

SOME ASPECTS OF THE LATEST CHALLENGES OF CONTEMPORARY THEATER IN TERMS OF TECHNICAL PROGRESS

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During the 26 centuries of professional theater's establishment and development, performing arts have always faced challenges, and the centuries of its development are full of contradictions to overcome. These challenges, along with resistance—the crisis, for one—often set in motion, on one hand, the instinct of self-preservation and the reflex of renewal, on the other.

Over time, skeptical reviews repeat that theater, as an art and social institution, loses its relevance, the scale of its importance, although theater has always used not only to survive but also to respond effectively to challenges.

“In the moments of short or long global or local instability, theater was always reborn. Freed from traditional habits, poor and sincere, it emerged as a natural desire to narrate, describe and share, a way to deal with fears and survive, a passion for *playing with fire* or as a mystery: prayer, confession and devotion, or shelter, seeing oneself and then eternal game of ridicule. Appeared in unexpected times and unexpected places, exactly where at first glance no one expected the birth of a creative impulse (or even the birth of life!): during wars in military barracks, around bonfires in refugee camps, and between fires in the city's main squares.

Theater screamed in the markets and factories and whispered in cells, in concentration camps, and in the chambers of dying people. Real theater, real art, was always born as a result of correction for the extreme situation and united divided worlds, was born in ruins and was itself a ruin... but real theater could not last long in elite spaces like *banquet halls* or could not stay for long in places where they were trying to escape from real problems,”¹ wrote stage director Data Tavadze in the be-

ginning of April 2020 on the website of online magazine <http://hammotskmagazine.ge>. Yes, theater was always born in extreme conditions, and real theater was created after getting stuck. The 20th and 21st centuries are a turning point for theater facing fierce competition from cinema, television, and the internet. Theater made good use of its competitors and global technical advances to its own advantages, thus making theatrical art significantly more advanced, expanding its capabilities, and becoming far more diverse. The invasion of technical progress in the theater did not make it lose the main color of the theatrical art, or the zest in the form of *living art*. On the contrary, it made theater more interesting and attractive. The art of acting, as the main means of depiction, remained in the main and dominant theater, supported by the achievements of technical progress, turning a useless subject into the actor's partner onstage. Next to the actor appeared an image (as early as the 1920s) as a supreme and full-fledged character and an actor's partner. This challenge, growing into a proven method of the theatrical art, has taken a prominent place in contemporary theater. A good example of the final destruction of this challenge in theater are the works by Canadian director Robert Lepage who, in 1994, put together EX MACHINA, a theater company exploring and experimenting with a combination of technological innovations and traditional theatrical forms. The stage director, who loves technical progress, has conducted a number of successful experiments in this direction.

The boom of technical progress in our century has given birth to a new type of theater known as *hybrid theater* in the West. In the world of digital technologies, the actor had to face many challenges, getting a useless

¹ თავაძე დათა, რეკომენდაციები, 2020.

object as a new partner onstage, or rather an image that seriously competes with him. “Many theatrical companies are introducing and developing new forms of imagery in Europe and the US, but the art of acting remains the leading and central part in this charming bouquet. These researches show that the actor did not sacrifice technological progress, but has been highlighted. The partnership between the useless subject and the living actor onstage is neither unknown nor new to contemporary theater. The Puppet Theater (and mimic and gestures genres, shadows theater, marionette theater) with its many forms is a good example of the centuries-long history. These methods are also used successfully in the newest theater.”²

Researchers of European theater have been talking about the era of hybrid theater for a long time. Hybridity is one of the dominant trends in contemporary theater. The notion of genre has practically died in the newest European theater, the borderline between verbal and non-verbal theater, classical and modern ballet, movement and dance theater, dramatic and puppet theater, physical and dramatic theater has been erased.... Innovative performances of the newest theater in Europe, so-called contemporary theater, are called the Hybrid Theater Age. Caden Manson, curator of the Contemporary Performance Network, defines the term *contemporary performance*: “The term Contemporary Performance—a modern play—is used to describe a hybrid work of art when the fields of theater (dance, video art, visual arts, performing arts, and others) are experimentally spacing in each other. Sometimes it reminds you of an anarchist chaos, but is based on a complex, interactive-intellectual system.”³ Hence, theater, unsurprisingly, along with a human, began a parallel life in the parallel world, in another reality called the *third reality*, virtual space, cyber reality, digital world that invaded into theater. “Our existence is in several realities at once, the most important being the cyber reality which requires the use of modern technology as a means of self-expression. We listen, watch, think, write and read at the same time: In the cyberspace we interact with several people at once, maybe even a

dozen without their knowledge, we disguise ourselves with biographies invented in the cyberspace, borrowed by individuals and faces (literally, if from the ancient theater times we had to sublimate our own desires through the actor and hero, now the process is directly in our hands as cyber reality has allowed us to become what we want, and become cyber and not just imaginary); in the cyber world, we exist beyond time and boundaries, beyond language and reality, in a practically superfluous and superficial dimension. The art is as synthetic today as never before.”⁴

The art of acting, despite technological progress invading theater as well, still remains an actual, necessary, and leading component. Without it, theater is unimaginable, since it is the only living art that distinguishes it from other types of art. Therefore, the actor in contemporary theater is the weapon with which the stage director *throws* his saying, and not a visual effect creating *visual emotion*.

Today, the actor faces two problems: a) be versatile and b) stand up to technological progress. The demand for versatility in contemporary theater is due to the ongoing processes in European theater. One of the key characteristics of contemporary theater is the hybridity of form and content, a mix of methods and means, which is why contemporary actors must be ready to stand up to a variety of challenges.

Contemporary theater speaks all languages and creates a universal language of theater to link different cultures. “Changing geographic locations is hardly a surprise to anyone anymore, because modern man is increasingly attracted to the extreme, more *danger*, the unexpected, which is one of the key concepts for experiencing catharsis in modern arts. The object of playwrights’ research is the hidden layers of human consciousness, and new means for experiencing or perceiving come to the fore to express these layers.”⁵

In 2020, the World Theater met March 27, International Theater Day, in empty and faded halls. The pandemic engulfed the world and theater was forced to cease its traditional ways, and like other industries,

2 ჩხარტიშვილი ლ., პანდემია და თეატრი., ჟურნ. „თეატრი“, #2, 2020. გვ. 32.

3 Manson C, *How Do You Define Contemporary Performance.*, February 24, 2011.

4 Khetaguri L, THIRD REALITY, Rosenberg Quarterly the Magazine, 20 Feb. 2020

5 მესტირიშვილი მ., თეატრი კიბერ სამყაროში, ჟურნ. 2009. გვ. 15.

it moved to a form of remote communication, but the theatrical art is unique and special because it is based on live communication, its charm is an interactive touch. The sudden and accelerated collision with this reality also showed the unpreparedness of the performing arts. Theater found itself in quarantine, so it went online and, at the same time, home. Maybe the era of *family theater* is coming back? No one knows what the future holds for theater. These are just assumptions. Under conditions of pandemic, the theater faced a strange challenge, it suddenly lost its main tool, live communication with the audience. Now this relationship has changed its currency and moved into the virtual space, the digital world. Communication between the theatrical product (performance) and the customer (viewer) lasts for months in the cyber world. Stage director Data Tavadze offers an interesting opinion about it: “Today theater is facing a new, possibly unprecedented challenge: Though it calls us to *keep a distance*—which is in itself fundamentally contrary to its nature—it has countless technological possibilities to come as close as ever, and only creativity is needed to step onto this completely new phase of development. Can theater recognize this *forced circumstance* and move to a new level? Can it exist beyond real space? Where is this *real space* today? Maybe theater has always existed on the condition (let’s say, virtual) of the spaces it created in our imagination? I do not know for sure, but I hope we can start looking for answers to these questions, turn limitations on challenges, and take steps that we should have taken long ago. One thing is clear: The irreversible process of change and renewal has already begun, which can only be reversed only by force.... Not only in theater ...⁶ Before theater was *reloaded* to take on a new, next challenge, leading, prestigious and commercialized theaters in the first phase of the renovation started broadcasting live via the internet (and not any TV channel). In the first stage of the pandemic, performers, in empty halls, played performances in front of TV cameras to be watched by millions of viewers all over the world. On one hand, the awkward situation created for the actor provided an opportunity for the world of imagination to be open and accessible. On the other hand, theaters have lost not the audience, but live communication (which is so important to the actor) and income (on which performing

arts directly depend).

Along with live broadcasts, theaters began intensively showing online recordings of performances taken from the repertoire or ongoing programs, and several theaters held online premieres. Repertoire posters were released on the social network (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) with the schedule of online screenings of performances. This was the second wave of theaters operating under pandemic. In this form, and so swiftly, theater responded to the reality created by the pandemic, but what will happen tomorrow? How will theater continue to work and what will it offer the audience in the future? No one has concrete answers to this question, but I am sure that theater will find a way out of the crisis and almost impossible situation, and will respond to this challenge with honor and originality.

Under the conditions of the pandemic, Georgian theaters did not stand behind the European experience. Some of the theaters opened the treasury of performances removed from the repertoire and invited the audience to watch their works on the screens of computers and smartphones without leaving home. The visibility of performances (most of them) spread online has presented several problems, including the low artistic and technical quality of the performance recording, which makes it impossible to watch the play.

The answer to the situation on the earth and in Georgia as well, the initiative was very interesting and effective which was performed by Georgia’s Shota Rustaveli Theater and Film State University drama directing students Ketevan Samkharadze and David Tarba, who created an online play reading platform on the social network (<https://www.facebook.com/PlaysonlinereadingGeorgia>), performed online reading of several plays with the collaboration of two director and free professional artists and companions. They selected plays to read that had not yet been published or performed on-stage. Rehearsals were held online and final result was shown live, which had more than 15 000 views and shares in social networks in just two days.

Most plays were shot with one camera, which shows the play only in *large view*, and the actors’ voices are not heard well in most recordings. The display of the recordings, I suspect, also cost theater its audience,

6 თავაძე დათა, რეკომენდაციები, 2020.

as it became apparent for thousands of audiences now what limitations and creative problems Georgian theater is facing.

Along with theater, the audience is also changing. It has now become freer. In our era, viewers can enjoy a play in a desirable and comfortable environment without leaving home, from the bed, kitchen, or even toilet. Opportunities and means will change, but the audience itself will not. Suffice to say, Opera National de Paris, using new technology, has released a full recording of

Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* (directed by D'Amiano Mozzielletto) on various social networks, which initially had more than 2,500 viewers and 760 viewers watching until the last act.

Time will show what happens tomorrow, how theater will continue functioning in the future, how it will respond to new challenges, and before that the theater will find new ways to communicate with the audience, and to maintain the uniqueness and originality between the new and old fields of art.

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