**RE)MAPPING THE PAST: SIGNS AND SITES OF MEMORY**

**Rūta MAŽEIKIENĖ**
Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas

**ANIMATING GENIUS LOCI:**
HISTORICAL MEMORY AND SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE

**Key words:** theatre, site-specific performance, performance-as-research, environmental theatre, *genius loci*, memory of Jewish culture.

**INTRODUCTION**

When we think of the possibilities of theatre to participate in the processes of interpreting the past, constructing and reconstructing history and animating historical memory, it is impossible to avoid the issue of the contemporary performance practices characterized as *site-specific*. For site-specific theatre is considered to be central among the forms of contemporary performing arts, seeking (and succeeding) in evoking the historical and cultural memory of a particular place, restoring local histories and narratives, and wakening authentic *genius loci*.

The aim of this article is to analyse site-specific theatre productions as the performative practice of writing and rewriting history, encouraging the creative and active relation of the performers and spectators towards the legacy of the past inscribed into the social and cultural landscape of a place. Although contemporary theatre researchers get increasingly involved in the phenomenon of site-specific theatre and there is a number of excellent studies on the subject, in Lithuania the research on theory and practice of site-specificity is scarce. Some Lithuanian publications focus on the general relations between theatre and space, while others inquire into some specific facets of performance place, though the possibilities of site-specific theatre to participate in the work of interpreting the past and history still lack thorough investigation. The article refers to theoretical definitions of site-specific theatre and focuses on the production of the theatre company *Miraklis called Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7* (Pro Memoria Saint Stephen’s Street, Number 7) (1995), which is a case revealing artistic strategies that can be defined as performance-as-research, collaboration and participation.

**SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE**

One has to admit though, that the notion of “site-specific” originating in the discourse of visual arts and subsequently adopted by theatre artists and critics is often used to describe very different theatrical and paratheatrical practices, starting with conventional productions of a traditional kind of drama theatre, staged in non-traditional spaces and all the way to re-enactments of military battles in the historical locations or, say, street pageants based on medieval traditions. However, all of those quite remote artistic practices rest on the same key disposition, namely to remove the performance from the traditional theatre building and to validate the new place as a central component of the performance. According to probably the most laconic and yet precise definition of the site-specific performance, it is a “performance occurring in non-theatre venues and in which the site is a vital element, instrumental in developing the theme or form of the work”.

To make it even more explicit, one should add that when the non-traditional space used in the production determines the form (or aesthetic choices),
rather than the content, the production is characterized as "space-specific". Whereas the cases when the choice of space influences the thematic aspects of the content and relates to the local sociocultural historical landscape are referred to as "place-specific". With the increase of interest of contemporary performance artists in non-traditional spaces, it becomes important for a critical reflection to position the productions adequately between the categories of site-specific, space-specific or place-specific.

I remember my recent conversation with stage director Ain Mäeots from Tartu's Vanemuine theatre at the Baltic theatre festival and his remark that the taste for specific, non-traditional theatrical spaces in contemporary Estonian theatre has recently increased to such a degree that the directors almost compete among themselves to find the most unexpected place for their performance, as it seems obvious that in order to attract the public's attention one has to choose the fanciest, most inconvenient and difficult place to approach (like for example, deep in the forest in the middle of the night). However, one has to admit that the majority of such site-specific theatre productions, in Estonia as well as in the other countries (including Lithuania), are made exclusive only by the fact that they are performed not on the traditional proscenium stage, but in a setting unusual (and thus – exotic) for the performers and the spectators. The setting, in other words, can trigger the sensations of the public or provoke a somewhat different reading of the signs of the performance, however in many cases it does not interact closely with the thematic field and the meaning of the production.

PERFORMANCE AS HISTORICAL RESEARCH

However, when we speak about site-specific performance as a means of (re)constructing historical memory and as the possibility of reviving the peculiar local atmosphere, we have to focus on the productions that use the alternative theatrical space so as to turn it into the most important factor in determining the aesthetic form and the meaningful content of the production. In other words, we should discuss the examples of the productions where the sociocultural past and present of the chosen place stimulates the creative vision of the authors, delineates the thematic outlines of future productions and, eventually, is turned into an integral condition of the "here and now" of the performance. In cases like these, the authors of the production see the performance space as a discourse containing multiple cultural, social and historical layers and open to manifold artistic (re)readings and (re)writings. So what can probably be described as the basic point for the author of the site-specific performance is to listen carefully to this suggestive polyphonic text and to find a way to convey the collective experiences and memories contained in it, using theatrical language.

On the other hand, following researcher on site-specific performance Fiona Wilkie, one might propose that "in order to deal with the contained memories of site" an artist has not only to "find some way of telling them", but also "in doing so the choice must be made between what to tell, what to leave buried or perhaps to erase, and what other memories to import into the space". An artist, therefore, involved in the production of site-specific performance inevitably has to turn himself into a historian, collecting authentic data, analyzing the material and intangible heritage of the sociocultural landscape and, eventually, constructing his own version of history inscribed into the local space. The production in turn becomes a performance-as-research and an artistic practice participating immediately in the process of writing, rewriting and interpreting history.

CASE STUDY – PRO MEMORIA ŠV. STEPONO 7

At this point I would like to focus on a particular example, namely, the production of Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7 (Pro Memoria Saint Stephen’s Street, Number 7) which is a case revealing the different manners of performative (re)constructions and (re)interpretations of history and the artistic strategies for awakening of genius loci.

The 1995 performance of Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7 was directed by stage designer Vega Vaičiūnaitė. The group of performers who came together for this production (they called themselves Vilnius musical
street show company Miraklis and later became environmental theatre Miraklis) existed until 2002 and produced 9 performances. It was the very first (and so far – the only) theatre company of this kind in Lithuania. The history of the production of this performance points out a particular mode of production characteristic to site-specific theatre and proves that artistic productions can be turned into a certain medium to restore collective reminiscences and make it possible for history to have a voice in the present.

In 1995, as the festival Vilnius Days drew closer, the stage designer Vega Vaičiūnaitė was planning to make an installation in a derelict house under number 7 Saint Stephen Street, located in the old city of Vilnius. The house with a unique historical memory was once among the most impressive buildings in this part of the old city. However, according to the director herself, when she took a look through the gates of the house in 1995, she saw what was “probably the most dreadful yard in Vilnius”, which appeared to her as “a symbol of a devastated city” and a dreadful metaphor of the historical memory of the city. Having learned about the fact that this disintegrating, abandoned house, located on the edge of the old Jewish quarter of Vilnius, was once inhabited by Jews, Vytautas Vaičiūnaitė intended to make (as she put it) a “temporary museum of genocide”: an installation displaced all over the building, composed of giant figures of “bird people”, old photographs, books, sheet music and inscriptions. However, as the work on that memorial project progressed, the artist discovered not only the special, living past of this house, but also the unique present of this multicultural space.

As Vaičiūnaitė put it: “the house has attracted many different and amazing personalities”, meaning, artists from different disciplines (a painter, a puppet artist, a sculptress, musicians from the rock band Skylė, and artists of light and pyrotechnics) as well as members of the multinational community of this city quarter (including the older people of the neighborhood, who still remembering the history of the house, as well as passers-by, children spending most of their day in the street, etc.). As the artist was researching the history of the house, collecting old pictures and books, listening to the recollections and stories of the local people and watching the games of the local children, Vaičiūnaitė gradually developed the idea of a large scale artistic performance. Thus what was to have been an installation made by one artist turned into a unique, site-specific performance, based on the principles of artistic collaboration and community participation; the performance, which was described by theatre critics as a “phantasmagoric dream, dedicated to the memory of life that once took place in this quarter”.

Initially, Vega Vaičiūnaitė intended to focus on the aspects of house number 7 in Saint Stephen’s Street that had a direct relation to the tragic destiny of the Jews of Vilnius, once known as the Jerusalem of the North. The stage designer knew that this quarter of the old city of Vilnius, famous at the time for the ruined buildings and slums, during the period from the end of the 19th century to the World War II had been the centre of the cultural, religious, economic and social life of Litvaks. Different parts of Saint Stephen’s Street (Šv. Stepono Didžioji and Šv. Stepono Mažoji) were full of small stores and workshops and a publishing house; the Talmud Torah school was here and houses 5 and 7, according to art and city historians, were “the most impressive in the whole quarter”. World War II and the Soviet period erased this page of Vilnius history, while the buildings of enchanting beauty turned into ruins.

However, as work on the project proceeded it turned out that the street of Saint Stephen had a great history long before the 19th century; according to old legends it was once the site of the holy city for Pagan high priests (and the centre of pre-Christian Lithuania) burned down by the Teutonic Order. Later it became the main street of the Rūdininkai – the quarter located on the outskirts of the city – with a huge horse and grain market, noisy lodging houses and inns. After a fire in the 18th century, the newly built stone buildings shaped the quarter’s architectural character, which is retained today, and turned it into the setting for the complex and painful lessons of history of 20th century Vilnius (wars, occupations, genocides and mass deportations). The earliest facts of the history of Saint Stephen Street were learned by the authors of the performance...
from historical research\textsuperscript{13}, though a significant part of it was still alive in the memories of the inhabitants of the neighborhood. The local people, for example, told of the teachers and the pupils of the local Jewish school shot down in the yard of house number 7 Saint Stephen’s Street, about the atrocious Soviet repressions of the post-war years, about the habits and customs of the local population and about the young girl that once lived here and on her wedding day she had a long white dress which got smudged as she was walking down the street. The local stories and legends told by the people of different nationalities (Lithuanians, Russians, Poles and Jews) might have been considered quite unimportant if they were not used as the basis for the performance of Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7. Thus, according to Vega Vaičiūnaitė, the place itself provoked a narrative that was completely unexpected for the authors of the production.\textsuperscript{14} The narrative that had no coherent plot, yet offered suggestive images of certain moments in the history of house number 7.

The performance is constructed as if it was a “Pagan urban ritual” intended to “disenchant”\textsuperscript{15} the stiff and frozen space of the house and consists of different episodes: the lesson, the wedding, the children’s game, the war, the funeral, and the sacrifice. All these episodes were, as theatre critics noticed, “observed and attended by angels, the apostles of the ruins”.\textsuperscript{16} The central element of the structure of the performance is, however, not the fragmented plot line, but rather the very space and its audiovisual organization.\textsuperscript{17}

With the help of imagery and sound the authors inhabit and thus animate every part of the architectural structure of the building: the ritual-like action in the abandoned inner yard is filled with deindividualized characters (people, bird-people and angels played by non-professional actors (artists, musicians and children)); empty window openings covered with pages from old books, sheet music and notes are filled with mysterious shadows (that evoke fragments of the events that took place in the house, like the killing of the Jewish teachers and pupils); the huge figures of the masked “bird-people” with wings appear above the roofs of the houses; lighting effects help in withdrawing the inner spaces of the house from the dark ruins and in spotlighting the Jewish inscriptions on the broken walls; the intense soundscape that fills the space consists of live music, combining Jewish and Lithuanian folk music played by the rock band Skylė and the chamber music group Libra; texts and fragments of poetry are uttered in Lithuanian, Polish, Russian and Yiddish; the patter of the children’s game; the sounds and noises coming from historical memory (for example the neigh of horses and the clack of their hoofs revive the atmosphere of the horse market once situated there). All these intense images and sounds help to create a total theatrical event ending with the final scene of the ritual burning of the huge white figure of an angel, which is a symbolic act of sacrifice dedicated to the animation of the dying space.

CONCLUSION

Although the performance Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7 is deeply rooted in the environment of a particular quarter of Vilnius, the authors, by touching upon the themes of historical past, memory and identity of place relate it to the much broader issues of writing and interpreting history. In a broader context this abandoned and ruined house became a meaningful metaphor of our historical and cultural past and memory, which was deliberately subverted and deformed during the Soviet years. By choosing the path of artistic collaboration and dialogic relationship with the sociocultural milieu and local community, the authors of the Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7 succeeded in giving voice to the space and making the city itself the “playwright, the director and the actor”\textsuperscript{18} of the performance. The multilayered, simultaneous, non-linear and non-narrative character of the performance was conditioned not so much by the aesthetic quest, but by the specific nature of the place itself and by the unique input of the local community. Such an artistic form was not so much a reflection of the history of the place, but of multiple histories; it did not revive just the local memory, but the variety of memories; it did not define a single identity of the place, but rather discovered plentiful identities. In other words, it released multiple voices inscribed into the sociocultural landscape of this quarter of Vilnius and thus animated \textit{genius loci}. 
Notes


5 As defined by members of the working group Site-Specific Performance of association Performance Studies International, see http://psi-web.org/organization/groups-and-committees/site-specific-performance/.


10 Quoted in Dainius Gasparavičius, 2000, p. 49.

11 Ibid.


13 Such as the historical study *Lost Vilnius* (Vladas Drėma, *Dubgs Vilnius (Lost Vilnius)*, Vilnius: Vaga, 1991.).

14 Quoted in Dainius Gasparavičius, 2000, p. 59.

15 Vega Vaičiūnaitė, 1996, p. 43.


17 Vaičiūnaitė once said that she prefers theatre based not on the dramatic plot, but rather on ‘the musical act or visuality’. Quoted in Dainius Gasparavičius, 2000, p. 65.


Rūta MAŽEIKIENĖ
Vytauto Didžiojo universitetas, Kaunas

Pažadinant genius loci: istorinė atmintis ir specifinės vietos teatras

Reikšminiai žodžiai: teatras, specifinės vietos teatras, spektaklis kaip tyrimas, aplinkos teatras, genius loci, žydų kultūros atmintis.

Santrauka

Analizuojant tai, kaip teatras gali dalyvauti praeities interpretavimo, istorijos konstravimo ir rekonstravimo bei istorinės atminties atgaivinimo procesuose, mūsų žvilgsnis neįveikiamai krypsta į šią šiuolaikinio teatro praktikas, kurios žymimos specifinės vietos teatro (site-specific performance) vardu. Nes būtent specifinės vietos teatras yra laikomas viena svarbiausių šiandienos teatro formų, siekiančių ir gebančių prikelti istorinę, kultūrinę tam tikros vietos atmintį, atgaivinti lokalios istorijas ir pasakojimus, pažadinti autentiką vietos dvasią (genius loci).

Specifinės vietos teatro terminas šiuolaikiniame teatrologiniame diskurse vartojamas itin skirtingų teatrinių ir para-teatrinių veiklų (nuo konvencionalių, tradicinio pobūdžio dramos teatro spektaklių netradicinėse erdvėse iki karinių mūšių rekonstrukcijų istorinėse vietovėse ar viduramžišką tradiciją tęsiančių teatralizuotų eitynių miesto gatvėmis) apibūdinimui. Tačiau skirtingus specifinės vietos teatro pavyzdžius vieną esminę nuostatą – išskleidinti spektaklį iš tradicinio teatro pastato ir šisinti pasirinktą vaidinimo erdvę kaip leimiamą teatrinio veiksmo komponentą. Šiuolaikinio teatro praktika rodo, kad geriausiuose specifinės vietos teatro pavyzdžiuose netradicinės, neteatrinės erdvės pasirinkimas yra panaudotas tampa svarbiausių spektaklio estetinę formą bei prasminį turinį leminčiu veiksmui.

Straipsnyje teigiama, kad, įsitraukdami į praeities interpretavimo ir istorijos (per)rašymo procesus, specifinės vietos
teatro kūrėjai traktuoją pasirinktą erdvę kaip daugialypį skirtingų kultūrinių, socialinių, istorinių sluoksnų diskursą, atvirą įvairiopiems meniniams (per)skaitymams ir (per)rašymams. Tokiu būdu menininkai neišvengiamai tampa savotiškais istorikais, renkančiais autentišką medžiagą, tyrinėjančiais materialų ir nematerialų sociokultūrinio landšafto palikimų ir, galiausiai, komponuojančiais savų lokalioje erdvėje įrašytos istorijos versiją. Savo ruožtu specifinės vietos teatro spektakliai tampa meniniais artefaktais, tiesiogiai dalyvaujančiais istorijos rašymo, perrašymo ir interpretavimo praktikoje. Šiame straipsnyje, remiantis teorinėmis specifinės vietos teatro apibrėžtims, analizuojamas aplinkos teatro trupės Miraklis spektaklis Pro Memoria Šv. Stepono 7 (1995), atskleidžiantis ne tik performatyvius istorijos (re)konstravimo bei (re)interpretavimo būdus, bet ir tokius menines strategijas, kurias galima charakterizuoti spektaklio kaip tyrimo (performance-as-research), bendradarbiavimo (collaboration) bei dalyvavimo (participation) terminais.

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