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THE THEATRE BETWEEN THE SCANDAL AND CENSORSHIP

1. INTRODUCTION, OR THE POLITICAL INCORRECTNESS OF THEATER ART THROUGH THE CENTURIES

Art is symbol, all its aspects are symbolic and hence significant. But symbol of what? Signifying what? Intuition is truly artistic, is truly intuition and not a chaotic accumulation of images only when it has a vital principle which animates it and accounts for its complete unity.¹ The art always recognizes its recipient not directly, but mostly indirectly. Theater art is generally synthetic and its horizons integrate the social and aesthetic representation of the nature. The nature in this sense means the social and political environment and the sympathetic bridge in so called going beyond the fourth wall mutually influences the recipient's points of view. That is why the theater as a synthetic art consists of a strong message which symbiotically participates in the recipient's social and political life. Croce denies that art "has the character of conceptual knowledge." It is in this context that the meaning of the term "intuition" becomes somewhat clearer. Conceptual knowledge (and under this label we may include philosophy, history and science) is founded upon a distinction between reality and unreality, so that it must compare its hypotheses with "the world out there." "In contrast, intuition refers precisely to the lack of distinction between reality and unreality — to the image itself — with its purely ideal status as mere image."² Here, the political theater is a sort of aesthetic battle between fact and fiction. The approach to the play (mostly the directorial ones) is crucial for the recipient's

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¹ Benedetto Croce, *Guide to Aesthetics*, trans. Patrick Romanell (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts, 1965), 23.

² *Ibid.*, 14.

recognition of the message of the theatrical performance. The conceptualization of the art here turns into an attitude and in most cases into a political and social surge — a kind of meaning.

The political essence of our going to the theater is the existential fear of unanswered questions about our destiny. When we talk about destiny in social circumstances we intend a reality we reject “consciously” turning it into boredom, or a reality we rationally “metabolize” by discovering our revolutionary ingredients which, in the other hand, we transform them into political engagement and articulate through what indicates our intellectual instrumentation. The political essence of the two conglomerates of people entering the building (being at the same time a temple and a “space”) consists in the need to activate a certain mechanism against social constellations sublimated in a message delivered through the director’s conception or a sort of mainstream (play) and the need to articulate the message in a specific political and social formulation (audience). The theater has always been politically incorrect. Drama has an ontological line of subversiveness recognized for centuries. We have historical remembrance of Aristophanes’ antiwar “comedy” *Lysistrata* because of which it was banned by Grant’s Cumstock laws, a set of federal acts created by the US Congress; the ban being filed in 1873 not withdrawn until 1930. There is also Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome*, banned by Lord Chamberlain for its “vulgarity,” while Bernard Shaw’s *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* was banned for ethical reasons in London, but the same kind of ban failed to be enforced in America. Here we’ll also mention Lillian Hellman’s play *Children’s Hour*, as well as Henrik Ibsen’s *Ghosts* and Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, all forbidden because of their moral motives (homosexuality, incest, religious controversy). Political immorality throughout history meant a set of violations of ethical merits that include religious as well as moral and ethical “correctness.” The mentioned plays speak about the anomalies that pervade the social reality and they circulate as a kind of political boomerang between the social authorities whose repressive instrumentation strikes into the core of their articulation — the institutional denunciation.

In these constellations it’s very important how many members of the audience that enter the theater over the centuries are able to think critically and in how many of them the drama and its theatrical shaping can arouse the critical aspect of the theatrical reception. Political reality seems to be a complex substrate conceived by authoritarian rulers and those to whom it refers — the audience and the theater workers. Here we must not forget that theatrical artists themselves are also part of the audience, so that kind of stage “subversion” becomes cyclical. True theatrical art can’t be more “correct” because of its synthetic nature. Theater

has subversiveness in its expression and its essence, but the political installments recognize that energy as existing, finding its own diagnosis which is also articulated through acts, decrees, etc.

2. CENSORSHIP AS PART OF THEATER MOVEMENTS DURING THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

Censorship can, but doesn't have to, be a means of stifling the freedom of expression, and thus the freedom to interpret social movements in a country. In the twenty-first century, censorship is subtle and has turned into a scandal that lies behind "democratic principles" and freedom of expression, while in the previous century it was expressed through "legitimately" enacted acts to prevent the life of a work of art for various reasons. Of course, censorship as well as theater is part of the movement of this synthetic art. The second half of the twentieth century in the former Yugoslavia, but also in countries with a communist political orientation, is full of this kind of legalized repressions when it comes to engaged theater. What was important at that time for the theater was to immanently form political models of life instead of imitating it. The image of politically "incorrect" theater activists has formed a very interesting range of theatrical thinking that often breaks down that barrier of "correctness." Coming out of the stereotyped imagination of the playwright and director in the then communist reality, they created a special theatrical entity exerting a strong impact and included in the general voice against repression and hegemony.

The former Yugoslavia had a history of censorship that lasted until its dissolution, and which had in its foundations and processes the tissue of recomposing power. Namely, the framework of censorship moved from the government's ruling through the legality of its instrumentalism and the concretization of the repressive measures, until its conversion into a "scandal" and that period of thirty years had two censorship antipodes called "When the pumpkins bloomed" of the notable Serbian author Dragoslav Mihailovich and "Saint Sava," the play by Sinisha Kovachevich via the director's vision of Vladimir Milchin. The socialist reality at that time (1968) explicitly forbade the performance of the Yugoslav Drama Theater based on the novel by Dragoslav Mihailovich, directed by Boro Drashkovich, a play that talks about the destruction of the political regime through the life story of Ljuba the Sparrow, boxing champion and his clash with so-called OZNA at that time opened many political wounds, but it also provoked a great reaction, even from the president Tito himself. In this case, the measures

of the authoritarian government were concrete and extremely rigid: Dragoslav Mihailovich became a writer with a significant biography on that sinister island, the book was removed from the bookstores, and the performance was explicitly banned and removed from the repertoire, while the director Boro Dražskovich was excluded from the engagements almost for thirty years. But “When the Pumpkins Bloomed” was also a political scandal that changed the way of thinking in that former Yugoslavian federation, and it somehow happened simultaneously with the rudely suffocated student and intellectual revolution of 1968. Scandal and censorship have their “uroboros” connection. This performance opened a cultural and political milestone and it didn’t end with the violent and repressive removal of these important Serbian literary and theater artists. Public scandal after the ban turned censorship into auto-censorship. Namely, the government, wanting to hide itself behind its ideological matrix, turned the conglomerate of intellectuals into icons of revolutionary thought. These processes were moving slowly, but very significantly because they covered a huge area in the cultural reality of the former Yugoslavia. Of course, the 1970s focused on the huge influx of “blacklists” that housed all the “undesirable” artistic personalities. But censorship at the time went deep into the process of converting itself into a “scandal.” The strong social anger, which in essence was a scandal in those years, returned like a boomerang to the government because it was exactly that play which didn’t conceptually reach further than realism that opened the Pandora’s box of “subversive” works of all artistic genres (“Plastic Jesus”) through all kinds of progressive media in those years. That period of three decades transferred the scandal to the audience, to the crucial recipients of the theater. The great influx of “subversive” works imposed a very strange habit of constantly scandalizing the audience not only in the theater, so that the laws enforced by the Yugoslav federation at the time relaxed and deviated under the onslaught of open-mindedness, which in turn penetrated all the pores of the social life. Intellectual subversion, decomposing the strict and rigid attitude of the state apparatus, politicized the theatrical space, opening new tendencies, and thus new aspects of the theatrical liberalism. Liberalism in the Yugoslav theater, whose general legislation was losing its power quite intensively, brought many other topics and other fields of interest when it came to freedom of speech, which was still controversially determined by the so-called “verbal tort” which consisted in the fatal art. 134 of the Criminal Code of the Yugoslav federation. This relaxation, by bringing new topics in the theatrical life, started both religious and ethical controversy, which became burning topics in both Serbian and Slovenian drama. The act of desecration of the saint and the scandal with the play “Saint Sava” after

the text by Sinisa Kovacevich, the performance directed by Vladimir Milcin, performed by the Zenica Theater in Bosnia and Herzegovina, closed the circle of the scandal within the socialist reality and legality. Namely, the desecration of Saint Sava in Kovacevich's play gave impulse for the play to be interrupted and removed from the repertoire for a short time, but this time as a result of a scandal caused by religious authorities, conducted by part of the audience. Of course, this is also a legitimate reaction of the religious authorities, but in this case the very dissolution of the theatrical act took place from within, on the part of the audience.

The Yugoslav federation faced a lot of bans on theater performances whose echo further caused great popularity and formed icons by the artists themselves, while that kind of repression with the extinction of this federation was compressed in scandalous events whose ultimate goal was not to "punish" artists, but to delegitimize the theater expression itself, ie. the play. Saint Sava, or Rastko Nemanjich in Kovacevich's play is a controversial figure who is diametrically different from his portrayal in the minds of the believers. The early 1990s converted state repression into a scandalous subversion that would, in a way, become a opposing message to the one theater would convey in the next period, the period of political transition of the six states that would form after the fall of Yugoslavia.

3. THE MACEDONIAN PART OF THE POLITICAL PRISON FOR THE THEATER

The Macedonian theatrical reality felt the bitter taste of the forbidden plays. During the socialism, the desired theater in that area (throughout Yugoslavia) practiced the pure style which in a way meant a mimicry of the government behind the real function of this synthetic art. Theatrical criticism didn't deal with the phenomenological discourse of the theater and the political reality was rather blurred in the eyes of the viewer. Several performances warned that the political ferocity of the time and freedom of expression were in fact the biggest problem of that society. Two cases of the banned plays speak of the danger of the theater's true messages: the play "Mara's Wedding" by Macedonian novelist and playwright Vladimir Kostov directed by Ljubisha Georgievski and the play "Great Water" dramatization of one of Zhivko Chingo's greatest Macedonian novels, a play directed by Vladimir Milchin, but at the "New Stage" Theater in Bratislava.

Almost in the same year, 1977, both bans took place: "Mara's Wedding" at the National Theater in Bitola, a play about marginalized people whose free

will brought them to social misery, and hence they became strong supporters of Mara, a woman whose altruism and sympathy gathered them in her residence and the ban on “The Great Water” by Zhivko Chingo in the theater “New Stage” in Bratislava directed by Vladimir Milcin. It takes place in Bratislava during the time of Czechoslovakia, during the hard Stalinism, and the text of the “Great Water” talks about exactly that issue, while in Macedonia as part of the then Yugoslav federation it takes place at a time when that country is definitely separated from that type of governance, but still struggles with the free will and repression of the ruling elite. “Mara’s Wedding” ends in court with a deeply inappropriate accusation that points the finger at both the artists and the theater itself allegedly because of “chauvinism and racism” referred to sentences taken out of context, and “The Great Water” certainly takes place during the period of Charter 77 and the Prague spring. The trials in the case of “Mara’s Wedding” were very short, but the success of that performance at festivals across Yugoslavia was enormous. What happened to this type of ban? At that time, the theater was in great collision with its transparency. Macedonian theater artists dealt with the very essence of the theater, *mutatis mutandis*, as in its meaning at a time when the Bare Island was full of openminded artists of all genres. The seventies are the years when the revolution in the theatrical sphere became part of the directorial concept. It was a time of independent theaters, of Satinski’s satire, which also inspired Macedonian authors, a time when repression had to be institutionally processed. “Mara’s Wedding” created a very interesting situation that was further reflected in other politically instructed theatrical productions. Namely, the subversion in theatrical art became the *de facto* legitimacy of the great theatrical artistic personalities. Conceptually, theater relied on the reflection of political reality on classical dramatic models, while the habit of theater artists to become proclaimers of open-mindedness brought about a highly controversial institutional policy: they became relevant actors in the very institutions whose policies they obstructed and denied.

4. THE SCANDAL ON THE STAGE AND OUTSIDE IT— CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL MOVEMENTS OF THE CRITICAL ASPECT OF THEATER PERFORMANCE

The new way of theatrical subversiveness, explained above, highlights scandalization as a conflict that either hinders the theatrical act itself, or becomes a cause for social and political change. That direction is recently exemplified by

the directorial views of Oliver Frljich, a director who has imposed himself with a kind of pamphlet theater that talks about many unanswered questions in the field of national intolerance and religious controversy. His trilogy about Croatian neo-fascism is well known, as well as performances such as “Alexandra Zec” and “Your Violence and Our Violence,” which talk about the emigration crisis, the attitude of developed countries in Europe and the United States towards this part of the world. The scenes scandalize a certain interest group and the performances are questioned not so much by the authorities themselves, but by the audience. “Our Violence and Your Violence,” as well as the play “Zoran Djindjic” which talks about the assassination of the Serbian Prime Minister were performances experienced diversions with their occurrence, but also with their sustaining: the first at the Sarajevo Festival MESS, and the second during its production which theater artists ended by leaving the work process itself.

Oliver Frljich with his way of thinking made the theatrical act subversive to the extent that it became a political weapon. Clashes led by the scandal of certain groups of people prompted by the content of the play were not a substitute for its banning. In this case, while the governance is peripheral, it provides inspiration for this kind of destructive activism. The transition has brought many doubts, mostly political and social, and they are the inspiration for performances whose subversiveness reveals deeply hidden animosities.

5. CONCLUSION, OR DOES CENSORSHIP HAVE ITS OWN MODIFICATIONS AND MIMICRIES

Is the scandal a mimicry of the ban and is its energy relevant to what it means to remove a politically incorrect artistic act? Oscar Wilde said that “everyone interprets the symbol at their own risk.” The virtuality of the twenty-first century proved that this great writer was absolutely right. The message of the play is always interpreted as an attitude, so here the question arises: what is that attitude? As a synthetic art, the theater and its performance act collectively, to a large extent together with the audience. But, as mentioned above, theater artists are also audiences. The scandal is a sort of instrument of the social rebellion that opposes both autocracy and a certain theatrical concept. Its phenomenology speaks to the fact that the scandal doesn’t have to be politically colored in order to cause political consequences. Authoritarianism corresponds to fear, and the scandal – to courage, but it seems that theater history does not exemplify their coincidence. Authoritarian regimes in the new age are mimicry by themselves:

they hide behind the democratic processes, while scandals have no place to hide: their openness is a letter whose reading is not always clear. The theater is a place to open the real problems, but not a place where they are solved. The above examples illustrate informative times, but also a time when the huge selection led to informational chaos that threatened the theater act to make it either very incomprehensible or too simple. Political correctness has its ontology deep in history behind us, while scandalizing as an energy for change is more and more like a conceptual opposition to the utilitarian effect of theater art itself.

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