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Speculative Realities, Practice as Theory

Interview with Dorota Sosnowska

Martin Bernátek

[guests]



Dorota Sosnowska (d.e.sosnowska@gmail.com) is Assistant Professor in the Section for Theatre and Performance at the Institute of Polish Culture at the University of Warsaw, Poland. Between 2006 and 2008 she was a member of its Culture Animation specialization team. As a cultural theorist interested in theatre and performance, she participated in the project ECLAP (European Collected Library of Artistic Performance) between 2011 and 2013. She published the book *Królowe PRL. Sceniczne wizerunki Ireny Eichlerówny, Niny Andrycz i Elżbiety Barszczewskiej jako modele kobiecości* (The Queens of the People's Republic of Poland. The Theatre Roles of Irena Eichlerówna, Nina Andrycz and Elżbieta Barszczewska as Models of Femininity, 2014) and edited books about contemporary art: the Polish edition of Sarah Thornton's *Seven days in the Art World* (2011), Stanisław

Drózdź's *Between* (2011), and *The Edge of It* (2014). Currently, her academic work is devoted to issues of source, archive, documentation and media in theatre and performance studies. Since 2012 she has also been a member of the research project 'Sorces and Mediations'. She is the vice President of the Propaganda foundation.

In February 2016, Dr. Sosnowska gave two lectures at the department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic. Her first lecture, titled 'Archive, Body and Peripheries', focused on the concept of archive, based on the examples of Slovenian artist Janez Janša and the Polish group Komuna//Warszawa. In her second lecture, 'Body as Medium. Between Technology and Theory of Theatre', Dr. Sosnowska presented her and Dorota Sajewska's analysis of works by Polish directors Krzysztof Garbaczewski and Radek Rychcik. Her proposition originally inspired the editors of *Theatralia* to conduct this interview. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend Dorota's lecture, but knowing her inspired thinking, I have tried to discuss her perspective on theorizing performance, archive and theatre research, through an email interview from March 2016.

[MB] Which methodological challenges do you consider most pressing for current theatre research? Are there any issues which are specific to your country, Poland?

[DS] As theatre scholars, we found ourselves in a very specific place right now. Theatre itself is no longer a stable, homogeneous medium. It probably never was, but in the 20th century, when theatre studies as scientific discipline first arrived, it appeared as something possible to define and describe, with recognizable limits. Today theatre practice is very diverse and tends to undermine every bit of definition that had previously been established. It is not ephemeral because almost every type of theatrical work is recorded. It is not based on the presence of the actor, as the actor is constantly questioned by the use of live video, machines or body images; it is not even called theatre, because often we are invited to watch a 'work in progress', 'performance installation' or 'dance film' etc. On the other hand, theatricality as a mode of representation is entering galleries, video art, films. The medium we study is really not so easy to define anymore. Thinking about it, one must admit that theatre research, even in its anthropological dimension, is not enough. That's why, in my opinion the most pressing methodological question is: what is the connection between theatre theory and theatre practice? What I mean by that is to treat contemporary theatre practice as a theory describing the medium, as a space where questions about presence, body, time, history and identity are asked and perhaps sometimes answered. Categories and definitions we want to use in research should be taken from stage practice – then theatre studies could become more suitable for contemporaneity, also in its philosophical dimension. A good example is Rebecca Schneider's building the category of re-enactment in her brilliant book *Performing Remains* (New York: Routledge, 2011)¹, which taken from the social and artistic practice becomes a very powerful insight in our relation to time and history.

[MB] What are the prerequisites for developing the current theoretical considerations of theatre – which methods and contexts are indispensable for such a debate?

[DS] For me the most interesting theoretical considerations are possible when theatre or performance is no longer treated as category which requires definition. It is especially valid for performance. Every time it is defined in order to establish suitable methodology it appears as something so totalizing that it is hard to say what is actually not a performance. But in current theoretical thought – which grew from performance studies but is very critical of its fundamental categories – one can see that performance can be treated more as a perspective of the one who is conducting the research, rather than the description of something they are looking at. In that case, performance studies is not about looking for performance in everyday life, it is about looking at everyday life from the performance perspective. I think that a similar gesture would be possible in theatre theory. It could conceptualize the notion of theatricality in order to look at

1 Publisher information in brackets were added by the editors of *Theatralia*.

different modes of artistic and cultural practice from the theatrical perspective. Theatre, as an impulse for human behaviour, is older than any of its institutional forms. For Samuel Weber, theatre is the oldest medium mediating between *here and there, being and not being, now and then* – thus undermining every definition of reality. Theatre theory could in fact be a theory of mediation, a search for this dimension of culture where constant criticism is performed.

[MB] The understanding of the notions of ‘theatre’ and ‘performance’ differs in different intellectual, artistic and geopolitical (colonial) traditions. What kind of dominant discursive tropes and schemes do you observe in the establishment of distinctions between theatre and performance, or theatre and performance studies?

[DS] In Poland, it all depends what discipline and what academic circle you represent. For art historians, ‘performance art’ describes an artistic current present in the 1960s and 1970s which is now dead. For some theatre scholars, theatre is an old art form, dating from ancient Greece and present in western countries till today. For others, theatre grew out of ritual and is in fact a kind of performance that is understood as a mode of culture and not as a genre. The situation is complicated by the fact that we have two different ways of thinking about performance in Poland: one which was actually established in parallel with performance studies in the 1980s is ‘widowisko’ (spectacle). When Richard Schechner was writing *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003), at the University of Warsaw, there was a course called ‘Theatre in Culture’ which developed into ‘Anthropology of Performance’ (Antropologia widowisk). Another trend is to transplant performance studies as it was developed in The United States and for that purpose there was a term coined: ‘performans’. This second option is, in my opinion, more popular right now – maybe, as Diana Taylor shows in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2003), ‘performance’ should be kept as a word – with its foreignness in non-English language science, as it also has a story of colonial, economic and political domination inscribed in it. So the difference between theatre and performance is rather unsteady. It depends on the perspective and theoretical stand one wants to take.

[MB] Can you briefly describe the proportion between theatre theory and other fields of theatre research in your department and in current theatre debate in your country?

[DS] My feeling is that theatre theory is on the very margin of theatre and performance studies in Poland. We mostly conduct archival or anthropological research. But things have changed, mostly thanks to performance studies; we tend to reflect on the terms we use in research. So right now it’s marginal, but it is becoming more and more important. In our institute we have even introduced theoretical courses from all mediums we research, so the trend seems to be valid for all cultural science.

[MB] Can you think any historical figures of theatre research that may be particularly interesting for current theatre scholarship or that have been underrepresented or forgotten?

[DS] Every time I think about the given theoretical problem as a relationship between performance and document, body and history, object/thing and action, liveness and presence etc. the best examples that come to my mind are from the art of Tadeusz Kantor. This Polish artist was, in my opinion, a very progressive theoretician. His texts were surprisingly up-to-date with theoretical considerations from different fields of theatre and performance theory. I think we can find a lot of ideas there that are important, not only as deeply connected with practice, but also as having originated in a country behind the iron curtain, and based on a very different historical and political experience.

[MB] Theory itself is not isolated from social and political context, and it has – as with every ideology and conceptual mindset – concrete, material existence. Therefore, theory could be treated as form of action set in particular power relations. Which dominant actors and movements do you observe in the ‘field of theatre theory production’ – to use the concept of Pierre Bourdieu (Cambridge: Columbia University Press, 1993)?

[DS] I don't really know how to answer. It would require a much broader perspective but also a conviction that theatre theory is something that is established amidst different tensions, as a set of binding definitions and formulas. From my point of view, we should think about multiple theories. As I said at the beginning: theatre itself is a dynamic, changing and constantly self-analyzing medium, so maybe it can be seen from multiple and diverse perspectives built on various constellations and tensions. In my case, the production of theory is happening between academia and art. I try to think about theatricality in constant connection with artistic (not only theatre) practice, which also means a constant discussion with various ideological currents in the humanities. So we can say that this is a kind of closed loop where building theory is a part of repetition and mediation characteristic for theatre as a medium. That's how we work in frames of the scientific project we are running in our institute. It is called ‘Sources and Mediations’, and its aim is to conceptualize the relationship between live event and its documentation in very different contexts. Our methodology is to work with artists (theatre, performance and dance practitioners) who are interested in this relationship in their art. We have organized seminars inviting them to talk with us. Then from these talks and examples we have developed a type of dictionary. Now we are working on terms like *archive*, *mediation*, *instruction*, *reconstruction*, *transmission*, *body as medium* etc. and we are building a theoretical frame for this particular perspective. It is rooted in contemporary philosophical and anthropological thought but it is also strongly connected to artistic practice.

[MB] Which territories or approaches beyond the field of theatre research inspire you the most?

[DS] I take a lot from contemporary art. I'm really interested in video and performance art and the ways it is conceptualized by critics and researchers. I also find a lot of categories in media studies interesting. As I'm mostly interested in questions of presence and mediation, this is the natural field for me. Right now, my research is mostly focused on the notions of peripheries and emancipation. I want to reflect on the specific relation between archive, memory, history and body, performance, theatre in the peripheries. Those concepts gain different meanings in Poland than in The United States or Western Europe. For this kind of theoretical reflection, great inspiration comes from black studies. In Fred Moten's writings, I found an amazing view of body, race, politics, history and performance. This is one of the most important inspirations for me right now.

[MB] Which possibilities and limits do you see in the use of theatre terms and concepts out of the broadly defined field of 'theatre'?

[DS] As I said, for me this is the most interesting way of thinking about theatre theory. I would like to use the term 'theatricality' as a kind of philosophical tool that would be a link between humanistic reflection and social or artistic practice. Although it is of course risky, it is the only way for me not to concentrate on categorizations and differences between mediums, which doesn't really give any significant results. My goal in theoretical thinking is to be able to see theatre in art, film, and text. I would like to see theatricality as a way of thinking – a theoretical frame for research.

[MB] What are the most explicit fallacies in theorizing the body, gender and archive in theatre research and in theatre theory based on anthropology and anthropocentrism?

[DS] The main problem is quite banal. If you theorize performance as a field of body and experience, and body becomes itself a kind of archive that is opposite to the institutional archives and historical narrations, you are actually saying that there is no way to write about them. If the *body-to-body transmission*, to use Schneider's term, is the only way to learn the history that body contains, there is no possibility of talking about it. So, the first step is to treat theory as pure speculation. Then, if you are not chasing the objective truth about theatre, or even humanity as such, more becomes possible. Theory as speculation knows its limits and can be played with. So I would say that the main fallacy for every kind of theoretical perspective is to try to establish a system with homogenous and stable terms. It is especially dangerous in the case of *gender*, *archive* and *body*, as those terms tend to lose their political dimension when put in a theoretical frame. If you are asking about anthropology and anthropocentrism, I would say that anthropology itself has changed a lot. It became more self-critical, and maybe it is closer to cultural science right now. Anthropology as I know it from performance studies,

is really far from an anti-historical, anti-political or anthropocentric trap. The new way of thinking about theatre and performance represented by Rebecca Schneider, Diana Taylor (see SCHNEIDER 2011 and TAYLOR 2003) and others, was possible because of the return to anthropology – but anthropology after all what poststructuralism and postmodernism have changed.

[MB] What are the obstacles for developing current theatre/performance theory?

[DS] It is an understanding of what theory actually is. If it is understood as a classification, production of genres, names and definitions, then it is nearly impossible to do such theory today. But when theory is understood as a kind of speculation in constant relationship with practice, when it becomes a reflection about medium in terms of contemporaneity, it works quite well.

[MB] In which way can a theory be a utopian proposition for the performance, political practice and medium of what Giorgio Agamben conceptualizes as 'form-of-life'?

[DS] I use the word 'speculation'. For me, theory is not utopian as it is always connected to practice: body and materiality. It can't and shouldn't go beyond that. Theatre is very concrete – it is not an abstract thing. As speculation, theatre theory becomes a very powerful tool for thinking about society in its historical and political dimension. Looking from that perspective, one can say that Chantal Mouffe's *Agonistics* (London: Verso, 2013) is in fact, a theatrical concept. The same could be applied to the notions of public space or precarity. So once again: the most interesting way of thinking about theatre theory is, for me, to treat it with a certain perspective in research – not as way of defining its object. Maybe the best way to explain it would be to use Shannon Jackson's example. She is a theatre scholar who entered the field of contemporary art. She was shocked when, while watching a performance in an art gallery, she heard that for the art public, the performance was an immaterial piece of art. From the theatre perspective, there is nothing more material than body, which was a central thing in the performance. This is what I mean: theatricality is a certain position we take while looking at things in their bodily, material, active and constantly mediating dimension.

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