

# **Theatre and Cultural Interaction**



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Maria Shevtsova

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## PREFACE

The essays collected here reflect some of my main concerns during the past ten years and belong to the sociology of the theatre as I have understood and developed it until now. The areas of my research that I have chosen for the purposes of this volume are productions, audiences and performers. These are essential components of the theatre which, while distinguishing it from literature, dramatic and otherwise, place the theatre firmly in the realm of what in French is exquisitely called *les arts du spectacle*, “performing arts” in English not quite capturing the precision of the French phrase. Even so, the term *spectacle* is not monosemantic and thus not crystal clear: it incorporates a wide range of shows (variety and circuses, for example, are *spectacles*) that leave the term and, with it, the very notion of art, open to debate.

My essays do not dwell on problems of definition. Their focus, whether viewed from the perspective of spectators, performers or directors (as happens in the second essay, *Universal Theatre/Universal Culture?* and again when Jean-Pierre Mignon discusses his staging of *Peer Gynt*), is on performance works in which dialogue plays a considerable part. Their centre of interest, then, is what is known in Italy as *teatro di prosa*, which most usefully distinguishes play performance (or “performance of plays”) from other types of play or performance. Two of the essays devoted to productions - *Peer Gynt* by Patrice Chéreau and another stage version of the same play by Jean-Pierre Mignon - show that the “theatre” at issue here involves play performance and not other kinds of *teatro* or *spectacle* or performance, nor - least of all - the relatively new genre going under the name of “performance art”. The latter cannot, of course, be confused with the plural “performance arts”. The third essay, which gives an account of a bilingual *Three Sisters*, in French and Russian and directed by Nika Kossenkova and Pascal Larue, stays within the definition of the theatre as outlined here.

Even these brief words suggest that I have not taken a monocultural or

monolingual approach to the subject at hand. The approach may be generally described as “European” insofar as European directors/thinkers have nurtured my own reflections. Nevertheless, however appropriate, if unstable, the adjective “European” may be today in a federated Europe - so far of twelve countries - it is not the European aspect of the chosen directors/thinkers that is of most importance to these essays. Nor, consequently, am I proposing a Eurocentric or western view, or whatever other definition is used, favourably *or* pejoratively.

In other words, notwithstanding the fundamental role played by a broadly European social and cultural context in the elaboration of their ideas and practice, a role to which I certainly pay attention, what takes precedence in these essays is the *theoretical* value to be gained from the directors/thinkers cited. Consequently, the works of Mikhaïl Bakhtin and Pierre Bourdieu, on the one hand, and, on the other, the principles guiding the theatre practice of Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba provide major theoretical categories as well as points of reference for the hypotheses, proposals and arguments running through this book.

The fourth area, then, in which I have been working and which is included in the present collection involves theory. It was logical to call my first section “Theoretical Considerations” precisely because, although I regard theory as an area of the discipline of the sociology of the theatre (as is, for example, the rubric of “spectators”, it seems to me to be impossible to deal with the empirical reality of the theatre without some kind of conceptual framework. Theories provide us with something on which to hang our ideas, feelings, images and sensations, and a means of constructing them and pulling them together so that they make sense.

No one would contest the fact that we do or make theatre, which is why it is a practice in the truest sense of the word. And few would disagree that it is an art. Many, however, have been slow to recognize that theatre art is generated by social agents in a social context and that, as a socialized and socializing action, it is full of *social* as well as aesthetic meaning. We could put this differently by saying that everything we think of as being art in the theatre is not purely aesthetic: what belongs to art comes out of a society, and is caught up in a tangled network of activities to which are given such names as “economics”, “politics”, “education” and “culture”. The accumulation of these and more activities in time, and the changes wrought upon them by women and men over the course of time, give us “history”, from which the theatre, like all other practices, is inseparable. The theatre builds its own history in relation to this larger

history. But no matter where it is constructed, the theatre vibrates with the movements of its society.

These points are at the heart of the sociology of the theatre and must reappear, as they do in various guises, throughout this book. Nevertheless, what I emphasize here is one particular point or, rather, focus of interest that the sociology of the theatre would do well to develop. This concerns culture. The theatre, by being a social activity through and through, and consequently a collective one, is also a cultural practice. In other words, it is created out of the behaviours, emotions and values that are invested in the images and symbols appropriate to a particular social group. Once again, I do not concentrate on matters of definition, this time of the term “culture”. This term, like every other one that I have used so far, refers to complex phenomena and its very complexity assures its multiple meanings.

Suffice it to say that I draw on two main blocs of meaning: on “culture”, when it refers to the behaviours, values, customs and assumptions manifested in everyday life, and on “culture”, when it means the arts and related constructions of the imagination, feelings and mind. Clearly, the two blocs of meaning must be interconnected in some way. The theatre is culture as defined within the second bloc. Hence such descriptions as “high” or “learned” or “intellectual” culture. However, since the theatre does not, and cannot, spin in a rarefied atmosphere (this would be the arcane sphere of Art) but, on the contrary, has its feet firmly planted on the ground (irrespective of how ethereal or magical its effects), it is “culture” according to the first bloc. That is to say, it is part of the everyday organization of values, customs, and so on, by which this or that group of people lives, and is influenced, if not moulded, by that very organization. “Culture” irrevocably calls upon “society”, and vice versa. It would be hard to imagine a society without a culture (more likely cultures) or a culture that has not been elaborated by a collectivity - “society” - of some sort.

The intricacies of culture, of values, mentalities and perceptions, which are integral to societal interaction, permeate my research on theatre spectators. Since the research is ongoing, I have deliberately kept the “in progress” quality of my essays on spectators.

This having been said, these essays are nevertheless a significant contribution to the study of audiences - particularly because of their emphasis on a *qualitative* approach. Their qualitative dimension is highlighted by their emphasis on the culture of spectators, which culture includes the latter’s value-systems, evaluative skills vis-à-vis the theatre,

expectations of the theatre, and the roles/purposes/values attributed by spectators to it. Despite the growing number of audience studies available, it is still most unusual to find the kind of culturally-focused, qualitatively-centred perspective that seeks to bring out the interactive relationship between spectators and performance and that is characteristic of my work.

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“Minority/Dominant Culture in the Theatre” is a revised version of a paper presented in 1991 at “Theatre and the Discourses of Power”, a conference sponsored by the Department of Drama at the University of Exeter.

“Social and Cultural Elites” is a revised version of a text for the annual conference of the Australasian Drama Studies Association held in 1991 at the University of New South Wales.

The material in my essay on audiences for *Phedra*, the tragedy by Racine staged by Michael Gow, was first used for a paper delivered at Melbourne University in 1991. The occasion was a conference of the

Melbourne Performance Research Group entitled "Performance and its Discourses".

"Cultural Values and the Purposes of the Theatre" was first given in an abridged form and with a slightly different emphasis at "The Arts in the Media Age", a conference of the Research Committee 37 "Sociology of the Arts" of the International Sociological Association held at the University of Trento in 1992.