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Dramatic versus postdramatic textuality – paradoxes of a false opposition?

My contribution to the discussion regarding the global destiny and the local echo of the coinage “postdramatic theatre”, following the translation of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s influential study (into Croatian, it was in 2004), picks up the very last question listed by our hosts in their invitation letter, the one pertaining to the adequacy of the remark that the field of the postdramatic – whether in theatre or in theory – excludes any textual analysis for the benefit of performance studies. Indeed, a cursory reading of Lehmann’s introduction to his study could give credit to the aforementioned remark, since there Lehmann acknowledges that his primary concern was to redress the balance of theatre studies in favor of “the constitutive moments of the theatrical situation”, thus intentionally lessening his interest in “the dimension of the text” (Lehmann, 2004, 12). It seems that from the very start of his panorama. Lehmann only contributed to the critical confusion that very often links the practice of postdramatic theatre to an anti-dramatic and therefore also anti-textual, if not even anti-verbal stance. However, when in that same introduction he suggests avenues for further exploration of the field, stating that his book will fulfill its purpose if it encourages “new and risky attempts at doing theatre theory”, the issue of “the status of the text” in postdramatic, live and performance art after “the inherited ways of understanding the text have lost their credibility” (ibid.), emerges as one of the key questions left to be reflected upon – preferably, it would seem, along the lines of poststructuralist theory.

The controversy of the text versus performance relationship, which has for so long reigned in various theoretical accounts of drama and theatre, has indeed gained a new momentum by the renewed attention to its historical contingency that was stirred by Lehmann’s book. Nevertheless, various attempts at preserving a general, non-historical view of drama and theatre continue to

reappear, with the seemingly simple intention to correct out-dated notions of these entities as being somehow solely responsible for the confusing distinctions between the inherited and the experimental approach to the use of textual material in performance. Among other neuralgic points of Lehmann's, it is claimed, unreflected assumptions about the character of "dramatic theatre" – such as its irrevocably illusionistic nature, questioned by Dan Rebellato (2009) – the status of the dramatic text is said to continue to haunt the postdramatic as a ghost. According to Andrew Quick (2009), the play text is at the center of Lehmann's contestation of the main tenets of dramatic theatre, since it is to the primacy of the play-text that the German critic attributes the generative force of wholeness, illusion and world representation, no longer wanted on the postdramatic stage.

The latter "accusation" appears, moreover, to stem from the presumed perennial "literary" status of drama, as opposed to its primary "performative" use, both in theatre and the analysis of drama's discursive features. William B. Worthen's article "Antigone's bones" (2008), for instance, extensively "defends" drama, as conceived by its recent theory and criticism, from all allegiance to literature, claiming that Lehmann's historical-poetical distinction between dramatic and postdramatic theatre, like the disciplinary distinction drawn by Diane Taylor between the "archive" and the "repertoire" (the latter being the privileged interest of performance studies), relies on "a range of (mis)conceptions of Western dramatic performance" (ibid., 10) that have finally to be spelled out. Worthen detects the exact period of emergence of these misconceptions in the '50s, during the reign of the New Critical paradigm. "Seduced", as it allegedly was, "by the design of the printed page", this school of thought, according to Worthen, "assimilated the drama to literary studies" and "took the function of the stage as the interpretation of the privileged literary dimension of the drama largely by framing acting as a mode of reproducing the text in speech" (ibid., 12). Worthen, therefore, argues for a return to the "charting" of "the territory of dramatic theory" which had already in the '70s abandoned the New Critical paradigm and started to understand dramatic writing as an entity at "the interface between archive and repertoire, text and body" (13).

Quoting extensively from Michael Goldman's books *The Actor's Freedom* and *On Drama*, in which text and performance are seen as engaging in a "mutually constitutive commerce", indeed, as "generating one another", Worthen further supports his argument with references to such authorities of dramatic theory as Herbert Blau, Stanton B. Garner Jr. and Benjamin Bennett, and insists on the necessity to "contest the literary dimension of drama" by "conceptualizing it as an instrument for performance" (14) and as a "motivation" for a

“range of phenomenological configurations” as well as “complex participations of the dramatic event” – in short, as a matrix in which “doing things with words resists the sense that it’s the words that are doing the doing” (13). Bypassing, consciously or not, the implication that this doing is done instead by embodied “characters”, in a manner already canonically espoused almost a century ago by Pirandello’s famous essay on drama as “spoken action”, Worthen dismisses the pertinence of the idea that the text in postdramatic theatre functions as just another material for performance, asserting that dramatic writing was always designed to “afford specific uses – behavioral, contingent, present *performances* – rather than mere ‘interpretations’”, regardless of the fact that “different repertoires of performances use it, stake its instrumentality, in different ways”, sometimes “asserting the archive’s priority”, sometimes not, but “always (already) altering the text” (15).

The main paradox haunting Worthen’s discussion, in my view, stems from his own misconceptions regarding the concepts of “literariness” and “performativity” which inform the treatment of the text in both postdramatic and performance art. These concepts themselves have radically changed since the era of the New Criticism to which he insistently refers, deploring the fact that even the recent “multiplication of critical practices and perspectives” in literary studies continue to “treat dramatic writing as textuality”, “analyzing, say, the formal, ideological, psychoanalytic contingencies of play’s narrative, strategies of characterization, or fictive world” (13). “Literarity” and “textuality” are here conceived in strict connection to “forms of literary representation”, as if poststructuralist theories of the text – particularly that of Roland Barthes, explicitly invoked in Lehmann’s study, which severely criticized the notion of literature as representation – never existed.

The second misconception permeating Worthen’s discussion pertains to the notion of textual “performativity”, which he seems to conceive as deriving from the aforementioned idea of drama as “spoken action”, as well as from the constitutive indebtedness of dramatic writing to its inherent “exposure to performance”, the very source, as Benjamin Bennett suggested, of drama’s “disruptive position in the archive of literary genres” (21). Here again one should remark that textual performativity in poststructuralist literary studies implies a quite different relationship of the nature of textuality to the tropes of theatre and performance, which has nothing to do with the division among genres, but rather with its explosion in, as Barthes would put it, the general view of the text as “the fact of discourse, without a possible reference either to the contents ... or to the forms” (1968/2002, 58), a discourse producing a verbal play performed on “the stage of language” (1970/2002, 609) and thus “annihilating to

the point of contradiction its own discursive category” (1973/2002, 237). Contrary to Worthen’s persistent exhortations that we keep the notion of drama as writing that “precipitates an event”, “instigates subjects in action, ...process and place” (Worthen, 2008, 26–27), postdramatic textuality, as obviously it must still be insisted, concentrates precisely on the cleavage between this double, the dissociated (if not intentionally) and yet continuously correlated theatricalities, the one of the text, the other of the body.

This cleavage, as Worthen himself beautifully shows in his *Print and the Poetics of Modern Drama* (2005), was produced by the invention and growing circulation of the printed page, which led to an inevitable contestation of the “precipitation” and “instigation” of performance as the effects produced by the dramatic text. This process began, again, with Pirandello, who in his *Six characters in search of an author* already saw irremediable historical rupture and conflict where Worthen continues to see inscribed “interface” and an, if not seamless, then ever negotiable mutual “commerce” on a common ontological and phenomenological ground. In fact, one could claim that contemporary performance welcomes the visual impact of the “printed page” and the linguistic autonomy of “literature”, much more than what Worthen foregrounds as the (performative) arguments for drama’s case: it treats the resistant discourse of the literary text as a kind of alien body which is either visually or acoustically performing on the stage of language, in a confrontation rather than a collusion with the actor’s embodiment on the actual stage. That is why the challenge that came with the postdramatic turn regards not so much the burden of the referential illusion as the very idea of the identity of the text – of its substantial core, of “what the text is” despite its numerous historical alterations, as Worthen puts it (2008, 11) – which in dramatic performance retains the same consecrated status as the idea of the subject, together with its most frequent, one-to-one relationship with the actor’s body as representing the organic confirmation of its unity.

If we follow Barthes’s assumption that the “text has a human shape”, that its figure “is the anagram of the body” (1973), that its identity can be conceived of as predicated on an image just as much as the human subjectivity is predicated on the image of the body (cf. Čale, 2004), we could conjecture that the postdramatic use of textual “material” is on a par with the deconstruction of the idea of the human subjectivity as something residing in the body and generating what Barthes in his *Empire of Signs* denounces as the unifying “anthropomorphism” of the western dramatic performance, in which “the gesture and the word ... form a single tissue, conglomerated and lubricated as a unique muscle that puts expression into play but never divides it” (1968/2002, 37).

Following Morana Čale's interpretation of the analogy of the two "images" through the lenses of Lacan's "mirror stage", we could state that postdramatic theatre treats the text – the material image of structured discourse, either acoustic or visual – as Lacan treats the human body: as an imaginary remainder of the coherence of a textual entity endowed with a sense and a meaning, repressing the fear of fragmentation, castration and founding/ontic duplicity.

I will now draw three different examples from the past 40 years of Croatian theatre practice, in order to comment upon the postdramatic deconstruction of this "somatography of the written sign" (Čale, 2004) from the perspective of the three key theatrical authorial instances that, in the process of devising a new attitude towards the text, were forced to reconfigure their own authorial "deaths": the actor, the director and the playwright. My first example will be a performance that premiered in 1968 and was based on the adaptation of Queneau's *Exercices du style*. The text itself is an Oulipo experiment which reverses the inherited distinctions between story and discourse, between meaning as expressive of psychological interiority or historical reality and meaning as produced by the arbitrary play of language. It also undercuts its own textual identity by an endless proliferation of stylistic variations, that is, by a provisionally, arbitrarily ended succession of precisely 99 different versions of the same banal, anecdotal sequence that purports to represent an insignificant Goffmanian "breach" of proper "behaviour in public places". Adapted primarily to the laws of the Croatian language, infused by references to the Croatian literary heritage and to contemporary local verbal mannerisms, the script re-situated the story in familiar settings of the city of Zagreb, and was performed in the form of the alternate oral narrations of an actor and an actress facing the public in the guise of two very formally dressed, polished citizens.

Confronted with multiple narrations of the same story by unknown speakers, the actors were forced to build their quickly shifting personae in the same way the language in the text built the idiosyncrasies of different versions: through an arbitrary collage of facial and gesturing signs that did not issue from the expressive repertoire of either the character or the actor as a knowable psycho-social entity, but was rather constructing both in turn, exposing the fact that what we tend to perceive as a unique personality is nothing but an intermittent mimicry of facial, vocal and gesturing social stereotypes, floating signs relentlessly returning in other syntactic combinations. The performance was praised for the local imprint on the performances of various "social types", even though a good deal of the performed narrations were absurd and surrealist, retelling the story in Latin and in mathematical formulae, and ending in stuttering and aphasia. However, it has outlasted the most presumptuous

hopes for its duration on stage (it is still being performed by the same actors, after 41 years) precisely because it was one of the first disturbing incursions into the mystique of the emotional, spiritual and even visceral interiority of the actor, now mercilessly given over to the actuality of the encounter with the public. The ontology of the actor's body was here exposed as being what J.-L. Nancy claims any human body is, a self-alienating "excription de l'être" (Nancy, 2000, 20), a spatial ex-scription of being, exposed to the other's reading – literally "word deed", multiplied in the forceful, almost mechanically repeated corporeal enunciation of its alterity to itself, since in the performance it appeared to be expropriated by a preexisting "soul" that would immerse itself in the "soul" of the text, which nevertheless repeatedly and stubbornly proclaimed the "vacancy of any substantial core" (Čale, 2004) under a hilarious succession of artificially induced "images" of style.

My second example is drawn from the rich opus of the director Branko Brezovec, the most striking presence on the Croatian (and not only Croatian) stage from the mid-seventies onwards, whose iconoclastic poetics defines itself in an obvious deconstructive manner as a "non-grammatical theatre", which from its inception intentionally used at least two generically different texts without any common referential points in order either to make them produce unpredictable, "flashing" connections or engender a polyphonic dissociation of Sound and Sense (cf. Blazevic, 2008, 46), engendering a sheer "débordement du signifiant", an overflowing of dramaturgical trajectories that Barthes exalted as one of the outcomes of the indomitable productivity of the text (1973/2002, 448). Putting aside these as well as some other modes of destabilizing the integrity and coherence of the text, such as actors singing it or speaking it in a cacophonous struggle between at least three different languages, one of this director's particularly incisive uses of textual material, from Borges's short story *Emma Zunc* in 1996, for instance, or from Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens* in 2006, concerns precisely the "seduction by the printed page", which Worthen designates as the main obstacle to a true performative reading of drama. In Brezovec's work, the printed page of the text appears as the very theatricalization of the text's resistant materiality, of its obstinate objecthood as "the phenomenal surface of the literary text" (ibid., 443). The printed page represents precisely the space where the verbal and the visual inextricably collide in the creation of "the image", which "bestows a discursive body carrying a sense and a meaning" (Čale, 2004) to the text, in the same way that the visual projection of the body's surface for Lacan guarantees a Gestalt of the human ego, thus making it "a signifier representing a subject/text for another signifier" (ibid.).

By projecting various typographic shapes of the text onto the stage, sometimes covering the bodies of the actor, sometimes elements of the set, by cutting it into pieces stuck to or written on the cubes of the set variously distanced from the eye of the spectator, or by letting the actors fight with parts of it written in hand-writing on the card-boards in the shape of weapons, Brezovec not only points to the mutual specularity of human bodies-as-texts and texts-as-bodies, offering both of them simultaneously to the public eye for a dubiously legible, duplicitous consumption, but also forces both to face their *aphanisis*, by dismembering them, letting their fragments collide, stir, subside and vanish, thus evading any closure. While reversing the text towards a potentially endlessly generative “amorphous dispersion of pieces, fragments, and traces of discourse” (Čale, 2004), Brezovec provides a kind of hallucinatory, fetishistic pleasure in which the very subject of the director is unmade, enabling the text in the process, as, again, Barthes formulates it, to “show its butt to the *Political Father*” (Barthes, 1973, 2002, 252) and his subtle modes of institutional control, protection and use of textual “rights”.

My last example, the trilogy entitled *The Woman Bomb* by Ivana Sajko (2004), will touch on the most vulnerable position in the postdramatic landscape, the position of the playwright, and of her paradoxical, self-reflexive and perhaps even self-undermining strategies. In Sajko’s case, the textual material is produced for the kind of performance she calls “auto-referential reading”, another performative demonstration of the stubborn impossibility of assimilating the text to any kind of theatrical “translation” that would cut the umbilical cord tying its texture to the playwright’s personal voice and her own *lecture/écriture à haute voix*, evoked by Barthes as the supreme aesthetic realization of textual pleasure (cf. 1973/2002, 260–261). The first piece, *Archetype: Medea*, combines the tradition of a hybrid lyrical genre called the dramatic monologue with the ostentatious deployment of standard typographic signals for a play-script, such as stage directions. However, they imagine no performance, no setting of “the story”, but rather allow the voice of the author to appear, encouraging or commenting upon her other self as the enunciator of the main text, which also vacillates between the voice of the character and the voice of the actress/performer.

Thus, the entire text, announced in its subtitle as a kind of post-script to a performance already given, as a bunch of scattered, perhaps not even reliable notes taken during its course, suggests the ventriloquistic bravado of an always already performed and therefore for ever unattainable, yet ever-recurring acoustic specularity between the author’s body, the actual producer of the voice itself, and the text she projects as her own acoustic mirror image. The

second part of the trilogy, *The Woman Bomb*, intensifies the plurality of voices that both produce and disturb the coherence of the monologue, and ironically re-reverses the temporal reversal experimented with in *Medea* – between the supposed primacy of the text and the secondary, derivative character of its performance – by means of the high stakes any performance of the *Woman-bomb* entails, that is, the explosion of the performer exactly after the 12 minutes and 36 seconds of her frenetic “last words”. What in *Medea* was the distant yet ever re-appearing scene of the birth of the subject now reveals itself to be the predicate of her death, with the growing tissue of words attacking the body of the subject, over-loaded not so much with their meaning as with their last performative chance of vocally producing the vanishing instance of their enunciation. Sajko’s plays cannot “precipitate an event”, or “instigate subjects in action”. Rather, they mock any use of her textual material that would attempt to proceed with such an understanding of their function: the challenge they confront the theatre with is to start from the very impossibility of following any “instructions for use” – as Anne Ubersfeld once defined the specific structure of the play-text – and to imagine the performativity of these texts anew.

All these examples, therefore, could be said to be working under the assumption that “the imaginary unity of a text, as well as that of the body image representing the subject, is maintained at the price of removing the chaos it sprang from and effacing the doubleness of its identity” (Čale, 2004). That is why the use of textual material that they exemplify insists on “the proliferating bonds of intertextual or, respectively, intersubjective doubleness”, and rejoices in their common “anxiety in front of the possibility to explode under the dividing pressure of an all-encompassing alterity” (ibid.) – this alterity of course being in the case of a play-text primarily the unpredictable, contingent and historically determined realities of the stage – what Lehmann calls “the constitutive moments of the theatrical situation”. To try to tame this unpredictability by envisaging the forms of textuality to come would, I think, not only deny the balance redressed by the German theorist in favor of the substance of theatre, but also be a sign of our incapacity to accept the anxiety that befalls us as critics and that forces us to constantly re-adjust our dearest and most secured notions of what drama, text and theatre are.

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Summary

Starting from the assumption that the field of the postdramatic does not exclude any textual analysis for the benefit of performance studies, this paper both addresses the issue of textuality in the polemics surrounding the notion of “postdramatic theatre”, and corroborates the resulting reflection, by referring to the radical change of the status of the text as one of the most controversial features distinguishing Croatian postdramatic production from the rest of the local theatrical landscape.

Hans-Thies Lehmann’s influential study on postdramatic theatre has stirred up a renewed theoretical discussion as regards the lasting controversy about the text versus performance relationship, a controversy that, in the past, often moved around drama’s presumed “literary” treatment as opposed to its primary “performative” use, in both theatre and the analysis of drama’s discursive features. This discussion culminated in William B. Worthen’s (2008) extensive “defense” of drama, as conceived in recent theory and criticism, from all accusations of literarity, and a concomitant claim that Lehmann’s poetical distinction between dramatic and postdramatic theatre, just like the

disciplinary one drawn by Diane Taylor between the “archive” and the “repertoire” (the latter being the privileged interest of performance studies), relies on “a range of (mis)conceptions of Western dramatic performance” that have finally to be spelled out. The aim of my contribution is to demonstrate why Worthen’s arguments, far from succeeding in their plea on behalf of the cause of drama, only confirm the dramatic/postdramatic text divide outlined by Lehmann, who in the introduction to his study calls for a further exploration of postdramatic textuality along the lines of poststructuralist thought. The main paradox haunting Worthen’s discussion, in my view, stems from his own misconceptions regarding the concepts of “literariness” and “performativity” which inform both postdramatic and performance art, since these concepts have themselves radically changed since the era of the New Criticism to which he insistently refers, in deploring the fact that even the recent “multiplication of critical practices and perspectives” in literary studies continues to “treat dramatic writing as textuality”. In fact, one could claim that contemporary performance welcomes “literature” much more than the (performative) arguments Worthen foregrounds in support of drama’s case. The challenge that came with the postdramatic turn has regard, I suggest, to the idea of textual identity that in dramatic performance retains the same sacred status as the idea of the subject. If we follow Barthes’s assumption that the “text has a human shape”, that “it is the anagram of the body” (1973), we could conjecture that the postdramatic use of its “material” is on a par with the deconstruction of the idea of human subjectivity as something residing in the body. Postdramatic theatre could therefore be said to treat the text – the material image of structured discourse – as Lacan treats the human body: as an imaginary remainder of the coherence of a textual entity endowed with a sense and a meaning, repressing the fear of fragmentation, castration and ontic duplicity (cf. Čale, 2004).

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**DRAMSKA SPRAM POSTDRAMSKE TEKSTUALNOSTI –
PARADOKSI LAŽNE OPOZICIJE**

Rezime

Polazeći od pretpostavke da oblast postdramskog ne isključuje nijednu tekstualnu analizu u korist studija izvođenja, ovaj rad istovremeno pokreće pitanje tekstualnosti u polemici oko pojma *postdramskog pozorišta* i potkrepljuje uvid koji iz toga proizlazi upućivanjem na radikalnu promenu statusa teksta kao jednog od najkontroverznijih obeležja koje razlikuje hrvatsku postdramsku produkciju od ostatka lokalnog teatarskog pejzaža.

Uticajna studija Hans-Tisa Lemama o *postdramskom* uskomešala je obnovljenu teorijsku diskusiju o dugotrajnoj kontroverzi oko odnosa teksta i izvedbe, kontroverzu koja se u prošlosti često kretala oko pretpostavljenog „književnog” tretmana drame kao suprotstavljenog njegovoj primarno scenskoj upotrebi, i to kako u samom pozorištu tako i u analizi diskurzivnih obeležja drame. Ova rasprava kulminirala je Vortenovom (William Worthen, 2008) obuhvatnom „odbranom” dramskog teksta (kako je shvataju nova teorija i kritika) od svih optužbi za literarnost, i pratećom tvrdnjom da se Lemanovo poetičko razlikovanje dramskog i postdramskog pozorišta – baš kao i podela na osnovu naučnih disciplina koju je povukla Dajana Tejlor (Diane Taylor) između „arhiva” i „repertoara” (pri čemu je ovo drugo privilegovani predmet studija izvođenja) – oslanja na „niz pogrešnih shvatanja zapadne dramske predstave”, koja se konačno moraju jasno artikulirati. Cilj mog priloga je da se pokaže zašto Vortenovi argumenti, daleko od uspešnih u odbrani interesa dramskog teksta, samo potvrđuju podelu na dramski i nedramski tekst koju skicira Leman, koji poziva, u uvodu svoje studije, na dalje istraživanje postdramske tekstualnosti na linijama poststrukturalističke misli. Glavni paradoks koji lebdi nad Vortenovom raspravom, prema mom shvatanju, proizlazi iz njegovog sopstvenog pogrešnog razumevanja pojmova „literarnosti” i „performativnosti” koji prožimaju i postdramsku i izvođačku umetnost, jer su se ovi pojmovi i sami radikalno promenili počev od ere „nove kritike” na koju Vorten uporno referira, ne odobravajući činjenicu da čak i recentno „umnožavanje kritičkih praksi i perspektiva” u studijama književnosti nastavlja da „tretira dramsko pisanje kao tekstualnost”. U stvari, mogli bismo da tvrdimo da savremene predstave prihvataju književnost mnogo više nego (performativni) argumenti koje Vorten stavlja u prvi plan u svojoj podršci „slučaju drama”. Izazov koji dolazi sa postdramskim obrtom odnosi se na, sugerisala bih, ideju tekstualnog identiteta, koja u dramskoj predstavi zadržava isti sveti status kao i ideja subjekta. Ako sledimo Bartovu (Roland Barthes) misao da „tekst ima ljudsko obličje” i da je „anagram tela” (1973), mogli bismo da pretpostavimo da je postdramska upotreba njegovog „materijala” jednaka dekonstrukciji ideje o ljudskoj subjektivnosti kao nečemu što počiva u telu. Za postdramsko pozorište bi se, dakle, moglo reći da se odnosi prema tekstu – materijalnoj slici strukturisanog diskursa – onako kao što se Lakan odnosi prema ljudskom telu: kao prema imaginarnom ostatku koherencije tekstualnog entiteta koji poseduje neki smisao i neko značenje, i koji potiskuje strah od fragmentacije, kastracije i ontičke dvojnosti (up. Čale, 2004).