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Społeczeństwo. Edukacja. Język 5, 53-60

2017

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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IMAGES OF VIOLENCE IN COMPLICITE

OBRAZY PRZEMOCY W COMPLICITE

Abstract

In British theatre of the last three decades, we observe a significant shift from the more verbal, playwright-focused model of theatre whose meanings are determined primarily by the literary concept of drama to the one which exercises more profoundly artistic autonomy of theatre. *Complicite* is one of the leading theatre companies that are responsible for this shift. In the performances of *Complicite*, the theme of violence has been explored frequently. The whole variety of theatre devices were employed in depicting images of violence. The article discusses plays such as *Mnemonic*, *The Street of Crocodiles*, *Measure for Measure* and *The Master and Margarita*, *A Disappearing Number*, *Shun-kin* and *The Encounter* and mentions others.

Keywords: *Complicite*, Simon McBurney, *Mnemonic*, *The Encounter*, violence, theatre studies, communication, semiotics

Abstrakt

W ciągu ostatnich trzech dekad można zaobserwować w brytyjskim teatrze odejście od modelu teatru opartego na słowie, którego znaczenia determinowane są przez literacką koncepcję dramatu na rzecz teatru, który korzysta w większym zakresie z autonomii artystycznej teatru. *Complicite* to jedna z tych grup teatralnych, które stoją za tymi zmianami. W przedstawieniach *Complicite*, temat przemocy pojawia się regularnie i do jej zaprezentowania wykorzystywany jest cały wachlarz środków artystycznych. Artykuł omawia sztuki: *Mnemonic*, *The Street of Crocodiles*, *Measure for Measure*, *The Master and Margarita*, *A Disappearing Number*, *Shun-kin*, *The Encounter* i kilka innych.

Słowa kluczowe: *Complicite*, Simon McBurney, *Mnemonic*, *The Encounter*, przemoc, badania nad teatrem, komunikacja, semiotyka

1.

Specificity of theatre communication emerges from its performative character. No matter how detailed its overall blueprint is, the performance creates meanings here and now – in front of an audience – using verbal, visual, and sonic signals.¹ They function in a number of codes – or “languages” – that are mutually interrelated and enrich the semantic potential of one another.² Depending on sounds, visual context, words uttered by actors and their gestures, a bamboo stick may epitomise as different notions as a cockpit of a plane landing on the Amazon river, a window frame in a London flat, a wall of a room in ancient Japan, or a dangerous, if basic, weapon – a spear – that might be used for different purposes by native inhabitants of the Brazilian jungle. As a spear, the bamboo stick may kill but it may also be offered as a precious gift. It all depends on the context.

Liveness of theatre communication fosters physical immediacy between involved parties.³ Unlike in non-performative arts (such as literature, film, and painting), the audience is faced with a one-time event whose artistic and aesthetic potential depends as much on the preconceived blueprint as on the tangible contact between the stage and the audience. These are skills of an actor that stimulate spectators’ imagination. As a spear, one and same the bamboo stick may connote as different notions as a weapon and a gift. By extension the stick/spear becomes an attribute of either an enemy or a friend.

In British theatre of the last three decades, we observe a significant shift from the more verbal, playwright-focused model of theatre whose meanings are determined primarily by the literary concept of drama to the one which exercises more profoundly artistic autonomy of theatre. For sure, the intrusion of continental influences and more experimental forms of theatre were visible in the work of Samuel Beckett, Peter Brook and the likes, but it is emblematic that both of them decided to leave the British Isles for Paris. Yet, their work, and the continuous support of various forms of experimental and non-dramatic theatre by events and institutions such as the Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, the Riverside Studios, the Royal Court Theatre and more recently the Barbican Centre (all three in London), provided ground for a more radical transformation of the paradigm of British theatre as such. There is now as much space for dealing with theatre as theatre as there is for cultivating the kind of theatre in which the dominant position of the playwright remains unquestionable. The shift may be well illustrated by the success of radical social and formal experiments of In-Yer Face Theatre

¹ There are important theoretical consequences of this observation. See, for example, Patrice Pavis’s *Contemporary Mise en scène* [2013], Keir Elam’s understanding of the contrast between the “dramatic text” and “performance text” [2002, esp. 190-192], and Jerzy Limon’s more general observations in *The Chemistry of the Theatre* [2010].

² For a concise and lucid description of “codes of communication” see *Key Concepts in Drama and Performance* [Pickering, 2005, p. 222-224].

³ In *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* we read: “Liveness describes a quality of live performance – the sense that it is happening here and now. It is an important idea because it apparently distinguishes live performance from recorded performance-based media such as film and television, indicating that live performance has some intrinsic qualitative and even political difference from other forms of performance. It is an especially important idea because the nature, effects and even existence of this qualitative difference are the subject of considerable debate.” [Allain and Harive, 2006, p. 168].

in the 1990s on the one hand, and on the other by the type of research developed by the likes of Paul Allain, Patrice Pavis and Ken Pickering at the University of Kent in Canterbury. The shift is striking when we compare contemporary currents on London stage with the description of the state of matters that dominated in the late twenty-century theatre that emerges from the excellent book by Dan Rebellato entitled *1956 and All That* [1999].

2.

One may perhaps complain that such vibrant intrusion of continental and global tendencies has violated the virtues of what is generally defined as British theatre (indeed, even some more liberal critics tend to do so) but this is certainly not my view. On the contrary, the diachronic process which I am describing subverts petrified conventions of (the middle class) entertainment and provides much ground for the creation of new meanings and multifarious forms of theatre.

As David Gothard – a former director of the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh and the Riverside Studios in London – observes, the shift that has occurred in the British Theatre since the early 1980s is much in line with the development of the London-based Theatre de Complicite (in conversation, 19 September 2015). Indeed, Complicite has persistently and intentionally violated the habits of the British theatre so as to make it different to its canonised and petrified forms. Complicite took a reverse course to that of Beckett and Brook: after training gained in Paris they established the company in England. The direction (from Paris to London) reflects their aspirations of implementing continental influences in Britain. The success of Complicite is well conveyed by Gothard when he says: “They changed everything. Everyone wants to be like them” (in conversation 19 September 2015). It is equally illustrative to observe that whereas in 1985 their *More Bigger Snacks Now* was successfully presented as part of the Fringe festival, in 2015 the world premiere of their *The Encounter* was commissioned as a highlight of the Edinburgh International Festival. One cannot imagine a more explicit change in the artistic status of a theatre company in Britain.

We are dealing here with the process that Yuri Lotman describes as an explosion – the clash of opposing cultural paradigms (i.e. British literary drama and continental experiments) that results in a new entity (contemporary British theatre). Violent intrusion of external elements is responsible for redefinition of the very nature of the original system/paradigm. The process is rapid, impulsive in nature and inspires unpredictable consequences. The followers of Complicite pursue their own artistic and aesthetic objectives.

I am referring here to Yuri Lotman because his metaphor of culture as the sphere of artistic “explosions” that are embedded in more static periods of accumulative tranquillity is accurate and thought-provoking. In the remaining part of my argument, however, I am going to discuss more literal images of violence that appear in Complicite. Because violence is a recurrent theme in the company’s *oeuvre*, and it is by rule associated with notions such as: resistance, disobedience, insubordination, as well as collective and individual memory (paired with oblivion). Notably, the model of the world proposed by the company is not that of uncompromising, and non-reflexive confrontation but the one in which

overcoming cultural and mental divergence may be achieved by individuals. This is to say, the theme of violence is as central for *Complicite*, as are the ways in which confrontation may be overcome. In *The Encounter* the refrain-like repetition of the phrase “Some of us are friends” implies the other part of this understatement – “and some of us are enemies.” As a spear, the bamboo stick may turn into a gift but it may as well be used as a weapon.

3.

Exile, violence, anxiety, slaughter, fear of other people – these are intrinsic features of human existence that have accompanied us since the very beginning. The universal dimension of *Complicite* makes much use of this observation. *Mnemonic* – a performance that was devised at the turn of the millennium and toured around Europe – presents the Iceman (Ötzi), whose body was found in September 1991 in the Alps, as an Everyman who epitomises human lot. Inspired by Konrad Spindler’s book *Man from The Ice*,⁴ the performance is set in the twentieth century in a room in a London flat but it encompasses events from various parts of Europe happening roughly through the last five thousand years. The story is episodic, eccentric and at times may seem illogical⁵ but its main purpose is to intermingle atrocities occurring at various points of European history. Treblinka, the exodus of Greeks from Turkey, a puzzling Red cross hospital in Galicia, the Warsaw Ghetto, and a mass grave of murdered Neolithic villagers that was discovered in 1983 near Talheim in south-west Germany suggest that violence is substantial part of human lot.

For this reason, the image presenting the weak wounded Iceman escaping from other people into the wilderness of high mountain glacier turns out into a powerful metaphor describing who we are as human beings. The following passage comes from Scene Thirty-four:

Behind the plastic the light comes up on Virgil standing next to his bed, naked. As he speaks the bed moves away from him. The Iceman’s last moments merge with Virgil’s to his bed.

Virgil (*V[oice] O[ver]*) In a hopeless situation he succeeded in fleeing from the enemy. Every effort was made to capture him. If, as we know from Talheim, even

⁴ Certain passages of Spindler’s book are nearly exactly repeated in the play. For example, “As a rule archaeologists do not concern themselves with bodies in glaciers. They are ‘too recent’” [Spindler, 1994, p. 1] appears with minor stylistic changes as “**Spindler** (*V[oice] O[ver]*) Archaeologists as a rule, do not normally associate themselves with bodies found in the ice, they are far too recent” [*Mnemonic*, 2001, p. 26]. Other passages were adapted by the company in a more selective way. Compare, for example, “From a distance of 8 or 10 metres we suddenly saw something brown sticking out of the ice. Our first thought was that it was rubbish, perhaps a doll, because by now there is plenty of litter in the high mountains. As we came closer, Erika said: ‘But it’s a man!’” [Spindler, 1994, p. 10] and “**Helmut** (*V[oice] O[ver]*) From a distance of eight to ten metres, we saw something sticking out of the ice. Our first thought was that it was rubbish, perhaps even a doll, because there is plenty of litter in the high mountains. But as we came closer Erika said, ‘But it’s a man.’” [*Mnemonic*, 2001, p. 16-17].

⁵ This is, for instance, the case with the International Red Cross hospital, which appears in Scene Thirty. Set in Polish Galicia it does have no referential motivation as the on-stage action reflects Alice’s late twentieth century trans-European journey.

women and children were massacred, how much more dangerous would a grown man's escape from the pogrom seem to the victors? His only advantage was his superior knowledge. There was no hope of return at whatever time and for whatever purpose. So the man set out in the direction of Hauslabjoch, hoping that beyond the main ridge of the Alps he might escape his pursuers.

Over the following text, the chair slowly becomes the puppet of the Iceman. The rest of the company come around the table and take the puppet. It has a stick and its face is suggested by a towel. The puppet of the Iceman follows the final moments of the Iceman in his gully, 5,000 years ago.

Virgil (VO) Evidently overtaken by a blizzard or sudden fog, the Iceman was in a state of total exhaustion. In the gully in the rock perhaps familiar to him from previous crossings of the pass, he sought wat shelter he could from the bad weather. With his failing strength he settled down for the night. He deposited his axe on the ledge of a rock.

The Iceman leans against the bed.

Meanwhile, it had grown dark. It was snowing ceaselessly and an icy cold penetrated his clothes. A terrible fatigue engulfed his limbs.

He knew that to fall asleep meant death.

He staggered forward a few more steps.

He slipped and fell against a rock.

The birch-bark container fell from his hand; his cap fell off.

He falls to his knees, his head falls against the stone.

He only wanted a short rest but his need for sleep was stronger than his willpower.

He laid his head on the rock. Soon his clothes froze to the rough ground. He was no longer aware that he was freezing to death.

The puppet by now is lying on the snow. The only movements are its final breaths.

The company slowly retreat from the body. [...] [Mnemonic, 2001, p. 71-72].

The death of Iceman – presented on stage by the means of a portable chair that is accompanied by the entire company – tells us a lot about vulnerability, fragility and solitude of Everyman. His visual parallel with the movements of Virgil, and the compassion of the ensemble, make the story of his escape from human oppressors as generalised as it may be. Complicite leaves us with no doubt that the company's interpretation of what happened to Ötzi goes in this universal direction.

The story of the Iceman acquires a new dimension when it turns into a theatre piece. Individual and collective memory of the audience contributes to the on stage semi-osis in unpredictable ways. One such example is recollected by Simon McBurney – the main figure in Complicite – in his essay entitled “You must remember this.” When presenting *Mnemonic* at a festival in a Bosnian town of Zenica “Where the first refugees arrived from Srebrenica” the actor was struck by an unusual reaction of the audience:

I fumble across the stage in the darkness. Shadowy figures cram into every open space. I can just make out they are standing shoulder by shoulder. The steps are packed three or four across. The audience listens to my voice, which has been

pre-recorded, but which they imagine to be live. I have just asked them the question: “Where were you ten years ago? Can you remember?” Out of the darkness there is a hoarse shout. “In a cellar with my fucking family!” As the packed audience laugh and murmur, I put out a hand to find my chair. I can see nothing on stage at all. I break into cold sweat. In London, when I ask the same question, few remember. Here, memories of ten years ago are all too clear. [McBurney, 2015, p. 57]

In this particular case, the liveness of theatre performance means annihilation of the borderline separating the fictional world from the theatre situation. Fearful vulnerability of the Iceman is part of unforgettable experience of the members of the audience.

4.

The Street of Crocodiles, which was inspired by short stories by Bruno Schulz and his biography, juxtaposes the on-stage world of a victim to the endangering off-stage space of Nazi oppressors. Conceived as a delicate sphere of Joseph’s artistic imagination, the stage is increasingly intruded by the brutality of marshal politics. External world is vicious, oppressive and cannot be restrained. The dehumanised crowd represented by Nazi soldiers privileges brutality of persecutors, notwithstanding their inferior moral stand. Ominous sounds of marching boots that dominate the beginning of the play lead to the unavoidable, if absurd, death of the protagonist. The play finishes with an elaborate and metaphoric presentation of a rite of passage to the world of the dead. Just as the Iceman was accompanied in *Mnemonic* by the whole ensemble of actors in his last walk into the mountains, Joseph – the protagonist of *The Street of Crocodiles* – is in the company of family members after he is shot to death by a Nazi soldier. One other similarity between the Iceman and Joseph is that the stories of their lives and deaths are endowed with the status of a universal archetype. There is no doubt that in the aesthetics of *Complicite*, the victim is constantly supported.

The same is true in *Measure for Measure* and *The Master and Margarita*. In these stories, however, there emerges one additional dimension: the reference to the image of the world that we know from contemporary media. Images of Joseph Stalin, George W. Bush, coverage of the atrocities of the war in Syria, surveillance like technique of TV broadcasting and visual allusions to Guantanamo, provide immediate political context to the performances adapted from William Shakespeare and Mikhail Bulgakov. It does not mean that *Complicite* reduces the meanings offered by these authors to the level of political pamphlet. On the contrary, by suggesting parallels with the world around us, the company seems to strengthen universality of *Measure for Measure* and *The Master and Margarita*. The world has not changed that much throughout centuries. Devastating as they are, the principles that are crucial for the vision of the world as offered by Shakespeare and Bulgakov remain as relevant as they were in the past. This is not reductive usurpation but artistic tribute to the work of “old” masters. Stories of the past remain stories for the present.

The theme of violence is equally prominent in other performances. But it is approached from different angles. In *The Three Lives of Lucie Cabrol* the eponymous

hero is a recluse from her village and family. In *Light* the confusion brought by unrestrained freedom results in annihilating chaos, plague and unavoidable violation of all social norms. In *Shun-kin*, the sadomasochistic intimacy of Shunkin and Sasuke ends up in a powerful image of Shunkin's sacrifice for his lover. This is reflected in a powerful, if symbolic, image in which red ribbons are used. In Beckett's *Endgame* the physical tension between actors is very suggestive for establishing the line of interpretation, in which the unbearable struggle between Hamm (Mark Rylance) and Clov (Simon McBurney) is put at its extreme. This is the end of a world filled with unbearable impasse and enormous frustration. Violence is explored as an internal – psychological or psychic – state. In the futuristic world of *Lionboy*, Charlie Ashambe – the teenage protagonist – travels across the world in his unequal fight against evil forces of The Corporation. Being the play for young audiences, *Lionboy* turns into a parable that encourages the audiences to think and behave independently, out of matrix imposed by vicious institutions. Finally, in *A Disappearing Number* the world at the times of the Great World is depicted. Although the play presents the background situation and is based on the story of Cambridge mathematicians, there emerges one especially powerful image related with violence. At one point their complex calculations end up in a number that is innocent until the audience is informed of its connotation. As the voice announces: “34, 954, 920. The number of dead, wounded and missing in the First World War” [Complicite/Simon McBurney. 2008, p. 74].

5.

When depicted as a spear, the bamboo stick may be used as a weapon or as a gift. It all depends on the decision of a human agent. *The Encounter* assumes this as a universal principle that shapes relations between people and culture. The play depicts the meeting of a modern American – a National Geographic photographer Loren McIntire – with a secluded ingenious tribe of the Mayaruna people that inhabit the Amazonian jungle. Scared of the white people – the context of Francesco Pizarro, Ferdinand Cortez and other conquistadors explains this fear a lot – the Mayaruna people, at least some of them, meet Loren McIntire with friendship. He acquires insight into their lifestyle and is soon shocked by how much their nomadic lives are determined by their fear of other people. No matter how well-crafted their jungle villages are, they need to be burnt and left behind after a short period of time. There is no regret of material belongings. The Mayaruna people attempt to escape from the dangers imposed by the modern civilisation.

McIntire soon realises that this is not an unfamiliar dream for a modern man. His reaction to the Mayaruna's people burning the past, is presented in scene 14:

LOREN [...] I stare at the fire and imagine us in the west, burning our possessions so as not to remain still in time!

I picture bonfires, like this one, along some affluent American street. People dragging out their paid-for belongings; furniture, appliances, toys. Dragged out. Sprayed with gasoline, bursting in flames. All of a culture, the most materialistic and leisure-minded in the world, up in flames. I saw flames spring up in a front

yard, and another, and another. All along the street, all through the neighbourhood and the next and the next.

The sound of the fire is roaring. Music.

Washington. Pennsylvania Avenue, the White House, on fire. The Library of Congress, on fire! Freeing itself, taking off, soaring, carried by the vehicle of the sacrificial, purifying flames. Carried where? Carried where? Doesn't matter! Burning the past! Burning it all. Maybe I'll live to find the answer.

During the following, the ACTOR exhorts the audience to get rid of the past. The ACTOR tries to destroy the plastic bottles, but they won't break. They smash a glass water bottle to pieces, try to destroy the speakers, the endless box of tape, the work desk: they grab a hammer and manically destroy the desk. A frenzy of destruction builds to a climax. [Complicite, Simon McBurney, 2016, p. 48]

The episode is dominated by an on-stage act of destruction, and it increases liveness of the performance. Savage Loren/Actor enlivens the tension between the world of the stage and the audience. Yet, the act of destruction certainly aims to create profound senses as it questions not only petrified habits of the modern western civilisation, but also its obsessive preoccupation with material possessions. Unlike the Mayaruna people, Loren/Actor, and those who are represented by him (i.e. the Western culture), are so attached to their belongings that they become violent to the world around them. *The Encounter* presents a meeting of two types of cultures and is explicit with a critical evaluation of who we – contemporary westerners – are. These are theatrical images of violence to be remembered – and discussed – for long.

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