

The Spiritual and Moral Dimension of Modern Theatre

The Philosophical and Linguistic Analysis of Rhapsody for the Theatre by A. Badiou*

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Abstract—The paper investigates the problems of interconnection between performing arts, politics and the machinery of state, based on works of the famous French philosopher-post-modernist A. Badiou. The analogy between theatre and politics, proposed by him, analyzed when applied to Russian culture and interaction with political realia of past and present. An attempt is made to compare politics and theatre as phenomena that have much in common from the conceptual, structural and functional points of view. The paper also brings up the problem of the status and the role of a person and a society at large as components of creative process, some aspects concerning the extent of influence that theatre makes on both individual consciousness and collective thinking and their view of the world.

Keywords—theatre; culture; politics; state; A. Badiou

I. INTRODUCTION

Today theatre seems to be in the very place that the Russian philosophy of the 19th century was, which means that it seems to be doing more harm than good.

It only takes a brief survey of theatre critiques and news headlines to make sure that the public of today is mainly preoccupied with the sole question and that is what sense does modern theatre make and if it is of any help to the public? Theatre was doomed many times as being “useless”. Epochs change, people come and go, but theatre as a form of art still blooms, evolving and progressing, overcoming crises. The very semantics of the word “art” is changing. V. I. Dal’s dictionary offers the following definition of “art”: “A branch or part of man’s education” [1].

P. Y. Chernikh notes that early dictionaries of Russian

and Ukrainian register the word “art” as early as in the 17th century [2]. Berynda’s dictionary defines “art” as “wisdom” [3]. Polikarpov’s dictionary refers to it as to “experience”, “knowledge”, and “skill” [4].

It is here that we can observe an obvious link between art and enlightenment, art and education, which are inseparable parts of public life as being linked to politics too.

As one old encyclopedia says “theatre happened to be a stable marker of enlightenment and education at any time”. So it is already Time that poses a question then: what is the purpose of theatre and how can society benefit from it.

II. BADIOU’S PHILOSOPHY OF THEATRE

While thinking that over, one should turn to the famous work by the French post-modern philosopher Alain Badiou ‘Rhapsody for the Theatre’ for which his articles, written for the journal “L’art du Theatre”, served as the basis. As we know, Badiou draws analogy between theatre and politics, the fact that highlights the politicization of modern theatre in Russia today.

According to Badiou, theatre, as a form of art, goes quite smoothly with both politics and the State. “So, theatre is a matter for the State, question-raising in terms of morality and demanding an audience” [5]. Theatre is isomorphic to politics, which, as we know, exists, in Badiou terms, only the public and the masses form a knot: the masses who all of a sudden are gathered in an unexpected consistency (events)”. These very things (public, actors, a textual referent) are basic criteria of the theatre that Badiou uses to infer his numerous consequences.

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As Badiou believes, it is the public that is the primary theatrical setting. And one naked actor is enough to say there is at least one theatre costume present. And one textual referent is already enough to say there exists a stage director who guarantees that all above mentioned is gathered together at the right hour. Thus, Badiou singles seven essential elements of the theatre out of the three basic ones and that is the place, the text, a stage director, actors, décor, costumes and public. And of those basic three ones (public- the mass event, actors-the organization, the idea- the discourse) Badiou makes the following – the State itself is a political setting as names of political leaders that refer to those of actors are an essential feature of politics, and finally politics cannot do without historical discourse that brings thinkers of the past and real politics of the day together. In this way organization, textual referent, thinkers, proper names, the State, contrasting points of view, eventual masses are those seven essential “ingredients” of political situation. As a theatrical production requires an immediate presence of all the seven ingredients (a performance always begins and ends at some time) the same is true of politics which happens from time to time, that is to say it can be understood as something permanent but as event with a time limit. Badiou contrasts the temporal instability of politics and the atemporal solidity of the State.

So how does Badiou bond politics and theatre? He introduces the following two notions of theatre – ‘analytic’ (analytique) and ‘dialectic’ (dialectique). The first stands for the assemblage of the above mentions seven essential components of the theatre, while the second one means that theatre needs “a spectator to be summoned to appear in the tribunal of a morality under the watchful eye of the State” [6]. The latter is what bonds theatre and politics. Thus, Badiou supports his idea that theatre, on the one hand, is an affair of the State because as Art it “undoes the bonds of political desire” and cannot accommodate the social, and on the other hand, there is “putting at stake of an ethics”.

III. RUSSIAN CULTURE AND PUBLIC LIFE IN THE MIRROR OF THEATRE

The analogy between theatre and politics suggested by Badiou if related to Russian culture is not devoid of some heuristic potential and can turn out to be rather productive. The fact that both theatre and politics have some points of interception were repeatedly highlighted by a number of scholars. Such was, for instance, Y. Lotman who viewed the culture of the nobles as theatrical at the core since as early as Peter the Great’s time. The entire culture becomes theatrical from the “solemn” and “ritualized” spheres, including politics, to everyday ones. “Everyday life was going theatrical” [7], as conventional models of European everyday behavior become universally accepted cultural standards that need to be reproduced and represented. Further historical development of Russian culture not only failed to overcome this theatricality but under the influence of the tendency to theatricalize life which was characteristic of entire Europe at the beginning of the 19th century. He writes: “Specific forms of theatricality were leaving the stage and started dominating life” [8].

If we turn to V.V. Zenkovsky’s theory, we can consider the bond between politics and theatre in Russia from a different perspective [9]. For him the Russian culture of the 18th-19th centuries was, on the one hand, secular and “theurgist-oriented” and that is looking for the divine and characterized by eternal justification of being present on the other. By the 19th century the gap that separated culture from liturgical life only grew larger along with a growing craving to get the harmony and integrity back that was standing out in Russian thinkers’ works. The fact that being practically oriented and utopic, which in the majority of cases was revealed by an urge to use philosophical theory as a practical manual for everyday life and its transformation, Russian thought, according to Zenkovsky, does not define Russian culture as immature and weak, but as revealing its “theurgist idea”. In this respect politics and theatre are two modi of public mystic participation in creating cultural meanings.

It is not only the historical-cultural and historical-philosophical reconstructions that we can reveal the idea of bringing theatre and politics together in Russia. In 1834 V. G. Belinsky, a literary critic and a representative of materialism philosophy wrote in his article “Literary Dreams”: “Oh, how it would be nice to have our own peoples’ theatre! To see Russia on stage, with all its good and bad, pompous and shallow, to hear its heroes talking, to feel the pulse of its life...” [10]. N.S. Gogol saw theatre as “a pulpit to herald good things to the world from” [11]. This idea comes quite natural when we look at the self-reflection of performing art in Russia. Thus, for example, works dating to the 60-s of the 19th century by Appolon Grigoriev, a thinker, literary and theatre critic, poet and romantic present theater as the only proper form to solve the ethnicity problem, the problem that Russian thought in vain was striving to solve in all possible ways (philosophical, political, pedagogical etc.) in the first decades of the 19th century.

The problem of ethnicity in Russian culture is primarily a question that brings up the problem of Russia’s very historical existence, its birth as a historical actor, historical personality. Grigoriev agreed with Romanticism that understood the universal and the national as a unity. To be a personality (in this case it makes no difference if that is a single person or a nation) means to possess both universal human characteristics and those of an individual, peculiar nature that is predetermined by the “ground” and by a range of circumstances, including short-term ones.

Theatre, as contemporary art that takes place here and now, is that environment that allows one to embrace a bipolar unity – time and eternity, the universal and the particular. Thus, Grigoriev believes that it is the theatre which is capable of neither verbally expressing nor conceptualizing, but of involving one into creating some common thing and that is Russian life, peoples’ life: “We see theatre as a great cause, great, as it is by nature must be peoples’ thing” [12].

The golden era of performing art in Russia in the 20th century, which is quite rightfully associated with a creative genius of Stanislavsky who noticeably distanced himself

from everything that could be called “philosophy of theatre”, nevertheless is actually preconditioned by the philosophical context of the epoch and that is by the Philosophical Symbolism. Despite a great variety of Symbolism theories, politics and theatre can represent some of them as an explicit manifestation of higher principle, which does not only reveal the mechanism of what is called theatrical or political, but primarily justifies and conveys their meaning. What do we need theatre for? What makes revolution possible? Only because they are symbols (or alternatively, windows) of heavenly world or Sophia or any other higher principle that surpasses and justifies the chaotic, ugly and pointless nature of life.

In Soviet times theatre is inseparable from politics. For one thing, theatre is an excellent propaganda tool (this was immediately recognized by Stanislavsky, who warned against abusive theatre influence on the public), for another, despite its falling in the clutches of censorship, morality, ideology, theatre gets through that and assumes an even greater role, a religious one thus proving that neither profession-related topics nor ideologically edited dialogues are the barrier for the appearance of what the theatre is for, and what is placed higher than the empirical conditions of a given performance.

But like any other language, language of the theatre is characterized by some markers referring to vital philosophical concepts. The analytics of the theatre also refers us to some philosophical evaluation of the essence of performing arts.

IV. THE CONCEPTUAL PATTERN OF THEATRE

Let us consider some basic terms that Badiou uses in his ‘Rhapsody for Theatre’. While doing that we will deviate from the analogy drawn by him between theatre and politics. What we are interested in is what terms he uses to define his idea of theatre. Our analysis of his works shows that there can be five terminological blocks.

A. Theatre (Public, Actors, Referent) and “Theatre”

Badiou defines theatre as something that takes place if one can enumerate: (1) the public that has come to watch a play, (2) the actors who are actually present, with their body and voice, in a certain place from which the public can see them, (3) the referent, textual or traditional, so that one could say that the performance it actually represents.

Besides it tells “theatre” which he calls “pulp” and that needs nothing else but good box-office from the Theatre, as something that is able to tell us about itself and about the world. Badiou points out that Theatre is mostly hated by those who try to pretend they adore “theatre” as this camouflages the supreme demanding nature of Theatre.

Hatred of Theatre, glorified and concealed under the cover of the adoration devoted to “theatre” is described as a form of self-hatred by Badiou. “that person who arrived for the sake of the ritual insipidness of a celebration of self, some laughs, culture, recognizable figures, feeling always one foot ahead, answers that “hit the nail on the head,”

sublime decors, communion during intermission. All of a sudden, sticking closely to the event’s unfolding and following a set of trajectories subtracted from all calculation, we must pass through the twists and turns of desire, see the object eclipse itself before our eyes and, in the impasse of form, hit upon some incongruous point of the real” [13].

Thus, the stumbling point with Theatre lies in the fact that it requires from his Spectator to become in turn the interpreter of the interpretation for “nothing can ever make up for, or excuse, not having been a Spectator “.

B. Spectator and Public

Badiou offers to set spectator and public apart: cinema is for public, theatre is for Spectator. It is only a spectator, a silent and casual visitor for just one night, which allows the performance to take place.

C. Laziness and Thought

Badiou notes, that in any society, obsessed with production, there is always laziness or resentment of thought (or in Lakana’s terms, a passion for ignorance). And it is up to theatre to eliminate the ugliness of a lazy man, a person that is incapable of becoming Spectator.

D. Imitation, Singularity and Originality

Pulp theatre basically turns an actor into a professional imitator who helps the reader to avoid thinking. But an actor’s main virtue is not his technicality, but some ethic ground which shuns effects and tends to be singular, which is understood by Badiou as “a composition without a concept”. One should not confuse singularity with originality, as an original finally starts playing itself. While singularity is an ethical readiness targeted against all the rooted concepts.

A true “actor exhibits on stage the evaporation of every stable essence. Finally, it leads to emptiness.” [14]

E. Eternity, Meeting, Present or a Moment

The major effect Theatre seeks to produce is that of eternity. It is up to the performance to get Spectator ready to see what discourse carries to the eternity. The moment in which the thought is being processed constitutes the present when that meeting takes place.

V. CONCLUSION

One of the inherent qualities of theatre is to pursue human passions secrets, to open up the rules of personal development, of how a man sees the world while dealing with social and political issues.

Theatre, as any other art, as culture in general, mirrors the epoch. Mindset changes, esthetic values come and go, artistic view develops. Culture and art in their turn become a reason for a view of the world change.

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