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**SHOW AND TELL:
COUNTER-CANONICAL DISCOURSES AND
THE POLITICS OF PERCEPTION**

Theatre by its definition is a communal and social institution, representing as well as establishing certain socio-political functions. However, at the end of the 20th century there was a real sense, that “political theatre” as a form was thought to be dying (not to mention the notorious nature of the term *political theatre* in post-soviet space), and the ambition of theatre as cultural practise that inspires social change or at least some kind of active reflection was corrupt. As contemporary culture aspires to the condition of theatre and “society of spectacle,” a lot of differences, especially those between theatre and reality, entertainment or social action, are constantly blurred, the meanings and locations of *political* need to be retraced and redrawn. When the real live dramas are staged on a daily basis it often seems irrelevant, even disrespectful or impossible to engage in the luxury of making theatre. If we agree, however, that personal is the political, we must note that quite a number of theatre artists declare that to engage with theatre today means to take a position which is inherently oppositional or political and doesn’t need any further articulation. There is anger and sense of unarticulated frustration underlying many Lithuanian theatre productions, and that it can be read as a statement about the context in which politics and theatre might be currently played out. Therefore, the notion of *political* should not be so easily rejected

as outdated or obsolete. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of disagreement as to what it means to be political or critical of status quo in the contemporary theatre context? Looking back on the development of Lithuanian theatre of recent decades one of its most striking features is the lack of social or political reflection of the current situation. Not many of performances are affective, radical in content and intent, emotionally charged in its conception of delivering political conscience through performance. Only a small number of theatre works relate critically to the reality around them. The paradox is that the notion of *political* has not entirely disappeared from the stage of contemporary Lithuanian theatre — it exists in a complex representational matrix, variously situated between opposing forces. It’s obvious that we need to re-vision and re-read the texts of performances in order to recognise their strategic political agendas.

I’ll try not to confine the notion of *political* to works, which incorporate overtly social and political narratives and images, for example, I will exclude from my analysis a body of works attempting to engage more actively into political or social debates with the help of foreign plays, the so-called drama of *new brutality*, such as Marius von Mayenburg, Sarah Kane or Mark Ravenhill, as they represent quite simplistic notions of socially charged drama and the theatre perform-

ances that are structured accordingly. It's possible to call this kind of representation as "miming," as representation that imitates the structure of contemporary social order and its flaws, but not necessarily opens up the space for deconstruction or even criticism and is usually staged in Lithuanian theatre in such a manner that neutralises and romanticises the dramatic message. As Roland Barthes once said, where politics begins is where imitation ceases.¹ Quite contrary, this article deals with the performance that, although removed to some degree from a social or political "content," nevertheless establish a complex, unstable, relation with the *political*, which is probably the most relevant to the contemporary cultural context. This article will seek to provide an insight into several practices that can be conceptualised as critical or having certain socio-political underpinnings and at the same time to engage with wider debate about the nature of the *political* in contemporary theatre.

I chose to analyse several performances that embrace a more specifically *political* aim, that is: continued destabilisation of the cultural or political authority of any kind as well as the investigation of the social and ideological production of meaning. Being *political* in this sense means to reject the status of the canonical and to urge the spectator to reconsider its value. For this purpose I will use the term borrowed from post-colonial studies — "canonical counter-discourse". Helen Tiffin has defined this as a process whereby the post-colonial writer unveils and dismantles the basic assumptions of a specific canonical text by developing a "counter" text, which preserves many of the identifying signifiers of the original, while altering, often allegorically, its structures of power.² Without a doubt, not all texts that refer to canonical models are counter-discursive. It's not possible at all times to establish this affect by simply staging the canonical play, although, it's possible to articulate certain tensions between the canon and its contemporary enunciation through a revisionist performance. Most often in Lithuanian theatre classical texts are simply contemporised and usually these kinds of performances fail to fit the definition of counter-discourse. The same can be said about some post-modern techniques, such as intertextuality that does not necessarily entail a rewriting project. While all counter-discourse is intertextual, not all intertextuality is counter-discursive. By definition, counter-discourse actively works to destabilise the power structures of the original text rather than simply actualising it or acknowledging its influence.³ Rewriting the characters, the narrative, the context and the genre of the canonical script provides another means of interrogating the cultural legacy

of the canon and offers renewed opportunities for performative intervention. We can trace at least several attempts to produce a counter-discursive texts and languages in contemporary Lithuanian theatre, for example: the co-operative work of playwright Sigitas Parulskis and director Vytautas V.Landsbergis *From the Life of Souls* (1995) offers a re-writing of canonical text, where master text is targeted particularly for strategic reform; *Madagascar* by Marius Ivaškevičius (2003), opens up the possibility of creation of the counter-canonical language, although this strategy is limited to drama text only and does not translate into the whole scale performance, which, almost in opposition to drama, tries to re-establish the canonical portrayals of a historicist Lithuanian past. More complex and therefore more interesting examples of implied counter-discourse can be found in the performances *P.S. File O.K.* (playwright Sigitas Parulskis, 1997) and Sophocles's *King Oedipus* (2002), both directed by Oskaras Koršunovas. These performances not only try to articulate reworking of the cultural canon that is to some extent oppositional, but also incorporate performative elements as part of their anti-canonical arsenal.

These performances deal with mythological tropes (the story of Abraham and Isaac; the myth of Oedipus) as well as contemporary 'trivial' myths so called 'real' social dramas (soviet and post-soviet) and do so by subverting or rewriting them, exposing the power structures underlying the *reality* and *myth* as well as the representations of both. Linking the canonical discourses with soviet traumas, *P.S. File O.K* arouses conventional expectations of plot, character, and setting, but subsequently deforms and rescales them, causing disorientation in the audience. The characters in this play do not live in a world which mimetically imitates our own, but in textual worlds, which imitate other texts, thus blurring the boundaries between real/fictional past and opening it up for re-construction.

Similarly, by subverting, fragmenting, the structural elements (narrative, visual, aural) of *King Oedipus* the director aims to challenge traditional modes of perception, demonstrating that reality and fiction are both constructed in the same performative manner. In this performance of the classical drama text the director uses the actions of social life, contemporary social dramas as the underlying themes, frames, and rhythms of his performance. Through specific devices (such as costumes, speech, poses, objects, juxtaposition of different acting styles), the myth is deprived of the abstraction and re-inscribed with marks of the social, thus creating the "counter-mythical" system.⁴

Although strategies and operations of both performances are different, the techniques of rewriting the canon, whether textually or performatively are thereby used to challenge the common assumptions about social reality, distance between performance and experience, and fact and fiction. We can see from these examples that the numerous layers of meaning and coded information that a performance communicates are capable of acting counter-discursively. Hence the staging of *misé-en-scène*, as in *King Oedipus*, can immediately provide additional layers of signification that can point to particular underlying social drama or as in the case of *P.S. File O.K.* the subversion of the cultural codes or the appropriation of the representational signs of the canonical texts can productively shift the power structures that seem predetermined in the original script.

Another trace of the *political* in contemporary Lithuanian theatre can be linked with the politics of perception. This notion incorporates various strategies from self-reflexivity to the deconstruction of theatrical gaze. There are quite a number of performances in contemporary Lithuanian theatre that employ new technologies in order to juxtapose presence and absence, and live or mediated performances. One of the most recent examples that can be strategically read as a challenge to the spectator's gaze is Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* directed by Gintaras Varnas (2004). In this performance the action of watching (or even surveillance) is not only the object of performance analysis but a formal utterance as well. The use of digital recording and immediate translation of the ongoing performance disperses the centre of visual focus to at least two locations so that the viewer's gaze is both split and multiplied. The spectator's gaze is fractured by a complex system of intersecting gazes including those between actor and electronic image, actor and spectator, and spectator and fictional spectators. This split gaze forms a location of difference: two object sites of the gaze can never be identical. The refracted film-within-performance thus has the potential to articulate a different interpretation of events, or to de-emphasise the power of axiomatic ways of seeing. It also challenges the voyeuristic gaze of the spectator, inviting him or her to admit complicity in the acts of surveillance. This looking-at-being-looked-at not only interrogates the interplay between viewer and spectacle, showing that reality is not only what happens but also how it is seen. It confronts [a] cinematic gaze with theatrical sensibility and can invest the audience with more substantial and varied frames through which viewer positions are mediated or controlled. Although this analysis of visual mechanics does not exhaust the meanings of this performance, to some extent it interrogates

the means of representation themselves as structures of authority. Such a strategy is not a matter of articulating the political meaning, but of making visible the politics of representation.

The performances that I have discussed here offer the possibility of simultaneous reading of all the visual and aural aspects of power (or canon) and facilitates telling and showing of oppositional versions of the construction of the event, whether historical or present. These examples show that the *political* in contemporary theatre is rooted in both visual/textual effect and in its reading strategy.

I'd like to engage with more general debate about the nature of political in contemporary theatre, and address the question, what are the implications of such a complex notion as the *political*, can we define it as effective in social sense? In order to answer that, we have to understand the consequences of moving from a vertical and bipolar conception of socio-political relations to one that is decentred and multi-determined. This allows us to rethink the links between culture and power and contributes to understanding the failure of certain ways of 'doing' politics. For a long time the political in arts worked like this: against the impossibility of constructing a different order, artists established masked challenges in myths, arts or texts, hoping that starting from metaphors, new transformative practices would slowly or unexpectedly invade the picture. However, as this almost never happens, one reaches pessimistic conclusions about the efficacy of artistic practices. This limited symbolic effectiveness, observed and analysed by many researchers, forces us to acknowledge the fundamental difference between action and acting. To cite Néstor García Canclini, a difficulty in the political valorisation of cultural practices is to understand them as actions — that is, as effective interventions in the material structures of society. Cultural practices, including theatre, are performances more than actions; they represent and simulate social actions but very rarely operate as such. Alternately, political power exists insofar as it is dramatised — in ceremonies, performances, and arts. It needs ritualisation of the status quo in order to neutralise the instability of the social.⁵ I guess we can conclude, that the *political* in theatre today means to embrace this instability of the social and to deconstruct the staging of power, to show-and-tell that there is always *theatrical* and *the performative* in any social or political interaction. This way a study of representation becomes, in words of Linda Hutcheon, an exploration of the way in which narratives and images structure how we see ourselves in the present and in the past.⁶

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- ² Tiffin H. *Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-Discourse*, Kunapipi, 1987, Vol. 9: 3, p.17–34.
- ³ *Post-Colonial Drama: Theory, Practice, and Politics*, ed. by Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins. London & New York: Routledge, 1996, p.16–17.
- ⁴ The notions of *mythification/remythication* are quite explicitly defined by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957); the change of the term and its application to post-modern political art as well as its relations to mass culture is analysed by Hal Foster in his book *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics* (1985).
- ⁵ Canclini N.G. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies of Entering and Leaving Modernity*, Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995, p.261–262.
- ⁶ Hutcheon L. *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London & New York: Routledge, 2002, p.7.

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VAIZDAS IR PASAKOJIMAS: ANTIKANONINIAI DISKURSAI IR SUVOKIMO POLITIKA

S a n t r a u k a

Nepriklausomybės laikotarpis Lietuvos teatre buvo paženklintas diskusijomis apie teatro vietą besikeičiančioje visuomenėje ir sociopolitinio scenos meno lygmens nykimą. Lietuvos teatro posūkis vizualaus teatrališkumo link paskutiniame XX a. dešimtmetyje turėjo didelę įtaką šiandien vis gilėjančiam atotrūkiui tarp teatro ir socialinio konteksto, tarp scenos ir realybės. Galima pateikti nemažai šiuolaikinio Lietuvos teatro apolitiškumo priežasčių, tačiau viena svarbiausių – pakitusi *politiškumo*, o kartu ir politinio teatro samprata. Jeigu modernioje epochoje politinio teatro funkcija buvo kritikuoti esamas socialines formacijas ir atskleisti sociopolitines alternatyvas, tai postmodernusis realybės teatrališkumas reikalauja iš teatro kūrėjų gerokai subtilesnės strategijos. Politiškai angažuotas postmodernus teatras skiriasi nuo istorinio avangardo ar modernaus politiškumo, nes nesipriešina kokiai nors ideologijai, nesiūlo jokių socialinių alternatyvų ir neskatina maišto, o tiesiog dekonstruoja reprezentacijos mechanizmus bei juos kontroliuojančius procesus, destabilizuoja ir ardo vaizdinius bei tekstus, kuriais save įtvirtina įvairios galios formos. Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamos dvi postmodernaus politinio teatro strategijos, analizuojančios galios, ideologijos mechanizmus, slypinčius po estetiniais kodais: antikanoninės vaidavimo formos ir suvokimo politika. Atpažinti tokią kritiką neretai nėra lengva, šis naujasis politiškumas yra gerokai ambivalentiškesnis, prieštaringesnis negu modernus, jis tuo pat metu siekia ir nuversti, ir įtvirtinti ideologiją, veikia ir kaip bendrininkas, ir kaip kritikas, tarsi ir naudoja teatrinį kanoną, ir kartu jį ardo.

PAGRINDINĖS SĄVOKOS: *politinis teatras, politiškumas, dekonstrukcija, mitas, žvilgsnis.*

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