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POLAND

STREET THEATRE FESTIVALS AS SCHOOL OF THEATRE FOR (YOUNG) VIEWERS

Means intended to increase the number of festival viewers appear the simplest and most immediate solution when talking about the “audience development”. The well-grounded image of the theatre in the street as the most open, democratic form of art (as opposed to the “elite” character of indoor theatre) makes it easier for street theatre festivals to become themselves an effective tool of “audience development”. Street theatre artists declare that they are interested in contact, or even in direct communication with the spectator. For this reason they reach out to potential audiences, to places that “belong to people”, i.e. they take to the street, to the public space. Some artists see it as their mission to perceive this type of theatre (not without a reason, at times) as one with a mission: a theatre that turns up in places unfrequented by other artists. A type of cultural activity for “non-audience” intends to help to convert its viewers into full-fledged participants of the cultural offer. The ease with which one can come across this kind of art turns street theatre and its festivals into “first-contact” theatre for a significant group of spectators. Therefore some festivals such as the Kontrapunkt [Counterpoint] in Szczecin, or Festiwal Dialogu Czterech Kultur [Dialogue of Four Cultures Festival] in Łódź, which are not street-theatre-oriented events, add street performances to their program. Presented in public space, these performances are attractions that aim to encourage the spectators to take part in other festival events as well.

Another obvious solution in terms of audience development is turning specifically to young people, i.e. to the category of spectators who can be “educated” or won over to a given field of art.

The picture of street theatre as a phenomenon primarily associated with young audiences finds confirmation in a 2004 survey. Commissioned by Eunetstar, an organisation that brings together nine European street theatre festivals (International Straattheater-festival in Gent, Belgium; Terschellings Oerol, the Netherlands; Namur en mai, Belgium; Coup de chauffe in Cognac, France; Sibiu International Theatre Festival, Romania; Ana Desetnica in Ljubljana, Slovenia; Stockton International Riverside Festival, Great Britain; Galway Arts Festival, Ireland; and Malta Festival in Poznań, Poland), the questionnaire-based survey carried out at all the events shows significant presence of young people. The reason is obvious: street theatre is less easily appealing to the

“elder” audience due to less comfortable viewing conditions (one frequently has to stand, and is exposed to changing weather conditions; besides, as of late, the street has been perceived as a dangerous place, at least in Poland). The young generation is particularly strongly represented at the Malta Festival in Poznań, the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, and the Ana Desetnica in Ljubljana (Eunetstar’s festivals in the so-called “new Europe”), where 86% spectators are under the age of 35, and 64% of the overall number of viewers are students.

The picture of festival audiences that emerges from the Eunetstar survey is a rather favourable one: fewer than half of the respondents did not take part in any “cultural event” in the twelve months preceding the said festivals. In particular, it concerns the “new” Europe, as here greater “consumption of culture” is the dominant trend (e.g. in Poznań, 80% of Malta’s spectators take part in other cultural events). What is more, comparison of the Eunetstar survey with the report “Cultural practices during preceding 12 months: Eurobarometre 2003” shows that the number of cultural events attended by spectators of street theatre festivals exceeds the European average.

Based on this data, one can conclude that street theatre festivals make excellent places to initiate contact with art. It is, however, a misleading conviction. First of all, as far as the attitude of spectators to festival presentations is concerned, a surprisingly low number of people intentionally choose performances to be viewed (as many as 60% of respondents, who filled the questionnaires shortly before performances, did not know what performance they were going to see). It shows that street theatre viewers (who in these circumstances, should rather be called “onlookers”), including young people (who constitute the majority of spectators), do not attach importance to “the theatre” (which thus becomes a mere pretext to go out), but treat their participation in the festival as an experience of a different kind. The phenomenon has been labelled “wandering passivity” or superficial non-discriminating curiosity: people do not feel like making an effort to get familiar with the festival programme; they watch whatever they come across. This observation brings Floriane Gaber, who analysed the questionnaire results, to a conclusion that the said “wandering passivity [can be interpreted] as activity for pleasure similar to these in which people typically partake; entertainment rather than ‘serious’ action (...), which requires making a choice, reservation, appropriate behaviour”.¹ What is more, only 37% of respondents (average for all festivals under survey) declared they were street theatre enthusiasts and gave this reason for their presence at the festival.

¹ Eunetstar report, p. 10.

Although not a dominant attitude among street theatre audiences, this delight in street theatre can also, to a certain degree, result from the respondents' lack of reference: over fifty per cent claimed they did not go to the theatre, and street performances were unlikely to induce them to seek contact with other kinds of theatre. Spectators at street theatre festivals are thus active participants of cultural life, though not necessarily theatrical. Similar results were obtained in a 2007 survey carried out at Malta festival, where only 30% of the respondents declared that participation in the festival would motivate them to get interested in other kinds of theatre. Thus, adding street spectacles to theatre festivals' offer seems quite futile: they only attract spectators to particular events in the street, which does not turn into greater interest of the same group in other festival proposals. A reverse conclusion could also be possible: those viewers who regularly take advantage of their respective towns' cultural offer also tend to take part in street theatre festivals.

What for, then, if not for the theatre?

Here, I will also back my remarks with the results of the EUNETSTAR report, as these confirm what one observes at street theatre festivals. Pollsters noted a high level of "friendly sociability", which means visiting the festival with a friend or friends (the "Malta" of Poznań, where 73% spectators took part in the festival with at least one friend or acquaintance appears the most "sociable" of all events; a similarly high result, 65%, was recorded in Sibiu, while in Ljubljana the proportion was 53%). The festival "sociability" of respondents can be linked to their young age (viewers are too "old" to go there with their parents, but too young to go there with their children), combined with the young person's "culture of regular spending time out of home. What we have here is a classic example of people who have time on their hands, and are relatively independent (...)"².

In 2004, respondents also underlined that their participation in the festival was a special moment, a breaking away from daily life. However, when asked why they took part in a street theatre festival, a great majority answered that they particularly enjoyed its "party atmosphere" (69%, the highest proportion), stressing that they "loved" street performances (only 37%, the average for all festivals). In Poznań, in 2004, 63% of respondents declared love for street spectacles as the sole reason for their participation in the event, whereas three years later, only 19% made the same declaration). Other reasons given by spectators for their presence at festivals were: "I love being able to go wherever I want, and to leave whenever I want" (67%), as well as the event's charge-free character (53%). The "party atmosphere", which is valued so highly by spectators, is matched by their

² Ibid., p. 8.

behaviour: audiences “party”, and – as underlined by the author of the report – this kind of behaviour brings to mind “individualized type of consumption, which is closer to entertainment activity rather than to traditional ‘consumption’ of culture. (...) [Spectators] simply integrate the art of the street into their daily experience, accepting, at the same time, the conditions and patterns of behaviour associated with this type [of theatre] ”.³

In Floriane Gaber’s opinion, popularity of street theatre with young people can, to a certain degree, be explained by its likeness to other elements of young people’s culture (music, audiovisual arts): the impact of this type of theatre rests, above all, on image and sound, and, to a much lesser degree, on word and text. In the researcher’s opinion, a shift has also taken place from the traditional theatrical means of expression towards expression achieved through evoking images. Hence, in my opinion, it will be rather difficult for these spectators to employ the vehicle of street theatre festivals to develop interest in a different kind of theatre – esp. if those are based on more traditional modes of expression and deprived of the most popular elements of street theatre festivals. All this lets one ascribe street theatre rather to the young people's domain than to traditional culture. This picture prompts another very important question: “Will these young people of today be viewers of street performances tomorrow?”.⁴

The very example of the three “young front” festivals, Poznań, Sibiu and Ljubljana, may indicate that it need not necessarily be the case. The three festivals are organised in university towns at the end of the academic year, sometimes during the examination session, i.e. at a time when young people – secondary school and university students (incl. non-residents) – are still in town. Yet, they do not develop a longer-lasting attachment to the festival. It is just “temporary consumption”, which does not create bonds of loyalty: when these people complete their education and go back to their towns, they do not return for the festival. Research showed that the majority of spectators are local viewers, and the proportion of young people who stay in town especially for the festival is, paradoxically, lower in the “young front” towns than in the countries of Western Europe. Each year, the number of spectators to have seen previous editions of the event decreases: in 2004, 30% of “Malta’s” audiences would have seen the previous four editions of the festival; in 2007, the survey recorded only 12% such viewers. In Ljubljana and Sibiu, the levels were respectively 23% and 24%.

³ Ibid, p. 11, 12.

⁴ Ibid., p. 12

We can thus see that the spectator (mainly a young person) does not come to festivals of street theatre for the theatre itself, but goes out to have fun, to get away from daily routine. All this happens even though artists of this theatrical vein employ “modern” rather than traditional means of expression (just to quote the already mentioned dominance of visual effects), and in this way get their message across to young viewers.

However, are these young people and their habits of spending free time – in which street theatre has blended so deftly – that are to blame? I do not think so. In my opinion, the situation is, above all, the effect of changes which have taken place inside the street theatre itself. The spectator’s habit of spending free time out of home makes him very desirable for this kind of theatre: since, on a number of occasions, the measure of a festival’s success are sheer numbers of people watching the presentations, the spectator is needed in the capacity of a crowd to fill the often immense space of “non-theatrical places”. At the same time, to attract large numbers of viewers, the theatre assumes more and more popular, entertaining character; and because significant parts of the audience are not interested in the content of the performances, this becomes less and less important.

Contemporary open-space theatre has denied its tradition (which, on the other hand, it might have never fully realised). It withdraws from the public domain. One of the reasons is, perhaps, the shrinking area of the public space in towns. Space, once common property of the town’s inhabitants, gets privatised anew, and turns into someone’s property: it belongs to the town (identified with an administrator, and not with the community, the *polis*); owner of a shop, parking lot, or square; to inhabitants of closed residential quarters, or a private street. Furthermore, as Ewa Rewers indicates, a split “between the idea of the *polis* and the practice of the post-modern (post-industrial) town has occurred”⁵. She points to two spheres where this is clearly visible: the already mentioned “problems in determining who enjoys the right to the town”, and a “transfer of the *agora* to the domain of public media”.⁶

It is the latter observation that I find particularly important for my further considerations; basically, the transfer makes it impossible for street theatre festivals to continue to perform the role of “civic education” ventures, which – at least in Poland – these events once played. Polish street theatre of the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s entered the *agora*, or rather tried to establish its surrogate, in the politically “privatized” town.

⁵ Ewa Rewers, *Post-polis*. Krakow 2005, p. 5.

⁶ *Ibid.*

The Polish tradition of cultivating the theatre in the street, which was shaped since 1970's, first of all, by such groups, as Akademia Ruchu or Teatr Ósmego Dnia, adds to the picture a conviction that it is "civic" theatre, which treats public space as the *agora*, where artists voice their opinions on socially relevant matters. Founded in 1983, under martial law (sic!), the first Polish street theatre festival, the MFTU in Jelenia Góra, is a good example. Here, street theatre played a very important role for the viewer-member of a community. Theatre performances were intended to "assimilate" the street, to turn it into a space that belongs to people, and de-monopolize its usage by the authorities to mark official occasions. MFTU was followed by the Międzynarodowy Festiwal Teatrów Ulicznych [International Street Theatre Festival], which originated in Krakow in 1988, and where passing-by viewers "reclaimed" the space of their town, and familiarised themselves with a new type of theatre, until then – not least for political reasons – almost unknown in Poland. Since a number of Polish companies chose performing in the street (for at the time it was the only space available to them), these performances also bore witness to their rebellion against the political system (e.g. the 1983 "Raport z oblężonego miasta" [Report From a Besieged Town] by Teatr Ósmego Dnia. Originally created for the MFTU, it was based on works by the blacklisted poet Zbigniew Herbert). In the reality of the time, street theatre festivals made a splendid example of audience development on different, civic and theatrical, planes...

This might be the reason for the immense popularity, nay "bumper crop" of street theatre festivals in Poland in the early 1990s. Describing the newly-emerged phenomenon, Juliusz Tyszka pointed to its character of "a school of being together". "Open-air encounters with the theatre create opportunities for a festive being together in a large group, which for us, contemporary Poles, is of particular importance. (...) People come (...) to a number (...) of 'non-theatrical' (...) places of their own free will, and want to be there with other people. As simple as that. During these 'theatrical feasts,' the daily rules of the game and ways of reacting to other people are suspended. This way, new, authentic social bonds unmediated by a plethora of restrictive institutions are born."⁷ Floriane Gaber, who observed the Sibiu festival, shared the conviction: "the street in Romania is still (symbolically) a space that needs to be reclaimed after (recent) years of dictatorship,"⁸ and this is exactly the role that festival played.

Thus, street theatre festivals can indeed play a vital role in audience development, albeit on a different level than some might expect: not as a method of boosting the number of spectators at traditional theatre festivals, or adding new consumers to regular cultural production, but as the very

⁷ Juliusz Tyszka, "Szkola bycia razem". In: *Teatr w miejscach nieteatralnych* (ed. by J. Tyszka), Poznań 1998, p. 281.

⁸ Eunetstar report..., p. 10.

school of “getting settled”, or assuming public spaces in the initial phase of the democratisation of a post-dictatorial society.

Franco Bianchini pointed to one more aspect of the role played by festivals besides re-establishment or creation of public space (which proved so vital in the Polish context several years ago): namely, this of re-vitalisation of public social life. And although this range of festivals’ influence upon audience development shifted, it has not lost its importance, if only in neutralising the phenomenon and social consequences of the “alcoholic agora” brought about by “night-time economics: the dream of convivial cafe culture.”⁹

Hence, I still believe that the most important role festivals can play in audience development is related not to practices intended to increase the number of festival viewers, but to those that promote participation in festivals as a means helping people-viewers develop as individuals, and counteract a certain detrimental social phenomenon.

Festivals as platform for intellectual development.

I also want to mention two other elements that accompany theatre festivals and let spectators develop into more conscious or educated theatre-goers. One of them is sessions and conferences which complement almost all theatre festivals today. If a festival has a clearly defined theme, these mostly free events usually constitute a commentary to its subject matter. On the one hand, it is a sign of openness to the spectator, on the other, an attempt to educate him, as in most cases these general-knowledge events introduce the festival’s main issues. An interesting, although not fully effective idea (at least to date) to integrate this educational aspect in the practice of a street theatre festival was last year’s *Archipelag Malta* [The Malta Archipelago] “mobile conference”, whose subsequent parts were held in different locations throughout the town’s open spaces: the Old Market Square, the Jordan Bridge (a pedestrian footpath), a park in the centre of the town. Despite easy access to the places, the meetings did not enjoy particular popularity. The hum of the town combined with high air temperatures did not particularly encourage one to take part in three-hour discussions. (On the other hand, material collected in the book “Teatr w miejscach nieteatralnych” [Theatre in Non-theatrical Places], which is the outcome of 1994 and 1995 “Maltese” conferences, is still the only book published in Poland on theatrical efforts in non-traditional spaces...).

⁹ <http://www.efa-aeef.eu/newpublic/upload/efadoc/11/Bianchini%20Helsinki%20EFRP%2008.ppt>

Most festival conferences known to me combine serious theatrological reflection (typically presented by scholars in a popular way) with artists' statements. These meetings of theoreticians and practitioners become interesting forums for exchange of opinions between the two groups, and thus acquire informative value for festival goers. Not only do they add to the festival offer, but can also intellectually enrich its audiences.

There are countless examples of such conferences; they accompany almost every festival. In a number of cases, the events and ensuing publications are the only opportunities to present reflection on topics which academicians (at least in Poland) do not find serious enough to become subject of academic debate.

The other element I consider important is the form of festival catalogues. For eleven years of co-authoring 'Malta's' festival catalogue, I tried to include in the texts as much relevant information about the history and practice of a given ensemble as possible. Frequently, it was the only source of information about the performing companies; in other words, rather than underlining their advertising aspect, I tried to give these publications a more informative, educational character. In time, this function of festival prints lost its importance: development of spectator's knowledge was no longer a priority; what gained in importance was catchy promotion of a performance. I find this evolution of the festival catalogue detrimental, for – as shown by the 2007 "Maltese" questionnaire survey – spectators drew information about performances from media or friends, rather than from catalogues or the festival webpage. At present, it features information about the latest four editions of the event; the same texts can be found in the paper version of the catalogue.

If the catalogue no longer promotes festival events, what can its role be for audience development? The catalogue of last year's edition of Festiwal Dialogu Czterech Kultur – a unique "textbook" covering the subject of "Ojcowie" [The Fathers], to which last year's event was devoted – stands out against the above background. Besides information about festival events, this very interesting 330-page publication also contains interviews with artists and outstanding Polish scholars (Maria Janion), as well as their sketches (Krzysztof Pomian) and extensive abstracts of lectures delivered at the event. The catalogue thus becomes a valuable testimony to the festival, a textbook which offers the viewer a certain intellectual proposal, and presents him with material for further reflection.

To sum up: what I find most valuable, are the practices whose object is not only the quantitative "development" of the spectator within the framework of theatre festivals, but also his intellectual stimulation, as well as concern for his progress both in social and individual terms.

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