

IS THEATRE UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF NEW MEDIA?

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Abstract: The paper poses questions concerning the extent of direct or indirect impact of new media on the concept of a theatrical production and on the perception of a concret theatrical performance. Using examples of theatrical preproductions, the author divided the impact of media into several areas. One of them is the insertion of film clips into a theatrical performance or simultaneous large screen projections of what is happening on stage. The second area concerns (in)direct effect of new media on the currentness of the testimony of theatre-makers, such as, for instance, the projection of TV news that accentuate the impact of everydayness on the aesthetic perception of an audience. One should not discount the side effects of the media that entered the theatre, such as the effect of TV series on the social media popularity of actors. Therefore, when actors perform on stage, the audiences are inclined to perceive them as TV-series characters rather than dramatic characters.

Keywords: New media, film, TV series, video art, Slovak theatre, social media popularity of actors

In the past twenty years, we have been experiencing a booming entry of new media in theatrical productions. Is it just a lingering fashion wave or is it a meaningful use of new media in theatrical productions? In order to find an answer to

this seemingly simple question, we would have to analyse individual productions with respect to theatre genres (drama theatre, opera theatre, documentary theatre) and especially from the viewpoint of art and societal development. The impact of a concrete political situation cannot be circumvented either, as theatre has always responded to politicians, or politics, in a lively fashion.

From the mid 20th century onwards, theoreticians (Harold Dwight Lasswell, C.R.Wright, Denis McQuail) studying the definitions of the media from the viewpoint of their functions, have been referring to their information and correlation functions, the function of maintaining a continuum and entertainment function, and also to the mobilisation political and commercial functions. With respect to the theatre such functions may appear to be theoretical, however, they will facilitate a retrospective identification of the goal of theatre – makers.

Thanks to the entry of digital media, the theatre frequently changes to visual art, especially dance art or documentary theatre. New paradigms of everyday life in modern society, its belief system are reflected in the new models of production dynamics and speedy transformations independently of the composition of an actor's action.

Using the examples of concrete theatrical productions, we will try to answer the question to what extent the media will affect, either directly or indirectly, the concept of a theatrical production and what their impact is upon the audiences watching a concrete theatrical performance.

Let us then begin from the end, with state-of-the-art technology entering the concept of a theatrical production without which a performance could not even be staged. What we have in mind, though, is the impact of new media, such as 3D imagery, rather than stage and theatre technology. The Moscow production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* entitled *Hamlet|Collage* staged by Robert Lepage in the Theatre of Nations¹ in 2013 serves a good example. A single actor confined to an empty softly padded cube plays all eleven characters in the performance. This one-man show is enhanced by technological magic with colour lights, images, rotations of the cube, the change of the ambience, and by set design concept. The performance involves a technologically sophisticated handling of the hypercube inside which producers do all kind of magic with the space, and even create weightlessness. Several apertures in the cube let the actor in and out from the weightlessness of "his cosmic space", while changing his guises, language and gestures in the merry-go-round of political scheming and of human destinies taken from the plays of Shakespeare which are transformed by each era in its own likeness. The director pictured Hamlet as a patient of a sick time – of both the past time when he was excused for murdering uncle and Ophelia's father Polonius, and of modern "sick time" when human action becomes increasingly dependent on new technology that takes control over our conduct and decisions. Perfect sound

and music and video images are breathtaking until the actor ends up in a straight jacket again. The technologically challenging performance involves synchronised action of several hidden "actors". The Moscow performance of the eminent director is a mirror of the world we live in, of play within a play irrespective of the country in which the performance is staged by the director of international renown.



Hamlet | Collage The Theater of Nations, Moscow. Stage direction Robert Lepage. Yevgeny Mironov – one-man show. Photo Roman Dolzhansky. Archive of the Golden Mask Moscow Festival.

More examples of this nature can be given. Instead, however, let us focus on a more conventional form of the new media use in theatrical productions.

FILM CLIPS IN THE THEATRE

Among the forms most frequently used in a theatrical performance are film clips. Typically, they are projected either before the performance begins while the audience comes in or during the performance and oftentimes, they substitute the

description of the environment and the setting, mostly without actors on stage. Or, actors are present and the audience sees them simultaneously with the film clips or in completely different situations later on. By using film clips theatrical producers indirectly put questions to the audience that are either related or completely unrelated to the plot. However, their content affects the message or perception of a dramatic work. Film clips may also serve as a plot catalyst in the meaning of advancing the plot or they may expand events and motifs which can be seen either by the protagonist (the actor) or the audience, or their projection is visible to everyone. They are projected on both the backdrop and side walls.

Let us revisit the situation of the 1990s.² In 1994, at the beginning of her production of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*,³ Slovak director Soňa Ferancová projected slides of Moscow historical buildings. During the performance the sisters changed costumes (initially, they were clad in a historical Chekhovian costume only to end up wearing a mini skirt). However, in the finale the director did not use 1994 slides. Such slides would have shown unprecedented societal and urban changes not only in the political and economic "reconstruction" of society but also in people's minds and in the attitudes of the young generation toward consumer and spiritual life. Had they been aware of the changes in Russia, three sisters and the audiences of 1995 could have understood what life is all about.

A few years on, modern life had a strong grip on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* produced by the Hungarian director of European renown Róbert Alföldi. The story of his Hamlet on the Slovak stage of 2001⁴ was a story of a young man in an alienated and emotionally emptied environment in which natural communication

was gradually replaced by smart technology. Hamlet comes on stage on wheel skates and sees the ghost of his late father on a computer screen and communicates with him via the computer. Using the information from this source, Hamlet takes action which is not just tragic for the royal family but also for the country. He does not have the slightest idea - and he never learns - that he was a victim of hacking as part of political games and power struggle. In this respect Alföldi's production was not only a portrayal of a young man struggling for justice and the punishment of evil but also a formidable portrayal of the abuse of technology for personal gain and in the interest of a group. The director used a large-scale screen for the audience to read the dead king's messages to his son. The final scene of Hamlet and Laertes scuffling, while dangling from the ropes, was reminiscent of an old historical film and the audiences watched the duel on small monitors suspended from walls.



Onegin. Krasny Fakel Theatre, Novosibirsk. Stage direction Timofey Kulyabin. Photo Igor Ignatov. Archive of the Golden Mask Moscow Festival.

The computer as a communication partner is also meaningfully used in Novosibirsk production of *Onegin* directed by Timofey Kulyabin.⁵ The production is a new contemporary interpretation of Alexander Pushkin's verse novel. The affluent and spoiled Onegin of the 21st century is portrayed as a modern-day dandy. His cynical and cheeky personality shows in his daily communication with his friends and in society and is manifested through his blogs posted on the Internet. The commonplace details of his life are unthinkable without a computer, facebook, impersonal communication, and dynamic and hi-tech world. He loses the ability to communicate, show empathy and demonstrate love. How far things must go, how deep a human being must fall to realise that the electronic world brings no salvation, quite the contrary. It disconnects man from his ability to exist in the real world, it separates the individual from societal and social functioning while breaking the laws of social life. The falseness of the world is enhanced by a vast amount of information readily available to an individual on social media networks. By incorporating an individual's addiction to the Internet the Novosibirsk production underscores the belittling of values and effaces the difference between the presence and the absence of the purpose of life. Such an interpretation of Pushkin's story, together with outstanding and veritable acting, is bound to be attractive to both the national and international theatre critics and theatre-makers.

Opera or ballet productions do not shun film projections either.⁶ Video art, lasers, film projections in dance and ballet projects catch our attention and distract us from dance. For instance, in the original ballet performance *Everest*⁷, with music composed by

the well-known Slovak pop musician, through the grandiose sound of incidental music that expressed the abstract nature of the theme, video projection not only set the atmosphere of the plot but also touched upon politics.



Everest. The Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava. Stage direction Patrick Lancaric. Shot from the performance. Photo Ctibor Bachraty. Archive of the SNT.



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The borrowed name of the highest mountain in the world served the authors to epitomise “a way, a test of inner strength and courage, belief and the lack of it, a place where the gateway to metaphysics is opened” (Hubová, 2010 – own translation). The central characters of the story– man and woman – conquer their own Everests through their personal defeats and victories and the audience is able to follow them thanks to the projection of the names of their whereabouts. However, according to one critic, the projection looked “as if it were from the eighties, a mosaic of the photographs of changing faces is outmoded and, in fact, it is a puzzle pieced together from the faces [or, “fejsy” which is a slang word for facebook used by young people in Slovakia] of producers, performers and others” (Brathová, 2010 – own translation). Another critic rejected repetitive images of porno scenes on grounds of the poor means of expression of a ballet production rather than on grounds of prudery (Komárová, 2009:12 – own translation). In addition to porno scenes, video projection on three areas of the backdrop showed the faces of the then politicians and terrorist actions. It was this production that proved the idea that sometimes, less is more and this can also be applied to art. The overstatement of old-new media subdues dance art and its ideological and aesthetic messages.

The opera is in a somewhat different situation. The opera is limited by the score, it is more difficult to strike anything out of it unlike the literary source. Opera-makers frequently use film clips to set the atmosphere of the transference of classical plots to the present, but they are limited by music source and libretto. Let us quote an example from Slovakia, namely, the production of *The Barber of Seville* by Gioacchino Rossini.⁸ In international tables based on

the counts of performance runs of Rossini’s operas *The Barber* is currently placed seventh (Blaho, 2013 – own translation). Therefore, any inventive theatre director and an opera house, aside from hiring the most renowned singers, would be keen to vivify this typical comic opera. The acclaimed drama director Roman Polák opted for play within a play method and endorsed the set designer’s concept of three self-contained spaces. A small stage on which the theatre company was to mount *The Barber* was situated on the forestage. As was stated by an opera critic: “The performance is intended to entertain modern-day burghers (celebrities) who were assigned an elevated space by the director and the set designer that ran along the entire rear part of the stage. Although their foremost role is *Velká žranica*, or, excessive eating (the name of Marco Ferreri’s famous film *La Grande Bouffe*) with frivolous and sexually charged atmosphere, they would pop in the neutral space of the proscenium to catch a glance of the ongoing performance of *The Barber*” (Blaho, 2013 – own translation). In parallel to the story, the images of partying people and performing orchestra or the details of singers– actors of this dedicated theatrical performance of *The Barber* were projected on the backdrop. Not only play in a play method, inventive set design but also the live transmission of partying people enhances the consumerism of today’s society and the downgrading of arts. According to critics, this particular staging concept stood in sharp contrast to Rossini’s opera and it failed to stand up for a meaningful use of video projection in this direction concept. It moved toward the “modern” trend of simultaneous large screen projection of what was happening on stage.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA CULTURE
AND THEATRE

Another area of the impact of media on theatrical production is the projection of latest television news (political events or crime coverage), which enhance the impact of everydayness on the audience's perception.

Today, we are used to watching television, however, until the 1990s, the so-called Film Journal, i.e. newsreel film, had been commonly shown in cinemas. In Czecho-Slovakia, newsreels were shown before every full-length feature film⁹ and they were a source of the latest news and of the most interesting facts on domestic and international events. But, let us not just mention the turn of the millennia, let us point out the earliest meaningful use of this media in Slovak theatre. Director Viktor Šulc and set designer František Tröster (one of the leading Czech set designers) were the first theatre-makers to have used film in a theatrical performance, notably, in the 1937 production of *Biela nemoc (The White Disease)* by Karel Čapek.¹⁰ The text of the play and the production had strong anti-fascist sentiments.¹¹ The director and the set designer used shots from a Nazi newsreel, which were enhanced by the scenic design concept. Worth mentioning is a balcony situated above Marshal's study, which resembles the balcony on Palazzo Venezia in Rome from which Mussolini delivered his speeches. Together with the film shots of a fanaticised German crowd of the late 1936 it became a legible metaphor of a dictatorship regime (Mittelmann-Dedinský, 1984:175 – own translation). The performance was a great success. It was seen by theatre-goers from all over Slovakia and even from

Hungary which was under Horthy's rule. (Mittelmann-Dedinský, 1984:173 – own translation). Among others, the production owed its success to inserting the shots from a German newsreel which enhanced its strong anti-fascist sentiments in those tumultuous times.

Currently, television as an element of everydayness is routinely included in a theatrical production. Latest news, various information on any individual which are oftentimes willingly sent and shared with others reach hundreds of recipients in one go, not just an isolated individual or a handful of recipients. We are the witnesses of a mass postmodern culture (Rankov, 2002). People send text messages on the street, from their apartments, they watch horrifying scenes while travelling by public transport or seated on a bench in the park and their images are projected on a big screen or transmitted onto a stage. This function of "new" media tells us more about the new features of our lifestyle, rituals and stereotypes. The traditional belief system vanishes as a consequence of the changing patterns of pastime activity, of ever-diminishing interpersonal communication and due to the emergence of a new industrial mass postmodern society. Culture has become a commodity in both its form and content.

Catharsis, the requirement for the aesthetic criteria of artist testimony gradually wanes and art turns into a consumer commodity (Habermas, 2000). The image of the television broadcasting of news, entertainment programmes, quizzes as an element of everydayness has become a frequent part of theatrical performances. This can be seen, for instance, in the production of *Psota (Poverty)*¹² where a TV programme about celebrities cooking a salmon runs in parallel to the story of the preparation of a frugal

supper consisting of potatoes, thus creating a sharp contrast to a real-life situation of a family struggling on the edge of survival. The same applies to evening news reporting on latest international events which, quite logically, are irrelevant to a family which struggles with a tight budget to keep their household running.

In other theatre projects older or simultaneously recorded images and audio text are projected on large screens to complement the situation and advance the plot and the information communicated in this manner have a considerable impact on the testimony of theatrical producers. To give an example, the projects of performer Sláva Daubnerová (inter alia, *Hamletmachine*, staged by M. H. L. documentary theatre¹³) use the fade-in and out effect of the text, performances, various forms of video art and other media (visual, sound media).

An image is a subjective phenomenon. It can capture a state and facilitate the analysis of the world within and without. An image is also a reflection of our scrutiny and perception of actual reality, "it is an inner manifestation of human conscious and unconscious minds" (Baran, 2006:196 – own translation). According to film theorist Ludvík Baran the image incorporates two kinds of experience – that of an object under scrutiny and of the beholder. When applied to the theatre, one could state that the use of an image medium in theatre includes a third dimension. It mirrors the image of a theatre-maker who inserts a film or TV image of events, ideas, and opinions in a theatrical production, which results in a new product of consciousness. Oftentimes, duplicating and complementing the information ends up in redundancy. We fail to realise that things not

seen on stage, which are merely apprehended, may turn out to be as important as the things we can see (Aronson, 2007:50 – own translation). Therefore, one has to discern between a meaningful incorporation of new media in a theatrical production and a mere manifestation of modern trends.

IN CONCLUSION

One should not discount the side effects of new media in the theatre, such as the strong impact of TV series on the social media popularity of actors. When actors perform on stage, the audiences are inclined to perceive them as TV series characters (in soap operas and telenovelas) rather than dramatic characters. It is not unusual to see a popular comedy actor appear on stage as a dramatic or tragic character, which makes the audience laugh or applaud. Practice has shown that featuring in daily series for an extended period of time has a negative effect upon the actor's future development. It is a generally known fact that in daily series the situations and dialogues are roughly outlined and must be fine-tuned by actors to fit concrete characters and, therefore, everyday language is used more frequently. The well-trying gestures and facial expressions which are a component part of the actor's means of expression are transferred from television series to stage. However, this is a different topic, which deserves a separate paper.¹⁴

ENDNOTES

- [1] Theatre of Nations, Moscow, Russian Federation, première in 2013. Set designer Carl Fillion.
- [2] In 1989, the Velvet Revolution was started in Czecho-Slovakia. On 1 January 1993, two sovereign states were established, the

Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. Ever since 1918, when the First Czecho-Slovak Republic was established (with exception from September 1938 to May 1945 during World War II) the territories of Slovakia, Cechia and Moravia were united and in all official communication and dealings, not just in everyday life, two independent languages were used, the Czech and the Slovak. The languages are close to each other and similar with certain minor differences.

- [3] Trnava Theatre in Trnava, Slovak Republic, premièred in 1994. Set designer and costumes Alexandra Grusková.
- [4] Andrej Bagar Theatre in Nitra, Slovak Republic, premièred in 2001. Set designer Kentauer.
- [5] The Novosibirsk State Academic Theatre Krasny Fakel, Russian Federation, premièred in 2012. Set designer Oleg Golovko.
- [6] In musicals the use of new technology is almost mandatory to highlight the performance and to facilitate the connection of 20th century musical protagonists with the present time.
- [7] Ballet ensemble of the Slovak National Theatre in Bratislava, Slovak Republic, premièred in 2009. Music author Pavol Hammel, choreography Mário Radačovský, stage direction Patrik Lančarič, set designer Marek Hollý.
- [8] Opera of the Slovak National Theatre, Bratislava, Slovak Republic, premièred in 2013. Set designer Pavel Borák.
- [9] At that time, there was a cinema in Bratislava called Čas (Time), where only newsreels were shown round the clock.
- [10] The play raises concern about the growing danger of aggressive German Nazism. Two attitudes are confronted in the play: humanism and dictatorship whose goal is seizing of power and bloodshed.
- [11] This was a year and a half prior to the outbreak of World War II which was triggered by the German army invading Poland.
- [12] Poton Theatre in Bánovce, Slovak Republic, 2012. Video art Erik Bartoš, Peter Višňovský.
- [13] *Hamletmachine*, 2007. Visual effects Dušan Krnáč, software design Peter Gonda, projection Viliam Daubner; *M. H. L.*, 2010. Video art: Lukáš Kodoň – both P.A.T. Theatre.
- [14] The paper was written within VEGA No. 2/0070/13 project. Translation by Mária Švecová.

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- [3] V. Blaho, (2013), *Komika či politika? Gioacchino Rossini: Barbier zo Sevilly*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.theatre.sk/isrecenzie/864/97/Komika-ci-politika/?cntnt01origid=97/>
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- [8] M. Mittelman-Dedinský, *Viktor Šulc. Cesta režiséra*. Bratislava: Tatran, 1984.
- [9] P. Rankov, *Masová komunikácia : masmédiá a informačná spoločnosť*. Levice: Koloman Kertész Bagala LCA Publisher Group, 2002. ISBN 80-88897-89-0.

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