

The 14<sup>th</sup> International Symposium of Theatre Critics and Theatre Scholars

***The Actor is Dead, Long Live the Actor!***

Organiser: Sterijino Pozorje, Novi Sad

and

International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC)

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The traditional International Symposium of Theatre Critics and Theatre Scholars will be held on May 26<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> 2012 in Novi Sad (Serbia), within the scope of The 57<sup>th</sup> Sterijino Pozorje, Festival of National Drama and Theatre, in collaboration with International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC)

Chairman: Dr Ivan Medenica (Belgrade), Adjunct General Secretary of the IATC

**The Actor is Dead, Long Live the Actor!**

In the artistically radical theatre, from the 1960s until today we can observe that the actor often does not represent a character in the context of dramatic fiction any longer. We are referring, among others, to the new ritual theatre by Jerzy Grotowski, American theatre avant-garde (Schechner, Schuman, *The Living Theatre*), early theatre of images and sounds by Robert Wilson, contemporary theatre of the German-speaking countries (Marthaler, Goebbels, Castorf, Rimini Protokoll...). Here the stress is placed more on the actor's stage presence, on his/her mortal body freed from the immortal character, on the powerful interaction with the audience as the only essentially important theatrical constellation. This argumentation could refer, to some extent, to the notion of "pre-expressivity" (Barba and Savarese) in terms of the articulation of stage energy that precedes every personal and culturally codified performance mode.

One of the sources for this tendency is a deconstruction of the dramatic character, originating from the philosophical doubt in the metaphysical concept of the subject, and implemented throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century in drama and theatre based on it. "The Death of the Character" (Elinor Fuchs) is a process starting already at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by separating the character into a few of its symbolic manifestations in *dream-plays* by Strindberg, and ending in contemporary pieces in which the character is often not a "character" at all (in terms of representation of a psychological entity), but an undifferentiated speech platform (position, perspective...), a possible concealment for an individual or a group, male or female, a philosophical idea or psychological reality, or something completely different – as in "no longer dramatic stage pieces" (Gerda Poschmann) by Elfride Jelinek. This tendency in the contemporary writing for the stage could be related to the "postdramatic theatre" (Hans-Thies Lehmann) that has strongly disturbed the notion of stage representation of dramatic fiction. Dramatic and/or other texts are used here only as a material for creating an integral score of the performance ("stage text": Richard Schechner) in which all the elements (light, movement, sound, concept of space...) are equally significant.

Moving the art of acting from stage representation of fiction to "pure" presence and energetic exchange with the viewers is, therefore, one of the most general tendencies in the

contemporary, artistically radical theatre, no matter whether it preserves the connection with the text or not. That tendency transparently manifests itself in this kind of theatre, but it is, as Erika Fischer-Lichte convincingly argues, a general characteristic of every theatre. The actor's action on the stage *continuously* oscillates, even in the same performance, between signifying procedures and a "pure" manifestation of the corporeal (physical); representation and presence; *to signify* and *to be*. Those oscillations are, among other things, a result of the viewer's perception and knowledge: at one moment, the actor's move can be experienced as a sign, and at next as spontaneity or an expression of stage energy. This thesis functions in all performance arts, so we can also follow in contemporary dance, for example, oscillations between three levels of the body: the carnal, the professional and the semantic one.

We can take as an initial assumption for further consideration this dialectical thesis by Erica Fischer Lichte about the duality of the actor's position between "presence" and "representation." If we agree, therefore, that it is impossible for an actor to be consistently seen in the function of a representation of fiction – and that in the majority of radical and inventive stage practices since the 1960s (even earlier – Meyerhold, for example) this function is intentionally deconstructed – what kind of challenges does that pose for the art of acting? Is the actor trained in technique of Stanislavski or his interpreter in the USA, Lee Strasberg, ready to awaken that duality and to creatively play with it? Is the actor's (or dancer's) self-consciousness in this respect necessary at all? Do we not need an actor in the contemporary theatre anymore, but a performer?

This last question seems too harsh (it would require a re-formulation of the Symposium's title into *The Actor is Dead, Long Live the Performer*) because it implies that in the contemporary theatre we need a performer who is not an actor. If we persistently adhere to the assumption about continuous oscillations of the actor's position between "presence" and "representation," then we still need an actor, but a different, self-conscious one. Since it is inadequate to come up with conclusions, we are only offering main questions for a discussion.

- Is the actor's/performer's awareness about his border situation between "presence" and "representation (of character)" necessary, or is it enough for the viewer to acquire that awareness in the perception of the director's concept of the acting "style"? Can and should the actor only be "used" for the director's concept that would be realized/confirmed in the reception of the viewer?
- If an actor/performer has to awaken his border situation, how does one achieve that? Does that self-consciousness have to develop in the actor's previous education? Are the performing techniques by Brecht, Meyerhold, Grotowski or Barba significant for the actor to detach himself from the focus (*fixation*) on dramatic fiction and character with his "psychology"?
- If the previous training/education is not crucial for the actor's awakening of his border situation, is that consciousness then realised in the very process of working on the performance? Are workshops or continuous team work with the same director and collaborators (the concept of a "troupe") more important for this process than previous education? Is this type of work possible in the system of repertoire theatres?
- Does the question of awakening the performer's border position between presence and representation (or between "spontaneity" and "technique") exist in other performance arts

as well? Does a performer who is not educated for stage (who comes, for example, from visual arts), or a dancer in contemporary dance, accept more easily and awaken this situation? Is this question relevant at all in performance traditions which do not belong to Western culture? What is the position, in this respect, of "actors-experts" (Rimini Protokoll), or amateurs in contemporary stage practice?

- Are these efforts utopian? Is reaching for the concept of stage character and his *psychology* an actor's "natural" urge, which has an accomplice in the "natural" tendency of the audience toward dramatic fiction, toward the perception of a character and other elements of a narrative? Is the only necessary constellation of a theatrical situation – the relationship actor-viewer – at the same time, paradoxically, the main obstacle for the "emancipation" of theatre from the stage representation of fiction?

We are kindly inviting interested colleagues to send a resume of their work (up to 500 words) in English, French or Serbian to the following addresses: [ivan.medenica@gmail.com](mailto:ivan.medenica@gmail.com) and [dusana.todorovic@pozorje.org.rs](mailto:dusana.todorovic@pozorje.org.rs) until March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012. We would appreciate if the complete texts (up to 5000 words) in English, French or Serbian were sent until May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012. The papers will not be read during the Symposium, they will be available to the participants in advance on the web site of Sterijino Pozorje ( [www.pozorje.org.rs](http://www.pozorje.org.rs) ) instead, as well in the Symposium material. Authors are expected only to present the main theses and conclusions of their papers in 15 minutes, so there is enough time left for a discussion. Participants will have at their disposal technical equipment and support of Power Point and DVD presentations.

The Symposium will be held in English, French and Serbian, with simultaneous translation.

The organizer will take care of the expenses for accommodation and tickets to all the performances at the Festival, as well as the transport from and to the airport between Belgrade and Novi Sad. The Festival programme will be available on the web site of Sterijino Pozorje after the announcement of the selection (second part of March 2012). Participants from Europe will be provided with accommodation for up to three nights (arrival on May 25<sup>th</sup>, departure on May 28<sup>th</sup>), and participants from outside Europe for up to five nights.

Dr Ivan Medenica,  
Symposium Chairman

Dušana Todorović,  
Symposium Secretary