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Theatre stage design as the hyperrealistic social imitation

Abstract

Since the second half of the 20th century theatre has started to use completely different form of its expression tools. Mostly in German theatre society critics have started to use a term that refers to this new practice as „Regietheater“ /director's theatre/. In this new directing tendencies of drama interpretation, intentions of all or most of the original authors changed or became re-interpreted. This means displacement of various structures of the story; starting with geographical location and history period and ending with the relationships' patterns. Theatre and opera especially as the most comprehensive artistic form have had always the biggest power and potential to discuss the most delicate and complicated political issues. Giuseppe Verdi or Richard Wagner are only two amongst another geniuses whose works have been used as important instruments to regimes or politicians in diverse aesthetical narratives. Music or story can be timeless, especially in the period of the 21st century, the century of most lively visualisation. One of the ways to make the product more attractive and appealing, maybe deeper for us forming new questions and platforms for dialogue and understanding between different cultures is to transform theatre reality into the local portrait, visual frame that brings drama to the new dimensions. One of the biggest directors and scenographers in this field, Anna Viebrock, started to quote existing places, architecture and interiors connected mostly to the former Eastern Germany. With her usage of scenic space in various theatres across the Europe, interesting questions and connotations are risen. This tendency is described as hyperrealistic social imitation. Where does this performing strategy has its own borders? How and when we could use „local architectural medium“ to discuss another „local“ stories not only as dramaturgical plan of theatres but as the dramaturgy of today's Europe?

The present of the past and the invention of already invented

German set designer and director Anna Viebrock /1951/ is one of the most outstanding theatre artist of nowadays. Her personal and unique scenography style has been mostly formed and associated with two Swiss directors. Christoph Marthaler and Jossi Wieler. Both of them knows how to communicate with Viebrock's strong visual world. Marthaler through his expressive music theatre and more static acting, Wieler in more concentrated way to interpreters. Viebrock's scenography is metaphysical hyperrealistic study of the space. Her work as laboratory of the perception of materiality is mostly present in German /French/ and Swiss theatres.

Since the beginning of the 20th century theatre was not that much aesthetics oriented as before. Especially since 1950's, social factor of the story has started to play crucial role for the theatre aesthetics. Since 70's, after the strongest influence of the conceptual alternative art tendencies the stage design has focused again on the artistic presented reality – illusionism and historicism. Postmodern art allows until today the creation of variations and play with the original in its widest perspective. Viebrock's idiosyncratic but not aggressive and still readable theatre stage space consists of high consciousness of imagination, aesthetics, social – history and political reflection. Patina is symbol for the way of life, no trivial image of the period. Her discussion between architecture and drama is framed mostly by 50's and 60's aesthetics (Mueller-Tischler, Uebenauf, 2011). It works with the actual or timeless ideas like brake or conscious moment to the present recipient. Her rooms evoke capitalistic recency. Discrepancy is admitted also in relationship between the west and the east part of the Germany. This cultural and economic gaps between one country could be good example and general model to relationship between east and west in wider European scale. Magical world of the revived own totalitarian architecture signs bring still majority of the audience to the recent time. Illustration and representation of the parallel German political dual dimension is reliably visual and social document, where there is the new system's fast growth combined with suffering and fear, interpretable to the present time. Viebrock's walls are like a paradox to „Mauerfall“ as the symbol of the end of communism, to history where nowadays has the biggest power not Dogma but interpretation of the story, strange rooms with their own crime stories - space that seems surreal within the semantic context (Masuch, 2000).

The most inspiring material for stage designer Anna Viebrock are her own photos of the places, mostly interiors and fragments of the buildings. She collects her own spacial impressions. Her passion for the building with the clear history traces; hotels, housing and another common building's typology allocate work into the anonymous space, but otherwise she is still interested in privacy – „house money box“, where it is possible to look inside the architecture and discover what happens underneath the roofs of the objects. Besides architecture, for Viebrock it is very important to know how the organism of the object works or worked. Anatomy of the building is more important than four walls they border the area. Technical distribution systems, symbols, traces of the object usage, patina created by the age of the building. Another point of her visual and dramaturgical interest is to retain objects shortly before their demolition. She considers this act as obsession of our time, when

everything has to be new and optimized. To create a stage with already devastated or non-existent media channels, i.e. protest and message to the new generations. It is obvious that only things remain in our consciousness, they are intense and authentic. Because the drama is about real problems, she tries to find pictures that speak to her urgently and are associated or create a strong association to the story. Houses with powerful energy raving connected with specific period, people or events. Houses stood especially in former DDR. Space designed by Anna Viebrock shows present days, but just left. It is not correct to call it retro-style. It is still room lived with the feeling of the yesterdays. (Mueller-Tischler, Ubenauf, 2011). It helps the consciousness to be more aware and evaluate „the before“. Her settings suggest public zone even when they should represent private place. Anthropologist Marc Auge in his book, essay – Non Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity (1995) describes space as anthropological spaces of transience that do not hold enough significance to be regarded as "places". Examples of a non-place would be a motorway, a hotel room, an airport or a supermarket (Augé, Marc. 2012).

Viebrock likes moments when things and various objects like technical equipment does not work or does not function in a proper way. As for a lot of other artists also for her concept is important to let the audience be surprised by multiplicity of the meaning and of the possibilities to interpret simple objects. Viebrock's interpretation of this common things leads through its ambiguity to the completely different world. Scepticism of the audience is one of the goals. For Viebrock, the set design is one of the most important things to attract also people that haven't been conscious of the visual aspect of the drama. Even when the stage of the hypertrophied architecture could be considered as a kind of hyperrealism, more important is to find all the nuances that form drama surrounding as a new reality, new world – not only to copy, but create, large scale, more than concrete spaces. Scale, where human is small and alone (Masuch, 2000). Material of wall, floor, ceiling look as real as it was a dream, suggestive moment from your life. Because some of the proportions of rooms are surreal in combination with their real fragments, stage made by Viebrock functions in a very original way. It is no more coulisse wonder.

Architectural concept of the stage communicates the space even more realistically, if the main idea is built on the visual reality of design of the details inside. Within the wholesale of the stage, starting from the smallest plug connectors and ending with the bigger technical equipment of the building like lifts, Viebrock tries to find with the concrete design signs that reflect and support inner atmosphere, the right proportion to her reality. In these technical elements, audience always see functional aspect and therefore they more believe in the reality of the space. This is the way how director and stage designer create together wide opened door for the irreality. What is more strange than to place unthought action or use the normal thing not commonly?

By Viebrock; power transmission line, water and sewage pipes, power switches are segments of the deconstruction and signs or signals for the inner motivations. With the director Jossi Wieler in project „Camping 2000“ Anna Viebrock creates anonymous abandoned airport hall. With the movement of the escalators, undefined loudspeakers announcements and the sound of the clip-fly timetable equipment they created sophisticated world of symbols, hope and fear (Masuch, 2000).

Viebrock's detail move interiors with its stories to wondrousness. Viebrock herself then uses them as deep irony concept. For example Goethe's room is archive, cathedral and prison. Her rooms are everytime ambiguous but still specific. Reality is suddenly another reality. Persons seem to be in closed rooms as in the prison, stairs and doors lead only to a different interior or even nowhere. Wheelchairs situated in the rooms are not really used. They are probably only means of transportation - escape, as an alternative to the blind doors. For Anna Viebrock exterior does not exist as the space behind interior. Audience and characters on stage can only feel and guess reality behind.

Interior technical facilities like already mentioned heating systems are used as sound machines producing sound of choir or the voices of neighbours as another unexpected scenographic moment.

With director Christoph Marthaler, Anna Viebrock does not want to work only with notorious architectural installations and instruments but they try to discover and research another period contexts. In the play „Affäre Rue de Lourcine“ both of them refuse to place the story in a classical way to the Salon. Inspired by books about the lifts from the castles of emperor Ludwig II, they decided to arrange the drama story with its set design to the floor with all this period technical objects. They work with the elements /technical rooms, staircase.../ they are not well known in comparison to famed ornamented rooms. In this way they reveal another perspective to clarify and interpret the play (Masuch, 2000).

The realistic space in the first sight has to produce feeling that things in its expected mode of their function can not cooperate and function in normal mode. That is also the question of automatization of our mind, filtering and perception ability. Anna Viebrock invented mythology of profane. Design for the stage that expresses life-state where no artificial decoration is needed.

Stage design for Viebrock is in her „hidden play“ with the fictitious, intellectual and objective. Anna Viebrock describes as one of her favourite painter Pontormo. In his manieristic way of painting the deformation of the body, Viebrock finds a great way for stage visual manipulation - changing the proportion and perspective through reality of concrete objects. Very similar way of creating art as in Thomas Demand's art of

unidentified fragments of „political“ interiors which scale is tricky manipulated on the final photography medium (1). Another conceptual artist who works with the medium of building is Gordon Matta-Clark. He documents architecture short before the demolition (2).

Viebrock's strong influence to the dramaturgy and the shape of the play makes her not only author of the stage but she is much more of a concept co-creator. Her inconvertible world of architecture has been created as a process of consequences. Her world is a place of middle Europeans where religion and belief are translated to autocracy of the profane things.

„Die Drei Schwestern“ is located on the staircase, „Italienerin in Algier“ is situated in the corridor of the Asyl-Hotel /Stuttgart 1986, Wieler/. What exactly is the period of Viebrock's „today“ in her theatre space when all her characters in the unkind surroundings are old-fashioned? People in her space are not the ones standing in the centre, but actually individuals placed out from the centre. What period and location is for Viebrock the most important? What has significance for her visual and conceptual thoughts? Second World War with damaged interiors and countless consequences? Critics describes as her biggest influence period to be the 50's. Period with a numerous remains with the deepest messages (Masuch, 2000). It is not possible to feel warmth from her stage, where asylum and opened stations are presented. It is not possible to feel warmth in the place of substitution. Substitution of the house that was destroyed. Destroyed as revenge or allofness.

The play „Die Rassen“ is about the Reichstags election in 1932, about the students and their approach to this case. The main problem is the relationship between unpolitical student of the medicine who is under the pressure of his fellow-students and their effort to prevail him to elect NSDAP. About him and his Jewish friend. In one scene this student sits with his best Jewish friend on a river bank. Anna Viebrock's visual dramaturgy leads everytime to her inspirative photo-deposit to uncover contextual moments. Viebrock found a photo of his father also with his friend, probably from the same year as the play was placed in. In this creative process is visible the association method of her stage collage (Masuch, 2000).

One of the Viebrocks closest colleague is the director Christoph Marthaler /1951/. He is one of the leading personalities in the field of theatre stage, even in in-situ projects they work as urgent political narration. Amongst his strongest pieces belong the production of Wiener Festwochen 2013 named „Letzte Tage. Ein Vorabend“ /Last days. Eve./ and his and Viebrocks first performance in Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz Volksbühne „Murx den Europäer! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn! Murx ihn ab!“ written in 1993. In this second-named piece there are visible all his and Viebrocks impressions from the East-world. It is possible to see here the cooperation of Swiss and East-Berlin team with their own frustrations – lack of freedom, isolation, inner anger. All of these were implemented on the stage. People around the tables with unidentified monologues, excerpts from Wagners opera or religious songs. Noted in this piece there is also Marthaler's complicated relationship to his own Swiss culture and society with tendency to extreme dominance, cultural isolation and to exaggerated neatness. Probably in this project Viebrock created her best vision of communism exhaustion. With the wall clock and gradually unglueing title on the wall „damit die Zeit nicht stehenbleibt“ – let the time does not stop, taken from Tempelhof airport and the artefacts from the building of the Volksbühne, where the performance took place was invented the greatest place to demonstrate power of stage. (Adámek, 2010)

Marthaler's other dramatical piece – in-situ show: „Letzte Tage. Ein Vorabend“ /Last days. Eve./ used a monumental historical Parliamnet Hall in Vienna from the 19. Century (3). It is a critique of the European politicians and their racist tendencies. Actors, caricatured quasi politics. They recites speeches collected from the archives. Speeches with racist subtext. They are from the times of monarchy, Nazi propaganda as well as the present time. Behind reciprocal assentation of the politics to anti-Semitic or anti-Muslim comments one can see background political deals and alliances (Marthaler, In: Theater der Zeit. Arbeitsbuch 2014. Heft Nr. 7/8). Through the chamber live music of the Jewish composers performed by musicians dressed in the historical costumes, director deepens the vividness of his work. Letzte Tage is the story about acute immigration problems and critique of the preserved system. At the end a group of Japan tourist make an aggressive photos of the scene, maybe the sign of debilitating western world to Asia? (Širká, In: Kod. Roč. 7, č. 9, s. 42-45).

Another Marthaler's – Viebrocks model of the artistic visual and narrative coexistence model is opera „Katja Kabanowa“. Inspiration for this set design or place for this tragedy was directly from the town where Janaček premiered most of his operas, Brno (Mueller-Tischler, Ubenauf, 2011). Aesthetic of the desolate housing building with the curtyard and fragment of the fountain originally stand in front of the new Janacek's opera building associate besides of some opera characters also expanded period of the 70's with its fatal consequences.

Art as cultural diplomacy.

Art is the most appeal, most complex, influencing and accepted intellectual tool to define, analyze and discover. (Svetina, 2010). Theatre or music theatre can not stand in the time. Its new role nowadays with its power and expression is to be document and communication channel. Evidence of human creativity, tolerance and big case study.

Biographical note:

Peter Mazalan completed his architectural study /Ing.arch./ at the Faculty of Architecture of Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava, opera singing /Mgr.art./, Scenography and Costume design /Mgr.art./ at University of Performing arts in Bratislava. After his studies, Peter Mazalan worked as an Architect in Vienna and Bratislava. Later he performed as an Opera Soloist in the ensemble of the Bavarian Stateopera in Munich and Stateopera Klagenfurt. Since September 2014 Mr. Mazalan is PhD student at the Faculty of Architecture of Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava with his dissertation thesis: „Opera scenography as the hyperrealistic totalitarianism“. His main research interests concern the new director's strategies in the opera theatre built on the realistic visual and scenical re-presentation.

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1/ more about: Thomas Demans's work: <http://www.thomasdemand.info/images/installation-shots/>

2/more about: Gordon Matta-Clark

<http://www.guggenheim.org/new-york/collections/collection-online/artists/bios/874>

3/more about: Letzte Tage. Ein Vorabend

http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8148:letzte-tage-ein-vorabend-im-wiener-parlament-stellt-christoph-marthaler-rassistischen-reden-die-musik-juedischer-komponisten-entgegen&catid=38:die-nachtkritik&Itemid=40