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Editorial

Cognitive Theatre Studies Endeavours in *Theatralia* Ten Years Later

A compulsion to understand how humans in general, and in theatrical context, as audiences or artists, experience the human faculty of theatricality lies at the core of Cognitive Theatre Studies (CTS). With a history of more than twenty years, this fairly young field delves into the cognitive, perceptual, and emotional processes, among others, that shape the creation and reception of performance, acting, and staging. CTS has been helping theatre scholars to approach the perennial question about how people make sense of theatre: how we can co-experience stories that are not real, how we manage to share complex meanings such as emotions, or what underpins our interpretations of a performance, among other things.

Rhonda Blair and John Lutterbie (2011: 63) trace to the late 1990s the early attempts of theatre scholars and practitioners to accommodate the theoretical and methodological apparatus of cognitive science approaches employed by other disciplines (e.g., linguistics, psychology, physiology, neurosciences) to interpretation of theatrical events. Moreover, some related scholarly disciplines, such as Cognitive Musicology (e.g., LASKE 1988), which had started trodding this path even before Theatre Studies, also contributed greatly and inspired the early attempts to interpret theatre through the lens of mind and cognition.

However, the first pivotal publication that marked the official establishment of CTS as an internationally recognised discipline was a 2006 volume titled *Performance and Cognition* (MCCONACHIE and HART 2006). Various themes and ideas about cognition in the theatre environment presented in this founding or ‘emancipatory’ publication, paved the way for the trends that have been guiding the research into theatre and cognition. The authors touched upon such concepts as embodiment (embodied cognition), conceptual metaphor, image schemas, conceptual blending, perception

and reception of theatre, emotions and affectivity, audience and cognitive processes, imagination and simulation, memory and theatrical experience, Theory of Mind, and corporeality and kinesthesia, to mention some examples. Four years later, in 2010, Amy Cook's influential treatise saw the light of day and added greatly to this approach to thinking about the creation and perception of theatrical events (COOK 2010). Some of those early contributors to the field are now regarded as the founders of the CTS field – apart from Bruce McConachie, Elizabeth Hart and Amy Cook, also Rhonda Blair, John Lutterbie, Naomi Rokotnitz, or Lisa Zunshine, for example. Twenty years later, most of them are still actively developing schools of thought in research and artistic creation through their work with students, both practitioners and theoreticians. At the same time, new developments thrive as Cognitive Studies evolve along with technology, e.g., Theatre Neuroscience (e.g., BLAIR 2008; FALLETTI et al. 2016). The field of CTS is constantly evolving and continuously reflecting on its findings and shifts in research, as can be seen, for example, in a comprehensive publication from 2019 titled *The Routledge Companion to Theatre, Performance and Cognitive Science* (KEMP and MCCONACHIE 2019) that brings together the founding figures with other cognitive theatre scholars who have significantly diversified the range of topics since the aforementioned 2006 book.

In the last two decades, in the Czech research and teaching milieu, the insights and ideas from the area of CTS have been drawn not exclusively from activities related to the American or other English-speaking context but also from the research conducted in other countries. To mention one example, Czech scholars and practitioners have drawn inspiration from Italian insight into 'embodiment' and cognitive neuroscience research, which was incorporated as a new perspective into the field of theatre studies. For instance, the article by Gabriele Sofia titled 'Theatre as a Living System. Neuroscience, Biology, and Complexity in the Study of Actor-Spectator Relationship' was translated into Czech and published in 2010. And many other impulses still come from different sides of the cognition-in-theatre-focused world.

In the Czech environment, where semiotics (derived from Saussurean or Peircean paradigm) and structuralism held sway in the field of theatre analysis for most of the 20th century, the precursor of cognitive-oriented thinking was the Czech musician, aesthetician, and theatre theorist Otakar Zich (1879–1934). For instance, in his 1931 publication, Zich conceived of the dramatic person as a mental construct, a concept that resonates with today's CTS. It is not an exaggeration to say that Zich's thinking was ahead of its time, as he was already talking about ideas similar to the blending theory, especially in exploring the concept of dramatic persona. Through the efforts of the Theatre Studies Department of Masaryk University, the first English translation of this visionary work has finally seen the light (ZICH 2024).

Traces of Zich's 'proto-cognitivist' thinking were developed and discussed further in work(s) of other Czech theatre theoreticians, e.g., Ivo Osolsobě (1918–1975), who was thinking about – allusion of Seassure's work – 'course of general theatric' (1992), or in Jaroslav Etlík's 1999 discussion of ontological questions that face semiosis of theatre, exploring how theatre enables direct experience of reality through the bodily

presence of actors and spectators, which brings him close to the concept of embodied cognition (English translation in ETLÍK 2011). Yet, back then the cognitive turn was still happening outside the Czech Republic.

There is not enough space here to point out all the Czech scholars who got inspiration from cognitive theories to reflect on theatre production in the last twenty years or so. One example, which comes to mind, is a 2013 publication titled *Tvorba jako způsob poznávání* [Creation as a Way of Cognition] (CHYZ et al. 2013), in which the key concepts, such as ‘conceptual integration’ or ‘mental space’, were used as a means of deepening the understanding of the perception in the course of artistic creative processes.

In this vein, *Theatralia*, founded as a platform for the advance of theatre studies, has kept its hand on the pulse. In 2015, *Theatralia* published a study in Czech entitled ‘Metaphors We Act By. Perspectives and Limits of Czech Cognitive Theatre Studies’ (HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2015). A year later, a thematic issue co-edited by Šárka Havlíčková Kysová and Tomáš Kačer zeroed in on the theory and meta-theory of theatre, which also featured several cognitive studies-based approaches. For example, Svitlana Shurma and Wei-lun Lu (2016) applied cognitive poetics in the analysis of *Hamlet* translation, Šárka Havlíčková Kysová (2016) discussed the application of conceptual metaphor in the analysis of an operatic production, Jan Motal’s (2016) in-depth reflections examined the possibilities of cognitive phenomenology, and Tomasz Ciesielski (2016) focused on dance theatre from a neurocognitive perspective.

Following these first texts produced in the context of our workplace, the Theatre Studies Department of Masaryk University in collaboration with *Theatralia* continues to systematically develop a cognitive theatrological analysis of theatre performance and production. Thus, a cognitive theatrology team has been formed at the department, consisting of Šárka Havlíčková Kysová, Svitlana Shurma, and Martina Musilová, with Wei-lun Lu as a permanent collaborator. In preparation for publication are several texts on contemporary productions of Baroque opera, focusing more thoroughly on the multimodal manifestation of complex meanings in operatic lamentation on the theatre stage. In collaboration with the Institute for Research into and Study of Authorial Acting of the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (DAMU), represented by our colleague Martina Musilová, we are focusing on developing concepts such as embodiment and 4E cognition in acting as well. Inspiration in this exciting research endeavour comes to us not only in the form of publications. For example, in November 2022, Rhonda Blair made a concluding plenary lecture at The S Word: Stanislavsky’s Last Words... Conference, organised by the Theatre Faculty of the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague in collaboration with The Stanislavsky Research Centre (University of Leeds/University of Malta). In her inspiring talk, Blair presented potential CTS interpretations of Stanislavsky’s ideas and (acting) practice, emphasising the interrelation between action and cognition through the lens of the 4E cognition approach and the concept of linguistic bodies (see HAVLÍČKOVÁ KYSOVÁ 2023: 116).



Fig. 1: At the Cognitive Futures Conference in Warsaw, 14 July 2023.

Svitlana Shurma, Martina Musilová, and Šárka Havlíčková Kysová.

From Šárka Havlíčková Kysová's personal archive.

Whether in the hospitable spaces of the Theatre Faculty of DAMU or (more and more often) in Brno at our Department of Theatre Studies, the discussions on the above-mentioned CTS topics have intensified, supported substantially also by the cognitive teatrology team's participation and meetings with international colleagues at Cognitive Futures in The Arts and Humanities (fig. 1). All these activities contributed to Martina Musilová's decision to organise a one-day conference on Condition and Cognition at DAMU, Prague, in October 2023. The event focused on the field of acting and its perception, and provided a stimulating space for interdisciplinary discussions on cognition in theatre and theatre studies.

Several seminars have already been held at the Department of Theatre Studies in collaboration with other departments of Masaryk University as part of the teaching process, mainly implemented in the Master's program. In 2024 Šárka Havlíčková Kysová and Svitlana Shurma gave two thematically and methodologically linked lectures at the Language, Culture, and Mind Summer School (Masaryk University, 15–26 June 2024) focused on the representation of emotions in multimodal communication, in general, and operatic performance, in particular. The achievements of the team were

also presented at the 10th International Conference on Language, Culture, and Mind: Celebrating Linguistic and Cultural Diversity, with Wei-lun Lu as the Chair of the Local Organising Committee.

Overall, we try to explore how audiences perceive, process, and respond to theatrical performances by integrating insights from cognitive science, cognitive psychology, and neuroscience with theatre and performance studies. We focus on the questions of how elements like narrative structure, movement, music, and staging affect spectators' emotions, attention, memory, and embodied experiences. We investigate topics such as empathy, mental simulation, and multimodal perception in theatre, often using interdisciplinary methods, including empirical research, theoretical analysis, and audience studies. By bridging cognitive sciences with theatre theory, CTS provides us with a deeper understanding of how performances create meaning and impact actors and audiences on both conscious and unconscious levels. Cognitive approaches in theatre studies offer new perspectives on the 'embodied minds' of co-creators, performers, and spectators of a theatrical event.

This issue of *Theatralia*, nine years after the publication of the first one, focuses on exploring the latest developments in this interdisciplinary dialogue, examining how cognitive theories contribute to the study of performance, actor training, emotion, and embodiment. As researchers further integrate cognitive perspectives into their analyses, they refine our understanding of the embodied, enacted, ecological, affective, and interpretative dimensions of theatre. *Theatralia* thus continues to encourage discussions that bridge theory and practice while advancing the field's methodological and conceptual frameworks. *Theatralia* brings together a rich selection of articles, contributing not only to Cognitive Theatre Studies, but also to Actor Training, Opera Studies, Queer Theatre Studies, and beyond.

Our Yorick section is devoted to the applications of research into cognition and emotions to theatre and cinema. **Scott C. Knowles** in his article 'Enacting Kane's Disgust: A Cognitive and Emotion Science Approach to *Blasted*' explores how Sarah Kane's *Blasted* uses the emotion of disgust to shape meaning-making, communicate morality, and reveal how in theatre visceral reactions influence moral understanding through embodied cognition and enactivism. Two further articles deal with actor training approaches. **Martina Musilová's** 'Self-experiencing in a Specific Form of Acting Improvisation' examines how actors' emotions – whether positive or negative – can serve as catalysts for creativity in improvisation, focusing on the 'point zero' approach and drawing on *Dialogical Acting with the Inner Partner*, a psychosomatic discipline founded by Ivan Vyskočil. **Aaron Taylor, Douglas MacArthur, and Javid Sadr** in their 'Doing the Work: Embodied Cognition, Ecological Psychology and Screen Actor Training' investigate screen actor training as an embodied, situated practice, showing how undergraduate actors develop performative skills through the dynamic interaction of mind, body, and environment within a structured pedagogical program.

The discussion of challenges and future of the field of Cognitive Theatre Studies continues in **Šárka Havlíčková Kysová's** interview with **Rhonda Blair** and **Amy Cook**,

where the two founders of the discipline share their views on the range of issues, such as the benefits and drawbacks of the cognitive approaches, and how they can help students, critics, and theatre practitioners to deepen their understanding and interpretation of theatrical works.

In the Spectrum section, **Michaela Mojžíšová** in her article 'Absurdita a persiflaž v súčasnej slovenskej a českej opernej tvorbe' [The Absurd and Persiflage in Contemporary Slovak and Czech Opera] written in Slovak, discusses 21st-century Slovak and Czech operas, exploring how they employ absurd and post-dramatic techniques to convey themes of meaninglessness, existential frustration, social critique, nonsense, etc., while reflecting on opera's connection to both tradition and contemporary issues. **Tyrone Grima** and **Christopher Vella** in 'Iddi Dun Ġorġ: Queering Saint George Preca' dive into the queerness of Father George Preca, the only Maltese person canonised by the Roman Catholic Church, by examining his spirituality through a queer lens in a fictional theatrical script, aiming to reclaim and re-imagine the often-silenced sensual and erotic dimensions of queer individuals in religious narratives.

The reviews published in this issue include Shaun Gallagher's *Embodied and Enactive Approaches to Cognition* (2023), Kirsten Shepherd-Barr's edited volume *Cambridge Companion to Theatre and Science* (2020), and Czech edition of Monika Holá's *Bohuslav Martinů a Brno – Ke světovým premiérám jevištních děl skladatele* [Bohuslav Martinů and Brno – On the World Premieres of the Composer's Stage Works] (2024).

The Events section completes this issue with **Eliška Halodová's** review of the opera part at the *Janáček Brno 2024* Festival.

We would also like to draw your attention to PQ's open call for papers for 60 Years of PQ as a Meeting Place of Scenographic Worlds Online Symposium.

Hopefully, the range of perspectives we have aimed to present in the issue will deepen the understanding of the current developments in CTS, particularly its growing intersection with fields such as psychology, neuroscience, and cognitive science. The articles published in this issue reflect how this cross-disciplinary approach is shaping our understanding of the mind-body connection in performance, the cognitive processes involved in the interpretations of the dramatic texts and performances, and the role of perception and emotion in theatre. In the next ten years, we hope to see a deeper integration of cognitive science within theatrical practice, expanding our understanding of theatre and its transformative role in exploring the complexities of the human experience.

Šárka Havlíčková Kyšová and Svitlana Shurma

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