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Theater and its purpose: Antonin Artaud and Tennessee Williams

Anton Kurmelev*

Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, 31a Minin st., Nizhny Novgorod 603155, Russian Federation

Abstract

The article discusses two theatrical concepts introduced at different periods of the 20th century: Theater of Cruelty of Antonin Artaud and Theater as Benevolent Anarchy of Tennessee Williams. The comparative analysis of the two systems makes it possible to discover certain common features and purposes and reveals the typological similarity between them.

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1. Introduction

Since time in memoriam theater has been a unique medium to transmit relevant social and political ideas, to give comment upon eternal or current burning issues and acute problems, as well as to shape people's attitudes and opinions. Much has been written about this type of art, but the essential question remains the same: "why should those concerned with the art resort to drama rather than any other form of communication, what is the underlying, basic nature of the dramatic form and what is it that drama can express better than any other medium of human communication?" (Esslin, 1978, p. 7). Almost every theater scholar, or drama theoretician, or director, or critic has attempted to answer that question. According to C.W.E. Bigsby (1984, p. 1), one of the world's best analysts of American drama, "the theater is the most public of arts. It offers the opportunity of acting out anxieties and fears which are born in the conflict between private needs and public values." Martin Esslin, a famous academic scholar and a professor of drama, who coined the term "Theater of the Absurd", claims that the most distinctive feature of

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +7-910-798-7525.

E-mail address: anton.kurmelev@gmail.com

drama is that “it is more accessible because it requires less concentration and also that its impact is far more immediate, direct, and therefore powerful.” (Esslin, 1978, p. 104). One cannot agree more. Theater is the place where events happen here and now, thus it influences the audience emotionally right away. Moreover, theater makes a spectator, on the one hand, an emotionally involved into the action participant, and, on the other, an eyewitness who can reflect critically (though subjectively) upon the viewed. As a result the combination of two inseparable perceptions of a play – emotional and intellectual – reinforces individual critical appreciation and decision-making as well as enriches one’s point of view and reshapes a personal system of values.

Two other inseparables that determine the uniqueness of theater as a medium of human communication are closely connected with its purposes. To entertain and to educate have constantly been inalienable functions of this type of art, although, the latter one might be less obvious and tangible at some periods of time. Nevertheless, they are always interconnected and do not contradict each other. Even a very light-minded comedy can raise absolutely serious questions, provide food for thought, and, rephrasing Shakespeare, turn spectators’ eyes in their very souls. Most playwrights have taken advantage of this feature and articulate and popularize their ideas from the stage. K. S. Stanislavsky, an outstanding and world-renowned Russian director and theater theoretician, wrote in one of his letters: “Let’s not declare that theater is educative. No, theater is entertaining... Let people go to the theater to entertain themselves. But when they come to the theater, and we have closed the doors, we can instill into their minds and souls whatever we want.” (Stanislavsky, 1953, p. 228)

The beginning of the 20th century proved to be a turning point in the history of world drama and theater. Most of the works (performances as well as plays) produced at that time might be characterized by an intensive and persistent search of new ways to express human experiences, emotions, subconsciousness. At that time both playwrights and directors were looking not only for new analytical but as well synthetical solutions to reflect upon the turbulence and contradictions of the time. B. Brecht, G. Craig, Vs. Meyerhold, and mentioned above K. S. Stanislavsky are just a few names that symbolize that period in theater history and that stand for a certain theatrical system.

Two artists that this paper focuses on do not have much (or one might say anything at all) in common at first sight. Antonin Artaud, “a cult figure, a revolutionary force, and a unique psychological case history” (Esslin, 1977, p. xi), was a representative of French surrealism, more a theoretician, a director, and an actor, than a playwright. Tennessee Williams, “a busy escape mechanism” (Weales, 1962, p. 18), who discovered writing “as an escape from a world of reality in which [he] felt acutely uncomfortable” (Williams, 2000b, p. 151), was an adherent of poetic realism in his most famous works, who “expressed himself, sometimes quite candidly, about his private life”, but “was always reluctant to give information about his working methods.” [B, p. 167] Regardless different approaches to the creative process, both of them have revolutionized and reinvented theater. Artaud’s system has become the basis for numerous experimental trends. Tennessee Williams inspired a great number of quite realist playwrights. However, theater aesthetics of the American writer started changing drastically during his later period and resembled greatly the experiments of off-off-Broadway theaters which were profoundly influenced by progressive trends, as well as by Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty. This fact allows to suggest that two theatrical systems introduced by artists with absolutely different views might have certain similarities which are predetermined by the mutual belief in theater’s “mission, its power to change society, man, and the world, its revolutionary potential and redemptive force.” (Esslin, 1977, p. 82) Comparative analysis of two seminal works – *The Theater and Its Double* by Antonin Artaud and *Something Wild...* by Tennessee Williams – attempted in the paper defines things in common that two aesthetic systems have.

2. Antonin Artaud: Theater of Cruelty

Among the dizzying array of theater masters the personality of Antonin Artaud, a French representative of theater modernism and surrealism, merits special attention. His unique theatrical system made significant contribution in the development of the theater in the 20th century.

Artaud’s approach to the theater was a total rejection of methods and techniques that a conventional theater employed. “He belonged to the mainstream of the movement for a renovation of the theatre which had started as a reaction to its mid-nineteenth-century degradation into cheap melodrama and vulgar entertainment.” (Esslin, 1977, p. 83) Thus, in his theoretical works he criticized heavily contemporary theater. “We have the right to say what has

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