

Introduction: contemporary theatre and drama in Europe

ERIKA FISCHER-LICHTE

The 30 years between the 1960s and the 1980s of the 20th century are recalled today as a golden age of European theatre. They seem to have revived, continued and re-created the previous golden age brought about by the historical theatre avant-garde movements during the first decades of the 20th century (approximately 1900–1930). Then, Adolphe Appia, Jacques Copeau, Edward Gordon Craig, Leopold Jessner, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Max Reinhardt, Alexander Tairov, Evgeni Vakhtangov and others had striven for what they called a retheatricalization of theatre.

The more recent performative turn of European theatre following the 1960s was accomplished by stage directors in close co-operation with their stage designers and their groups of actors and performers. Among the names that have to be listed here, those of Ingmar Bergman, Benno Besson, Peter Brook, Jan Fabre, Jerzy Grotowski, Klaus Michael Grüber, Tadeusz Kantor, Jan Lauwers, Yuri Lyubimov, Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Stein, Giorgio Strehler, Robert Wilson, Peter Zadek feature most prominently. It was these directors who brought about the new ‘revolution’ in theatre, not the playwrights – with the notable exception of author-directors such as, for instance, Dario Fo. There have been quite a number of important playwrights in many European countries during these years, but only rarely did they establish a new kind of theatre. If they did, this usually was a result of a very close co-operation between a particular author and stage director, as, for instance, between Botho Strauss and Peter Stein, Bernhard-Marie Koltès and Patrice Chereau, Thomas Bernhard and Claus Peymann, Heiner Müller and Robert Wilson.

However, the fact that such co-operations existed, does not refute the statement that the great change in European theatre since the 1960s, its revolution and golden age, was brought about primarily by stage directors, designers and great actors/performers. It emphasized theatre’s particular materiality, i.e. its spatiality, corporeality and sound quality, as well as its particular mediality, i.e. the direct encounter of performers and spectators in one and the same space, sharing a common situation. The literary text of the drama was no longer of primary importance.

Although quite a few of the stage directors listed above still continue creating performances today – sometimes even stunning performances – with the 1980s, the golden age had come to an end.

That is to say, its end more or less coincided with an important political change in Europe – the ends of communism, the Cold war and the Iron curtain that divided Europe into two

different halves and Germany into two states. The societies of middle and Eastern Europe have experienced the 1990s as a time of fundamental transformation.

The transition from communism to capitalism and from the absolute dominance of the Soviet Union to independent, sovereign democratic states was not universally experienced as just a liberation, but also as a deep cultural crisis. The instability of a society in transition encountered the demand for a new national identity, which needed to be re-discovered or re-invented. The longing for a stable orientation, hopefully to be achieved by the construction of a national identity, has caused demarcations, exclusions and the foundation of new national states; in the case of the former Yugoslavia, it even led to civil war, population expulsions and ethnic cleansing. Confronted with such a situation, many social groups expected and demanded of the theatre that it contribute to the much-needed process of stabilization and even help to shape, to develop and spread a new national identity. Generally, the theatre did not meet these expectations. Instead, it dealt with the new situations in many different ways.

It was not only the new political situation that challenged the theatre at the end of the 1980s. It was also the new media. The revolution of the theatre in the 1960s, to a certain extent, can be regarded as a response to the mediatization of European culture. The demand for intimacy, for audience participation, raised in the theatre of the 1960s was meant as an emphasis on the theatre's immediacy and on the particular possibilities of an encounter between performers and spectators. On the other hand, the theatre started experimenting with the new media. It made quite extensive use of them, incorporating them into performances in various ways. In the 1990s, the situation changed anew because of 'reality TV' and the spreading of computers, not only as communication media but also as interactive media. The metaphor of 'computer as theatre' (Brenda Laurel, *Computer as Theatre*, Reading, Mass., 1991) was introduced and quickly and widely accepted. The demarcation between 'reality' and 'fiction', 'reality' and 'virtual reality' became more and more permeable and questionable.

The theatre responded to this situation in different ways. On the one hand the theatre once more underlined its liveness, i.e. its particular materiality, its corporeality and spatiality, as well as its particular mediality, by taking recourse to devices that had already been developed in the period between the 1960s and 1980s and also by developing new means. On the other hand, it quite often played with all kinds of frames and demarcation lines that separate 'fiction' from 'reality'.

Finally, what we have observed in the 1990s is a return of the text to the stage. In the most recent 'Theatre of the World' festival, which took place in Berlin in 1999, it was obvious that the text played an important part in the performances. However, not in the old conventional sense of a drama being performed. Rather, it became evident that the writing for theatre, in many cases, has changed remarkably, although this change is realized in very different ways in different European cultures. Still, it is quite remarkable that in the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, Ireland and Sweden, a new generation of playwrights has appeared who write their texts in close co-operation with the theatre, and partly even as part of the production process – as Shakespeare, Molière or Lope de Vega did. There are many striking talents, although, it remains to be seen whether among them there is a new Shakespeare, Molière or Lope de Vega and whether this new kind of writing will be able to bring about a new golden age of – or at least a decisive change in – European theatre.