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Productions directed by Alessandro Serra and Savvas Stroumpos in Budapest

Performance analyses involving
the perspectives of Theatre Anthropology

The subject of my paper is two performances that were presented at the 11th Madách International Theatre Meeting (MITEM):¹ one is the closing event, *Tragùdia – The Song of Oedipus*,² directed by Alessandro Serra, and the other is *The Seagull*,³ staged by Savvas Stroumpos. In addition to analysing these performances, I explore their cultural and theatrical context and attempt to approach them from the perspective of Theatre Anthropology.

1 The festival was held between 6–28 April 2024 at the National Theatre in Budapest, <https://mitem.hu/program/eloadasok> (last visited: May 2, 2024).

2 Co-production performance – Sardegna Teatro, Teatro Bellini di Napoli, ERT Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, Fondazione Teatro Due Parma. The online playbill of the performance: <https://mitem.hu/program/eloadasok/tragedia-oidipusz-eneke> (last visited: May 2, 2024).

3 Zero Point Theatre. The online playbill of the performance: <https://mitem.hu/program/eloadasok/siraly-2> (last visited: May 2, 2024).

The art and method of Alessandro Serra—links to Jerzy Grotowski

In 1999 Alessandro Serra founded the theatre company named TeatroPersona, which did not exclusively operate as a theatre company, but also as a theatre research group and a creative workshop. In his experiments, he wanted to follow the path laid down by Grotowski, focusing on the study of physical actions and the practice of so-called vibratory songs.

By placing the emphasis on the actor's actions, he relates to Grotowski's poor theatre, which emphasized the practice of the actors over aesthetic solutions. "[W]e found that theatre can exist without make-up, without autonomic costume and scenography, without a separate performance area (stage), without lighting and sound effects, etc. It cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion. This is an ancient theoretical truth, of course, but when rigorously tested in practice it undermines most of our usual ideas about theatre. It challenges the notion of theatre as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines—literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, acting, (under the direction of a *metteur en scène*. This 'synthetic theatre' is the contemporary theatre, which we readily call the 'Rich Theatre'—rich in flaws" (Grotowski 1968, 19). In poor theatre, the actor is a central figure who plays a key role in creating a relationship between the performer and the audience during the performance. This required precise training of the actor, focusing on the total psychophysical unity of the actor, while trying to eliminate the fixed movements (masks) of learned behaviour. The aim was to influence the collective unconscious of the audience (Mendes de Jesus and Sousa Pereira 2022). Regarding the performance of *Tragùdia – The Song of Oedipus* at MITEM, we can state that Alessandro Serra tries to get close to the collective unconscious on the basis of a story familiar in European culture. He explains this in an interview with the MITEM team:

"The performance is based on myth, not history. Theatre is only created beyond the story, I would say, when the plot is 'negligible' or at least widely known. The audience of Sophocles was perfectly familiar with the story of Oedipus through oral tradition, but especially through the countless tragedies dedicated to him before Sophocles. Oedipus is not an invention of Sophocles. Just as the story of Hamlet is not Shakespeare's. Today, half

a millennium later, theatres around the world are full of *Hamlets*, proving that spectators don't go to the theatre because someone tells them a story." (Kornya 2024.)

As regards vibratory songs, it is important to point out that at this point we can also draw parallels with Grotowski's method. The Polish theatre-maker used the tools of Theatre Anthropology to research the ritual songs of ancient traditions. In doing so, he collaborated with artists and researchers of African descent: they collected and used African and diasporic songs of African origin (Mendes de Jesus and Sousa Pereira 2022). In the context of Serra's *Tragùdia*, we can say that the basic concept of the staging derives from the word "tragùdia" and its etymology: the Greek word for "tragedy" means "the song of the goat" or "the song for the goat" (Kornya 2024). He bases his staging on the role of the chorus and the songs of the chorus, in which the coordination of the actors' body movements appears as an important component.

Serra is involved in his projects as a creator with a complex theatrical vision, not "just" as a director. In addition to writing and staging his productions, he is personally responsible for the design and construction of sets, lighting and costumes. This is a departure from the so-called traditional mainstream theatre practice. Serra thinks of theatre in a coherent system and, in his own words, "writes for the stage", where writing is an act that comprises all theatrical processes. This approach results in a four-dimensional drama that takes place in the given place and time (as the fourth dimension), with 'readable' instructions guiding the actors' movements alongside the dialogue.

In Serra's *Tragùdia*, the lights are linked to the dramaturgy, while the set does not have an aesthetic function, but is a tangible material: it helps and determines the movement of the actors. The flickering, stroboscopic nature of the lights breaks the constancy of the scenery, giving a visual dimension of agitation and fragmentation.

The relationship of the staging with other theatrical traditions, aesthetic insights

It is crucial to interpret the ancient myths and mysteries evoked in the performance in an anthropological and cultural context. The purpose and point of the well-known story of Oedipus is for the blind “swollen-ankled” man to pass on a true secret, a sacred mystery at the end of his life. The performance can also be interpreted as a mystery play inspired by antiquity, revealing deeper cultural and sacral layers to the audience.

The method of the Italian theatre-maker is very similar to East and Southeast Asian theatrical forms. For the sake of simplicity, it is worth restricting the comparison to MITEM’s productions and programmes. Last year’s Theatre Olympics and MITEM performances include several Far Eastern ritual theatre forms that parallel Alessandro Serra’s method and theatre. In the Indian Kathakali performance (Tölli 2023a) we saw dramaturgically interconnected excerpts from the epic of the *Mahabharata*, while in the Tibetan opera (Tölli 2023b) the story of the dakini (fairy lady) Nangsa Obum was reenacted. We are talking about three very different theatrical and dance languages, but in addition to the fact that they make the viewer process the events happening on stage by elaborating a familiar plot (in their own context), there are other reasons why these styles and schools are comparable. It is worth highlighting some aspects that apply to all three performances.

The action is accompanied by songs alongside or replacing spoken words. The stage movement marks out a ritual space. The set is either absent or only indicative, and the location of the action is identified by the dialogue, the songs of the chorus and the context. The stage movements, the choreographies unfolding in the space, the spatial formations are also closely linked to the story being told. The choral songs in *Tragùdia* evoke the atmosphere of early Gregorian chants and harmonious polyphonic church songs. The movement of the chorus members often resembles a school of fish: it is defined by energy beams, currents, and shows patterns.

In an aesthetic analysis of the performance, it is important to examine the role and significance of the lights, the set and the costumes. In Serra’s case, the lights follow the dramaturgy, while the set is a tangible material that supports and defines the movement of the actors. The flickering of the lights and the illusory appearance of the set support the visual expression of the fragmented



Picture 1. Stage view from Alessandro Serra's production of *Tragùdia*
(Photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

and agitated nature of the performance. The Gesamtkunstwerk-type artistic vision of the performance offers a unique experience that intensely engages the senses and the imagination of the audience.

Conclusion

Alessandro Serra's production of *Tragùdia – The Song of Oedipus* is an example of how theatre can reinterpret ancient Greek theatre, following and using Grotowski's theatrical method. As in the various forms of Eastern ritual theatre, this is supported by songs and body manipulation, complemented by minimalist but complex visuals rich in signs.



The art and method of Savvas Stroumpos—links to Theodoros Terzopoulos and Eugenio Barba

Along the lines of the anthropological and cultural context of the performance of *Tragùdia – The Song of Oedipus*, interpreted above, it is worth examining *The Seagull*, directed by Savvas Stroumpos and offered in the programme of MITEM. The production places particular emphasis on the theatrical techniques developed by Stroumpos' master, Theodoros Terzopoulos, allowing the deeper psychological layers of the characters to be explored. Terzopoulos's method is described in detail in last year's publication in Hungarian (Terzopulosz 2023). In his theatre, as we have seen with Serra, the actor is at the centre. The action on stage is governed by breathing, for which he provides his actors with the right basis in a complex training session.

Stroumpos's interpretation of Chekhov's play is linked to the tools of physical theatre and to the theatrical forms researched and summarised by Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese. Each character awaits his or her scene in a specific extra-daily position of balance. These positions allow the presence of the players to come alive before they actually start playing (Barba and Savarese 2020, 64). As with commedia dell'arte character types, the actors adopt a typical pose when they are not in the scene, and work with a set of movements suited to their role when they are in the foreground. In contrast to the director's MITEM performance last year, *Report to an Academy*, the most important stage element here is not movement, but frozen images and interlocking gazes, as the dialogue is mostly delivered in a tension-filled stillness.

Barba and Savarese describe how the so-called unstable balance, which is almost fundamental to Eastern theatrical forms, is also present in Western theatres, for example in the commedia dell'arte style. This observation is particularly interesting since the postures of the characters in *The Seagull* are reminiscent of the poses of the various role types anyway. This particular state of balance leads to stylisation, to aesthetic suggestiveness (Barba and Savarese 2020, 64), and this is also true for the performance examined. Here, the extra-daily balance evokes the *demi-plié* position of classical ballet (Barba and Savarese 2020, 67): knees bent, all parts of the feet touching the ground, feet crossed.



Picture 2. Scene from Savvas Stroumpos's performance of *The Seagull*—Elpiniki Marapidi in the role of Nina, and Savvas Stroumpos in the role of Trigorin (Photo: Zsolt Eöri Szabó)

The characters', especially Trigorin's, hand positions captivate the eye. As with balance, we glimpse the extra-daily, but the definite codification typical of Asian theatre (Barba and Savarese 2020, 154) is not perceptible. The actor tenses his fingers at every moment of the scenes, which increases the flow of his energies and helps to prevent those who are not in the scene but are on the stage from entering a state of rest.

The list could be extended further, as the performance would offer a good basis for an analysis based on all the dictionary entries of *Színházantropológiai szótár* (A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology). However, the scope of this paper does not allow this.

Analysis of the performance

In *The Seagull*, we see that the set, like in *Tragùdia*, strives for minimalism, but instead of the side and backstage elements serving as a screen, we see a white platform on the floor. More precisely, there is an empty white circle in the

middle of the stage, with two white projections on the sides, smaller platforms, and a tiny chair on the right. There is seemingly nothing to suggest the lakeside setting described by Chekhov. Five actors are on stage simultaneously: Nina, Treplev, Arkadina, Trigorin and the mysterious Pierrot. Stroumpos has therefore got rid of the estate manager and his wife, as well as many other characters. The focus is on the main characters and the seagull itself. Nina, Treplev and Arkadina are behind the white circle, while Trigorin is seated on a chair lit by a separate circle of light. Pierrot starts in the middle and then takes the platform closer to the audience. The novelist, by virtue of his physical position, is clearly presented as an outsider, while he too becomes involved in the strange state of consciousness unfolding within the white circle.

During the scenes, only those who are in dialogue or who are delivering a monologue occupy the circle, and then everyone goes back to their original place. Each character's movement is unique, revealing the personality traits of the character. Nina's soft movements suggest her fragility, Trigorin's smoothness is evident in his movements, while Arkadina's dual personality is portrayed in the greatest amplitudes—sometimes broken and fallen, sometimes chatting and laughing with feigned ease.

Pierrot performs several functions: he narrates by reciting the author's instructions and occasionally engages in dialogue with Treplev. He can also be seen as Kostya's inner voice, who is above all a seagull himself. The way he brings to life the movement and the voice of the water bird is an astonishing feat of body awareness and body management.

Conclusion

In *The Seagull*, the director interprets and reinterprets Chekhov's classic work in a unique way. The director's method combined with the actors' learned technique creates a layered and intense performance in which the use of extra-daily balance is most salient, but the hand positions also add important elements to the shaping of the roles.

Summary

On the one hand, the two MITEM performances above provide a point of reference for examining the work of the theatre-makers who have been prominent

in European theatre: through the productions of Serra and Stroumpos, different methods (Grotowski's poor theatre, Barba's collections) are kept alive on the contemporary stage. On the other hand, through them all the knowledge contained in the theoretical works and collected volumes of the masters is given practical meaning.

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