

On political theatre in Germany and Estonia

What is the political power of theatre nowadays in comparison with previous periods? Is theatre losing its political power? Did it ever have it?

To start with, it is important to define what is meant by political power. Theatre does not need to do the work of politics, that is to govern the world, the state, the city, to organise the life of people, to prevent it from total chaos. For every work there are professionals and theatre-makers are not and should not be politicians. Another question would be, whether theatre could influence politics or, rather, the society around us? My answer would be yes. If not influence directly (making politicians accept certain laws, but even that is done by theatre – Augusto Boal's legislative theatre in Brazil), then to reflect the society, make the members of the society think about certain issues, to discuss them and through that change something in their thinking and mentality.¹

Germany – big names

Germany has a long tradition of political theatre. The capacity of this essay does not allow me to go into details of theatre history, but I will mention some crucial moments, when theatre has offered something for the society and also renewed theatre aesthetics. The notion "political theatre" was first used by Erwin Piscator in 1929. Piscator's theatre in the 1920s in Berlin renewed theatre aesthetics (brought radio and film media on the stage, introduced technical innovations etc) and reflected the pessimism that was widespread in the German society after the World War I. Thanks to Piscator theatre was brought from bourgeoisie to the working class. After returning from exile, Piscator had another period of influence – the documentary theatre of the 1960s. He staged several contemporary plays (most famous being Peter Weiss' "The Investigation," 1964) dealing with taboos in a post-WWII society of Germany, the main issue being how to cope with the country's Nazi-past.

Of course, there is another German theatre-renewer – Bertolt Brecht – who has had an enormous impact on world's theatre (and other arts). Brecht's epic theatre was meant to be both didactic and entertaining and that links perfectly with many performances in contemporary German and Estonian theatre, as well as with performances seen at KRT in Krakow, April 2008.

Estonia – a maze of history

As the history of Estonia differs a lot from the history of Germany, manifestations of political theatre are significantly different as well (and more exceptional). Still, during the short period of independence (1918-1939) Estonian theatre-makers travelled to Berlin and German theatre became a guiding light for some of them. German expressionism and Piscator's renewals reached Estonia, but had little impact on an average bourgeoisie theatre-goer. Still, aesthetical modernisation was started and it found its followers in the theatre renewal period of the 1960s-1970s – the period of so-called thaw of the Soviet power-machine.

Three-four directors who stood in front of the renewal were influenced by Grotowski's approach (it was not possible to see his theatre behind the iron curtain, only a few Polish magazines reached Estonia and some of the theatre-makers learned the language only to read the articles!). But what was political about their theatre? It was essential to read "between the

¹ I am currently writing my MA thesis on political theatre in Germany and Estonia. I describe the 20th century history of political theatre in both countries and compare the situation in the new century. One of my questions is: why is there a strong tradition of political theatre in Germany and almost none in Estonia? The reason lies in the history and development of society in respective countries.

lines”, the audience learned that perfectly throughout the 50 years of Soviet occupation. The renewal of theatre in the 1960s was an intensive period where the aesthetics of theatre was renewed as well; links to some contemporary theatre-makers can also be drawn. The theatre of that period can be called “metaphoric theatre” and although no directly political themes were allowed on the stage, there were still hints on the closed situation of the Soviet society and the wish for national awakening (that still had to be on a waiting list until the end of the 1980s). Theatre was a way to rebel against the oppressive regime, but only with means of art.

Link between times

Can we learn from history and see the influences in contemporary theatre? Yes, quite clearly. As Germany has a strong tradition of political theatre, we can also see political issues and critical viewpoints in the changing capitalistic society on the contemporary stage. The directors such as Frank Castorf, Rene Pollesch, Christof Schlingensiefel and others are living in a new capitalistic world and commenting that on the stage. They describe the world around us with our own world’s means using multimedia (film, video), mixing theoretical texts, the tempo on the stage is quick and the actors/the characters there are nervous and intense.

Due to Estonia’s tempestuous history and the aim to race off towards capitalism as quickly as possible in the 1990s, it’s only now possible to start talking about some interesting examples of political theatre in Estonia². The theatre that is travelling a lot in Germany, Switzerland and Austria is [NO99](#). They represent the entertaining political theatre (as did the German *andcompany&Co* in Krakow). *NO99* takes global and locally critical issues (the run-out of oil, the lack of babies) and boosts it up with an appetising form (musical, dance etc). Another branch of political theatre is documentary theatre (which is a growing tendency everywhere). A female director Merle Karusoo uses simple form and brings serious issues under discussion: Estonians in the war of Afghanistan (parallels with the war in Iraq), integration between Estonians and the Russian minority etc.

Andcompany

Into this historical and contemporary discourse of political theatre suits very well the fairly new German group [andcompany&Co](#), founded only in 2003. In an interview (http://www.andco.de/text/&Co.-Interview_highlights.pdf) they reveal that they have been studying by the important theatre theoretician Hans-Thies Lehmann and his influences are easily seen in their performance *little red (play): herstory* at KRT festival in Krakow. “little red” is a perfect example of a postdramatic theatre. It is a post-modern piece of art, where music, literature, philosophy, theatre theory, politics, visual arts, pop culture etc is mixed. The text of the performance (meaning all the elements on the stage) is remixed, cut, doubled, repeated. Nicola Nord: “... theatre will cease to exist if it’s not searching for new collaborators from other fields (fine arts, photography, video making, etc.) But instead of a Wagnerian “Gesamtkunstwerk” we’re looking for a loose artistic association based on the idea of networking and the art of conspiracy.”

The members of *andcompany* are aware of their political responsibility and interestingly enough they declare: “Nicht politisches Theater machen, sondern Theater politisch machen!” Alex Karschnia: The ‘theatricality of politics’ is a problem that is not to be solved by a new form of ‘authenticity’ or ‘purity’ of the political realm, but by staging a critique on the stage of theatre, of using ‘theatricality against theatricality’: spy vs. spy.”

² There is an MA thesis on Estonian political theatre written in German: Monika Eppelt „Das Zeitgenössische Theater in Estland: Das politische Theater des NO99“, Institut für Theaterwissenschaft, Universität Leipzig, Oktober 2007: http://www.no99.ee/uploads/files/magisterarbeit_estnischestheaterl.pdf

The spirit of protest within *andcompany* is clear and the following statement links well with my idea from the beginning of this paper that theatre can cast its influence on the society only indirectly. When asked in the abovementioned interview whether Alex Karschnia believes that theatre can play a serious part in facing and dealing with political/social problems, the answer was: "Only very indirect, today theatres can probably only help facing problems by refusing to play their part, their role of 'enlightened entertainment', of cultural education and identity building."

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