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Postdramatic theatre and political theatre

Hans-Thies Lehmann's book *Postdramatic theatre* has become a landmark work in thinking on this relatively new subject. Although in the preface of the Croatian edition the author has qualified it as a *do it yourself kit*, it is much more than this. It has influenced many theoreticians and artists in many ways. Its conceptualization of the heterogeneous and waste landscape of new theatre has provided a strong impulse for the constant rethinking of theatre, its potentialities and functions. This book has provided conceptual tools through which the work of a new generation of theatre creators has been filtered and understood, as well as the work of the established theatre artists whose work was the basis for Lehmann's conceptualization. Lehmann's unorthodox statement that the decision as to whether or not an art work belongs to the paradigm of dramatic or postdramatic theatre always depends on the wider context, has given to the concept of postdramatic theatre a certain vividness and the possibility of a constant reevaluation of works that are constitutive for the paradigm of postdramatic theatre.

Reading *Postdramatic theatre* again for the purpose of this conference, after doing it for the first time in 2004, has been a pleasant task. Lehmann's work has confirmed itself as still valid in the field of recent theatrical production. Its categories and concepts are still very precise and useful. So, we could say that time is on the side of this book. However, reading it again I was quite surprised by two points which I obviously did not examine closely in my first reading. These points arise where Lehman explicitly speaks about the political in postdramatic theatre. I will first quote one of these points:

Theatre abandons any attempt directly to anticipate or accelerate a revolution of social relations – not, as is carelessly imputed, due to an apolitical cynicism, but because of a changed assessment of its potential efficacy.

The second point is a little bit longer:

Nevertheless, in a reality brimming with social and political conflicts, civil wars, oppression, growing poverty and social injustice, it seems appropriate to conclude with a few general reflections on the way in which one could theorize the relationship of postdramatic theatre to the political. Issues that we call 'political' have to do with social power. For a long time, issues of power have been conceived in the domain of law, with its borderline phenomena of revolution, anarchy, state of emergency (Ausnahmezustand) and war. In spite of the noticeable tendency towards a juridification of all areas of life, however, 'power' is being organized increasingly as a micro-physics, as a web, in which even the leading political elite – not to mention single individuals – have hardly any real power over economico-political processes any more. As a result, political conflicts increasingly elude intuitive perception and cognition and consequently scenic representation. There are hardly any visible representatives of legal positions confronting each other as political opponents any more. What still attains an intuitable quality, by contrast, is the momentary suspension of normative, legal and political modes of behaviour i.e. the plainly non-political terror, anarchy, madness, despair, laughter, revolt, antisocial behaviour – and inherent in it, the already latently posited fanatical or fundamentalist negation of immanently secular, rationally founded criteria of action in general. Since Machiavelli, however, the modern demarcation of the political as an autonomous plane of argumentation has been based on the immanence of precisely these criteria.

These two quotes raise the question of the political in postdramatic theatre. How is it possible to think politics and political theatre within the postdramatic paradigm? What kind of politics are we talking about when we talk about theatre? What about the political dimension in theatre after all the projects for the direct politicization and repoliticization of theatre that we witnessed from the historical avantgardes to Brecht, and from Brecht till recent days?

In the first quote, Lehmann denies theatre's possibility to revolutionize social relations. As he says, "not due to an apolitical cynicism", "but because of a changed assessment of its potential efficacy". In these words we hear the reverberation of Lehmann's earlier conclusion that theatre in collision with new and newer media has lost its central social position. Moreover, in it the representation of the political has changed and cannot be proceeded with in the same way. As Lehmann says:

That politically oppressed people shown on stage do not make theatre political.

We could add: “Not anymore.” Losing its monopoly of representing the wholeness of social reality, theatre has turned to its implicit politics. Concentration on processuality and the development of alternative models of decision-making, opposite to the dominant ones in our society, has caused a shift in the aspirations of postdramatic theatre. Lehmann is simply registering this situation. Turning to its inherent politics, invisible labor, process, the production of the new collectivity etc. are worthwhile efforts, but it seems that the question of theatre within the field of the macrophysics of power is not anymore on the agenda. Abandonment of theatre’s representational role as duplicator of an already existing non-theatre reality, has meant also the abandonment of the idea of theatre as the generator of overall social changes.

But let’s make a short detour in order to get closer to our problem. In *The meaning of Sarkozy*, Alain Badiou says:

The communist hypothesis as such is generic, it is the basis of any emancipatory orientation, it names the sole thing that is worthwhile if we are interested in politics and history. But the way that the hypothesis presents itself determines a sequence: a new way for the hypothesis to be present in the interiority of new forms of organization and action.

Talking about sequence, Badiou has in mind that there have been two great sequences in the communist hypothesis. The first one was that of its setting up. It ran from the French Revolution to the Paris Commune. It spanned the period of time from 1792 to 1871. Through it, all kinds of entirely new political phenomena were introduced into a wide range of countries across the world. This sequence was closed by the striking novelty and radical defeat of the Paris Commune. Its closure showed the extraordinary vitality of its formula, but also the limits of this same formula.

For it was unable to give the revolution a national scope, or to organize effective resistance when the counter-revolution, with the tacit support of foreign powers, succeeded in bringing to bear a competent military response.

The second sequence ran from 1917 (the October Revolution) to 1976 (the end of Cultural Revolution in China). It was dominated by the question: how to organize the new power, the new state, in such a way as to protect it from destruction by its enemies. The problem of this sequence “was no longer the existence of a popular working-class movement acting on the basis of the communist hypothesis, nor was it the generic idea of revolution in its insurrectionary form. The problem was that of victory and duration.” So, the basic distinction between the first and second sequence is that the latter one was concerned

with the realization of the communist hypothesis that had been formulated during the first one.

It would be interesting to examine what was happening in the thinking and praxis of theatre during the first and second sequence of the communist hypothesis and how these two areas were reflecting on each other, but that is a task that still awaits fulfillment. Badiou proceeds with the analysis of the second sequence, detecting the reasons for its failure:

As was only normal, the second sequence in its turn created a problem that it lacked the means to resolve, by the very methods that had enabled it to resolve the problem handed down by the first sequence.

Regardless of the accuracy of these historical correspondences, a similar movement of the hypothesis on theatre regarding its role as generator, anticipator or accelerator of revolution in social relations could be traced. If we just glance briefly over the formulation of this hypothesis in different periods of the history of theatre, we see a similar logic of its appearance and failure. The formulation of the hypothesis by the historical avantgarde came together with their demand to erase the border between art and life. Theatre, within the broader conception of art, was recognized as a means for revolutionizing social relations. The formulation of this hypothesis in theatre as a first sequence was followed by an attempt at its realization. The work of Bertold Brecht could be singled out as the most serious and most articulate in this field. But in the end, the problems which were in a way handed down to him by the historical avantgardes, situated in the broader context of Aristotelian dramaturgies, created new problems, which he lacked the means to resolve. Brecht's dependence on fable (story) as the *sine qua non* of his dramaturgy inhibited the further development and realization of the hypothesis of theatre as a generator, anticipator or accelerator of revolution in social relations. The theatre that came after Brecht abandoned "the political style, the tendency towards dogmatization, and the emphasis on the rational we find in Brechtian theatre." If we take Brecht's theatre as the last big sequence of this hypothesis, in the sense that it had clearly defined political aims and aimed at a revolution of social relations, then the question is, where are we now with this hypothesis in the present time and state of theatre? Drawing the parallel with Badiou's account of the communist hypothesis and its present situation could be helpful again. Badiou says:

In this respect, we are closer to a set of problems already examined in the nineteenth century than we are to the great history of the revolutions of the

twentieth century. We are dealing, as in the 1840s, with absolutely cynical capitalists, ever more inspired by the idea that it is only wealth that counts, that the poor are simply lazy, that Africans are backward, and that the future, with no discernible limit, belongs to the 'civilized' bourgeoisies of the Western world. All kinds of phenomena from the nineteenth century are reappearing: extraordinarily widespread zones of poverty, within the rich countries as well as in the zones that are neglected or pillaged, inequalities that constantly grow, a radical divide between working people – or those without work – and the intermediate classes, the complete dissolution of political power into the service of wealth, the disorganization of revolutionaries, the nihilistic despair of wide sections of young people, the servility of a large majority of intellectuals, the determined but very restricted experimental activity of a few groups seeking contemporary ways to express the communist hypothesis... Which is no doubt why, as also happened in the nineteenth century, it is not the victory of the hypothesis that is on the agenda today, as everyone knows, but its conditions of existence. (...) First of all, to make the hypothesis exist.

In Badiou's description of the situation in which the re-establishment of the conditions for the existence of the communist hypothesis is on the agenda, we find echoes of the same need for theatre today. Lehmann's abandonment of theatre's role as anticipator or accelerator or, why not, generator of a revolution in social relations should be abandoned. Instead, the conditions for the reappearance of the hypothesis of theatre as a generator of overall social changes should be found. This is not an easy task and it requires a lot of experimentation. The widespread depolitization of theatre in terms of denying it the possibility of formulating and efficiently achieving political goals is essential for it within the logic of the neoliberal capitalistic market. Within this context, and as an ideological apparatus, it functions massively and predominantly by ideology. We can see the crystallization of neoliberal ideology in the tyranny of parliamentary democracy, which, as Morad Farhadpour says in his text "**Secularism and politics in Iran**", **overpoliticizes people** "in order to achieve a de-politicized society with free markets, a small state and minimum tension, where people can immerse themselves in their private lifestyles." He proceeds as follows:

The main paradox of democracy is that it is not itself democratically produced. The origin of democracy, whether in a long process of reform or a sudden violent change, remains external to it. Democracy itself is never put to the vote.

In the depoliticized society of the free market we cannot expect theatre to avoid this depolitization. It enters the same process of commodification as any

other product. Its political potential has become a commodity like any other, and it has a certain value in the process of overpolitization in the service of a depoliticized society. When Lehmann says that:

Theatre abandons any attempt directly to anticipate or accelerate a revolution of social relations – not, as is carelessly imputed, due to an apolitical cynicism but because of a changed assessment of its potential efficacy,

his conceptualization of theatre's depoliticization, wrapped in a thesis of the sober estimation of its potential efficacy, is actually a contribution to neoliberal peaceful coexistence and potential appropriation of any ideas as long as they do not attack its main ideological basis: the particularization of interest, private property etc.

It should not be overlooked that Lehmann's postdramatic paradigm has also entered the process of commodification. It has become a norm in the evaluation and categorization of recent, but also past theatre production. As Mr. Lehmann said yesterday, it is a label that makes some productions more saleable on the artistic market. Rimini Protokoll knows this very well, and they label themselves as postdramatic.

Back to the question of the political in theatre. I think, as I said before, that theatre will have to make the conditions for the reappearance of the hypothesis of the political in theatre. Maybe this hypothesis has changed since the presence of the political in ancient Greek theatre or since Erwin Piscator's political theatre. Maybe it should be reformulated, along with its tasks and goals. Maybe it should be rethought in relationship to new political paradigms. Today, as Brian Holmes has shown, we hear of globalistic fundamentalism, and theatre should reexamine its position within this field of the different bifurcations of the macrophysics of power. Within it, the reestablishment of conditions for the reemergence of the hypothesis seems crucial for the postdramatic paradigm. Lehmann says:

It is not through the direct thematization of the political that theatre becomes political but through the implicit substance and critical value of its mode of representation.

If I try to avoid the normative side of Lehmann's theory comprised in this utterance, I would like to finish by posing two questions: "Does today's theatre have the strength to create a political reality instead of a mere representation of social reality and critical valuation of its mode of representation? And what should this political reality be?"

Summary

This paper examines the concept of the political in postdramatic theatre, as the issue has been posed by Hans-Thies Lehmann. By analogy with the “the communist hypothesis”, elaborated by Alain Badiou in his book *The meaning of Sarkozy*, this text problematizes Lehmann’s view that contemporary postdramatic theatre is not able directly to change social relations, and that its political potential is realized only through developing alternative (non-hierarchical) forms of collaboration, human relations and decision-making within the artistic process as such – forms which are different from those dominant in society. In the sense of Badiou’s argumentation, one should find new prerequisites for the revival of the hypothesis of theatre as a generator of overall social changes, which is a very hard task, requiring many further experiments. Lehmann’s conception of the depolitization of theatre resulting from a rational estimation of the political inefficacy of theatre in the contemporary media and consumer society, could become just a form of adaptation to and/or coexistence with the logic of the liberal capitalist market.

Oliver Frljić

POSTDRAMSKO POZORIŠTE I POLITIČKO POZORIŠTE

Rezime

U ovom radu se ispituje koncept političkog u postdramskom pozorištu, onako kako ovaj problem postavlja Hans-Tis Leman. Po analogiji s „komunističkom hipotezom” koju formuliše Alan Badju u knjizi *Značenje Sarkozija*, problematizuje se Lemanov stav da savremeno, postdramsko pozorište nije kadro da direktno menja društvene odnose i da se njegov politički potencijal ostvaruje samo razvojem alternativnih (nehijerarhijskih) oblika saradnje, odnosâ i donošenja odluka u samom umetničkom procesu kao takvom – oblika različitih od onih koji preovlađuju u društvu. U duhu Badjuovog razmatranja, trebalo bi naći uslove za povratak hipoteze o pozorištu kao generatoru sveukupnih društvenih promena, što je težak zadatak koji zahteva mnoge eksperimente. Lemanova koncepcija depolitizacije pozorišta, uslovljena racionalnom procenom političke (ne)efikasnosti pozorišta u savremenom medijskom i potrošačkom društvu, može da postane vid prilagođavanja i/ili koegzistencije s logikom liberalnog kapitalističkog tržišta.