



**GESELLSCHAFT FÜR
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**Interculturalism and Aesthetics:
The Deconstruction of an Euro centric Myth**

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The continuous theme of the European theatre in the 20th century is the theatrical exploration of the body by the integration of intercultural impulses. Numerous theatre reformers anticipated non-western European theatre techniques to receive stimulation for their “innovations” mainly from the traditional Asian theatre. Therefore, a complex utilisation has been initiated concerning techniques and concepts of non-western theatre traditions as well as a correlation of modern, traditional and post-modern elements. The new forms implied new approaches and training methods for the western theatre.

For example: Based on Gordon Craig’s theories and the techniques of the traditional Japanese theatre Meyerhold developed the theory respectively training method “biomechanics” as a basis for his “theatre of alienation”. The traditional Japanese theatre was of interest for the European reformers mainly because of its anti-psychological dramaturgy, its stylisation and its stage architecture. As a result of an extreme integration of rhythm into language and movement Meyerhold achieved an approximation of theatre towards dance.

In his search of a magical and metaphysical theatre, the “theatre of cruelty”, Antonin Artaud examined rituals, Mexican believe systems, drugs and the traditional Asian theatre. Artaud defined theatre as “experience of borders”, as a “holy space”. The basis of his conception of a pure and total theatre was the actor’s autonomy from the script or drama. Artaud intended the confusion of the audience through a universal phonetic language. Therefore, he was particularly interested in the traditional mask dance of Bali (which he actually never had seen in live performance in Bali).

Jerzy Grotowski viewed in the actor’s body the roots of the “total theatre”. With his forms of expression the actor replaces all other elements of the theatre, like set, costumes and the like. Therefore, Grotowski developed a canon of practices to overcome physical obstacles in the transfer of psychological impulses. As a result the body transformed into a tool of self-revelation. With his Para theatrical actions Grotowski intended to suspend the basic structures of theatre.

In search of new theatre experiences as well as a universal theatre language Peter Brook undertook several expeditions through Africa. With his multicultural theatre group he tried to actively live multicultural theatre. In this context theatre functions as a raising experience of reality. Brook intended to create a basic group of multiethnic

actors, who, by working with other groups, should reform the conventional theatre. Further he tried to discover what is behind a culture, what gives life to a culture. Hence the actor had to gain distance to his own cultural background and stereotypes. Brook believed that the abandonment of ethnic mannerism creates a situation in which people with different backgrounds are enabled to creative co-operation. In this nexus Brook derived at the abolition of all usual cultural and sub-cultural language systems to create a universal phonetic language.

Further investigations on this topic of research were realised by Collin Turnbull. He tried to define the relationship between theatre and anthropology in working with Peter Brook on the drama project "Mountain People."

The former Grotowski student, Eugenio Barba, developed a theatre pedagogic based on intercultural exchange and the reception of ethnic theatre traditions. In this context he analysed traditional oriental and Asian theatre forms. Barba undertook several expeditions to Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India designating these travels as "the search for the lost theatre". Hence he defined his theatre work with the Odin theatre as "theatre anthropology". According to his understanding, the priority of theatre anthropological research should lay on the exploration of a universal theatre overcoming cultural obstacles and functioning as a model of a universal phonetic and motion language. The first purpose of theatre anthropological research should be the discovery of the "recurring principles". Together with Victor Turner he founded the "International School of Theatre Anthropology" (ISTA) in Denmark in order to realise research projects on this topic.

In his research Victor Turner focused on the examination of rituals as forms of performance defining it as "performing ethnography". Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba have adopted this concept. Turner worked with students of theatre science, anthropology as well as actors. He organised workshops in which students developed performance scripts based on description of rituals and behaviour of foreign cultures.

Among others, Clifford Geertz criticised Turner's and Schechner's theory of rituals representing the origin of all theatre forms. Geertz argued that this approach neglects the manifold cultural contents, symbol systems as well as emotions and value systems of specific cultures. According to Geertz drama functions as social meta-commentary of the respective society.

Confronted with social problems, also Brecht profoundly questioned the central aspects of theatre. Theatrical forms consist of ideological implications. They do not simply repeat content, but reflect a certain social reality and the search of solutions of a society in a complex and historical specified way. With his “educational plays”, the “*Lehrstücke*”, Brecht found a possibility to deal interpretatively with history and politics. He wanted to initiate a mind-expanding process by politically educating the audience.

As we can see, the mystification of non-western theatre traditions served as cultural stimulus for the Euro-American “theatre reformers”. In this context it is significant to mention the absorption of non-western cultures, their extraction out of the respective socio-cultural background. They did not intend to explore or consider these forms of cultural expression per se but abused them for their own interests. Nevertheless, even these studies are focused on the ritual character of non-western theatre forms. They strengthen - unconsciously? - the Euro centric polarisation of European - cognitive/ structured and non-European - impulsive/ritualistic. Taking non-western contemporary theatre forms into account this statement cannot be valid, but rather documents an obsolete European wishful thinking. The European theatre does not represent the edge of the cultural evolution pyramid. It is significant that theatre anthropological research concentrates almost exclusively on traditional theatre forms assuming that in the respective countries no other forms of theatre are to be found. In this context the research on non-western theatre forms represents a “mystifying search for a lost theatre”.

Recent studies, like those of the Indian theatre scientist Rustom Bharucha, criticise the “festive usage” of foreign cultures by the theatre avant-garde. Bharucha described this phenomenon as a naive, unchecked and an ethnocentric pattern of behaviour. In this context Schechner’s definition of “Interculturalism” represents the exploitation of foreign cultures in a differentiated form, and therefore, a more or less veiled continuation of colonialism.

Often non-western theatre forms were only mentioned in terms of their benefits and relevance for the western theatre. The intention of theatre anthropological researchers often had been the definition of the origins of the western theatre and the gaining of impulses for their own theatre art. They focused on non-western ritual and performance forms. This leads to the question if this research has reinforced the

dichotomy between art/culture in western countries and ritual/tradition in non-western countries. Has this concept manifested a hierarchical distinction between western and non-western societies along with their cultural forms of expression? This is also visible in the lacking discourse on non-western contemporary theatre and performance forms.

So far non-western theatre forms are often categorised with the label "Ethno". This tendency is based on the concept of a universal aesthetics in the valuation of art. It is assumed that an art form exists which is considered as beautiful and aesthetical in all cultures in the same way. This concept isn't only massively euro centric but absurd, as it doesn't take local historical and socio-cultural conditions into account. This concept neglects cultural innovations, individuality and specifications.

In that context it is essential to examine established theories and concepts in terms of their hierarchical positioning, valuations and mystifications. By doing so the view on foreign cultures through the lenses of Euro-American norms, clichés and expectations is made visible.

Therefore, the combination of theatre science with cultural and social anthropology and other scientific disciplines is necessary and essential to recognise the complexity of contemporary non-western theatre in its socio-cultural background. It is required to demand openness for innovative theoretical and methodological approaches, which are not limited exclusively to one or another scientific discipline and which are not obliged to established doctrines, but rather follow the requirements of interdisciplinary research.

Taking these reflections into account we have founded the Society for Theatre Ethnology in 1998. We aimed to develop a research approach, which enables differentiated studies of non-western theatre forms. Our scientific work is based on the hypothesis that a universal aesthetics does not exist and that each culture develops its own characteristic sense of aesthetics and therefore, creates specific views, valuations and categorisations. This approach pinpoints that the meaning, the content, the form of expression, and aesthetics are depending on the historical and socio-cultural conditions of the respective societies. Therefore, they are only perceptible and understandable within that context.

But if aesthetics only exists within a specific socio-cultural context, an aesthetical hierarchy of cultural forms cannot be made.

In that context the discourse with and the integration of local theatre scientists, ethnologists, artists, critics, etc. is essential as they can provide insights about the positioning and the meaning of the theatre forms out of the perspective of their particular society. Referring to the motto “self representation versus foreign presentation” a comparison between the results of Euro-American and non-western researches can be drawn which enables to analyse what is seen differently and what is seen similarly.

In that perspective an interdisciplinary as well as international co-operation is required, both theoretically and practically to develop a concrete research method as basis of an adequate research practise. This is another aim of the Society of Theatre Ethnology.

This theories and methods found application in my research in Jamaica. I have been working with the SISTREN Theatre Collective for nearly four years. This interactionist research approach enabled insights and conclusion, which a purely objective researcher – research subject situation never could have provided.

In the context of field research it is further aimed to de-mask stereotypes and to analyse cultural forms of expression as modes of cultural resistance, especially in former colonies. The theoretical and practical approach towards non-western contemporary theatre forms intends to promote the acceptance and presence of these theatre forms in international science and theatre practise.

The structural transformation of European cultures is a result of on one hand internal changes and on the other hand expansion to other parts of the world. We have to get aware of the fact, that the differentiation in so-called “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries is not accidentally, but politically constructed and socially directed. It is a result of colonialism, which doesn’t only determine the past, but also the presence and the future of the former occupied societies. It is significant that the as norm defined culture of a few never has been experienced by the majority. Hence art has been misused as a means of differentiation within a society. Associated values defined cultural norms. Any changes of these norms were considered as deviations of the established culture. Colonialism and cultural imperialism still exist in

a more or less transformed way. The globally growing gap between the rich and the poor indicates the most complex ethic questions of modern societies as it questions the basic view of justice. We therefore, have to look at the essence of this problem out of an ethic perspective.

In that sense we consider the artistic and scientific approach on non-western theatre and performance form to be essential to initiate a process, which questions the definition of our own culture and contributes to deconstruct the hierarchically valuating understanding of cultures. The deconstruction of the society imminent conception of a cultural evolutionary pyramid will be a challenge for further research in theatre ethnology and intercultural performance studies.

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