticians, practitioners, and teachers. The relatively broad theme *Theatrical Mind: Authorship, Staging and Beyond* allowed for contributions from many areas of research, ranging from historical reconstructions to analyses of contemporary practice, including dance or digital arts.

The conference was running alongside an international theatre festival *Presente Indicativo* hosted by Piccolo Teatro. The event was dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the birth of Giorgio Strehler, an Italian theatre and opera director, and presented theatrical productions by renowned authors and collectives such as Sergio Blanco (Uruguay and France), FC Bergman (Belgium), or Marta Górnicka (Poland). Many of the productions thematically complemented the conference programme, and together with performance lectures, plenary talks, and discussions contributed to the diverse mosaic of the conference.

The opening plenary talk was given by theatre director, author, and university professor Richard Schechner, who is the

EASTAP associate scholar for 2022. In his talk entitled ‘Postpone the Great Game’, he created a connection between warfare from the past with the current Russian invasion of Ukraine, perceiving it as a performative act. Schechner proposed for this gamified performance to be put on hold while humankind deals with the existential threats of climate change and species extinction. Prioritising these issues that affect all humans might then result in a transformation of how we perceive the value of all life, including human. He was followed by the associate artist Constanza Macras, an Argentinian choreographer and founder of the interdisciplinary ensemble DorkyPark that combines dance, text, live music, and video. One of the most relevant plenary sessions was dedicated to the Ukrainian director Stas Zhyrkov who is currently the artistic director of Left Bank Theatre and the head of the theatre department in Kyiv. Zhyrkov often collaborates with (mainly western) European theatres, in order to bridge the seeming gap between the East and the West (e.g., at the German-Ukrainian festival *Wild East. Event – Ukraine*, hosted by the Magdeburg Theatre in 2016). In his talk, Zhyrkov introduced his work and related it to the current situation in Ukraine, pointing out both the pragmatic, everyday impossibility to rehearse and perform, but also the overall uncertainty about the function

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of theatre in the face of a war. A certain contrasting levity and sense of humor accompanied the plenary talk of an Italian artistic collective Sotterraneo that investigates linguistic possibilities of theatre and experiments with audience engagement in their site-specific as well as front-view productions. During their performance lecture, they presented a set of rules they apply as theatre makers and demonstrated their tendency to oscillate between reality and fiction in a constant subversion of their statements.

The Emerging Scholars' Forum (ESF), which produced a productive exchange between the ESF participants and their audience, was dedicated to presentations of PhD students or young graduates. The ESF strives not only to let the young scholars present their research, but also create a platform for transcultural exchange and networking. Among the topics of the contributions were disclosure of ballet through digital media (Silvia Garzarella), theatre as a 'relief zone' of violence in Mexico (Geraldine Lamadrid Guerrero), gender and sexuality in theatre and performance art (Tereza Turzíkóvá), and application of the Chinese martial art and exercise system Taiji Quan in acting (Ai-Cheng Ho).

The contributions from the five-day main programme of the conference were divided into panels of four parallel sessions, presented in English, Italian, or French. Despite the plethora of the contributions, certain leitmotifs could be observed across the conference. For instance, several contributions focused on changes in authorship, offering new perspectives on theatre makers, such as Antonin Artaud and his connection to 'immersive theatre' (Laurens De Vos), Giorgio Strehler as an opera director (Matteo Paoletti),

and Peter Brook as a 'director of relation' (Rosaria Ruffini). A significant portion of the conference was dedicated to the study of drama (e.g., Jessica Perich Carleton on Samuel Beckett's *Come and Go*), and novel approaches in contemporary playwriting (e.g., Rosa Branca Figueiredo on 'Authorship and Staging of African Theatre').

Furthermore, a series of panels entitled 'Live Digital Arts' were dedicated to the accelerating involvement of digital technologies in theatre, extending to the realm of immersive theatre, new media, or digital performance. In her contribution to 'Performing Arts Archives', Desirée Sabatini analysed the problems related to archiving theatre productions as audiovisual files in digital archives and suggested how artificial intelligence and deep learning could contribute to developing the open sharing systems necessary for contemporary research. On the same panel, Anna Maria Monteverdi presented a part of her ongoing research on the gender imbalance in creators of intermediate theatre ('Why so Few Female Designers?').

Many of the contributions focused on fringe areas of theatre practice, some of which have emerged only recently, including online performance and its transgressive function during the COVID-19 pandemic (Laura Gemini, Stefano Brillì, and Francesca Giuliani's talk 'Staging Theatre without Theatres'), the dissemination of a singular author/director in the field of new media performance (Vincenzo Sansone), or 'applied theatre' as a method of reintegration of excluded minorities (the presented case study of Sanae Amrani Jai focused specifically on Moroccan female prisoners). The ever-changing paradigm of what theatre can become was reflected in more theoretical contributions, many of

which worked with concepts ranging from eco-criticism to new materialism or post-humanism. For example, Carl von Winckelmann proposed a concept of *mise en relation*, as a counterpart to the traditional *mise en scène*, employing the idea that other-than-human agencies take part in the creative process of seemingly human theatre production. Perceiving theatre as a relational system and a permanent *becoming* could contribute to the reframing of theatre methodologies, reflecting the post-anthropocentric condition of today.

All in all, the conference demonstrated the crossroads that the field of theatre studies and theatre practice itself is at right

now: on the one hand, there are pressing matters that influence everyday life and need to be reflected in theatre making (or the impossibility of theatre making due to these circumstances), such as the war in Ukraine or global warming. On the other hand, we still feel the need to deepen our knowledge of theatre history and its grand creators, albeit perceiving them through different paradigms. Although the question posed at the core of the conference – *What is a theatrical mind?* – cannot be simply answered, I would like to propose a pursuit of *theatrical mindfulness*, as a way of incorporating issues and ideas exceeding theatre into our thinking of theatre.



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