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Radical and Not So Radical Transgressions: Invading Backstage Domains

Featuring as one of the privileged metaphors in humanities and social sciences, theatre provides primarily an image of a circumscribed space whose spatial syntax and modes of human engagement take place within and with respect to the larger space of the city, the world, and, as in Calderon's Gran teatro del mundo, the universe. It is precisely as a special organization of spatiality that theatre reached the status of Foucault's radical hetero-topos[1] , flexible as it proved to be as a model for not only counter-representing all the human dealings in the external space, but also of conceptualizing, as in Freud's psychoanalysis, man's inner world, his psychic topography. But theatre is above all a concrete place, a built form with its own spatial history, its changing social and ideological functions, and its ways of bestowing to the bodies that enter into it actual or phantasm identities, thoughts, sensations, feelings and memories.

My intervention will deal with one of the ruling borders/dichotomies/barriers of theatrical space, the one dividing "front stage" from "backstage" regions. In his detailed analysis of the latter in an individual and concrete theatre building[2] , Andrew Filmer relies among others on Edward Soja's "trialectics of being", and thus also on Lefebvre's categories of perceptual, conceptual and lived aspects of spatiality which Soja evokes[3] , which will here be of particular interest. In contrast to the repercussions of such an analytical triad for the ethnographic study of concrete theatrical sites, I will ask how it pertains to potential manipulations of the aforementioned division of front-stage and backstage within contemporary performance practice. The temporal aspect of this manipulation should also be emphasized, having in mind the historical provenance of a whole backstage mythology – evidenced in numerous novels, plays and films situated in the backstage world - in the elaborated architectural designs of the so-called théâtre a l'italienne. It is its 19th century version, especially after the introduction of the electric light, that sharpened the separation between the darkened auditorium, the enlightened stage and the invisible space behind, where the actors

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prepared themselves for the entrance, and where the stage-hands of technicians assured the smoothness of the contrivance. Given the fact that 20th century European theatre history is crucially marked by attempts at breaking free from the coercions of such theatre architecture, with all its ingrained power relations, and particularly the ways in which it dictates the actor-audience relationships, contemporary come-backs to this type of theatre in the form of site-specific performances requires some further theoretical and interpretive elaboration.

Any analysis of the perceived, the imagined or cognitive, and lived theatrical space - whether that of the front-stage, or that of the backstage - to a certain extent conceptually draws itself from the gap that, within theatre, divides the realms of production from the realm of the "spectacle itself", that is, the hidden material and living background from the revealed and perceived imaginary figures of the stage. "The spatial syntax" of theatre[4] is thus necessarily, qua conceptual resource, embedded into any discussion of the actual configurations of theatrical buildings, or rather projected upon them as a division that multiply actual back-stages and front-stages into their own ever-receding doubles. Consider for instance how it is used in the neighbouring fields of sociology and psychoanalysis, and what kind of consequences these conceptualizations produce in their later eventual return to the fields of theatre and performance studies proper.

Erving Goffman is well known for his dramaturgical approach to the study of human interaction: the notions of backstage and front-stage behaviour and activities, although shown to be taking place in concrete and closed spaces of human sociality (for instance, workplaces or formal ceremonial settings versus bathrooms, restaurant kitchens or private offices) serve to the author above all as terminological tools for designating a crucial rift in social behaviour, between our daily "impression management", and our desperate attempts at maintaining a private preserve, or rather "regions" hidden by a "barrier to perception" (Goffman 106), in which we can relax and prepare for performances of our selves. Goffman used this distinction most insistently in his early Presentation of self in everyday life[5] , but it continues to reappear in his later studies as well, and it is interesting to observe what conceptual nuances it acquires and looses in the process: at the beginning it is indeed largely sociological in the nature of its analytical efficiency, since it is held to divide groups of people, or, as Goffman would put it, "production teams" from their "audiences" (Goffman 77-105). This distinction borrowed from theatre helps him to establish a new sociological category,

that of the “dramaturgical experience”, that widely differs from the usual concept of social status or social role, for belonging to either the production team or the audience of, say, a ceremony, has the capacity to suspend all other social distinctions and unite individuals in what Goffman calls “the same climate” (Goffman 176).

So what makes this climate so specific, particularly when it comes to the backstage region? The dramaturgical experience is established whenever a “collusive arrangement” takes place that provides the feeling of “backstage solidarity”, founded upon an array of secrets, facts kept in the dark, held to be incompatible with the image a team is trying to convey. First, there is the meta-secret, the secret that the team is holding something in the dark, and then, the very secrets it is withholding, which Goffman then differentiates into strategic secrets and capacities concealed in order to prevent the audience from preparing themselves for further developments of social situations, or from impeding their course. These make for inside secrets: the ones that acquire additional value of making all the individuals of the backstage team members of a separate group that feel different and special, “in the know”. Both strategic and dark secrets are therefore sometimes exaggerated in order to strengthen such effect of solidarity: that is why backstage talk almost always includes also gossip, outright criticism, mimicking and ridiculing of the audience.

But backstage is also a vulnerable space: some individuals may assume “discrepant roles” (Goffman 141-166), by becoming either impostors introduced into the backstage in order to gain access to the group’s secrets and then share them with the audience, thus damaging the impression the team seeks to give, or shills, members of the audience that spy on behalf of the team. There are, however, intermediary service specialists, who are also discrepant in their dealings, such as salesmen and architects who deal with setting, or hairdressers and dentists, who deal with personal fronts, neither of them belonging to the performing team. Similar status is given to confidants – priests and psychotherapists – and other service specialists forced into that role by their clients. Finally, colleagues cannot help but to be in the know of one’s professional impression management: for instance - to bring the whole story back where it conceptually started - actors watching other actors performing are not ordinary members of an audience, but individuals expert in backstage matters and therefore hardly victims of their illusions.

The front of a performance can, however, be disrupted within the team as well, whenever there occurs a communication out of character, or out of the arrangement of the team, which threaten the official definition of the situation: these happen either as accidental mishaps, inadvertent blurring out of unperformed exclamations, or as intentional sharing with the audience the understanding that one is only putting a show, by referring to one's routine in a cynical or technical way, alluding to the collusive arrangement with others or making derogatory remarks about the audience, all this resulting in a sense that performance is something the team can always stand back from, back enough to imagine or play out simultaneously other kinds of performances, "attesting to other realities" (Goffman 207). In other words, for Goffman there can never be a clear line between front-stage and back-stage: no matter how firmly we define certain social spaces as spaces of relaxation and collusion with others, the division recedes from the already fragile social frame of behavioural interaction to the psychic space of each individual and his or her personal framings of experience: when Goffman in his later writings returns to the term "backstage", as, for instance, in his discussion on academic lectures in his book Forms of talk[6] (Goffman 172), he will use it exclusively for denoting the split consciousness of his performing lecturer, and his awareness of the "other realities" he must pay attention to.

Let us now turn to psychoanalytic uses of the backstage metaphor, deeply engraved in Freud's first topography of the psyche, and to its implications for the analysis of theatre reception in André Green's Un oeil en trop[7] . Let me first however explain what I mean by the mentioned "deep engraving": David Wiles, a researcher of the history of western performance space, first drew attention to the extent to which Freud's three systems – unconscious, preconscious and perception-consciousness - nicely fit the configuration of 19th century theatre buildings (Wiles 232-233). Theatre was, as is widely known, one of Freud's dearest spaces of leisure in the early years of his professional career, as it also figures as one of the frequent topoi of many dreams recounted in his masterpiece, The Interpretation of dreams, where his notion of a psychic apparatus with the mentioned three systems first took its spatial shape. Perception-consciousness, according to Wiles, is here placed in the audience, preconscious occupies the front-stage, while the invisible dealings in the backstage - the place out of which the unknown impulses and unthinkable wishes emerge in the form of plastic images, situations and "dramatizations" - becomes the unconscious.

For André Green, who builds his theorizations upon the same conjectures, this analogy explains the sustained appeal theatre holds for humans, as a social institution in which one can indulge in hypnotic attachment to "negative hallucinations" (Green 15), that is, submit to what he calls "a double reversal created by the exchange between the spectator and the spectacle" (Green 13), the first one at this side, and the other one on the other side of the edge of the stage. While the first one returns the spectator's gaze in a denial of access to the visible objects on stage, its full magnetic impact of producing the untouchable yet also familiar otherness is nevertheless assured by the second and opposite reversal, the urge of the gaze to explore the space by which the illusion is created, in which the false is fabricated. Furthermore, Green insists, this otherness of the visible, assured by the desire to reach the invisible, is so effective since it re-creates the relation of otherness between the subject and the world, the spectator being always fully aware of the confrontation of the entire space of the theatre building and the space of the world. The two edges of the stage – the barrier between the stage and the audience, and the one between the front-stage and the backstage – are thus doubly operative: first, as metaphorical features of individual consciousness apprehending the world both inside and outside the theatre, and second, as parts of actual theatrical spatial syntax in which the apprehension of consciousness itself can take place.

But what happens when these two barriers are intentionally crossed over, especially if one crosses the latter, the one leading to the backstage, that, according to Green, is in principle "a radically uncrossable limit" and has therefore to be "renounced" as "impossible" (Green 15)? We have already indicated that this prohibition is just an extrapolation of what Alice Rayner in her study on the backstage[8] insists on calling an "ideological" and "historically determined contract" of bourgeois "spatial configurations of stage design" that marks the mutual exclusion of "signifying and non-signifying practices" of workers, the "reality of practice that leads out the backstage door to the world" (Rayner 537-538). We must never forget that theatres are built forms and lived spaces as well: someone inhabits backstage, and it does not hold its attraction simply as a threatening, forbidden, darkened cave of the unconscious, as Green seems to imply, but as a space of living and breathing Goffmanian "teams" not only of technicians and other "service specialists", but above all of actual, professional actors preparing for their entrance, sharing mythic inside secrets, be they dark, as is their stage-fright, strategic, as are their stage cues, their mask

and the rehearsed dealings they will engage in when they arrive in front of us, or the ones they share on us, mimicking and ridiculing us as either “lousy” or “warm” audiences. Would entering that space make us Goffmanian impostors, would we thus pressure internal mishaps of the production team? Would it mean finally having access to the real which our desire aims at, “even where that real is pragmatic and empirical” – filled with “the actuality of labour” (Rayner 539), and its “banal, vaguely disappointing” and “mundane” side (Rayner 538) - or would it be just another fantasy, comparable to the obtuse effects of contemporary reality shows? Having adopted a Marxist stance regarding the ideological operations of the invisibility of backstage work, Rayner inevitably returns to psychoanalytic grounds when she rightly warns us that the appeal of the backstage

> *arises not because the objects and people backstage are actually more real than the objects and people on stage in performance, but because the spatial model of inside and outside creates a geometry of seeming difference. The spatial image not only incites the desire to see more, and to see the truth, but also reinforces the conviction that what is conventionally hidden and then revealed is more true and real than any representation. This sense of the real, which is felt as privilege, thus actually requires a hidden space, an invisible practice, where desire might find its object. And that desire is powerful enough to find reinforcement in the social contract within theatre (Rayner 539).*

By referring now to three contemporary performances that engaged with these questions, I certainly do not intend to reduce them to reality shows, although one must acknowledge a growing appetite for such entertainment as a symptom correlative to the poetics of the intrusion of the Real, as Lehmann[9] summarized the affinities and ambitions of much current post-dramatic theatre practice (Lehmann 203). Its strengths, however, do lie elsewhere. When we are invited in Nataša Rajković’s and Bobo Jelčić’s performance entitled Slowing down to split in smaller groups and join the actors in their separate dressing-rooms before the performance actually starts, we are led to believe that we are intruding into their private preserve, as we are tickled at the same time by the prospect of finally “seeing through” some of their strategic secrets and capacity concealments. Instead of being let “in the know” of their professional solidarity, however, we are indeed confronted with a further crossing over the barrier, their seeming non-professional, ordinary humanness – with men and women who address us intimately and tell their personal life-stories,

making us feel awkward and unwillingly indiscreet, the better to soon realize that the stories told concern “in fact” fictional characters who will appear on the front-stage in any moment. The dramaturgy of the later presented “whole” is thus displaced by our own backstage reminiscences, filled with new and criss-crossed layers of fictionality, among which we must include the trick of our sense of intrusion, and a thorough disorientation regarding the question where the backstage of this backstage experience is to be conceived of, let alone seen or sensed.

A further complication of such spatial re-configuration was envisaged by Oliver Frljić in his “double bill” Dido and Aeneas/Death in Venice, in which two performances, with largely the same cast, took place in the same theatre at the same time, functioning as back-stages to each other’s front-stage, to which was later added a third one, entitled The Plague and directed by Anica Tomić, happening in the tiny narrow corridor in-between the already occupied two performance spaces, catching and framing the behaviour of the actors while they were running for the cues or trying to relax before the next performing task. Directors as well as some technicians appeared and disappeared at will in all the three performances, sometimes even in aggressively disruptive or irreverently hilarious manner, as if they wanted to bring the performances back to their rehearsal phase or to break free from the whole business. At a certain point, the audience was led into the very dark centre of the entire building, in the under-stage world, where some of the most powerful passages from Artaud’s Theatre and its double, the ones on the plague, were recited in whisper. This experiment was not interested in the actors’ personal selves, but in the material aspects of their investment into somebody else’s illusion, whether the one of the director or the one of the spectator, who joined hands for the first time as prime impostors within the backstage world of exhausted performers, devoid now of any romantic aura. The actors, of course, performed even there, and they may have, as Mislav Čavajda did, faked their fainting in the space in-between, but they were still exposed to the audience in their bare life as being blatantly physically abused in order to keep the pace of the double bill running smoothly. The audience, on the other hand, or should I say on the other side, was forced to attend all the three performances in separate evenings, being thus confronted to its attachment to the invisible ones, attentive at entrances and departures of the actors that measured their energy and investment in order to arrive on time in the other performance, as well as at any sounds that may be signalling what is going on out there, out of one’s sight.

My final example is a work in progress by the American performer Louise Weaver and British director Julia Barley, based on my English translation of Miroslav Krleža's short story Behind the Mask, that had its first workshop trial in 2010 in the National Theatre in Rijeka, under the title Performing in Agony. The text is in itself a study of the phenomenon of backstage, since it consists of a reported interior monologue of an actress suffering from stage-fright while preparing for her appearance on stage. A stunning fictional testimony to memories, feelings, perceptions and bodily sensations of the backstage space, the story blends outward dealings, physiological reactions and psychic experiences of what lies behind the view and the knowledge of the public. The transformation of this short story into a performance script, which was alternately read, then vehemently recited and then spoken as if in intimate fresh-talk, emphasized the confusion regarding the "original" narrative status of the monologue, which vacillates in between third person narrative, internal discourse and an eloquent direct exhibition, exaggerated up to the point of affirming what Miran Božovič would call "histerical materialism" (Božovič 21) of the over-sensitive, paralysed, sweating and shivering female body, the ultimate backstage of the actress's professed, confessed and confused thoughts.

During the performance, the audience was seated on the stage together with all the technicians, although far behind the closed curtain, positioned thus as if, upon the curtain's opening, the audience had to start to perform as well, while the director Julia Barley followed Louise Weaver's departure from her dressing room with a camera, whose projected close-up could be followed on a transparent cloth hung in between the curtain and the public. Upon the performer's arrival on stage, the projections of her various social personae started to continuously haunt her intermittent stepping in and out of the realms of experience framed in the narrative by constant shifts from her present to her past to the horrible imminent future of having to step in front of the public - which, of course, was already watching her perform. The paradox of this half-touching and half-humorous deconstruction of the artist's persona, however, arrived with a thorough identification the public felt with the performer when the curtain was finally raised, and when the triumphal music announced her final entrance into the front-stage, together with the standing ovation heard from the loud-speakers, of which she fantasized at the end of her monologue. In front of the raised curtain and the stage, there gaped the empty seats of the audience, reminding one of the horrifying emptiness

of all that lies behind the multiple masks of our selves, and that lure us into our undying appetite to reach and confront the real.

My examples are, I conclude, provocative and self-reflexive projects that complicate issues connected with the "intrusion of the Real" by going back to traditional theatre buildings and attempting to treat them not as inherited, temporarily neutralized and conventional frames for the display of distant fictional universes, but as sites to be re-visited in their own right, with all their aforementioned conceptual associations, as well as perceived qualities, embodied experiences, and working services. The fact that these sites in collective imagination function as heterotopias, however, seriously obstructs any easy apprehension of them as historically contingent built forms, places of material labour and not places of fantasy. What is required is a reorganization of their spatial syntax, and the unwitting overlap this reorganization produces in the mind and bodies of both the actors and the audience, with their inherited and internalized schemas of apprehension, as well as with their imagination, emotions and memories previously attached to the theatrical place. By encouraging the audience to cross the so far "radically uncrossable boundaries" and by enabling the newly arranged performing space to feed on the impact of their affective power on all subsequent perception and inhabitation of the theatrical building, the performances I described do engender new emotional states, social encounters, political insights, and aesthetic worlds. But these states, encounters, insights and worlds nonetheless remain on the front stage of the Real. Trying to inhabit it may in fact be seen as the ultimate illusion, if not even as one of those desperate theatrical gestures by which theatre all throughout the 20th century attempted, "in fact", to escape from the Real[10] .

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I propose to address Edward Soja's "trialectics" of historical, social and spatial aspects of being, as well as Lefebvre's categories of perceptual, conceptual and lived aspects of spatiality, as they pertain to one of the ruling borders/dichotomies/barriers of theatrical space, the one dividing "front stage" from "backstage" regions (see Rayner, 2002 and Filmer, 2006). Belonging to traditional theatre discourse, and issuing from elaborated architectural designs of the so-called théâtre a l'italienne, this division namely has its conceptual destiny that reaches beyond the realm of performing arts: while Erving Goffman (1959) extrapolated it onto the study of everyday social

interaction, André Green (1969) demonstrated its operations with respect to Freud's first topography of the psyche, steeped as it proved to be in 19th century spatial conditions of theatrical production and reception (Wiles, 2003). Of course, 20th century European theatre history is crucially marked by attempts at breaking free from the coercions of inherited theatre architecture, with all its socio-cultural implications and ingrained power relations, but the division between backstage and front stage, especially given its mentioned conceptual resonances, continued to haunt the most daring re-arrangements of the ways in which space dictates the actor-audience relationships. It is especially interesting in this respect to look at endeavours of contemporary performance projects to re-define the use of traditionally designed theatre buildings, since these projects often include invading backstage domains in order to expose the very representational apparatus of performance and make the spectator aware of layers of meanings and feelings involved in their intrusion into so far "forbidden" regions. I will concentrate on three recent instances of Croatian performance practice in which this invasion not only brought forth problematical aspects of such a transgression but also engendered new social, emotional and aesthetic experiences, new combinations within the spatial syntax of the theatrical place.

[1] Michel Foucault, Des espaces autres, in: Dits et écrits: 1954-1988, Tome IV (1980-1988) Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994, 752-762.

[2] In Sydney Opera House, see Andrew Filmer, Backstage Space, The Place of the Performer, Ph. D. dissertation, http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/1415

[3] Edward Soja, «Thirdspace: Expanding the Scope of the Geographical Imagination», in Human Geography Today, edited by Doreen Massey, John Allen and Philip Sarre, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999.

[4] I borrow this phrasing from Filmer (BPP, 31-36), who uses the term «the spatial syntax» following Kim Dovey's blending of spatial syntax analysis, discursive analysis and phenomenology, developed in her Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form. London: Routledge, 1999.

[5] Erving Goffman, The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. New York: Anchor books, 1959.

[6] Erving Goffman, Forms of Talk. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.

[7] André Green, Un oeil en trop. Le complexe d'Oedipe dans la tragédie, Paris: Editions de minuit, 1969.

[8] Alice, Rayner, «Rude Mechanicals and the Specters of Marx», Theatre Journal, Volume 54, No 4, December 2002, 535-554.

[9] Hans-Thiess Lehmann, Postdramsko kazalište (Postdramatic theatre), Zagreb: CDU, 2004.

[10] Slavoj Žižek, How to Read Lacan, London: Granta Books, 2006, 59.

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