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Polarity and Coherence of 'Making' and 'Viewing' in Contemporary Theatre Theory and Practice

Interview with Knut Ove Arntzen

Tereza Konývková

[guests]



Knut Ove Arntzen (Knut.Arntzen@uib.no) is a professor of Theatre Studies at the Department of Linguistics, Literary and Aesthetics Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Bergen, Norway. He is oriented towards research, especially in the field of theoretical and practical concept of visual dramaturgy and post-mainstream developments in contemporary European theatre. Knut Ove Arntzen publishes his findings in many international periodicals and books, and presents them to students and other theatre researchers as a visiting professor at European universities (for example in Lithuania, Belgium and Germany).

Knut Ove Arntzen visited the Department of Theatre Studies at Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic on the 17 and 18 May 2016. While there, he outlined the theoretical specifics of visual dramaturgy in the course 'Dramaturgical Models and a Visual Dramaturgy in the Context of Postmodern Theatre'. It is hoped that the University's relationship with Dr. Arntzen will be developed in the following years.

The following interview was carried out as an e-mail conversation in April and May 2016.

[TK] Which methodological challenges do you consider most pressing for current theatre research?

[KOA] The most pressing methodological challenges for theatre research are probably the question of artistic research, and what basis it should have in-between the 'making' and the 'viewing' on one side, and the contextual analytical approach on the other. There is no doubt that applied theatre studies deals with practice as an academic investigation based on students' works, be it any kind of live performance. How should these works be approached? Another challenge is the question of metaphorical concepts, which are inspired by philosophy and critical analytical approaches. And how we should deal with the empirical aspects and sociological approaches, if the study object is experimenting artistically in new dramaturgy.

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

[KOA] I think that metaphorical-aesthetical approaches can be used as prerequisites for developing the current theoretical considerations for theatre today, and how dramaturgical questions can be raised from the 'making' and the 'viewing' at the same time, more than from a distant, 'arm-lengths' observation of an empirical or sociological kind. These approaches are, however, still valid for some research aspects such as contextualization and historiography.

[TK] What position does the theoretical concept of visual dramaturgy have in contemporary European theatre practice?

[KOA] Visual dramaturgy is a theoretical concept, which has a close relation to practice. It is useful to both 'making' and 'viewing', and as a dramaturgical model of means of expression put on an equal footing, it might be more immediate understandable than parataxis, although parataxis is inherent in a post-dramatic understanding. Let us say that visual dramaturgy (alternatively: audio-visual dramaturgy) has a strong relevance to a theatre where you 'see what you get' and 'get what you see'. It has become a reference concept within the post-dramatic as well as in understanding performance art and theatre in-between their convergence or transgressions.

[TK] What conditions do you consider need to be fulfilled in order to make contemporary theatre performances aesthetically valuable?

[KOA] The understanding of basic dramaturgical models, working in all sorts of live performance situations in the matter of tension and de-tension, the rhythm and how to make the audience curious enough to not fall asleep. In other words, it is the understanding of the weave of actions and games in narrative theatrical machines or in soft performances of an ecological kind.

[TK] Is it possible to make a prediction (based on empirical findings and cultural and theatre theories), of how the artistic forms of the European theatre will be developed in future? What aspect of theatre performances will be emphasized more?

[KOA] Well, empirical findings can be very neutral and disregarding of the experiential aspects. Neither is cultural, and theatre theories disconnected from practice are unable to see how artistic forms are developing. You need to be 'a maker' or 'a viewer', and if you can combine these two approaches to pragmatic and aesthetical observation and contextualization, you may arrive at a curatorial view as your own disposition. Very few theatre 'scientists' have this, and very few even travel a lot. And if there is a festival close by they might even neglect it. So if the theatre researcher is able to combine criticism and a curatorial outlook, it is possible to see the changes in the field. Take, for instance, the early post-modern theatre with a split between actors and spectators; the late post-modern situation of new authenticity; hard and soft performance; the post dramatic and post spectacular, where theatre devices operate in a non-illusionist context; or, the social examination by games and ecological engagement or migration. As a drama researcher in mainstream theatre, it is possible to see some new trends if you go to many theatres around Europe.

[TK] What theatre or theatre group and its artistic program correspond to your notion of the 'ideal theatre'?

[KOA] I hesitate to use the more romantic concept of ideal theatre, which would be rooted in notions of 'theatre for the people' or 'theatre in a national building'. This is outdated, and we are in need of seeing social engagement and developing identities at the core of new theatre and theatre groups today. There have been artistic-programs like Junge Hunde or House on Fire (European Union), facilitating new productions, after the golden age of new authenticity and pop theatre like Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, Wooster Group or Forced Entertainment. If this is ideal in any sense, now that new African and other geo-cultural orientation have emerged, defining the marginal, postcolonial and genocides becomes a new agenda.