

## Theatre and ... para-theatre

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‘Even art, is nothing more than a way of life. Living in one way or another, we can prepare ourselves for it without noticing it. Anything that is *real* is very close to art, closer than the pseudo-artistic professions are, which have no relation to real life and, while they are mimicking art, they refuse and insult in practice its entire ground; this is what Journalism, almost all of the Critics and the three quarters of what is called, or wants to be called Literature, do’ (Rilke, trans. by me:109).

These words by Rainer Maria Rilke which he wrote in a letter to a young poet who asked for the great man’s instructions in order to improve his poetry, encompass the start and the finish of the issue that is titled ‘theatre and ...para-theatre. Rilke, in his attempt to talk about art could not avoid differentiating it from what some people have decided to promote as art. Theatre, as a form of art itself, has suffered the invasion of its clone, so to speak, which has exactly the same name and expropriates exactly the same means through which the former reveals its literary artistic value. First, it uses people who are called actors, but are not. Second, it is sheltered in a building that has a scene, costumes, props, music, lights and is called theatre (but it is not). Last, it manipulates the sacred fundamental of literature that is called dramatic text or, even worse, it produces its own texts by some who want to be called playwrights.

Obviously, I am giving the description of a huge business company, the para-theatre, which has taken the place of theatre and has caused the degradation of this form of art. Basically, it is the product of the business of mass culture that includes the newspapers and magazines, the television, the radio and the cinema.

We very often listen on T.V. to successful playwrights, actors and other professionals of art expressing their feelings about their prolific or not career. They

usually refer to the hard effort they have made and the physical and mental pain the accomplishment of their work has left them with. Not only that, but also they sometimes refer to the sacrifices they had to make, like devoting their leisure time to the thing they have been working on, not having any time for their acquaintances, and having to spend huge amounts of money for it. After they have tried to convince us about the trouble their occupation with the specific work has caused to their life, they start talking about what others have said about it and that, if the critics' comments are expected to be positive, they announce their decision to go on with a second work.

In his writings on the culture industry, Theodor Adorno has stated Walter Benjamin's words that 'both high art as well as industrially produced art "bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change... [and both] are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which, however, they do not add up' (qtd. in Adorno, ed. J.M. Bernstein: 2). With the rise of capitalism after the industrial revolution culture, or more specifically 'art' and 'literature' suffered a complete change since they became connected to the term 'civilisation'. In other words, they became part of the pantheon of man's technological achievements. As a result, culture was not seen 'as the deepest record, the deepest impulse, and the deepest resource of the "human spirit"' any more, but the product of industry that served the purposes of materialism and capitalism (Williams 15).

Adorno's reference to 'high art' may sound a bit vague nowadays. Is there such a thing as high art, and, if there is, how can we distinguish it from the industrially produced consumer art? To begin with, theatre is one of the most genuine forms of high art, not only because of the fact that it dates in the ancient years but also because it has to do with animate representation of human life so that other forms of fine art like poetry or painting or sculpture may 'parade' on its scene. But, how was

the art of theatre born? Nietzsche in 'The Birth of Tragedy' presents the two kinds of need of ancient Greeks that urged them to create the art of theatre: their need to dream, driven by God Apollo, and their need to be drunk, represented in the elements of the celebration of God Dionysus (Nietzsche 18). In this way, the dithyramb was created, the first form of drama that led, later on, to the creation of the 'sublime – the taming of horror through art; and [the] comedy – the artistic release from the repulsion of the absurd' (Nietzsche 40). Moving from the tragedy of ancient Greece of 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. to 2000 A.C. we realise that tremendous changes have occurred in the field of theatre. The progress of science and the technological achievements have influenced our mind, our behaviour, our way of life and, as result of that, our approach to theatre. During the last century, scientists' persistence on inventing things that, according to them, will make our life better, have led to the cloning of everything, even human beings. Theatre could not have escaped. On the contrary, it has fallen prey to the mass production of the nineteenth century by having become a huge business. This means that it is already part of the mass culture that defines our civilisation, which makes production imperative and promotion necessary in order for this business to succeed. But, how does this kind of theatre, the para-theatre, work? Basically, the function of its 'institutions (theatres and their predecessors and successors), ...[its] formations (groups of dramatists, dramatic and theatrical movements) ...[and its] formed relationships (audiences, including the audiences within theatres and their wider social formation)' has to coincide with the laws of industrial production and distribution (Williams 139). In this way, it serves the purpose of its existence, that is, to bring money to the business of mass consumption.

To begin with, the demand of the theatrical businessman that owns a 'theatre' is to have a full box-office. A way to achieve that is by making a beautiful

building, large in size, that will be located at the centre of a big city like, for example, the West-end theatres of London. The concern, in that kind of theatres is to have as many seats as possible, expensive props, impressive lights and elaborate decorations. Usually, if not always, the promotion of the 'theatre' is the work of a marketing company that is responsible for things like the music that is going to be heard in the foyer, the kind of drink and food that it will serve, to the size and the colour of the programme that the spectators will buy once they enter the building.

The star-system that has been imposed to Europe basically by the American Hollywood and Broadway is the womb that gives birth to the 'actors' who will become another wheel in the machine that produces the product called 'theatre'. These people are merely professionals who have graduated from a drama school which, itself fits in the chain of mass culture of modern society. This kind of actors is taught to believe that art is something that needs good connections and a nice appearance in order to enter its field. Dead in their emotion, lacking completely academic dramatic and theatrical education, they are usually unreflective and superficial personalities. Acting is the last thing that concerns them. Rather, their main concern is to see their name in the shining tabloids and their picture in the first page of the newspapers. Undoubtedly, there is an entire system of 'artistic teams' that protects these professionals and makes sure that they all become absorbed by popular and expensive productions each year.

'Playwrights', also, support the business of para-theatre. They usually are unemployed high school graduates or spoiled children with bourgeois background who fancy to follow trends and become victims of fashion. Irresponsibly enough, those people write scripts in the same way they would put stamps if they worked in a post office: as a thing that has to be done in order to get paid. Created to fit

everywhere, this kind of playwrights really fit everywhere: on T.V., in the radio, in the theatre, even in best sellers. Undoubtedly, the themes they write about are the naive, popular themes that concern the mass: usually following the trends of modern life, they write about minorities like homosexuals, asexuals, transsexuals or love stories with short references to money, family and friendship. So, the themes are usually realistic presentations of every-day life situations that, according to the each playwright's judgement, are worth describing. The effect is exactly the same to video-recording one's life and then making him watching it on T.V.: it usually creates a bit of laughter and sympathy since the audience is very much interested in recognising situations similar to theirs on the screen.

'The complex sociology of actual audiences, and of the real conditions of reception and response ...(the cinema audience, the newspaper readership, ...the television audience [and the theatre spectator]...) is overlaid by bourgeois norms of "cultural producers" and "the mass public" (Williams 137). For them, theatre going is a way of escaping everyday life, forgetting about problems and obligations, and 'theatrisize' themselves, meaning, being involved in an artistic development. This stems from the trend of theatre going with which bourgeois society confirms its pseudo-intellectual involvement to mass art. So, for them, theatre is a form of entertainment, a place with music, dance and song. Also, it serves as a place where you can expand your public relations and make new acquaintances. This is the reason why the audience of para-theatre chooses to watch performances that the critics have praised and, therefore, they have become popular to the public. So, theatre, for this kind of people, means nothing more than going to a pub or a restaurant.

As far as the critics who support the para-theatre are concerned, they are definitely those who influence the audience and form opinions about which

performance is worth seeing or not. Unfortunately, this kind of critics are the absolute professionals who will not judge according to dramatic and theatrical criteria the artistic value of a play but, instead of that, they will support whatever they are told to praise by those who have hired them. Usually, these professionals belong to castes, which consist of a whole team of people who get paid by the theatrical businessmen to support their publicity. So, their freedom as literary critics is limited, if not present at all.

But, who are those who have created para-theatre and why it has become so popular nowadays? Undoubtedly, the source of the problem lies in the political and ideological background of each country. First of all, it has to do with man's dependence on money. The rise of capitalism has created a complete new definition of what a human being is. The turning point occurred at the moment man believed that he can learn everything, he can create everything, and he can control and influence everything, just because he has money. Faith to the values and traditions has been replaced by faith to the power money ownership gives. Ideologies have collapsed or exist only in the theoretical level. The voters of each country choose to form governments that promise them economical welfare and national security. This means that man started being afraid of man and he found ways to protect himself by creating fences around him, borders, which he guards with guns and missiles. Not only that, but also thousand of new material needs have been created, needs that man has to cover, otherwise he does not feel complete. The greed of human kind to take advantage of the wealth as much as we can resulted to the distribution of money to 'daring' scientists who, surprisingly enough, decided that the way to fight deadly diseases and illnesses is to create new human beings, clones as they call them. So,

man is treated as another tool in the machine of the global business and his children are considered to be the replacement parts.

But, there are also indirect effects by the treatment of humanity as a huge stock exchange by those who own the money and the power and control our lives: the restriction of the masses' critical ability that leads to our lack of education. In this vicious cycle of propaganda for the global unification man has become a docile organum since he has been convinced that he can not do anything by himself. The decisions are to be taken by the powerful who are, usually, the governments and the businessmen they co-operate with. Those are the ones who choose which our future is going to be, basically taking advantage of our naivety in order to accomplish their goals: to gain more power. Their plan has been very clever: at first they imposed materialism to the consciousness of the masses and then, they started proclaiming moves to globalisation. They argued strongly to persuade us that there is the need for a global economy, global politics to make alliances in order for us to become stronger. But, to protect ourselves from whom? The answer is that the world's strongest men wanted to protect themselves from the masses, in a typical game of love for power. So, they have managed to hypnotise us by leading us towards miseducation.

The imposition of a mass culture was basically cultivated through the human exposure to the mass media. Television, that is the most accessible means of communication, whose broadcast programs characterise the level of cultural advancement of each country, has become the means through which the businessmen, and of course the government, influence the masses. The fact that, especially in the countries that have been influenced by western civilisation, television programs like, soap operas, family series, even cartoons, promote a very specific life style that is based on consumption, fashionable trends, sex and violence. In this way, the

audience gets used to homogeneity that has banned personal tastes, traditions and roots. As a result, the viewers' level of education becomes lower and they end up receiving and accepting the negative messages under the conditions of apathy and somnolence.

‘Psychological emptiness is itself only the result of the wrong kind of social absorption. The boredom that people are running away from merely mirrors the process of running away, that started long before. For this reason alone the monstrous machinery of amusement keeps alive and constantly grows bigger without a single person being amused by it’

(Adorno, trans. Jephcott: 139).

This statement by Adorno suggests that lack of education and taste as a means to establish a level of good quality in one's life is the reason that has also led people to surrender to the culture of consumption, that has transformed art to a commodity.

This gives an explanation to the question why art, and especially theatre, have lost the purpose they were created for. The most important reason is that modern man has lost the meaning of life that is to feel, to create and, through this creation, to improve himself. As a result, ‘the commodification of art ends up in the aesthetization of the commodity’ (Adorno, ed. J.M. Bernstein: 20).

Theatre has to co-exist and make its presence obvious in the labyrinth of commodities and trivialities concerning art. It has to compete with its own ‘twin’, para-theatre, in a world full of twins that look identical and challenge our critical ability. The way in which theatre, as a form of art, manages to disconnect itself and become recognisable is through its originality. In this way, it stands magnificently alone, challenging its enemies to stay away or change their approach to life in order to conquer it.

Nietzsche, in his attempt to describe the function of theatre as a form of art in life says: ‘...state and society, the gulfs separating man from man, make way for



an overwhelming sense of unity that goes back to the very heart of nature' (Nietzsche 39). Undoubtedly, theatre is created by and for those who have the courage to say 'no' to a way of life that disrespects them and considers them to be nothing more than a number in the mass of the population.

'We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics when we have succeeded in perceiving directly, and not only through logical reasoning, that art derives its continuous development from the duality of Apolline and Dionysiac' (Nietzsche 14). The German philosopher refers to the effects that good art, and, as a result, theatre has on man. As far as those who want to write theatrical texts, the playwrights, are concerned, they have to feel the need to dream. Because, 'the beautiful illusion of the dream worlds, in the creation of which every man is a consummate artist, is the precondition of all visual arts' (Nietzsche 15). A true artist has to be prepared to notice his dreams, since dreaming is a way of perceiving reality not as a fixed, stabilised and ready-made thing but as something that can be interpreted in many different ways and, still, not to remain unchangeable. Theatre is the need of man to present and interpret these different ways of seeing life or, better, of feeling it:

'It is the poet's task, my friend,  
To note his dreams and comprehend.  
Mankind's most true delusion seems  
To be revealed to him in dreams:  
All poesy and versification  
Is merely dream interpretation' (qtd. In Nietzsche 15).

The second function of theatre is the effect from man's acquaintance with the sorrows and the joys that life as a bulk of illusory contradictions gives through art, that is, to intoxicate his mind and his soul and transcend.

'...Schopenhauer has described the tremendous *dread* that grips man when he suddenly loses his way amidst the cognitive forms of appearance, because the principle of sufficient reason, in one

of its forms, seems suspended. If we add to this dread the blissful ecstasy which ...rises up from man's innermost core ...we are vouchsafed a glimpse into the nature of the Dionysiac...'

(Nietzsche 16,17).

The engagement of man in art is something that brings him mysterious feelings, gives him the joy of creation and urges him challenge his limits. In much the same way, the playwright or the actor are met with feelings they had never met before, feelings that have nothing to do with the trivial and the ephemeral of everyday life. They manage to escape reality and through their art to feel united with their own being and, as a result, with the Universe.

Undoubtedly, the commentary by Nietzsche is basically referring to the metaphorical use of the words 'dream' and 'intoxication'. He talks about the feelings that those of us who have watched and participated, either as an actor, or as a member of the audience, in a good theatrical performance have experienced. Also, he talks about the position of a true playwright who expresses his feelings through creating a dramatic text. Here lies the problem due to which theatre is not easily accessible to the hearts of humanity as a form of art: because it can only be felt. True theatre is the one that presents views of life that are not easily recognisable, both sorrowful and joyful situations, and reminds us of them, if we already know them, or invites us to get to know them, if we have never been in them. Also, it raises issues that are in contradiction with the present situation of each society, it opposes them and questions them. In this way, it helps us explore, primarily ourselves, and then the others living next to us. Also, it helps us become more lenient at times, but also more strict. Last, it transmits ideals and values and shows us ways to alleviate the human pain. In this way, it helps us understand ourselves, the world next to us and, as a result, our place in nature, which means that we realise our position in this world as

human beings. In other words, it leads us towards our self-education that, eventually, shows us the way to spiritual and physical freedom.

‘Literary scholarship without an inkling of the difficulties of writing and the hidden sandbanks (which direct the current of art into often unsuspected directions) runs the risk of becoming mere assertion, an obstinate proclamation of laws which are no laws’ (Brandt 46). In this statement, Durrenmatt tries to argue against the strict academic judgement of a theatrical piece of art. He suggests that the dramatists should not be uninvolved in the theatrical inspiration as a part of the process of the playwright who tries to express himself by writing. A literary critic should be first an artist, to have been engaged in artistic creation, in order to become a critic. So, he must be able to judge not the work of art as an object but as the result of someone’s effort to transmit through his art the ideals of his way of life. As a result, the critic has to explore the background and look through the dramatic text or performance and not at them.

One might argue that good theatre may be interpreted in many different ways since, as we said before, there is no definition and no clear-cut rules that an artistic creation has to follow. Also, the aesthetic judgement of someone is formed according to his racial, ideological, social, even religious background. In this way, a marketing student with potentialities to become a businessman may be ‘touched’ by a theatrical performance and give completely different reasons for his liking than an artist who spends his entire day studying the classics and has also worshiped the same performance. Both of them, have a completely different stand in life and it is due to their differences that they can never agree in their justification of their artistic tastes. Does this mean that theatre has more than one definition and may mean different things to different people? Definitely not. Theatre is a form of art, so its value is not

challenged by conflicting appreciations. Like all forms of art, theatre is not an object but a living organism that breathes and grows so its value will never stop existing. It lives as 'thing in itself'. Many masterpieces like, for example, Parthenon, have existed through the ages despite the violations they have suffered. Undoubtedly, their aesthetic beauty does not depend on the fact that they have been worshiped and they still are, but it appeared at the moment of their birth and it will always remind us of the reasons they have been created for.

'Works of art live in an endless loneliness, and criticism is the worst medium to draw near them. Only *love* can "perceive" them, embrace them, be just to them' (Rilke, trans. by me: 33). The need for a sensitive approach to theatre as a form of art is imperative since it is the only way to distinguish it from para-theatre. These words by Rilke are an invitation to put our emotions in use and re-estimate what each one of us has done in order to support this form of art. Definitely, his words sound like a melody in a cacophonous world that violently disputes any attempt of the minorities to differentiate from the mass. Despite the attacks, however, theatre will continue breathing until the death of the last original human being in a cloned Earth.

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