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## The Relevance of Philosophy of Theatre. A Methodological Perspective

**ABSTRACT:** *Ancient practice long ignored by theatre studies, philosophy of theatre has recently resurfaced. While from Aristotle onwards it has traditionally represented a speculative analysis on the nature of the theatrical object, philosophy of theatre is now becoming a proper methodology that allows to place the truth-bearing value of theatrical practice at the centre of reflection. The philosophical approach to the theatre aims to evaluate the theatrical object or practice (a show, a document, a theory, and so on) revealing the way in which its generically expressive effect is capable of broadening meaning, in the evolution of both the forms intrinsic to the language and those that are generically human. The philosophical approach ultimately is a methodology that allows to re-establish – in critical and reflective practices – the crucial connection between theatre and life, beyond any evaluative and descriptive practice of the object of analysis. Starting from a series of examples of philosophical reflections (Lukács, Badiou, Puchner, Sini, Rokem), this paper aims to show how such a methodology might still open up productive areas of research on theatre in the present day. Finally, the need for a new philosophical reflection on the theatre in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic will be examined, with particular reference to the concept of presence and its crucial relation to mediation practices.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Performance Studies, New Theatrology, Pandemic, Badiou, Lukács.*

### 1. Philosophy of Theatre between Performance Studies and New Theatrology

As this critical volume shows, Italian and international reflection on the theatre is witnessing the resurfacing of a philosophical interest<sup>1</sup>. An example of this is provided by the significant number of studies in the field published over the past few years, from Tom Stern's *Philosophy and Theatre. An Introduction*<sup>2</sup> and *The*

<sup>1</sup> This article works and expands upon on a few topics which I have already addressed before. See, in particular, Ceraolo 2015 and Ceraolo 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Stern 2018.

*Philosophy of Theatre, Drama and Acting*<sup>3</sup> to Martin Puchner's *The Drama of Ideas*<sup>4</sup>, from the multiple phenomenological perspectives on theatre, recently re-examined in Italy by Carlo Rozzoni in *Per un'estetica del teatro*<sup>5</sup>, to Freddie Rokem's *Philosophers & Thespians. Thinking Performance*<sup>6</sup>. Such a new wave of interest is distinctively characterized by an increasingly outward-looking nature of the theatre as an object to be analysed starting from its philosophical reconsideration. In other words, a new phase has been developing in the contemporary reflection on the theatre. Following the historiographic period of the 1960s and the openness to semiotics, anthropology, and sociology of the New Avant-Garde in the 1970s, in the late 1980s the reflection on the theatre embraced the postmodern view. Ever since then, it has been eluding the ontological issue and isolating itself either in the "closed enclosure" of Performance Studies or in the performative approach typical of continental studies generically pertaining to what has been called New Theatrology<sup>7</sup>.

In parallel with the postmodern approach, studies on performing arts seem not to have confirmed the innovative effect that had marked their development, especially in the way it had been conceived by the American New Avant-Garde. This has mainly been due to both a rejection of the European poststructuralist reflection and a reconstruction of the concept of performance. The recent reflection on the theatre lacks an outward-looking nature, or shows a pseudo-openness lacking an actual epistemological support, as it has been demonstrated by the chaotic – and especially American – approach used to enhance the intrinsic value of dramatic theory that has embraced the perspective of cultural studies, chaotically combining different concepts. This has resulted in the current marginalization of the reflection on the theatre, not only in the general field of art studies, but also in the specific sector of the performing arts.

Once broken the link between theatre forms, life forms and their fields of analysis, studies on performing arts have been incapable of identifying significant new research perspectives. Consequently, a research practice has developed that,

3 Stern 2017.

4 Puchner 2014.

5 Rozzoni 2012.

6 Rokem 2009.

7 The relationship between American Performance Studies and European New Theatrology deserves to be addressed in a separate paper. The topic has been dealt with by Marco De Marinis on multiple occasions. Suffice it to say here that, as he has pointed out, the difference between the two approaches does not lie in the centrality of the performative level, which is shared by both, but rather in a different relationship with historical analysis and the concept of theatrical work. As De Marinis stated, "I think performance studies is methodologically too vague, its object being too vast and ill-defined and, above all, I find its relation to the historical dimension and historiographical knowledge lacks clarity and direction, risking radical relativism and excessive subjectivity (and anyway, let us not overlook the demystificatory power and the possibility of original rereadings brought on by the overlapping of poststructuralism, deconstructionism, postcolonial studies, gender studies...). Indeed, almost everything can be claimed as an object of performance studies, thanks to the Schechnerian distinction *is performance/as performance*" (De Marinis 2011, 74).

far from interpreting the theme of performance by linking it to other human practices – as Richard Schechner, the father of Performance Studies, had suggested<sup>8</sup> – has rather limited its object to theatre practices. This has led to a violation of the basic principle that described studies on performing arts as a constantly outward-looking movement, destined for the fusion of artistic and life practices, including political, social and cultural ones. On the other hand, when a kind of openness has been shown, it has meant a denial of the uniqueness and specificity of the theatrical practice, resulting in a widespread theatricality corresponding to social life as a whole and denying the distinctiveness of the theatre, thus overlooking the theatrical event and its distinction from the text and the audience.

Such a research approach has been confirmed by the fact that the most innovative experiences of the reflection on performing arts of the past few years have contradicted their own premises, either explicitly or implicitly. An example of this is provided by two significant works on performance in the field of continental European New Theatrology, Erika Fischer-Lichte's *Ästhetik des Performativen*<sup>9</sup> and Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatisches Theatre*<sup>10</sup>. In Erika Fischer-Lichte's work, a programmatic return to an aesthetic approach can be observed, with it going back to Lessing and Goethe as well as referring to Walter Benjamin and Max Hermann, the founder of the German *Theaterwissenschaft*. Fischer-Lichte considers the aesthetic approach the only – but still re-conceivable – starting point to grasp the specificity of contemporary postmodern practices. Similarly, Lehmann's work shows a clear return to the Hegelian system that had characterized Szondi's *Theorie des modernen Dramas*, together with a subsequent sort of Adornian sociologism, whose theoretical jumble and hermeneutic perspective have confined – despite producing original results – Lehmann's theory of postdramatic theatre to an outdated “critical thinking”, a dialectic process of thought that cannot be separated from a negative perspective.

In other words, following Schechner's crucial reflection, studies on performing arts, both analytical (Performance Studies) and continental (New Theatrology), seem to have developed significant proposals on the theatre only by violating their own theoretical premises. They have crossed the boundaries of the postulates that, in an increasingly unproductive way, they had established regarding their capability of dealing with those life forms that Performance Studies had initially intended to “colonize”<sup>11</sup>, only to abandon them for a retreat in the autonomous area of performance or, paradoxically, for a radical denial of the uniqueness of the theatre.

This is the framework within which the reflection on and in contemporary times seems to have developed at an international level. On the one hand, it

8 Schechner 2003, ix.

9 Fisher-Lichte 2008.

10 Lehmann 2006.

11 An example of this is Schechner's extraordinary proposal to reshape classical aesthetics starting from the performative field. See, for example, Schechner 2003, 333-367. See also Schechner 2004, 7-9, and Schechner 2006, 1-27.

has burdened itself with the experiences of single artists/performers/directors seen within a context purely focused on performance, with no relation to the ideal forms to which those performances should have made reference. This has meant renouncing the idea of the theatre as a specific, unique entity engaged in a conversation with the world, often deliberately excluding the possibility of such a conversation, appealing for a sort of apologia of the performers' bodies, of their socio-political instances deprived of any ideal openness. On the other hand, the reflection has tried to fly high and build a dramatic theory that, making exclusive reference to the performative field, has, even when being productive, reshaped and used methods and genres belonging to classic theory (New Theatrology).

In this sense, even Bonnie Marranca's *Performance Art Magazine* and her attempt to deviate from Performance Studies, on the one hand by referring to the modernism of the historical Avant-Garde, and on the other by trying to re-establish a direct link with artistic practices (in terms of both literature and the fine arts), does not seem to have violated that approach to theatre studies based on the issue of the actor's body presentation and performance. The same can be said about those projects that, despite not explicitly belonging to the sphere of theatre studies, have recently taken charge of the reflection on the theatre, starting from different perspectives and objectives. An example of this is the already cited Freddie Rokem's somewhat unconventional study on the relationship between philosophy and the theatre. Not to mention the Italian Carlo Sini's analysis on dynamic arts, carried out as part of an ambitious attempt to encyclopaedically reorganize philosophical knowledge and later embraced by a number of theorists and scholars of the theatre.

Although the final volume of Sini's *Figure dell'enciclopedia filosofica* might lead to think of his proposal as a philosophical reworking of Eugenio Barba's and Jerzy Grotowski's theatre anthropology, his work moves the issue of the theatre from the field of the arts, to which it had been confined by Aristotle and the Western culture, to the field of knowledge, where the theatre is seen as an epistemological experience for humankind, representing a place for educational development – hence its educational value. According to Sini, the theatre is no longer a pure expression of aesthetics, but the oldest form of knowledge. It represents the primordial form of human experience to which it is necessary to go back in order to redefine the dominance of dynamic and performative processes (whose paradigm is the theatre, especially in the ancient rituals of Asian and extra-European cultures) over the speculative processes of human action<sup>12</sup>.

## 2. The Philosophy of Theatre as a Methodology

It is within this framework that a new interest in the philosophy of theatre has developed. But what does this development consist in? And why does it contradict

<sup>12</sup> Sini 2005. See also Sini e Attisani 2021.

the previous experience briefly summarized in the section above? The first reason for this contradiction lies in the fact that philosophy of theatre mainly aims at re-establishing the concept of theatrical work and the link between the latter and life forms. The philosophy of theatre certainly belongs to that area of dramatic theory to which Performance Studies and New Theatrolgy make reference, but in a rather innovative way, with the difference primarily lying in its methodological paradigm.

Furthermore, the contemporary philosophy of theatre seems to definitely break with the entire history of dramatic theory. From Aristotle onwards, traditional dramatic theory, in terms of both a philosophical and theoretical perspective, has essentially been a reflection on the theatre. Throughout its history, it has heterogeneously been a trend, the artists' comments on their own performances, a delimitation of boundaries, a means to affirm the extraordinary expressive violence of the theatre, a way to redefine the authentic path along which it acts, the almost accidental and free stage of a broader speculative or aesthetic reflection.

Such an approach has remained unchanged over the centuries, to the point that the most important experiences of the modern theatrical scene seem to have derived their own practice from theory. They have interpreted practice as the implementation of either a material deviation from or an adjustment to their own theory. Theory, in turn, has been considered a reflection on the theatre, a supposed truth of thought to be applied to a theatrical event whose tangible completion is practice. As a result, a distinction has been made between the "real" theatre and the "official" one, the latter representing a traditional theatre not involving any theoretical aspect, a simple form of entertainment for more or less educated audiences.

Despite the diriment centrality of theory in the field of theatre studies and practices, a specific philosophical approach has been marginalized for a long time. Most of the complex reasons behind that might be explained starting from an apparent wrong move made by philosophy in the first place, i.e. viewing theatrical practice as an external presence, subordinate to the philosophical system of thought, rather than coexisting with it. Philosophy has considered the theatre-object – in terms of both its general nature and protagonists (Antonin Artaud to Jacques Derrida, Carmelo Bene to Gilles Deleuze, and so on) – in contrast with thought, as a different entity or a simple ancillary presence. The theatre-event, not conceived in a diagonal relationship with philosophical practice, has become one of its specific objects of analysis, a simple form of experience. Philosophy has regarded the theatre as something essentially representing the acts of *seeing* and *listening to* what happens on stage, its visual and sound movements. The theatre, when contemplated, has been described as the "place of seeing", a place where the subject is visible, and hence close to painting by its very nature. It has also been seen as a "place of listening", close to music, a place where unreality per se is experienced, the place of "the double", of mimetic, deceptive events –

following Aristotle's *mimesis*<sup>13</sup> – in contrast with philosophical practice, viewed as the authentic “place” of thought.

The first innovative aspect of the contemporary philosophy of theatre lies in the fact that it is not just a simple theoretical method applied to theatrical practice. It is far from being a reflection, an ancillary feature or an interpretation of practice, as it has historically been considered. The philosophy of theatre is the way in which, through thinking, theatrical practice may be awarded its own “independence”, defining how, through its general practice, it is capable of shedding light on its specific truths. Philosophy is therefore “positive” thinking, the unveiling of the specific metalanguage of a truth-bearing practice, the description of its effects, the broadening of its meaning. It does not represent the creation of a discourse on something, but the explanation of the ways in which that something might give rise to a new series of truths.

This perspective on the philosophy of theatre has been developed by Alain Badiou, a prominent contemporary philosopher who has been dealing with the theatre for years. In his *Rhapsody for the Theatre*<sup>14</sup>, Badiou has identified a historical connection between the theatre and philosophy that completely reshapes the role and function of philosophy in relation to the art of the stage. According to Badiou, the theatre and philosophy share their place and moment of birth (ancient Greece), but also – and especially – a common destiny, both being the means through which humankind has historically found its way through “the inextricable life” and the movement of history. However, whereas philosophy develops a process of *éclaircie*, of clarification of life and history through a direct movement of the idea, the theatre follows the indirect path of representation. The theatre is the *mise-en-cors* of the Idea, its actualization, its reduction to the finiteness of bodies. Not surprisingly, these two ancient practices are at the origin of our civilization: the theatre and philosophy are coexistent as analogous forms of the unveiling of truth. Although they speak different, independent languages, their truth-bearing power indissolubly marks their shared journey through the history of mankind.

Following Badiou, the theatre produces unique, immanent truths. Such truths are not external to the theatre, they do not belong to politics or situational contexts, they do not have an exclusively anthropological function aimed at determining human action, they are not simply the finite version of the philosophical Truth. They are rather theatrical truths and might only develop on stage, following a process whose extremes are the written text and the audience, respectively. In other words, the movement of the theatre is the transition of something specifically theatrical from the theatrical text (immutability) to a single audience member at a specific event (contingency). The entirety of this movement is the process of general truth of the theatre, which establishes a new temporality.

Badiou has described this “something” transitioning from an immutable to a contingent state as the “theatre-idea”. The theatre-idea is first of all the incomplete

13 For a recent discussion on *mimesis*, *poiesis* and *catarsis* see Attisani 2018, 177-180 and Attisani 2019, 17-41.

14 Badiou 2013.

result of a theatrical text, the product of a playwright's work. Its main feature is its incompleteness, as the theatrical text does not aim at conveying exhaustive meanings as novels do, but it needs to be completed, fulfilled, by a performance. Any drama produces multiple theatre-ideas, universal concepts such as revenge, identity, power, love, which in the theatrical text acquire the incomplete dimension of the idea. This immutable state transitions to contingency thanks to a director who, gathering an audience at a specific event in a specific place, by means of the actors, scenography and costumes, fulfils the theatre-idea by correlating the eternal character of the text with the moment of performance. Therefore, Badiou maintains that the two essential elements of the theatre are the playwright, who is the author of the theatre-idea and the keeper of theatrical eternity, and the director, who safeguards its objectivity and makes the moment of performance possible.

It seems clear how Badiou's description of general theatrical practice (the movements of the theatre-idea and its related aspects) shows a systematic, nearly final break with the previous philosophy of theatre, *the thoughts on the theatre* historically developed. However, the structural indissolubility of the relationship between philosophy and the theatre, in this sense deeply modern, had already been analysed by another philosopher of the Twentieth Century, György Lukács. In *History of the Modern Drama*<sup>15</sup>, Lukács states that the theatre is based on the paradox of perceivably and materially expressing the deepest abstract ideas, thus tangibly revealing the most rigorous dialectics. Since its purpose is mass effect, drama expresses more primitive, less refined and complex feelings than the other genres, and it is nevertheless the most abstract and the closest to philosophy of them all. According to Lukács, the essence of the theatre consists in expressing the deepest problems in life with the help of direct and immediate symbols. Dramatic theatre is a dialectic of different forms of willpower clashing with each other. This is because if feelings are not problematic, do not clash with each other, are not in contrast, are not in a dialectic relationship as forms of willpower moved by the same necessities, and until dialectic is not abstract, the theatre cannot offer anything. This paradoxical fusion of the concrete and the abstract characterizes both technical and dramaturgical issues, making the theatre the most philosophical of the arts. The theatre materially and dialectically conveys the abstract – it is the abstract in action. Like philosophy, the theatre is a union of the real and the virtual, the imaginary and the tangible, as it materially (and hence politically) produces in the present something that exists at a purely abstract level.

The reason why these two cases suggest a proper philosophical methodology to study the theatre might be explained by another specific example. In *The Drama of Ideas*, Martin Puchner considers Badiou's the most innovative interpretation of that dramatic Platonism embraced by Martha Nussbaum and Iris Murdoch. This hermeneutic purpose hides a demolition of the paradigm of studies on performing arts that, by making use of some crucial aspects of Badiou's reflection, is aimed at substantially modifying its founding instance. According to this paradigm,

15 Lukács 1909.

the actor/performer's body is never the bearer of an idea that goes beyond itself, which means that the movement of the theatre is not a representation of some incorporeal instance, but rather a representation, happening here and now, of a material movement achieved through the actor's body.

The philosophical reflection on the theatre thus is not just a way to meditate on its intrinsic nature, but a method to create a field of reasoning where the experiences to be analysed (a show, an artist, a trend, and so on) are considered in relation to that same nature. In other words, the philosophy of theatre is a proper critical and analytical methodology, as it allows scholars to relate to the object starting from the way in which the object itself might outline, although provisionally, the nature of the theatre per se. Therefore, the tools of philosophy allow to restore the truth of the theatrical object, reducing, to some extent, its structural incompleteness. Once a connection between the practical level and the philosophical discourse has been established, the finiteness of a work is transformed into its potential universality. This means translating into a universal idea (philosophy) something that is, by its very nature, the expression of a material particular (the theatre).

The capability a theatrical work has to "talk" is always secondary to the possible creation of a field of reasoning that, originating from the work itself, relates it to the world, the latter representing what it deals with, more or less consciously. This relationship may only be re-established by a discourse starting from a universal not entirely belonging to the work, but not prevailing over it either. This is because in the first case, the discourse would be completely absorbed by the work, thus becoming sterile. In the second case, the work would only be an excuse for a purely abstract perspective of the discourse itself. If its two components are correctly balanced, the philosophy of theatre is an unrivalled tool for knowledge and enhancement of the theatrical object, thanks to its capability of relating the theatre to life, considering one in relation to the other, and vice versa.

### **3. Present and Future of Theatre and (its) Philosophy**

It is unnecessary to point out how the philosophy of theatre is essential in the present day in order to analyse the theatrical object in an age of crucial change. As the theatre is experiencing a period of radical mediatization (expedited by the practical consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic), it seems almost obvious to consider philosophy an essential tool to understand what the theatre is and what historical function it has in the present day. However, the issues that come into play are much more complex. This is due to the fact that the present and future of the theatre, which are certainly unquestioned, seem to be more and more linked to the capability the theatre has, and will have, of creating new languages and objects to convey its strength in the forthcoming period. These new objects should not replace live performances, but they should complement them, following that principle of reproducibility that has characterized the enjoyment of another kind of performing art in the early Twentieth Century: music.



As I have already pointed out elsewhere<sup>16</sup>, this process of objectification is much more difficult for an art form like the theatre, which is indissolubly linked to the human presence, unlike music, whose technical elements have more easily undergone a process of reproducibility. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight how philosophy might play a key role in this context, not only as a tool to investigate the theatre and its ontology, but especially as a practice capable of restoring the centrality of the theatre. Indeed, several reflections on the theatre have actually led to its marginality, in contrast to the heterogeneity of world issues. Continuing to interpret the theatre based on its intrinsic features, as an inward-looking rather than outward-looking phenomenon, or continuing to mistake it for reality, denying its uniqueness, means fostering those processes that have resulted in the other (audiovisual) performing arts partially outshining the theatre. As it has already been stressed, the strength of the theatre can only be emphasized through a reflection that makes every single theatrical event face real life. This might even mean abandoning, to some extent, a solely theatrical language to embrace a philosophical discourse capable of producing such a synthesis.

The philosophical language becomes stronger when building non-specialised discourses where the interpretation of the object or practice of analysis is characterized by a number and generality of references that are external to it. The philosophy of theatre links the forms of representation to life forms, creating a connection between the theatrical language and the uncertainty of material conditions. Its methodology is anti-specialised by definition, as it builds a knowledge in which every element of the theatre – from aesthetics to politics, from ethics to sociology – is considered in relation to the generality of the world. In the present day, turning to the philosophy of theatre means rediscovering the essence of the theatrical fact and its many modifications, revealing the way in which its new language, being subject to historical change, might show some general truths. This might be achieved only through a philosophical methodology that deviates from the partial nature of a work, its intrinsic logic, in order to direct it towards the abstract horizons of life and its universal elements.

As Walter Benjamin stated, “critique seeks the truth content of a work of art”<sup>17</sup>. This is because “reflection”, which Benjamin considered critique’s distinguishing feature, “is not, as judgment is, a subjectively reflecting process; rather, it lies enclosed in the presentational form of the artwork and unfolds itself in criticism, in order finally to reach fulfilment in the lawful continuum of form”<sup>18</sup>. In other words, critique is where a work shows its truth, before reaching fulfilment in the continuum of forms. Only through critical reflection, does a work communicate, become a universal idea, and establish a connection with other works. This important task of reflection that Benjamin identified, but critique has not been capable of fulfilling for years, might – and needs to – guide the philosophy of theatre in the present day.

16 Ceraolo 2020, 127-132.

17 Benjamin 2002, 297.

18 Benjamin 2002, 165.

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