Worlds in Words

Worlds in Words:
Storytelling in Contemporary Theatre and Playwriting

Edited by

Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera

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PREFACE

STORYTELLING ON THE BORDER OF TWO PARADIGMS

In the mid-1930s Luigi Pirandello, the author of a metatheatrical trilogy that challenged the most significant issues of the traditional theatre, started work on his last play, *The Mountain Giants*.[1] In this play he returned once again to the question of the essence of the theatrical art. The action of *The Mountain Giants* begins in the evening, in front of a palace that lies in an inaccessible mountain valley. The palace is inhabited by Cotrone and the Scalognati, whose grotesque appearance and behaviour make them resemble patients of a mental hospital. Upon hearing that a small group of people is approaching the palace, the Scalognati desperately try different theatrical tricks to scare them away, but finally have to give up and invite the guests to the palace. They listen to the story of their unexpected guests, whose speech is quite muddled. They are survivors from the itinerant troupe of the Countess Ilse, a former actress who went back to the theatre to stage a fairytale, *The Changeling Prince*, written for her by a poet who had fallen in love with her. Nobody wanted to watch his play, although initially it was put on stage with all due visual splendour. Gradually the troupe shrank to the eight actors most faithful to the Countess, and devoted to carrying out her mission. "We do not cross out a single line. What cannot be shown is read out loud," one of the actors explains. "The play is so beautiful that nobody pays attention to the actors, the lack of the set design, the props…," another actor assures the Scalognati.[2] But who are the Scalognati? This is explained by Pirandello in the second act of *The Mountain Giants*.

The inhabitants of the secluded palace oppose the concept of theatre and stage illusion propounded by the Countess and her troupe. The Scalognati worship free imagination which has broken free from all rules of common-sense logic and representational convention. No wonder that at

[1] Pirandello, "Giganci z gór."
[2] Ibid., 194.

first sight they seem to be mental patients, because their appearance and behaviour does not fit the commonly accepted image of adult "normalcy." At best they remain on the border of life and dream, or "fairytale and reality," as Pirandello would have it. Or perhaps they have already crossed this line. "We have children's blissful ability to treat games seriously," Cotrone explains.[3] Contrary to the actors, who are still aware of the difference between reality and stage fiction, the Scalognati treat everything as simultaneously real and fictional. For them everything is a phantom born out of their minds, senses and instincts. It might seem obvious, then, that Countess could not find a better place for her performance. In Cotrone's palace her play, which was rejected by ordinary audiences because of its irrational content and unstageable form, which merges epic and lyrical elements, has now gained a chance to find proper viewers. However, the next act of *The Mountain Giants* is an argument for a different claim. In this act we watch animated puppets which represent characters from *The Changeling Prince*. Cotrone tries to convince the Countess that "the real miracle is not a theatre performance, but the poet's imagination in which the characters are born and stay alive." In theatre the actors bring the characters down to the level of a fictional stage reality with more or less skill. This, however, has little to do with the truth of animated figments of the imagination, to which the beginning of the fairy tale testifies, and which we subsequently watch on stage. But the Countess prefers the imperfect art of the theatre, and insists on a confrontation with spectators. For this reason she wants to show her performance to the eponymous mountain giants, who symbolise Pirandello's contemporaries—advocates of technological civilisation who prefer the emotions evoked in a stadium or cinema to the theatre.

It is hard to say how Pirandello imagined the finale of *The Mountain Giants*. The last act is a reconstruction prepared by his son Stefano on the basis of conversation. Is it true that the giants' servants, enraged when the expected entertainment did not materialise, were to attack the stage and kill the Countess, as the embodiment of stage poetry? One can imagine that the entire 20th century has written in the finale. Indeed, Pirandello's last play could be read as a stage metaphor of the changes in theatre and drama which begun in the 1870s as a response to economic and socio-political transformations. In their aftermath, the social and political reality that was slowly emerging could not be reflected by the old theatrical paradigm. This inspired not only the appearance of texts for the theatre which consciously contested the dominant conventions and basic rules of

[3] Ibid., 209.

communication with the audience in the name of unrestrained freedom of imagination, but also numerous attempts at redefining the essence of the medium of theatre and theatrical *mimesis*. In this sense, *The Mountain Giants* can be read as a summary of those developments which, somewhat later on, Peter Szondi described as the crisis of traditional drama, when he sought to show the only possible way out of this crisis, towards the epic theatre and drama.

Peter Szondi, a German philologist well read in Hegel's *Aesthetics* and György Lukács's literary theory, published his *Theory of Modern Drama*[4] in the mid-1950s. He had little doubt that the form of the texts written for the proscenium-arch stage, first in the Renaissance, and then developed by Racine and Corneille, and later by the German Weimar classics, Schiller and Goethe, was but one of many possible embodiments of drama. However, he considered this form an incarnation of the very essence of the dramatic, which he defined as a dialectic synthesis of the object (the epic) and subject (the lyrical). He also introduced the term "absolute drama" to describe the nature of interhuman relationships as presented in and through dialogue. According to Szondi, drama defined in these terms found itself in a severe crisis because of the new rhetorical and authenticating conventions invented by Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Maeterlinck and Hauptmann, who wanted to render a faithful image of the contemporary world on stage. These authors took up themes that were new to theatre stages at the time—the past, internal life, socio-economic problems—and which led to the inevitable destruction of the dialectic synthesis of the epic and the lyrical, regarded as the very essence of the dramatic. Although Szondi was well aware of the fact that he himself was defining traditional drama as a synthesis of the epic and the lyrical, and although he was fully aware of the experimentation with lyrical drama carried out by playwrights at the end of the 19th century, it was only in epic stage solutions, especially those proposed by Bertolt Brecht, that he saw the future of the theatre and the texts written for it. There were two reasons for this. On the one hand, Szondi was inspired by Marxist thought, and linked the development of capitalism as a socio-economic formation with people's progressive alienation. He was convinced that the deepening chasm between the individual and the world, the subject and the object, was best rendered by the epic genres, because of their particular structural features. On the other hand, the beginning of the crisis he analysed was in the 1870s, when naturalist drama was emerging. Its founding father, Émile Zola, defined stage reality as drawing from the image of reality created by the great

[4] Szondi, *Teoria nowoczesnego dramatu*.

French realist novelists. Szondi overlooked one thing, however: Zola and the naturalist theatre only changed the principles of referencing the outer reality, without even slightly shaking the foundations of the theatrical and dramatic paradigm established in the Enlightenment period. The crisis he described was less a sign of changes to reality and the principles of its presentation on stage than of a contradiction internal to the traditional paradigm of drama and theatre.

However, Szondi did not notice the ambiguity of the word "drama." It refers to one of the three basic literary forms, and also a genre that belongs to that form. Significantly, various attempts at defining drama as a genre were taken up as early as the Enlightenment, as a critical response towards classical poetics, which classified and set up a hierarchy of the existing genres. One of the first responses of this kind was Denis Diderot's *Entretiens sur le Fils naturel*, published in 1757, and *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*, published two years later.[5] Diderot painstakingly investigated the one-sidedness of classical poetics, and gleefully pointed out the lack of connection between the prescriptive rules they put forward and particular plays written by the ancient authors and his contemporaries. For this reason, he and many of his peers advocated a review of the dominant poetics. He wanted to introduce another literary form, halfway between the tragic and comic, which would occupy two ends of the same scale. This third form was to be "the most useful and common." "A human being is not full of exclusively pain or joy,"[6] Diderot wrote, referring to everyday experience as the most meaningful marker of dramatic verisimilitude, thus motivating the need to change the received dramatic system. Classical poetics, which he contested in the name of theatre's fidelity to life, not only strictly distinguished the tragic from the comic, but also precisely defined the genres they constituted, according to the rule of appropriateness or propriety (*bienséance*). These rules dictated the choice of the theme and its degree of fictionality or fidelity to historical facts, the characters and their social status, the use of prose or verse, as well as the verse's metre and other means of expression. By the same token, the poetics strictly regulated the relationship between the world represented and the outer reality; put differently, they clearly defined the principles of imitation and the realms of life to be imitated by a particular genre.

At that time the set of conventions and artistic strategies ascribed to a given genre functioned in the sphere of social communication—as Mikhail Bakhtin later argued[7]—as a world view formed in a long historical process

[5] Diderot, *Pisma estetycznoteatralne*.
[6] Diderot, "Rozmowy o *Synu naturalnym*," 89.
[7] Bachtin, *Problemy poetyki Dostojewskiego*.

of changes to social reality and culture. It carried a given ideological message, and not only allowed a given topic to be raised, but also dictated the manner in which it was raised and the message it was to offer. It was not only Diderot who understood this function of genres inherited from previous generations. In his preface to *Mary Tudor*, Victor Hugo juxtaposed modern drama to the great tragedies by Corneille, Racine and Voltaire: "It cannot be, as with the great authors, that one side of the thing is systematically and perpetually brought to light; the thing should be seen from all sides at once."[8] Thus he captured the very essence of the ideological coup invented by the philosophers and artists of the Enlightenment, which gave rise to drama as the preferred genre of the epoch. It was to be free of the one-sidedness and ideological filters known to the other genres. And for this reason, the newly-defined genre seemed capable of representing the world unrestrainedly, in all its aspects. Because of the manifest objectivity and directness of the represented world, drama as defined by the authors of the Enlightenment and Romantic period soon became synonymous with the dramatic form as such.

Instead of slavishly imitating the classical poetics and the works of their predecessors, Diderot, and later Hugo, argued in favour of a convincing imitation of nature and the truth of human condition. As a consequence, standards of evaluating dramatic and theatrical works changed radically. Spectators no longer had to know the rules and prescriptions of *bienséance* put forward in the classical poetics and acquired through education. An understanding of drama only depended on the spectator's "sensitive heart," while the probability of the events it represented could be measured in an entirely egalitarian fashion—by the everyday experience of each audience member. Nature and truth, both verified by the spectator's own experiences, became arguments on whose strength drama as a modern genre not only embodied the entire dramatic form, but also stood as the source of the metaphor of the stage as a window, whose neutral ideological frame selected and presented fragments of life chosen by the playwright, making it possible for the spectators to see them better.

Although the trademark features of drama as a genre were ousted, drama itself did not cease to function as a testimony to specific social and historical circumstances. This, however, can only be proved by means of a detailed analysis of changes in the meanings of such key words as "nature," "truth" or "everyday experience," which consecutive generations of playwrights, from the Enlightenment onwards, employed so often.

[8] Hugo, "Przedmowa do *Ruy Blasa*," 215.

Drama as a genre remained seemingly independent from socio-historical processes and cultural determination because it modified its structure so surreptitiously, and thus kept from affecting the basic impression of the probability of the represented reality, which was verified by the spectators' experiences. This compatibility with the audience's experiences and their knowledge of the world thus constitutes its ideological dimension and normative function. It may support those who want to introduce new themes and hitherto unknown realms of reality to the stage, and consequently call for a verification of dominant dramatic and theatrical conventions, as well as those who only want to see what they have already seen in the theatre—worlds and characters that are easily recognisable. It suffices to read the naturalist manifestos, in which the postulates of "nature" and "truth" on stage appear alongside the conviction that drama is specially predisposed to show nature and truth, also argued by the playwrights of the Enlightenment and Romanticism. After all, it was not the naturalists, led by Antoine and his Théâtre Libre, who came up with the idea of the fourth wall. They merely spread the idea. The concept of the "invisibility of the audience" can be found in the thesis *Discours sur la poésie dramatique*. "No matter whether you create or act," Diderot argued, addressing both playwrights and actors, "treat the spectators as if they were not there. Imagine a wall rising at the edge of the stage; act as if the curtain never rose."[9] This proves that drama as a new genre was to remain ideologically neutral. Contrary to the normative rules of the older poetics, the author was only to create a space for the characters to live, without restraining their words or gestures. Drama as a genre ceased to resemble those defined by normative poetics, and became a separate discipline of mimetic art.

Therefore, contrary to Szondi's claims, naturalist drama did not spark the crisis of the old paradigm, but rather redefined how the probability of stage events was verified. Playwrights still wanted to achieve the reality effect, that is, to create an image of life on stage that spectators could recognise as a counterpart of the reality they knew from everyday life. Diderot still believed in the universal human condition and equally universal truths; therefore, he assumed everyday experiences to be shared and the spectators' knowledge homogenous, that they emotionally responded in the same way to "images of misery." The changes thus described as the birth of naturalist theatre were the effect of the gradual dispersal and individualisation of the audience. Playwrights tried to draw on a stock of shared experiences, or rather the common and dominant

[9] Diderot, "O poezji dramatycznej," 168-9.

principles of their interpretation, to homogenise the spectators for the duration of the performance. The best proof of this tendency is that the main source of credible images of the world for naturalist playwrights was the realist novel. For Zola, it was not everyday reality that provided the basic material for the naturalist playwrights, but rather the realist novels of Balzac and Flaubert. These authors taught the spectators to watch in a specific way and recognise the most significant aspects of reality. Therefore, the elements decisive for the fidelity of the image of the world on stage—set design, costumes, situations and characters' behaviour—did not function as signs of the reality represented, but as signs of signs, because they referred to an already existing system. By the end of the 19th century, this modification let the spectators, who read the stage signs in an altogether individualist manner, still believe that theatre meant participation in a communal undertaking, and left them under the impression that they were dealing with an unmediated image of the world. But this was because this image *de facto* created the point of view of an onlooker whose presence had no effect on the object observed and its interpretation.

Zola encouraged theatre-makers to imitate the image of the world created in the novel on stage, but he treated this solution as only a means to an end. He wanted thus to retain the impression of objectivity and directness of stage action. The frame in which Balzac or Flaubert cut out images of the world became the frame of the proscenium arch in the theatre, the frame of the window which allows us to see the world as it is, with no apparent constraints. It was Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht who started not only reproducing reality on stage according to novelistic rules, revealing its status as a double copy, but also began to employ typical novelistic solutions and conventions, which were used to produce a copy in naturalist theatre through theatrical means. The overt presence of a narrator, the prominent presence of various forms of direct address, elements of time and space or various kinds of indirect speech—these were the solutions used by Brecht as *V-effects*, which were to reveal the ideological nature of the images of the world presented by bourgeois theatre. The novelistic diegesis, contrasted with the mimesis of traditional drama, which had produced a seemingly objective and direct vision of the world ever since the Enlightenment, privileged the literary text at the cost of the theatrical medium. The latter did not function as the chief aim of the playwright's strategies, but merely a means to an end: the Enlightenment's deconstruction of the image of the world and the human condition. No wonder that Brecht's epic theatre can be seen as the ultimate solution to the crisis of drama—as Szondi argued—but simultaneously as an

antitheatrical solution, in accordance with new interpretations of the history of drama and theatre in Europe from the turn of the 19th century onwards.

The concept of the relationship between theatre and the theatrical text in the 20th century, still dominant in the first half particularly, remains dependent on the point of view introduced by early 20th-century experimental theatre directors, such as Appia, Craig or Artaud, who fought for the integral and autonomous art of theatre. They are responsible for the conviction, still widespread, that nearly everything that deserves to be regarded as contemporary began with the dignified gesture of the theatre-slave who finally decided to gain independence, breaking free from the chains of literature that had impeded it for far too long. This idea is faithfully reflected in the concept of the "retheatralisation of theatre" formulated by Georg Fuchs in 1904, which determined the contemporary understanding of the place of the theatre within the historical avant-garde.[10] Nearly twenty years earlier, his countryman Friedrich Nietzsche had employed the term *Theatrokratie*, borrowed from Plato, with reference to Richard Wagner's idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which had by then gathered considerable popularity. Nietzsche feared the pernicious influence that theatre in his time exerted on the other arts. By treating theatricality as a desirable virtue, theatre imposed the rules of theatrical representation on other arts, particularly stage mimesis, which was unmediated and conditioned by the presence of the actors, and the probable motivation for what they did on stage. Martin Puchner in *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama* very convincingly links Nietzsche's diatribe against the theatrical mimesis dominant by the end of the 19th century with the work of such modernist playwrights as Gustave Flaubert, Stéphane Mallarmé, William Butler Yeats, James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett.[11] While Mallarmé or Stein, and later Beckett, stuck to the model of minimalist playwriting, others deliberately trespassed the technical restrictions of the contemporary stage and its rules of mimesis through excess, submitting to madness of the imagination. This is the case, for example, in episode XV of *Ulysses*, entitled "Circe," which takes the form of a drama. In this context, Pirandello's Countess can be easily seen as a stage reflection of Mallarmé's plan to write an almost unstageable (according to the dominant restrictions) drama in three acts, in which the action was to be limited to the conversations of the last descendant of an aristocratic family, and the

[10] Fuchs, *Schaubühne der Zukunft*.
[11] Puchner, *Stage Fright. Modernism, Anti-theatricality and Drama*.

wind that sighs in the ruins of his castle. Moreover, he wanted to play the leading role in this performance and tour it from one fair to another. This makes it clear that both the interpretation of *The Mountain Giants* and the view of the development of the 20th-century paradigm of drama and theatre changes according to the perspective and methodology adopted.

Although the modernist playwrights deliberately violated the rules of theatre craft and the very foundations of the art of the stage, they equally drew from spectators' knowledge of conventions. Small wonder that their antitheatrical gestures directed against the dominant model of the stage were carried out as descriptive or prescriptive recipes for performances, that is, stage directions. These had previously been used mainly to describe actions that created the illusion of a represented reality, which was to present itself to the spectators in its entirety. Modernist playwrights refused to act as deliverers of well-made plays that catered to the needs of the theatres and dominant conventions, and used them to describe a reality which opposed the expected, direct imitation of the people acting (understood as the most proper kind of dramatic mimesis) to a diegesis, a verbal description that mediated these actions from the author's desired perspective. The verbal description of the reality represented in the stage directions was to redefine what the readers and the spectators watched in an imaginary or real scene, or to serve as a prism for the stage events, conditioning the desired process of perception and reception. For many modernists who took the antitheatrical stance, stage directions became the preferred place of resistance against the model of theatre they knew, and of designing new and independent dramatic forms for the stage of tomorrow, or the theatre of the future.

It must be stressed once again: even if antitheatrical modernists manifestly ceased to consider the technical possibilities of the theatre and the conditions for creating stage mimesis, the projects for new represented realities inscribed in the stage directions came into being in close connection with the dominant theatre practice. On his play *Herodiade*, Mallarmé wrote unambiguously: "[It is] absolutely stageable—although it is impossible in the theatre, it depends on the theatre for its comprehensibility."[12] He was supported by James Joyce. In one of his essays on contemporary theatre he repeated this dictum in a mirror-reflection thesis on drama, which "is conditioned but not controlled by its stage."[13] According to this conviction, both authors addressed their plays primarily to readers—but those who knew the dominant stage conventions

[12] Quoted in ibid., 60.
[13] Quoted in ibid., 82.

intimately. Only then, with the reader sitting in an armchair, before the stage of his own internal theatre, could he imagine a performance a hundred times more poetic than those he could see in the theatre, which was impeded by the corporeality of the actors, their craft, the materiality of the stage and its technical requirements. However, he managed to do this only because the existing theatre determined his habits and expectations. The theatre the modernists hated for making "masterpieces die"—a phrase repeated by Maeterlinck, in spite of his immense popularity on European stages—provided an element that made it possible to show spectators a vision of a new theatre, the theatre of tomorrow.

The rejection of drama's subservience to the theatre took place slightly earlier than the retheatricalisation of the theatre initiated by the leading theatre-makers of the beginning of the 20th century. This rejection was aimed mainly at the element of the theatrical art which, from the Enlightenment era onwards, was the best guarantee of stage action reflecting life: at the actors and their concrete bodies, the common or schematic gestures which bring the message of drama—often written in a poetic language—down to the level of the material and the mundane, instead of showing the modernist *au-delà* or reaching a level of abstraction and gaining the magical force of a ritual. It suffices to recollect that many modernists wanted to replace the actors with dancers. "How can you separate the dancer from the dance?" Yeats asked rhetorically, thus touching the very core of the problem: with a dancer it is difficult to see once a fictional character, and then a flesh-and-blood performer. Dance eliminates the pernicious duality of the dramatic theatre, the duality of the real, phenomenal body and the semiotic, fictional body built on top. However, unlike the contemporary directors of postdramatic theatre, the modernists did not want to watch real bodies on stage. Rather, they intended to create a real artefact in the theatre. Through discipline imposed from outside, they wanted to change the material and changeable body of the actor, which does not easily mould into an aesthetic form, into a kind of a marionette or mechanism that exclusively carries out necessary and meaningful gestures. Therefore, if we return once again to Pirandello's *Mountain Giants*, we can easily recognise a trace of these modernist, antitheatrical projects in *The Changeling Prince* prepared by the Scalognati with magic and mannequins, which was to render the idea of the poet better than living actors.

Obviously, the intentions of the antitheatrical modernists resemble the basic theses put forward by Edward Gordon Craig in his manifesto *On the Art of the Theatre*. However, Craig shifted the bulk of the responsibility for the naturalism and the artistic imperfection of theatre onto the

playwrights, who lured egoistic and self-centred actors with their texts, so that the former spoke words that were not their own. For this reason, he also wanted to counteract the naturalism of his contemporary stages by eliminating the literary text. One of the anti-mimetic solutions used by the modernists was counteracting the directness of the stage illusion via an artificial separation of the spoken word from the gesture that usually accompanied and authenticated it. They achieved the desired effect by following in the footsteps of the Eastern theatres, and divided the stage rendered in the stage directions into the space of a narrative or commentary, and the space of a mimetic gesture, as Yeats did in his *Plays for Dancers*. Another version of the same solution can be found in Brecht's later proposition to introduce banners commenting on or anticipating the action on stage. Irrespective of the differences outlined here, both the texts written manifestly against the contemporary theatre and the experiments that aimed at a retheatricalisation of theatre by freeing from the dominance of literature had a similar root in their attempts to rejuvenate the relationship between art that came under the auspices of institutions, and the radically changing socio-political reality and the concepts of human beings and the world that it conditions.

The possibility of placing Brecht's epic theatre within the framework of the changes in drama worked out by Szondi, and within Puchner's alternative model of the history of theatre in the 20th century, proves that in fact this seeming opposition is but an illusion. Both Szondi and Puchner work on similar assumptions, because both treat the novel and drama as separate literary forms, as Schiller and Goethe had before them. They define literary forms in terms of particular conventions and solutions, seen exclusively on the level of the structure of the artefact as an autonomous aesthetic phenomenon. Bakhtin, alternately, suggested that art was to be treated as one of many types of social communication, and saw every medium and artistic genre as a historically determined expression of a particular world view. For this reason he treated the novel not as a repertory of possible conventions and solutions, the realm of diegesis in juxtaposition with the mimesis typical of drama, but rather as a manner of drawing ideological relations between a work of art and reality, irrespective of the literary genre.

Therefore, it is not by accident that Brecht should appear in the context of our discussion of the avant-garde experimentation of the turn of the 20th century. Unlike that of the antitheatrical modernists, Brecht's playwriting and the concept of theatre it implied had an overt political and sometimes even didactic purpose; yet it grew out of the same need to re-negotiate the contract with the audience that Peter Szondi identified as the crisis of

drama, which occurred the moment the old dramatic form began to prove too limited to render the experience of the modern man in a rapidly changing, industrialised world. According to the author of *Theory of Modern Drama*, the epic theatre in its mature form provided the paradigmatic structural pattern for the development of drama in the 20th century in terms of the change of the relationship between stage and audience, making it possible to address new topics in the theatre. The epic theatre which Brecht developed from the late 1920s onwards was to provide a response to the exhaustion of the traditional paradigm of drama, which by the beginning of the 20th century had proved incapable of tackling new social and political issues, such as the rules of the capitalist economy or the mechanisms of the stock market. Brecht was fully aware of the fact that the traditional form of drama, based on the interhuman conflict, could never render the workings of abstract economic and political systems, because it communicated with the spectators via projection and emotional identification. It therefore necessarily shifted the spectators' attention towards individual characters and their trials and tribulations, and away from the objective analysis of the political and economic environment that conditioned their fate. The Brechtian *V-effekt*, which exposes the machinery of the theatre in order to destroy the stage illusion, was a means of positioning spectators as distant and rational observers who could use the material the stage provided to analyse the reality outside the theatre.

In this sense, epic theatre broke free from the constraints of the old dramatic form and thus reconfigured the stage-audience relationship by modifying the traditional structures of drama. From this perspective, Brecht—quite inadvertently—continued the tradition of perceiving the theatre as a social laboratory in which attitudes and world views were being critically examined. This, however, is only true of those epic plays which Brecht called *Schaustücke*. Although plays such as *Threepenny Opera*, *Galileo* or *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* have become the cornerstones of epic canon, Brecht himself treated them as necessary compromises with the requirements of the mainstream stage. After all, even when he wrote his *Small Organon for Theatre* back in the 1950s, Brecht admitted that despite all his contempt for the Aristotelian form, he still believed in one of its tenets: the conviction that it was the story that gave the theatrical art its soul. The essence of his experimentation lay in finding novel ways of rendering the story on stage, without needing to slip back to the worn mechanism of projection and identification. In other words, he preserved the standard diegetic dimension of theatre, but exposed the theatrical and dramatic conventions responsible for creating a

convincing stage illusion. At the same time, he was fully aware that "the performances presented before the spectators evoke only moral effects of an inferior sort," as he wrote, summing up a period of experimentation that was to lead to a new type of a theatre spectacle, which he called *Lehrstück*.

Brecht translated the term itself into English as a "learning play," and this denomination contains a clue to the nature of the radical change this convention was to bring. As a didactic play for amateur troupes, the *Lehrstück* was to be a typical theatrical script, which, however, would not assume a separation of the performers from the audience. Bidding farewell to the modernist concept of the work of art as artefact, Brecht decided to do away with the traditional division into actors and spectators. He wanted to turn both groups into active participants, taking part in a performance which becomes a simulated social experiment. The participants were to imitate the emotions suggested to them and mime bodily behaviour imposed by the script. Even more significantly, instead of watching stage events from a stable point of view, as in traditional theatre, they were supposed to adopt various roles, to look at a problem under discussion from different—sometimes mutually exclusive—perspectives. Therefore, the *Lehrstück* was to create a theatrical situation in which, on the basis of a pre-given story, the participants would be able to learn from each other by embodying a number of roles, along with the political attitudes those roles implied. In this way the audience would have a chance to recreate and re-enact everyday experiences, in a collective effort. The group gathered in the theatre was to sanction the accuracy of the conclusions they reached together, which would further lead to the transformation of the outer reality.

This model for the play of the future seemingly goes very far beyond the limitations of the traditional dramatic form, in that it completely blurs the border between stage and audience. Indeed, the structure of the *Lehrstück* turned out to be so far ahead of its time that it surfaced the moment when politically committed theatres of the early 1970s started looking back in search of predecessors. Small wonder, because the form of the *Lehrstück*, with its clearly didactic purpose, still preserved the heritage of Aristotle's poetics, no matter how much Brecht wanted to escape its influence. Not even in the *Lehrstücke* could Brecht abandon the diegetic dimension of traditional theatre, constructing classical stories. After all, the logic of cause and effect not only links separate situations, turning them into a chain of inseparably connected events, and thus parables commenting on the outer reality. It also provides gestures and behaviour with seemingly "natural" and self-evident meanings. Thus it prevents the spectators from questioning what in a particular situation determines the

meanings of such concepts as "justice," "freedom" or "humanity"; concepts which are in fact historically conditioned and culturally contingent. It was this blind spot in the theory of the epic theatre that Heiner Müller, the most renowned inheritor of the Brechtian tradition, addressed when he continued debating the concept of theatre from the mid-1960s on, changing the outer reality by providing spectators with an opportunity to re-examine their convictions and attitudes.

"It is stage action which is a model, not history. Show attitudes, not meanings," Müller wrote, summarising a series of his rewritings of Brecht's most well-known *Lehrstücke*.[14] The main aim of his preoccupation with the works of his predecessor was to expose this blind spot in the structure of the *Lehrstücke* which served as a carrier of ideology. For this reason Müller gave up reconstructing the story of the original plays in his rewritings. On the contrary, by rendering them in blank verse and deliberately omitting some parts, he deprived them of the theatrical dimension they possessed in the form designed and executed by Brecht. In the closing commentary to his *Mauser* (1970), a new version of Brecht's *The Measures Taken*, he very clearly defines the relationship of the text to its stage production and the prospective recipients. He very clearly emphasises that the text should not serve as a basis for a typical stage rendition, even in the metatheatrical form prescribed by the theory of the epic theatre. He suggests that the spectators recite passages from the text, but not try to identify with any fictional figure or standpoint represented. In this way he sought to eliminate any possibility of producing a fictional reality which would imitate the outer world on the strength of the referential contract. Changing the point of view from situation to situation and trying on various verbal masks the text provides, he allowed spectators to gain a critical distance from the issues addressed by the text. By adopting various points of view, spectators were to be inhibited from reaching pat conclusions and arriving at oversimplified interpretations. At the same time, they were to realise how every form of presenting the text on stage, even a recitation, necessarily implied a particular interpretation of the reality represented. The collaborative theatrical effort was to provide an opportunity for each of the spectators to confront and re-examine the ideological background of the hierarchies that governed their decisions in everyday life. In this sense, the theatrical project for which Müller's texts are written can be described as a laboratory of social imagination. Here the text serves neither as a design for a prospective stage production, as in traditional theatre, nor as material

[14] Müller, "Drei Punkte [zu *Philoktet*]," 72.

for a performance enacted by the spectators, as Brecht intended in writing his *Lehrstücke* as the theatre of the future. It provides merely a frame to be filled with what the spectators bring in as their memory, both conceptual and bodily. Although Puchner does not take up this topic—he finishes his book with Brecht and Beckett—Müller's laboratory can be regarded as the final point of a development initiated with the antitheatrical experiments of the mid-19th century, which led to the abandonment of the traditional work of art, endowed with a prearranged structure and meanings. This process peaked in the developments Hans-Thies Lehmann called postdramatic theatre. However, we are more interested in the evolution of forms of texts for the theatre which ran parallel to postdramatic stage experiments.

A different manner of understanding the artefact and a new definition of the stage/audience relationship results from the various and complex partial changes of the traditional paradigm that took place in the 20th century. The relationship between the theatre as a laboratory and the texts written for it is only the most telling example of these developments. It allows us to show the essence of the change in artistic strategies and the field of experimentation: in the *Schaustücke*, Brecht reveals and demonstrates the working of the theatre machinery which produces the illusion of the reality represented in order to make the spectators notice and consider the organising principle of the story as a tool for propagating bourgeois ideology as seemingly universal values. In the *Lehrstücke* he intensifies the impact of the theatrical illusion and the ideology it transports, turning the spectators into participants. Müller questions the medium and the institution of theatre in order to liberate them from subservience to any ideology. Therefore, he focuses on a problem that Brecht's ideology of suspicion did not embrace within the scope of its deconstructive epic solutions. He proposes a new manner of organising literary texts, free from the basic dramatic and theatrical conventions, determined by a specific architecture of the theatre space and the stage/audience relationship inscribed in it. Significantly, Brecht retained the story as a whole, because he treated theatre primarily as a tool of social interaction and persuasion, not as an autonomous work of art in which the aesthetic function dominates. Müller did the opposite. He tried to make his texts independent of himself as an author, and offered them as material for free use by any practitioner. He privileged their creative autonomy, while simultaneously trespassing the borders of traditional drama in a radical way. In spite of these significant differences, for both playwrights the basic field of experimentation is the literary text as a particular constellation of conventions and artistic solutions, which have a persuasive and performative force. Brecht precisely predicts and carefully designs

their impact; Müller deliberately gathers them in bulk and uses shock tactics to spur the recipients to make independent choices. It was only Müller's descendants who started to use more precisely devised and aimed solutions, using multimedia strategies to guide audience response. One such strategy that has been increasingly employed in contemporary writing for the stage is storytelling, whose (re)introduction to the theatre of the 1990s would not have been possible without radical changes in the understanding of theatre and the texts written for it, as well as the dominant concept of orality, which sets the destination of a given text and its ascription to a particular medium. Although in theatre and the texts written for it this feature has become salient only in the last three decades, the theoretical foundations for these changes were laid by the interdisciplinary studies carried out in the 1930s by Mikhail Bakhtin.

Taking the Socratic dialogue as a model which assumed the relativity and intentionality of truth as well as the autonomous character of the points of view presented, Bakhtin revealed the fundamentally monologous nature of contemporary drama on the margins of his meditations on Dostoevsky's polyphonic novels.[15] In spite of the presence of the conflict of standpoints and the seeming independence of the characters' utterances, appearing merely as quotes, he treated dialogue as a formal solution which had little to do with the authentic dialogue he found in some types of the contemporary novel. The novelistic dialogue was typified by a loose confrontation of voices, which gave rise to a speaking subject. As Bakhtin's analyses reveal, for Dostoevsky such a dialogue was the primary aim, all else was merely a means. In traditional drama, however, the author primarily creates characters and places them within a specific perspective, while the dialogue serves as a means of revealing these points of view, bringing to light what was already there from the very beginning. Therefore, although we seem to be dealing with characters' direct utterances in traditional drama, the words they speak are extremely subjectified, subject to the author's intentions and his vision of the world. Thus Bakhtin discovers what slipped Szondi's attention when he treated Brecht's theatre and his use of novelistic solutions as an expression of the alienation of the human being in the epoch of developed capitalism. He overlooked the fact that the subject/object opposition already existed in the model of traditional drama he calls absolute, although on a different level: between the author and the characters he objectified, characters who were to embody independent individuals on stage. In the context of Bakhtin's theory, the epic character of drama takes a different shape than in Brecht's

[15] Bachtin, *Problemy poetyki Dostojewskiego*.

theatre as described by Szondi. It is less connected with the use of typically novelistic solutions, such as the narrator, banners or commentaries that create distance, or replacing mimesis with diegesis, than with dismantling the hierarchic structure of drama and releasing the individual voices and the spatio-temporal context they typify. The theoretical consequences of the development of drama, especially that of the last few decades, seen from the perspective of Bakhtin's polyphony (which captured the novel at a specific historical moment), are best shown by Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, a French playwright and drama scholar. Fully aware of the fact that he writes in opposition to Szondi, he calls the processes by which drama gradually acquires the traits of a novel "episation." This allows him to delineate the development of contemporary drama as a tendency towards polymorphous forms, whose effect on Dostoevsky's novel was described by Bakhtin.

Only in France did Szondi's views meet with insightful critique. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the French translation of his *Theorie des modernen Dramas* came out at the beginning of the 1980s, at exactly the moment when the validity of the predictions contained in the book was being clearly undermined by contemporary French playwrights. A polemic against Szondi opens the book *L'Avenir du drame* (1981), written by Sarrazac and devoted to the French drama of the 1970s. Moreover, a recent 1999 edition of *L'Avenir du drame* closes with an intensified polemic against Szondi, because, according to its author, the development of European drama in the 1980s and 1990s only confirmed the hypotheses put forward in his book.[8] An anti-Szondi polemic also permeates the dictionary of contemporary drama studies entitled *Poétique du drame moderne et contemporain*, which was published two years later and prepared by a group of researchers from the University of Sorbonne in Paris, working under Sarrazac's supervision.[9] Above all, Sarrazac vigorously protests against what Szondi calls "the three-step movement of the dialectics of form and content," in other words, against the teleological perspective, disguised as the necessity to overcome the crisis of drama; a perspective from which epic drama's ousting of pure drama presents itself as a (r)evolution embodying the spirit of historical progress.

In response to the views he criticises, Sarrazac looks back to Antiquity and puts forward an alternative theoretical solution, coining the term "rhapsodic" and/or "hybrid" theatre (drama)—concepts which in the context of the contemporary drama do more justice to the coexistence of

[8] See Sarrazac, *L'Avenir du drame.*
[9] See *Poétique du drame moderne et contemporain.*

the lyric and the epic elements, which neither oust nor neutralise the purely dramatic passages. Both these terms epitomise the essence of the modern aesthetics of disjunction (*une esthétique du disjoint*), which sets the Aristotelian tradition of drama, conceived of as a "beautiful animal," against the loosely-stitched patchworks or chimeras of dramatic moments and epic-poetic passages created by bringing together heterogeneous elements. Writing in the spirit of Deleuze's philosophy, Sarrazac strives not so much to give a normative or a merely descriptive account of the new model of drama, but rather to grasp this characteristic drift towards the rhapsodic manifest in most contemporary texts for theatre, which continuously violate or blur the borderlines between genres and sub-genres, or, to put it more vividly, push these borderlines forwards, so that they constantly evade us, just as the line of the horizon always moves further away with every step we take. According to Sarrazac, the crisis of contemporary drama is not only a desirable permanent state, but also a strategy that playwrights deliberately choose in order to inscribe a unique indestructible updating mechanism, which keeps working effectively with every act of reception. It can function even in different cultural contexts or at different times, due to the changing, but irreducible tension between its disjoined elements. The historically or geographically conditioned redefinition of one or many of those elements does not defuse the tension, but rather gives it a somewhat different quality, constantly forcing the audience to assume an active role, the role of the co-author.

Attractive as it is, Sarrazac's proposition prompts serious reservations in one respect. His theatrical chimera or rhapsodic play, composed of heterogeneous fragments and contrasted with the Aristotelian "beautiful animal," still consists of elements of other "beautiful animals," descending from the same or related ancestors. To put it less metaphorically, he does not question the very foundations of theatrical *mimesis* and traditional theatrical communication, made up of two communication circuits: one on stage between the fictitious characters, and the other, carefully hidden from view, between the stage and the audience. Permeated with rhapsodic pulsation, forever standing on the borderline, Sarrazac's "elusive" drama remains a classical literary text, because it is destined to create an alternative world to the one inhabited by the audience, who are thus once again invited to take part in old-fashioned projection and identification. These mechanisms are old-fashioned, in spite of, obviously, being constantly modified according to the requirements of the disjunctively combined dramatic, lyric and epic fragments.

Perhaps Jean-Pierre Sarrazac, concentrating mainly on the French drama, could not perceive something which today manifests itself much

more openly in German and British theatre (neither of which having been really influenced by the absurdist drama). Moreover, Sarrazac, in a manner typical of theatre scholars, focuses his attention on tendencies observable in the mainstream drama, making allowance only for those experiments of the avant-garde which have won wide mainstream recognition. The majority of the solutions found in the most contemporary texts for theatre originated a few decades ago, in an entirely different context: within the framework of the postcolonial and feminist drama. However, what is most important at this juncture is that both the texts written for feminist theatre companies and those expressing a postcolonial ideology came into being not in simple opposition to the dramatic and theatrical mainstream, as was the case with Brecht or the absurdist playwrights, but sprang from the radical questioning of the very foundations of the dominant culture and its inherent cognitive paradigms. In the case of postcolonial drama, plays which violated the received understanding of the dramatic came into being as a result of a return to indigenous (oral) literary and artistic traditions, free from the constraints of causal thinking and pragmatic categorisations and divisions typical of the "disenchanted world" of pragmatics. The result of this return often resembled what Sarrazac calls rapsodisation.

It is at this point that we can observe the process of interaction between oral and literary genres which literary anthropologist Walter J. Ong traced in his numerous works, particularly in *Orality and Literacy* (1982).[16] The starting point for Ong's discussion of the oral features of Western literature is the much debated issue of the assumed illiteracy of Homer, or his lack of knowledge of the principles of writing poetry. According to previous studies, notably those carried out by Milman Parry, Homer's epic poetry contains phrases and forms of address alien to written poetry, and indicative of the fact that these works were meant as a form of public recitation. Therefore, as Ong concludes on the basis of his elder colleagues' analyses, Homer's poetry can be judged as substandard only if we adopt the perspective of what he calls literacy—the ability to read and write—which in Western culture became a means of preserving and spreading knowledge and tradition. However, it suffices to change our point of view and look at writing as an imperfect form of recording the spoken word, existing in only a specific context and addressed to a specific audience, to realise the function of the written text differs from its spoken original. In the oral cultures that Ong studies, it is not the content of the text that matters primarily, but the relationship between the speaker and the audience, a relationship which is always being renegotiated and is

[16] Ong, *Orality and Literacy*.

dependent on the dynamics of interaction. If we adopt the premise that spoken language preceded its literary equivalent, it is necessary to modify our view of literature as a variant of that primary oral culture. Accordingly, in his analyses of the canon of Western literature Ong shows the emergence in different epochs and styles of what he calls signs of secondary orality—signals present on a textual level which testify to the fact that the text is destined for oral presentation. In distinction to primary orality—for example, those texts which are only spoken, retained in the memory of storytellers, and spread by word of mouth—secondary orality provides a way of preserving the oral dimension of the written word. Although Ong concentrates on the history of the epic genres throughout the history of literature, the approach he puts forward may be useful in the context of the re-emergence of storytelling in contemporary drama.

It might seem obvious that storytelling strategies from indigenous cultures could make their way to the mainstream stages only after the end of colonial period, when the postcolonial Other started fighting for its right to participate in culture and govern its institutions. Undoubtedly, specific strategies of storytelling, especially those from native Asian and African cultures, have been extensively adopted by playwrights who wrote for Western audiences, examples of which provide a large portion of case studies in the present volume. This development was clearly the aftermath of the social and political changes of the post-war and postcolonial era from the late 1960s onward. Therefore, it might look as if the storytelling convention was entirely new to Western culture, which our analyses of a few approaches to the development of the history of European drama and theatre clearly question. If we look at Brecht's epic theatre and Müller's experimentation with dramatic form in the context of Ong's theory, we can see these phenomena as indicative of a gradual introduction of elements of secondary orality to drama. Indeed, drama as a genre can be said to be an oral genre by definition; however, the secondary orality in Brecht's and Müller's texts is not in the construction of the text and the represented reality it projects, but in the stage/audience relationship. In their plays, which less serve as a basis for a theatrical work of art than initiate the process of interaction between the performers and the spectators, secondary orality can be observed in the rhetorical conventions, i.e. the signs which establish the relationship between the audience and the performers, and define the terms of the mimetic contract.

Hence the general idea of *Worlds in Words. Storytelling in Contemporary Theatre*. It is by no means restricted to an investigation of the elements of the indigenous cultures increasingly visible in contemporary plays and theatre production. This work has already been

done by a number of distinguished scholars, many of whom have provided significant insight for the texts we have gathered. We would like to place storytelling in the context of the historical development of European drama in order to demonstrate links and parallels between what remained outside the mainstream, and the non-Western theatre traditions which have constantly intermingled, giving rise to particular dramatic and theatrical phenomena. For this reason, this introduction has searched for the common source of those lines of development which may, at first sight, look entirely disconnected—the antitheatrical modernist experiments and the political theatre of Brecht and Müller. Both can be seen as different versions of the same process of introducing secondary orality into texts for the theatre, although carried out on a different structural level of the text. Brecht wanted to emphasise the presence of the actor as a performer and the theatre machinery as an epic element, creating a fictional world and its significance. Müller, by using the structure of the text described above, gave viewers the chance to be constantly changing their point of view, and demonstrated in theatre how this shifting can affect the interpretation of the text. From this standpoint, the immense popularity of storytelling techniques should not come as a surprise, but rather as part of an ongoing process of development that began in the Enlightenment, as we have tried to argue in this Introduction. In order to trace selected aspects of this process, and demonstrate the continuities which have so far been hidden behind the dominant views on the history of drama and theatre, we have chosen essays which present various aspects of storytelling and its presence in contemporary theatre and drama in various forms, and particularly in terms of performer/audience communication.

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CHAPTER ONE

STORYTELLING AS A PERFORMATIVE FORM

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is regarded as an integral element of oral culture, which in our print-dominated era has persisted under the name of folk tradition. Although it has been increasingly treated as either an ethnographic curiosity or a sub-species of plebeian theatre, usually disregarded by theatre-makers who wanted to be perceived as high artists, the current understanding of storytelling was determined by the time and the manner of its unexpected renaissance at the turn of the 1970s. As Michael Wilson convincingly argues in his book *Storytelling and Theatre*, the renaissance of storytelling in the United States and Great Britain could be observed within the framework of avant-garde movements born in the spirit of counter-culture.[1] Undoubtedly, many artists returned to this nearly forgotten tradition in order to show active resistance to the overt rationalisation of life and art in Western societies. In fact, they repeated the same gesture which the Romantics made two hundred years before, when they returned to folk culture as a source of "living" wisdom, of practical and pragmatic knowledge. From today's point of view, an equally—if not more—significant reason for the return of storytelling is the desire to radically break with the traditional "dead" bourgeois theatre and to invent it anew, on entirely different premises. And this was not a matter of salvaging a branch of performative arts which had a wide social resonance. It suffices to recall that Guy Debord, motivated by the revolutionary spirit of the Parisian May in 1968, at approximately the same time described Western societies as "societies of spectacle," in which truth and authenticity were replaced by falsity and pretence which also typify (theatrical) art.[2] No wonder that at the turn of the 1960s/70s a project for creating an alternative theatre, in which storytelling could take its place as one of many tendencies and aesthetic strategies, seemed to be a long-awaited remedy that could forge inter-human relationships anew and bring truth back to social life by transforming it into a new kind of *communitas*, created and consolidated by artists. It is not our aim to evaluate the results of these dreams and efforts to create a new society in the era of counter-culture. However, there is no doubt that this context of the renaissance of storytelling had a decisive impact on our current

[1] See Wilson, *Storytelling and Theatre.*
[2] See Debord, *La Société du Spectacle*.