

Conference Paper

Post-dramatic Performance: Semantics and Pragmatics (Based on the Play Shpalikov Staged By the Yeltsin Center Theatre Platform "In the Center")

Nemchenko L. M.

PhD of Philosophy, Associate Professor, Ural Federal University, Yekaterinburg, Russia

Abstract

The article is devoted to the understanding of the phenomenon of modern theatre, defined by the German theater critic Hans-Thies Lehmann as "post-dramatic theatre". The purpose of the article is to show the mode of existence of post-drama in the real theatrical process. From Lehmann's point of view, post-drama is not a new direction in art, but a state of the theater in which it emancipates from the literary source. The post-dramatic theatre breaks the tradition of narrative art and abandons the rigid structure of the play. The semantics of post-drama is considered in the tradition of contextualism, when the meaning directly depends on the context. The contextuality of the play *Shpalikov* is its semantic field. The pragmatics of post-drama is in the creation of a new polylinguistic space. Post-drama changes all the language elements of the theatre, including the audience's expectations.

Keywords: Lehmann, semantics, pragmatics, "post-dramatic theatre", theatre platform "In the Centre", the play *Shpalikov*

Corresponding Author:
Nemchenko L. M.

Received: 12 February 2019
 Accepted: 21 February 2019
 Published: 3 March 2020

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

© Nemchenko L. M.. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Man in the world of culture Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Theatrical practices at the turn of the XX-XXI century demonstrate a constant violation of specific and genre boundaries, the "work" in the "foreign" territories. These are the performances of Dmitry Krymov, who turned the artist's work into the source of dramatic action, and the singing actors in the *Theatre-Theatre* by Boris Milgram in Perm, and the wordless *Three sisters* by Timofey Kulyabin, and the sound dramas of Vladimir Pankov. The theoretical and methodological substantiation of these trends can be found in H. T. Lehmann's book *Post-Dramatic theatre*. Lehmann proposed a term capable of denoting the phenomenon of the new theatre, which, on the one hand, formally preserves a set of traditional language elements – dramaturgy, acting, art of direction, but, on the other, the literature, the acting, and the director's scheme are outside the structural and functional relationships and hierarchies. They are present, and at the same time absent; drama is replaced by verbatim, "raw", fragmentary texts; actors' game is dominated by "zero"

OPEN ACCESS

convention, causing surprise from deliberate amateurishness. Perhaps, only the director remains the main mouthpiece of the will, but only in relation to the dramatic text and the actor, for the sound and plastic design and the visual elements of the play are on a par with his efforts, but do not obey him, creating an independent field. The whole chain of the links is labeled as “post-drama theatre”.

2. Methodology

The object of the analysis is the post-drama theatre, which is “on the border between the “theater” as such, performance, visual arts, dance and music.” [2, 174]. The subject of the research is the play *Shpalikov*, staged on the theatre platform “In the centre” at the Yeltsin Center.

The methods used in the research are semiotic and culturological.

A semiotic approach assumes examination of the performance as a symbolic object that requires decoding of its values. From the model of utterance as the unity of semantics, syntagmatics and pragmatics, proposed by C. Morris, we deliberately exclude syntax, since in our case syntagmatics is the sphere of the director’s explications, responsible for the technology of constructing a theatrical text and requiring special professional competences of the director. We are interested in the content of the message, i.e. the semantic field of the play, which, from the point of view of J. Perry, can be understood only when the function of the dependence of the statement (in our case, it is a play) on the context is investigated [4].

The cultural method makes it possible to consider post-dramatic performance in the context of post-classical, post-literacy, post-science, and, in general, in the context of postmodern. The postmodern does not perceive reality as a pattern, and the criticism is on the meta-account and meta-story, the fact which at the time was stressed by J. Lyotard, “In today’s society and culture - the postindustrial society and the postmodern culture... a great story has lost its credibility, regardless of the method of unification, which it was intended...” [3, 92].

At the same time, the place of the structured order has been occupied by chaos, which claims its structure. J. Baudrillard wrote on the simulation of knowledge and practice, while studying consumer society in the context of media. He mentioned that the cultural activity of man turns into a culture of messages from the media, from their cyclicity and repeatability [1, 159].

3. Spalikov, the Postdramatic Play

The play staged by the theatre platform “In the centre” at the Yeltsin Centre, directed by Nikolai Russkiy on the play by Rinat Tashimov *Shpalikov*, semantically reproduces all post-dramatic guidelines: this is not a traditional biography, i.e. the play lacks the beginning of the narrative, as well as dramatic development, action and a coherent plot with the characters’ lines. At the same time, the play is an honest conversation about the time, which has long turned into the mythological 60s, into “The most glorious time / When we are not with these — but with those / When on the road of losses / Still do not believe / And who is lost — it is easier for them / They are all far, far away”. The myth is not subject to verification, but it gives freedom to the imagination, in our case, the imagination of the playwright and the director, who restore the contexts of the life of the protagonist. One of them is political, which is why the authors allow the first Secretary of the CPSU Nikita Khrushchev and the US President Richard Nixon to walk hand in hand. There is also a place for the Flood (the scene of the Flood, when Shpalikov’s tears are washing into Moscow and its inhabitants, including all the same Nixon and Khrushchev, plus the crew). The play by Nikolai Russkiy is fundamentally minimal and conditional. The conditional character is dictated by the objective conditions of the life of the theatre platform “In the Centre” (the absence of a traditional stage, ramp, etc.), i.e. the context of the existence of a specific theatrical text. In this case, the physical properties of the place are artistically significant. The empty space of the rectangular hall of the Centre gives a feeling of freedom, such an important characteristic of the 60s, and at the same time, the right to loneliness, desirable and tragic for the artist (not accidentally, in the play, Shpalikov is often lost and he is looked for). The empty space with a low ceiling resembles a shooting pavilion, corridors of power, and Moscow streets, where good and not very good people walk.

The play *Shpalikov* unites different languages of arts - cinema, music, dance, poetry, but dominates in the theatrical performance of cinema - both in the form of the episodes from *I am walking around Moscow*, *Outposts of Ilyich*, *Long happy life*, *Atalanta*, and in the form of editing principle as a key to the semantics of the play. Everything is being assembled: the film and the theatre, the screen light and the theatre light, the lines and the rhymes, the fine staging and the ascetic frame of the screen. Without a strictly organized plot, this polylinguism creates an atmosphere of the past 60s, allows the viewers to design their idea of the Artist, power, and history.

4. The Performance As a Space for Discussion

Post-dramatic plays cause a lot of discussion, which is the case with the play *Shpalikov*. The main claims of the critics are just connected with the misunderstanding of the contextual nature of the semantics of the play, hence the questions: “Why Khrushchev and Nixon dance tango to the song of Valery Leontiev? Why Shpalikov sings *I am walking around Moscow* to the Shainsky’s melody of the *Blue car* (the climax of the performance)? Semantically, this is clear: Shpalikov was a contemporary of Khrushchev and Nixon, since the two actors in costumes refer to themselves that way. But the political discourse does not work here in the traditional mode of the conflict “the poet and the tsar”, and the director deliberately travestied power, transforming the iconic heroes of the 60’s in the circus clowns. And when the action is subject to the logic of the absurd (the dance of Khrushchev and Nixon), the selection of popular tunes, composed a decade later, is appropriate. It is the mythological principle of “everything in everything” (and the 60s is a myth) that prepares the finale of the play, when the tragedy is born out of fun, success, and serenity. Another difficulty of perception is the impossibility of genre definition. Indeed, *Shpalikov* is not a stylization, not a biopic or a homage to the author. As the critic Natalya Shainyan wrote, “none of the characters are equal to themselves, except Shpalikov – he is the only one who reels, suffering among the wicked hypocrites, and leaves, saying, “I’m tired of you”. This precisely conveyed quote from the suicide note is a feeling that draws attention to the work of the young authors and does not allow the viewers to define it in familiar terms – perhaps, a new way of theatrical story is born before our eyes”[5]. A new way of theatrical story is the rejection of the development of characters, the rejection of chronology and factual accuracy. It is the installation of the fragments of life, associative links and contextual reminiscences.

5. Conclusions

A post-dramatic play is a performance constructed from a variety of languages of the modern culture, a kind of polyphonic work with equal voices of theatrical synthesis. In the play *Shpalikov*, a set of voices is specified by the semantic and pragmatic objectives of the statements of the young authors. The semantics of the performance is determined by its pragmatics. The young authors appeal to the young viewers who know nothing about Shpalikov and perceive the 60s in the context of the widespread mythology of the “thaw” as a time of freedom and creativity. Therefore, the biographical facts of the

lives of the poet, the screenwriter and the director are needed only to create a general atmosphere of absurdity, a vacuum in which any creative desire and effort are lost. The pragmatics of the play is in the clash of the myth of a happy time with the real departure of the poet who wrote the lines, "Great Russia, and there is no one to call."

References

- [1] J. Baudrillard, *The consumer society. Myths and structures*. Moscow: Cultural revolution, 2006.
- [2] H.-T. Lehmann, *Post-Dramatic theatre*. Moscow: ABCdesign, 2013.
- [3] J.-F. Lyotard, *The postmodern condition*. Moscow: Publishing house ALETEYA, 1998.
- [4] J. Perry, "Thought without Representation," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary*, vol. 60, 1986.
- [5] N. Shainyan, "Spalikov is walking across Moscow," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, no. 211 (7674), 2018. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2018/09/20/na-artmigracii-pokazali-spektakl-o-gennadii-shpalikove.html>