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LITHUANIAN THEATRE CRITIQUE IN THE FIRST DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY: THE PROBLEM OF DENOMINATION

When did theatre critique in Lithuania actually begin? This issue still needs to be resolved in the history on Lithuanian theatre. Although over a century has passed since articles on theatre first appeared in the Lithuanian language, historians cannot agree on the date marking the commencement of national theatre critique. They persistently tend to note a number of different dates. Most *theatralia*¹ in the press before World War I has not been treated as a subject of serious scholarly study. This is partly due to the influence of a confusion of criteria for such an investigation, for example, the ‘qualification’ or ‘objectivity’ of a critic. The writings of the pre-World War I period are considered almost as a homogenous entity, useful merely for generating a list of performances played² or, as an amateurish criticism, critics had to abandon in the Interwar period³. Nevertheless, it is possible to reconsider the status of the *theatralia* of this period by treating it differently, overlooking the various, rigid and not necessarily relevant, and criteria for evaluation.

At the end of the 19th century, the Russian regime repressed Lithuanian culture by prohibiting print in the Lithuanian language. This period is considered one of the darkest in Lithuanian history. One witness of those times, Vincas Kudirka, expresses that, “The only signs that Lithuania exists at all are the newspapers.”⁴ Newspapers at the time, it must be recalled, were all published

abroad and smuggled into Lithuania illegally. Despite this, in 1888, Kudirka attempts to form the *Lietuva* (Lithuania) Union in Warsaw. In Kudirka’s letter to Jonas Basanavičius,⁵ he mentions theatre as one of the means for retaining Lithuanian culture. The theatre, as a phenomenon of joint endeavour, was generally linked to retention of national identity. Such thought resulted in a boom of illegal cultural gatherings known as “Lithuanian evenings”.

Texts on theatre appeared in the Lithuanian press at the very end of the 19th century. Most, especially those of a publicist nature, dealt with theatre as part of general reflections about safeguarding the Lithuanian language and national identity, as well as reducing illiteracy in the rural population. Very few reviews of actual performances can be found during this period for an obvious reason. “Lithuanian evenings” were illegal and it was dangerous to mention them in print. However, performances held abroad, in Lithuania Minor, in the territory of contemporary Latvia and other areas were treated differently.

Varpas (*The Bell*) periodical published one of the early reviews in 1889, rather unexpectedly discussing *I Lituani* opera, performed in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The author, Andrius Vištelis-Višteliauskas, had attended and sent his report about this opera, written by Amilcare Ponchielli,

who based it on a poem by Adam Mickiewicz. Višteliauskas greatly admired the music but pointed out distortions of historical facts in the opera's plot.⁶

In 1895, *Varpas* and *Žemaičių ir Lietuvos apžvalga* (*Review of Samogitia and Lithuania*) periodicals published the first extensive polemic articles about theatrical endeavours by the Birutė Union, established in Tilsit in 1885. Publicists were arguing the worthiness of plays that the Union had chosen to stage. Critiques were about two plays by Aleksandras Fromas-Gužutis, entitled *Kauno pilies išgriovimas* (*Destruction of Kaunas Castle*) and *Ponas ir muzikai* (*Gentleman and the Peasants*) and a third by the brothers Keturakis, *Amerika pirtyje* (*America in the Steam Bath*), a comedy.⁷

Despite the risks involved, the press also mentioned some plays, performed within the country. For instance, in 1895, *Varpas* informed, “the Lithuanian intelligentsia held a private staging of a certain Lithuanian comedy at a certain town for the Easter holiday.”⁸ Additionally, in 1900, *Ūkininkas* (*The Farmer*) announced that a certain family had arranged a private performance of a comedy, based on *The Wedding* by Nikolay Gogol, in Šiauliai during Shrovetide.⁹ The press demonstrated considerable interest about the first legal performance — *America in the Steam Bath* — played within the territory of contemporary Lithuania in the Palanga Resort in 1899.

Can these early examples of writing be considered theatre critique? This question can only be answered by a comparison of *theatralia* in the underground, illegal press with that in legally authorised newspapers and magazines, which appeared after the ban on the Lithuanian language in the press, had been lifted. Critique is understood as the art of judging and evaluating, as indicated by the term's etymology. Yet, in early Lithuanian *theatralia*, a particular evaluative element was remarkably different in comparison with later texts.

Before the relative liberalisation of social life, established from 1904, authors writing about Lithuanian performances often employed a special approach. They treated Lithuanian activity of any kind as extremely important. For example, Lithuanian evenings were considered, as Gabrielė Petkevičaitė-Bitė later called them, “a feast of the nation but not an art, which did not exist at that time.”¹⁰ This sort of position of benevolent enthusiasm by reviewers explains the frequent absence of a critical view. Nevertheless, this changed after the turn of the century.

A critical approach to performance first began to appear immediately after the change in the political situation in the mid-1900s. In 1904, an unknown author remarks in *Varpas*, “Aesthetics

are absent from the Lithuanian stage”¹¹ (written about a performance by a Lithuanian charity union in Riga, Latvia). Such expression suggests, in my opinion, the start of a shift in perception about performance, not merely a change in tone. External conditions were more favourable, enabling authors to take a more critical stance regarding theatre arts. This also made it possible for Lithuanian theatre to surface from the underground and engage in more intense development.

Detachment or distance, which is characteristic of evaluating and judging, offers authors an opportunity to reflect their own personalities in their compositions. Now, the notion of national interests relevant to theatrical endeavours is more directly linked with the intellect and personal experience of a specific author. Moreover, younger Lithuanian intellectuals developed a new concept regarding theatre, as well as art in general, in the beginning of the 20th century. Since theatre critique is a deeply subjective mix of emotional and aesthetic reactions, traces of an author's personality are extremely important.

Authors can be perceived differently in texts published from 1904 to 1914. Numerous texts are presented with nearly no argumentation. These boil down to a simple “liked or disliked” formula. The lack of a clear aesthetical declaration is characteristic for this period. Most reviewers failed to support their opinions with precise aesthetical statements. (An exception was Adomas Jakštas, who defined his outlook on the “expression” of beauty and art in his theoretical articles).¹² Nevertheless, signs of very different systems of reacting and evaluating can be discerned in texts with a more complex structure.

The turn of the century was paradigmatic; its echoes are distinct in Lithuanian *theatralia* of the early 20th century. Although critics continued to be profoundly concerned with national issues, they emphasized aspects of artistic value. All critical texts can be categorised as containing one of two concepts of theatre ontology. The mainstream tendency, adopted for the notion of theatre at the end of the 19th century, emphasised its social and political importance. It was enriched with aesthetic criteria while preserving its utilitarian nature.

The younger generation of Lithuanian artists and writers created an alternative concept. Interplay of a rational and anti-rational outlook on the world marked this concept, which was characteristic of Western culture at the turn of the century. Critical statements of this later faction expressed a revolutionary longing for the theatre as an autonomous form of art, dealing with the depths of the human soul as well as with national spirit. These were linked with different aesthet-

ics of Neo-romanticism. The critical thoughts of the earlier faction expected theatre to teach and construct an image of Lithuanian culture. Then, up to a certain degree, claims were relevant to the aesthetics of Naturalism.

Several factors can be discerned that assisted in the establishment of the impact of these forms of *theatralia* in society at the beginning of the 20th century. First, the policy of the press must be examined. Articles on theatre can be found in almost every edition of the major newspapers. Some were also published in magazines on culture. (The first specialist theatre magazine, *Veidrodis* [Mirror], was published in Chicago, in 1914).¹³ While none hired a regular reviewer, editors sought a broad discussion on the current situation of the Lithuanian stage. Thus, quite a liberal editorial policy was adopted. A great many reports of several lines can be found in the press alongside a wide range of articles and reviews.

A characteristic feature of this period was the lack of a definite aesthetical declaration. The only means of tracing the criteria for evaluation by most authors was to combine their remarks in different texts. That was one of the reasons for a generally negative view of theatre critics. Subjectivity was the most frequent accusation addressed to a critic. Contemporaries of the times, Sruoga and his pupils Julius Būtėnas and Vytautas Maknys, had already fixed this in the memory of Lithuanian theatre.

Clearly, critical thought was under constant discussion at the start of the 20th century. Theatregoers and artists of the period were aware of critical texts and often reacted by publishing a counter strike. Significantly, statements that critics expressed in an article were sometimes treated as a personal insult. For instance, in 1908, Liudas Jakavičius-Lietuvanis, who was directing Lithuanian performances in Riga at that time, declared that theatre reviews are often harmful. He claimed that many amateur actors lose their spirit for further work after being evaluated.¹⁴ Notably in his article, Lietuvanis uses as an argument that the reactions of an audience differ from those of a critic. Thereby, the author instinctively underlined the major difference in evaluative perceptions of a performance: spontaneous and emotional by an ordinary viewer and distanced and judgmental by a critic.

Another factor that helps to define the status of *theatralia* at the beginning of the 20th century is the self-reflection of art critiques in general, a process which began in period under discussion. The need for art critique by the intelligentsia of that period was obvious and this issue received much attention. Art criticism was a relatively new

genre for most writers. Thus, some texts, which were devoted to 'quality' critique, encouraged further readings of specialised literature. Others simply called for a serious view on criticism.

Despite the elementary nature of some of these texts, it is possible to define two concepts on theatre critique. The principle of grouping is based on a notion of the functions that theatre critique was expected to fulfil. The mainstream faction employed this first concept. They considered critique as a tool for improving theatre arts or, in other words, as a "serious and impartial filter"¹⁵ of the developmental process. The other faction presented an alternative concept. Texts by Sofija Čiurlionienė-Kymantaitė provide the most concise position. She placed the activity of a critic on the same level as that of an artist. This author called for a creative intermediation between the art and a receiver, since the gift of the artist cannot be influenced by critique.¹⁶ The goal of criticism, according to Čiurlionienė-Kymantaitė, is to broaden the field in which an artist's gift "radiates" and by which the work of art reveals the invisible "world of soul". The ability to perceive artistic inspiration within the work of an artist was considered necessary and Čiurlionienė-Kymantaitė defined the talent of the critic as equal with that of the artist.

In conclusion, a brief remark must be made on the specifics of *theatralia* genres. There is an opinion that Lithuanian theatre critique of the period did not fulfil its basic function due to the relatively small number of reviews devoted to any one particular performance. Indeed, an analysis or description of a performance was often set within a wide discussion on theatre or social issues. For instance, an article on plays staged by Juozas Vaičkus in *Žemaitija* [Samogitia] includes general impressions about the trip to the area.¹⁷ (The editor of *Viltis* [Hope] had specially commissioned the author, Martynas Yčas, for this trip due to public interest about the Vaičkus theatre). The most prominent authors of critiques hardly ever reviewed specific performances. Treatment of single Lithuanian plays had not yet become a sphere for wider discourse. Moreover, authors clearly avoided discussing performances by Polish, Russian or Jewish troupes (at least in the Lithuanian press), although sometimes, they attended such performances. There are many instances in the press of reports on performances, especially the peripheral ones, which consist of no more than a few lines.

Regardless, a more precise analytical revision of *theatralia* during the start of the 20th century is absolutely necessary. It needs to include considerations regarding the nature of critical texts, which contain a distinct tendency to evaluate and

judge and maintain an intellectual distance from the performance being observed. It must also regard the controversial status of critics in society and the process of self-reflection. A more exhaus-

tive analysis of these critiques on the theatre in Lithuania could lead to a more distinct positioning of their beginnings and role during the decade prior to World War I.

REFERENCES

- ¹ The term “theatralia,” borrowed from Polish for this work, refers herein to the entirety of information and articles on theatre in the press.
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- ¹¹ -as, „Korespondencijos“. *Varpas*, 1904, no. 4, p. 61-62.
- ¹² Druskus [Adomas Jakštas], „Trečioji lietuvių dailės paroda Vilniuje“. *Draugija*, 1910, no. 30, p.1-2; Jakštas A. „J. Jurkūno paskaita apie meno problemas“. *Viltis*, 1915, no. 25, p. 178-190.
- ¹³ It is worth to mention that in 1911, Jonas Strazdas started *Teatras (Theatre)* magazine in Vilnius. Nevertheless, I underlined “*Veidrodis*” because “*Teatras*” almost exclusively published texts on drama.
- ¹⁴ Lietuvanis [Liudas Jakavičius], „Mūsų scena ir jos kritikai“. *Vilniaus žinios*, 1908, no. 176, p. 1.
- ¹⁵ *Lietuvos žinios*, 1909, no. 23, p. 2.
- ¹⁶ Čiurlionienė (Kymantaitė) S. „Liuosos mintys (Dailės troškimas žmonių dvasioje)“. *Viltis*, 1909, no. 13, p. 3.
- ¹⁷ Yčas M. „Teatras. Skuodas“. *Viltis*, 1911, no. 102, p. 4.

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LIETUVOS TEATRO KRITIKA PIRMAISIAIS XX AMŽIAUS DEŠIMTMEČIAIS: DENOMINACIJOS PROBLEMA

S a n t r a u k a

Šis straipsnis skiriamas dvidešimtojo amžiaus pradžios lietuvių teatro kritikai bei kontraversiškam jos statusui lietuvių teatro istoriografijoje. Tradiciškai kritiniai šio periodo tekstai yra nuvertinami dėl abejotinų profesionalumo bei objektyvumo kriterijų, taikomų jų autoriams. Atmetus apriorinį požiūrį bei traktuojant kritiką kaip meninio sąmoningumo ženklą, leidžiantį rekonstruoti teatrinio įvykio suvokimo strategiją, įmanoma gilesnė ir vaisingesnė analizė, leidžianti tiksliau nustatyti lietuvių teatro kritikos pradžią.

Pagrindiniais požymiais, padedančiais nustatyti teatrui skirtų tekstų prigimtį, tampa intelektualinė autoriaus pozicija spektaklio atžvilgiu, subjektyvaus vertinimo elemento intensyvėjimas, visuomenės reakcija į viešai išsakytas kritines pastabas bei polinkis į autorefleksiją, užsimezges bendrame dvidešimtojo amžiaus pradžios lietuvių meno kritikos diskurse.

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