

DOI: 10.7596/taksad.v6i5.1292

Citation: Shevchenko, A., Shevchenko, E., & Salakhova, A. (2017). Postdramatic Theatre of Director Christoph Marthaler. *Journal of History Culture and Art Research*, 6(5), 173-178. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.7596/taksad.v6i5.1292>

Postdramatic Theatre of Director Christoph Marthaler

Arina R. Shevchenko¹, Elena N. Shevchenko², Aigul R. Salakhova³

Abstract

The present paper deals with the main tendencies of modern European theatre represented in the creativity of a famous Swiss director Christoph Marthaler. Drama and theatre of the end of the 20th – the beginning of the 21st century were exposed to radical transformation. This change has been reflected in the theory of *postdramatic theatre*. A contemporary theatre is becoming more visual. Nowadays natural theatrical synthesis of various arts – visual, plastic, verbal, musical becomes an intersection of all kinds of artistic and medial practices as it has never been before. The new drama and theatre decline mimesis as the main principle of attitude to reality, they do not depict and do not reflect life, but strive to create a magic and/or ritual space of performative living and a special type of communication with audience. These peculiarities of modern theatre get a vivid evocation in the works of Christoph Marthaler. Having entered into theatre from music, the director creates his own unique language of art. The article proves that Marthaler's works are an individual model of postdramatic theatre. The author concludes that its main distinctive feature is to blur the border between musical and dramatic performance. Marthaler does not stage the play – the images appear from musical phrases, fleeting impressions, observations and dramatic improvisations. The analysis enables to claim that the theatre in a real process of performance replaces the mimetic acting today. The applied principles of drama analysis can be used in studying of the other contemporary postdramatic theatre's models.

Keywords: Postdramatic theatre, Performance, Synthesis of arts, Christoph Marthaler.

¹ Kazan Federal University, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication. E-mail: sheara@inbox.ru

² Kazan Federal University, Institute of Philology and Intercultural Communication.

³ University of Regensburg, Institute of Slavic Languages and Literature.

Introduction

German theatre of the 20th – 21st centuries belongs to the avant-garde trends of European theatrical process. The character of modern German theatre is formed by such outstanding directors as Peter Stein, Frank Kastorf, Michael Talheimer, Thomas Ostermeier, Andreas Krigenburg, Cristoph Marthaler and others. Christoph Marthaler (1951 y.o.b.) is a famous Swiss music performer, composer and director. Many specialists view quintessence of contemporary European theatre in his works. The aim of the present research is to reveal how and in what form the characteristic features of modern theatrical process are interpreted in Marthaler's stage direction. H. Th. Lehmann's theory of *postdramaticism* as the main vector of the theatre development of the end of the 20th – the beginning of the 21st centuries is formulated in the book *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999). It gives the key how to understand the essence of fundamental changes in theatre signs' using. If European theatre has been considered the theatre of drama for many centuries, now the focus of attention is the discourse of not drama but theatre itself. Drama or another literary text used in theatre is only an element, a *material* of staging, but not its fundamental principle. On the example of C. Marthaler's theatre the article demonstrates how the function of a word in performative theatre is changing, how the emphasis is shifting towards body, plastic centrism. It raises the question of how the postdramatic culture changes the role of a playwright, a director, an actor; also a syncretic character of hodiernal theatrical art is brought to light. On the one hand the results obtained make it possible to clarify the very notion of postdramaticism that still is a debatable one (see Glossary of Modern Dramatic Art, 2016); on the other – to reveal the mechanisms of interaction between the literary (drama) and the theatrical text in new theatre. Finally, they give an idea of the artistic language's specifics of one of the leading European stage directors in our times.

Methods

The complex descriptive analysis of the dramatic and theatrical text was applied as the key method of study. The object of study has determined the interdisciplinary approach including the elements of culturological and theatrical analysis. The use of hermeneutic method in interpretation of Christoph Marthaler's artistic language's correlations is the main peculiarity of the author's approach, whereas to reveal the cultural context begetter the foregoing correlations to the limit becomes its primary purpose.

Results and Discussion

The new theatre rejects the Aristotelian cultural model. Refusing from an imitative function and creation of an illusion it suggests an antimimetic conception. The idea of meaninglessness of copying the reality and the necessity of searching for other correlational methods has been established in the 20th century. «Abstract action», «formalistic theatre» that is in the real process of performance, «energy theatre», «postdramatic theatre» where the theatrical text is already becoming not only the dramatic one replace the mimetic acting. A German scholar J. Schröder defines postdramatic theatre as one *“having practically abandoned a cornerstone of the Aristotelian art of drama – mimesis, acting, characters, conflict, situation, dialogue”* (2006: 1080). The culture of postdramaticism changes the role of a playwright, a director, an actor radically. Thus the text of a play is being written during the moment of its staging per se. The actor is no longer a performer, he becomes a co-author. The role structures has been abandoned, the personality of an actor, the transfer of his reflexions to a spectator take central position: *“Actors... follow the logic of their bodies: latent impulses, energetic dynamic, mechanics of the body itself and its motoricity”* (Lehmann, 2013: 52). The director becomes a medium between the author, the actor and the spectator: *“Theatre is gradually transforming as if into an instrument, by the means of which “the author” (“the*

director”) vectors his “discourse” towards the audience”⁴ (Lehmann, 2013: 51). At the same time the borders between the genres are being blurred: a combination of musical and narrative theatre, of concert and stage acting appears and so on. In this connection J. Schröder marks: “Theatres... rivaling new mass media have got free from traditional predominance of dramatic text even more radically and in the course of “re-theatralization” and “de-literaturization” have become open for performative forms of dance, music and mime theatre”⁵ (2006: 1081). H. Th. Lehmann, pondering over the problem of postdramaticism’s perception, writes: “... postdramatic theatre poses itself as a place of meeting of various arts and that’s why develops (and even demands directly) some new potential of perception, which would go away from drama paradigm (and even from literature at all). Therefore it’s not a surprise that the lovers of other arts: fine arts, dance, music... often feel much more confidently in its spheres than conservative theatregoers having get used to literary, narrative theatric forms” (2013: 50).

All the enumerated peculiarities of postdramatic theatre are inherent in Christoph Marthaler’s works. In his performances we do primarily observe the tendency of combination of musical and narrative theatre mentioned above. The large-scale musical-dramatic collages being determined in an absurd-ironical key are the director’s favorite genre. Every spectacle is preceded by a long rehearsal process, during which the director converses with the actors unhurriedly: discusses the idea of staging with them, creates a special warm atmosphere that lets the future performers share their experiences, dream and improvise. The whole performance is born out of these one-moment impressions, reactions, observations, gestures and, first of all, musical phrases. Marthaler’s productions represent a bizarre mixture of songs, musical fragments, silent scenes, facial expressions, gestures, dances. Personages being on stage are subjected to the musical beat.

Scenography as the most essential part comprises the concept of *Marthaler’s theatre*. In 1988 Ch. Marthaler has got acquainted with Anna Fibrok, a stage designer – since then they work together. In co-creation they have produced more than 80 performances; opera for the most part (see Marthaler, 2017). Anna Fibrok usually forms up a certain intermediate, isolated space on stage, a waiting hall to some extent. It is unsuitable to live in, one can only stay there temporarily. Marthaler often stages his performances in derelict houses and historical buildings, at the railway stations and museums, etc. Into this public, cold, non-homelike space, the director puts his personages into such a cold, uninhabited, public space, where they seem to be especially miserable and helpless at the background of high walls. The actors do not act a psychological drama, they rather exist in Marthaler’s aesthetics of theatre of the absurd. Their characters are awkward, odd and freaky; robbed in shabby garments, they represent heroes who are absolutely out of time. Marthaler’s theatre is unique and recognizable. Numerous attempts to grasp the point of it are reflected in the following word combinations: “*absurd naturalism*”, “*burlesque realism*”, “*snobbish Dadaism*”, “*melancholic decadence*”, “*trance in geometric interiors of Anna Fibrok*” (Schaper, 2003), etc.

Absurd naturalism, the first one, is connected with an exaggeratedly naturalistic character of presentation. The row of scenes in the performances contain disgusting physiological details, as well as an absurd character of acting performed on stage. It is reflected in the absurdity of cues and situations, in the discrepancy between the behavior of personages, the phrases uttered and the songs sang. The influence of Samuel Becket’s theatrical aesthetics is manifested there. On the one hand the term *burlesque realism* distinguishes the parody as the main device of the director, on the other – emphasizes a special character of interrelations between his productions and reality. It has been already mentioned that contemporary theatre refuses from mimetic function and searches for another ways of interaction with the realness,

⁴ E. Shevchenko’s translation.

⁵ E. Shevchenko’s translation.

using the strategies of *workarounds* (J. P. Sarrazak's term). Such a *relativist realism* is inherent in Marthaler's artistic world. The notion *snobbish Dadaism* accentuates an elitist character of Marthaler's theatre, not intended for the mass audience. This director's art is characterized by an intricate artistic language; it is in a high demand among a risky, ready for experiments audience that is susceptible to the language of a bright theatrical convention most of all. Concerning the second part of the notion mentioned, we admit an obvious interchange with the tradition of Dadaism, demonstrating a kind of an artistic revolution, responding to the violence and absurdity of the world around with the riot against sense as it is. The collocations as *melancholy decadence* and *trance in geometric interiors of Anna Fibrok* mirror an atmosphere of dejection reigning on stage, a delayed, meditative character of action, a sticky, somnambulistic, really trance-like state into which the personages are immersed. Each of these notions represent a certain distinction of the director's artistic world, but they give a full understanding of what Marthaler's theatre is only in the aggregate.

The show *Murder a European! Murder Him! Murder Him! Murder Him! Finish Him Off! (Murx den Europäer! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn ab!)* Staged in Berlin theatre *Volksbühne* became a landmark work for Ch. Marthaler (2017). In 1993 Frank Kastorph invited a yet unknown Marthaler to the production staged at his own theatre. *Murder a European!* Has brought honor to the director and has become *Volksbühne's* calling card for many years. It has held out 178 performances. There has been a full-house during fourteen years up to February 2007. The production has turned out to be a classic example of Marthaler's theatre: it includes all the specific elements and typical devices used by the director. Christof Marthaler created a tragic, absurd requiem in memory of East Germany gone into oblivion. An acute portrait of a German philister is created in the staging where the comprehension of German history and mindset, of *Germannes* is going on through the German song culture. As well the other but typologically related examples of interactive *acting* of a crisis situation during the crucial moments for the country can be observed in the Russian theatre of the nineties (see Prokhorova & Shamina, 2014; Zavyalova & Shamina, 2016). They were often put on the classical material (see Zueva, Shamina, & Nesmelova, 2016). Marthaler uses folk and revolutionary songs, national-socialist marches, anthems, pop songs, fragments of classical music and songs of GDR epoch in his performances. Seamlessly connected they create a unified complicated musical canvas reconstructing the history and mentality of the German people. Thus we deal with such a postdramatic model when not a dramatic text but a *musical* one serves as a basis.

The stage space resembles a retirement home or an asylum. The miserable signs of socialist daily life are recognizable: identical plastic tables, high walls with plastic fittings, huge stoves where brown coal is burnt, a public washstand with the same hand towels hung out in a line. Eleven personages are as if thrown out from the real life: they drag out a queer dozy existence while their life is subordinated to mechanistic rituals (they wash hands, have tea, sing at a signal). They are in "*urban retro*" style clothes: training trousers, short jackets, "*orphan*" dresses, featureless suits, formless shirts. The characters are lonely, isolated; their awkward attempts to get close inevitably fail. Thus an elderly man and his wife must be trying to start a conversation, repeating one and the same phrases with blunt insistence: "*Equality reigns on earth, but then in heaven everything is all right*"; "*Shall you take a nap?*"; "*You've poisoned the dog!*" – "*I haven't poisoned the dog.*" – "*Poor dog*". A grumpy fat woman first sings a schmaltzy song about a good lad, then a song of GDR's youth absolutely discordant with her appearance, age and temper; tells the story of a neighbor's illness, showering her with insults nearly in a moment. A man in traditional leather breeches reads out his mother's grandiloquent letters, recites the verses of Biedermeier poets and at the same time beats a harmless pitiable foreigner without any reason. A miserable gawky fellow, posing as a brutal sex symbol, demonstrates his biceps to people around him and declaims one and the same obscene anecdote with a persistence of a broken vinyl record. A moron girl shows her nose at

regular intervals and puts a footboard on the foreigner. The foreigner stays busy with his physiology – itches, eats slovenly, burps, masturbates and so on. The endless idiotic repetitions of the same phrases, gestures, scenes and their variation create a comic effect. At the same time an atmosphere of fatalism, absurd, bureaucracy and apathy which has been typical for the epoch of GDR's decline is being recreated on stage in a nominal form of parody. We deal with an ugly heritage of totalitarianism. Hence the director denounces a widespread "common wisdom": *Wo Musik erklingt, da laß dich ruhig nieder, / böse Menschen singen keine Lieder* (Where is the music, there are joy and comfort, / Evil people don't sing the songs). However an image of an average burgher created in the production is not at all innocent: he is obedient, downhome, sentimental, aggressive, patriotic but simultaneously easy to manipulate, full of hatred of his neighbor, perishes from xenophobia. Patriotism as his most important feature is exposed through the idyllic songs about Native land, marches, sentimental hits and a bouillon song about Germany in the end. Not by chance the second title of the production is *Patriotic Evening*. It is significant that sleepy, apathetic personages, entering a state of total enmity of everybody against everybody rejoice and unite in the process of choral singing. This device is a bright allusion to the German history of the 20th century.

The title of the spectacle is borrowed from *Indian Song* of a German science-fiction writer, poet, graphic artist Paul Schneibart (1863-1915). Parodic play upon the text of the song leads to the extension of the production's story value. The image of a rank-and-file German grows to the image of a European, what brings the theme of "the sunset of Europe" into the work.

Summary

The analysis done allows to conclude that the theatre of Christoph Marthaler is a director's individual model of postdramatic theatre. Marthaler's stage performances are created not mainly from the plays but appear from musical lines and phrases, dance moves, gestures, observations, fantasies, actor's improvisations. In that way they reflect the essential processes of the "postdrama" epoch such as the deliteralization of theatre (overcoming the dependence on literature), its performative character, the shift of focus to a theatre as a performance, as a show, its convergence and combination with other genres (e.g. musical or dancing ones), the rejection of mimetic acting, the search for another ways of interaction with reality, the use of the *relational realism* devices that enhance the role of theatrical convention and visualization. The peculiarity of Marthaler's model is the elimination of the borders between narrative and musical theatre. The author uses the expressive means of the both genres to their full extend, creating large-scale musical and dramatic collages that have strongly pronounced a parodic and absurd character. Marthaler's artistic discoveries are in the stream of the main path of modern theatre's development. They allow to reveal the core of transformations that it goes through nowadays.

References

Glossary of Modern Dramatic Art (2016). Postdramatic Theatre (pp. 57-61). Mirgorod. Supplement 1. Lausanne-Siedlce.

Lehmann, H. Th. (2001). Postdramatisches Theater. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.

Lehmann, H. Th. (2013). *Postdramatic Theatre*. Moscow: ABC design.

Marthaler, C. (2017). Christoph Marthaler web page. URL: <http://christophmarthaler.ch/>

Marthaler, C. (2017). *Murx den Europäer! Murx Ihn! Murx Ihn! Murx Ihn! Murx Ihn ab!* URL: http://www.volksbuehne.adk.de/praxis/murx_den_europaeer/

Prokhorova, T. & Shamina, V. (2014). *School for Democracy: Interactive Theater in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. *Comparative Drama*, 48(1-2), 59-73.

Schaper, R. (2003). *Triumph der Trance. Der Tagesspiegel*. URL: <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/triumph-der-trance/381158.html>

Schröder, J. (2006). *Postdramatisches Theater Oder Neuer Realismus? Drama und Theater der Neunziger Jahre. Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von 1945 bis zur Gegenwart*. Hrsg. Wilfried Barner. München: Verlag C.H.Beck.

Zavyalova, V. & Shamina, V. (2016). *Post-Perestroyka Challenges in Russian Political Drama*. *International Journal of Humanities and Culture, Special Issue*, July, 682-687.

Zueva, E.; Shamina, V. & Nesmelova, O. (2016). *Russian and Western Productions of *The Merchant of Venice*: Some Problems of Staging*. *The Turkish Online Journal of Design, Art and Communication*, November, Special Edition, 2415-2420.