



A SITE FOR SECRET MEMORIES. THEATRE IN STATE-SOCIALISM

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***Abstract:** In my lecture I will present a research project that has created a methodology to reconstruct the theatrical events of the last 70 years. I was motivated by the recognition that the methodology of theatrical historiography prepares a web of interconnected past events based on stories of institutions and artists, and this historiography presents us with solid lines of processes. The cultural events of state-socialism are difficult to follow with this historiographical process-analysis, as the narratives that keep them in the memory are also censored narratives themselves, and the rewriting, losing an counterfeiting of the memories present us with a double history: the sites of memory of the official public sphere and those that remained from the local interpersonal spaces, or the "secondary public sphere".*

The analysis of the theatrical performance writes a micro-history, based on the reconstruction of aesthetic values, and it achieves the perception and understanding of secret, hidden interrelations and rewritten phenomena by the impact-analysis of the events.

The reconstruction of the theatrical performance is not simply an interrogation of the past: it is an investigation. The memory of a performance is made visible through and among the reports of agents and informers, and resolutions of censors. The aim of my lecture is to present our collective method called "Philther".

***Key words:** Theatre in state-socialism, the double-speech, the secondary public sphere, Official memory and archives, www.philther.hu.*

1.

In state-socialist cultures theatre historiography has to struggle both with the ungraspable and ephemeral nature of its subject, the theatrical performance, and with the official discourse of historical remembrance. These stories draw up a line of memory in which we can follow the formation and effect of each element. Stories of developments, institutions, ideologies are generated, some of which focus on the national theatrical efforts, some on avant-garde phenomena, but they share one common hypothesis: the history of theatre means the history of theatre as an institution. Everyone knows those spectacular books in which strange, puppet-like, costumed figures parade in stiffened postures among imposing decorations. In these pictorial representations a certain kind of remembrance is organized into history and confirms that the notion of theatre inevitably involves a building and a company.

The established methods of historiography can be adapted for national histories (like in the history of the Irish national theatre); histories of specific eras (English renaissance); as



well as the avant-garde (Aronson, 2000, 25). But when analyzing the culture of a smaller linguistic community it becomes clear that in the state-socialist culture the very method of historiography becomes a device of repression, an expression of power. My questions concern not only the actual facts of historiography, as they accumulate in the depository of national memory, but also the historiographical technique that builds up this depository.

My research can be summed up by two main aspects. First, I look for the events of non-official theatrical activities in the state-socialist era as they can be traced in urban legends: acts of resistance that were hidden, secret, forbidden; and reconstruct them and their historical impact. And from this follows the second direction: to write the history of the non-official events (Szőnyei, 2012, 1:11-32). The challenge is not in establishing an image of our past that differs from the official histories (Gyáni 2014: 41-51); neither in introducing new names in the Hall of Fame, rather, to work out an alternative method of historiography. This method, called *Philther*, concentrates on the state-socialist era (1949–1989), but instead of the parts of the theatrical process, instead of the history of the institutions, the actors and the plays it chooses the performance, the event itself as its subject.

2.

So the history of dramatic theatre is a history of institutions, their attached artists, actors, directors, choreographers, stage designers etc. In this model the characteristically post-dramatic (Lehmann) performative events (like home theatres, exhibition-happenings, open-air show-actions) are excluded from the memory of the state-socialist era. And what is excluded from the cultural system is excluded from the interpretative system as well.

Two statements by two historians inspire my work. Peter Szondi strongly establishes that theatre history is only possible in the case of eras that provide the documents that are required for the reconstruction of the performances. Thus, for the theatrical periods preceding the English renaissance we don't possess historically relevant material, consequently, we don't possess their history. The second statement comes from the legendary theatre-anthropological drama-history of Erika Fischer-Lichte, who explores forms of staging through the works of playwrights, that is essentially through the texture of plays, and who defines the framework of theatre through the phenomenon of liminality.

It follows from the first statement that if the cultural events of the 'secondary public sphere' have no documents, they won't have a history. From the second statement comes the conclusion that virtually any written document can be used in a theatre-anthropological analysis to reconstruct a theatrical event.

These two insights bring about a third one: when we investigate stage-socialist theatre we have to face a state-approved discourse that evaluated each event solely based on whether their political message was loyalist or oppositional. Furthermore, working with archival documents we have to realize that "the authoritarian state with its institutions of internal security did not succeed in establishing a totalitarian system, but made itself believe it did." (Szőnyei, 2012, 1:213.) Our objective is to find the theatrical event



among constructed narratives, and for the sake of this presentation we posit the existence of two public spheres: the primary, official or governmental; and the concealed one that we call secondary.

The memory of the official public sphere is limited to the forms of dramatic theatre and it is documented industriously. The memory of the secondary public sphere lives in urban legends and it concentrates on the event-oriented phenomena of performative theatre. This strictly socialist value-based public discourse automatically files every non-institutional theatrical event as avant-garde and oppositional; and every institutional one as (social) realist and conformist. Let us see two examples.

I chose both my examples from 1985. The first is a performance in an institution privileged by state-socialist culture, Katona József Theatre. For the reconstruction I had access to stage photos, contemporary reviews, the news about an international tour and the recording of a televised broadcast. Furthermore, I had several interviews with the creators at my disposal. This over-documentation created an interpretative framework around the performance, and the epochal, masterful psychological-realist staging of Tamás Ascher became a dominant item in the canon of the stage-socialist era. The canonizing factors are also clear: faithfulness to the dramatic text (here: Chekhov); faithfulness to history (here: early 20th century Russia); faithfulness to theatrical form (here: Stanislavsky-method, small-scale realism, that is the psychological truth inherent in human relations, like Irina's nostalgic love towards Vershinin.) I would say that this performance was suitable to becoming a part of the state-socialist canon as, being a production financed by the system, it could state anything that was not expected by the system only in undocumentable nuances. This kind of communication that developed as the unique language of state-socialist theatre is called double-speech and it cannot operate without the complicity of the initiated audience.

At the end of Ascher's 1985 *Three Sisters* the soldiers enter the scene: they march in place (mark time) in the background. Their uniform is reminiscent of that of the Soviet Army occupying Hungary, (and whose presence was publically styled friendly and consensual) and this regiment simply stays on the stage. They march in place but don't go away. Olga, Masha and Irina bitterly weep on the front stage, military music blares at the audience, and the technique of double-speech creates an intense presence that is not inherent in the specifics of the performance, but relies on the context of the audience's preliminary knowledge. It offers the recognition that Hungary is an invaded country, where artists are forced to limit their subjects to the private sphere: public life, our collective sphere (that is: politics) is a forbidden topic. By the theatrical method of double-speech the spectator gets involved in the theatrical discourse, but this aspect is hushed in the descriptions of the over-documented performance. In fact none of the contemporary reports mention the closing moments of the play.

My second example from 1985 is *Dramatic events* directed by András Jeles. This is an emblematic piece of the secondary public sphere with its own legend. Instead of a



theatre it was performed in a public hall, used for fairs and pop concerts. It wasn't on repertoire; they performed it only twice, in front of a few hundred people. The players were amateurs, the space unaltered and unglamorous, the date of the premiere spread by word of mouth, and participation itself rendered the audience a part of a world of legends: the legend of opposition. Only a few photos remain of this performance and it never got any reviews. On the other hand, a video version was made (without audience, at another site) and every reconstruction is based on this.

This performance paraphrases the idea of faithfulness to the state-socialist canon, using a genuine social-realist drama from the fifties, *Windstorm* by Imre Dobozy. The original story takes place on 23 October 1956, the day of the Hungarian revolution, and it presents examples of collaboration and heroism according to the rules of political propaganda. Thirty years later in the staging of *Jeles* the ideological canon of state-socialism is presented as incomprehensible and distorted: there is nothing to be faithful to. The actors recite every word of the play verbatim, including the staging instructions, but without acting on any of them: their bodies are twisted and distorted, hidden under thick layers of ragged, nondescript clothing, their speech elaborately obstructed. The performance emphasizes the vulnerability of words and utterances by ignoring every aspect of realist representation and using only injured obstructed, paralytic movement and speech in a deprived, grey environment. At the end of the play the actors form a tableau and start to strip off their rags to Mozart's *Dies irae*.

In the urban legends of 1985 this production is established as the single most important performance of the era, and, although only a few hundred spectators actually saw it, its strong effect can be traced through several generations of performances.

These examples show that both the over-documented and the under-documented performance appear deformed in the official *lieux de mémoire*. In addition, this deformity remains invisible from the inside of the discourse itself.

The pool of urban legends created a platform for the interpretation of the secondary public sphere and the rescue of these legends is underway in the form of interviews and memoirs: we work on the reconstruction of the state-socialist era's secret sites of memory. In this work the partial opening of the state-archives gave us some unexpected help, providing theatre historiography with new data. All non-institutional creative artists were aware that they were being watched, that their activity was recorded. But nobody expected that a significant part of the records was professional criticism, aesthetical evaluation of their art. In 1990, after the regime change it became clear that several performances in the secondary public sphere were recorded in detailed reports that can be considered reviews. Several of the undercover agents were actual experts of the trade, and since 1990 their work is partially open for research. These are the sources that create the scholarly discourse of the secondary public sphere; thus the interpretative framework of the artworks is formed decades after their actual production.

A peculiar element of the history of state-socialist theatre is that in several reports not only each actor, but also each audience member is identified by name. We know



who was present at the early happenings, who attended the home-theatre performances of Péter Halász (while we have no information about the audience of his Squat Theatre in New York). The secret sites of memory, the legendary theatrical memorial sites of Budapest are brought to daylight in the written documents of the informers' reports.

3. Methods

It often occurs that the informers' reports are our sole source for the reconstruction of a production in the secondary public sphere. In these cases we have to take into account the following considerations:

1. The system of expectations

The reports were created in a deeply structured system: the writings of the informers must be read against the comments of their handler officers so that we can see their expectations take shape (Horváth, 2014, 13). This is the purest expectation horizon of the state-socialist system: the bulk of the reports make it clear that it's not the aesthetic but the political character that determines the judgment of a performance.

2. The phenomenon of performativity

In the archives one can start searches by the name of the artists. The filing system is based on the names of theatrical artists in a cultural context where an official theatrical event is always defined by the playwright's name and his work's title. Thus the informer-critics' context inadvertently stumbles upon the method of event-focused observation: instead of the playwright's text it is the director's stage work that becomes the subject of prospective censorship. The agents' reports invented the phenomenon of performativity long before official theatre-criticism did.

3. Tabloid-factor

It is an important value of the reports (though it may seem superficial gossip from today's point of view) that the spectators are also identified – at least those who are personally known to the informer. This feature helps us to reconstruct the formation of creative circles.

4. Oral history

After 1989 the Archive that holds the reports acquired a new building and became a new memorial site of Budapest: this symbolically ends the non-located era of oral history. The new site is at Csengery Street, a few minutes from the most important private art-archive, Artpool. The new task of theatrical historiography is to form solid statements about the events preserved in urban legends, backed up by the written sources of state and private archives (Carlson, 1993, 511).

And lastly, we have to work in the awareness that this all but justifies the characteristics of political theatre, the expectations of state-socialist cultural policy and the discourse of the informers' reports: counter-culture did exist. The avant-garde is political. Art is always, inevitably political, that is the hardest lesson of state-socialism.



4. *Philther*

The *Philther Project* utilizes the aforementioned historical documents and urban legends to form a reconstruction of the plays in question. Urban legends are event-focused and the informers' reports follow the creators/directors of those events. The history of the secondary public sphere cannot be written but as a history of performances. This is the basic concept of *Philther*.

The portmanteau "Philther" is a playful combination of the words "Philology" and "Theatre", which became the name of a method: a net or sieve, woven from theatre and philology, that filters out for us the canonical theatrical events of the last seven decades.

The basic question of *Philther* is this: how can theatrical-cultural events be reconstructed in their uniqueness, preserving their historicity and international impact (Postlewait, 2009, 157). *Philther* takes the performance as the exclusive subject of theatrical historiography. Neither the creators, nor the circumstances of creation, but only the perspectives of historical analysis form the re-viewable, re-readable entity of the singular, unrepeatable performance: a unit of understanding and describing the past. Thus it consciously abandons the historiographical praxis that divides the past from the present: it reconstructs past performances reflecting on present aesthetic experiences. The project examines the development of European and Hungarian theatrical and cultural tradition as a single unit: this is how it is related to the formation of canons.

At the end of the previous phase of our research an urgent methodological question arose: what historiographical devices can be offered to the users who prefer the approach of linear reading. We realized that in the following period we must concentrate on the analysis of the logic of links. As a prerequisite, we must clearly define those six aspects (theatrical-cultural context, textual dramaturgy, direction, acting, design and sound, historical impact) that, besides forming the framework of the historical analyses, also integrate the singular Hungarian performance into the European language of theatre studies. Thanks to these entries, the site will function as a virtual encyclopedia.

Conclusion:

The form of *Philther* offers the opportunity to easily create the reader's own narrative. Surfing can carry the reader away from the ideas of linearity and progression (Lengyel, 2008, 283). But *Philther* also allows the mainstream performances to leave the positivist narratives of development and provides a matrix for them, the context of performative presence, in which the mechanisms of the double-speech practiced in state-socialist culture might be recognized and understood.



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