

What is theatre about?

Battle of Ideas - Eventos Satélite 2011

DEBATE SEG 3 OUTUBRO

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1.

I prefer the English title of this session, *What is Theatre About?*, because in it the preposition comes at the end, almost an afterthought. It is a supplement of meaning, one that concerns meaning, and it immediately poses a problem. We're not just discussing what is theatre, we're saying that theatre's meaning is something else, somewhere else.

In fact, I checked this, "about" was originally a preposition dealing, as many others, with spatial positioning. It meant "on the outside of" - so if theatre is about something, then theatre is outside of that, surrounding it. Its meaning is something hidden inside: a content.

The Portuguese preposition, "sobre", means "above", or "on top of": then theatre's meaning lies beneath it, under the surface: a subject.

This is the age-old metaphor of the artwork as box, with an inside and an outside: content and form. The dichotomy, says literary critic Paul de Man, has been inverted in some compelling twentieth century theories, but without getting rid of the box.

As for theatre, it didn't have to wait for structuralism to turn the box inside out: it was once supposed to hold the mirror up to nature, thus reflecting an outside - life, or the world. That's the story of naturalism, but perhaps also of the very idea of representation: in the theatre we are always here and now, but constantly referring to there and then. In Plato's Cave as in the *X-Files*, the truth is out there.

The performative turn, in the 60s and 70s, tried to deal with the curse of this splitting, sometimes using a literal box-cutter. They replaced representation with the fetishism of pure, unmediated presence - to mixed results, as there is no such thing as a full presence. No one (neither performers nor spectators) is ever always there, our minds drift; and there is an irrepressible movement towards fiction and symbol, even when someone is pointing a gun at Marina Abramovic.

I think I'll always side with the structuralists in saying that form is content. I embrace the lesson of *Cahiers du Cinéma* (formulated by Godard, then proven by Rivette) that "a tracking shot is a moral issue": a formal decision is always a political one.

For the first production of Teatro da Cornucópia (Molière's *The Misanthrope*, 1973), Luis Miguel Cintra, who is here today, wrote in his director's notes that this was a play about sincerity and hypocrisy, thus sketching an outside reference, a didactic project for life; however, as Cintra also claims, this is the subject of theatre itself. In fact, it matched his own definition of theatre, stated four years earlier: "Se no teatro é tudo a fingir, a coisa mais importante do teatro é a honestidade." ["If in the theatre all we do is pretend, theun honesty is the most important thing in the theatre"]. The "about", then, was turned inwards, it set the rules of the game and established the company's poetics.

This was a foundational gesture, but we can't always be setting ground rules (or can we?). If we only discuss tracking shots, when do we talk about concentration camps? Because theme and subject are so easily prey to cliché, there seems to be some sort of modesty, an avoidance (that I have experienced myself) when the time comes to address these big issues.

2.

A couple of months ago, we presented here a production by New York company the TEAM. The show was called *Mission Drift*, it took two years to develop and was, among other things, a mythical history American capitalism.

In Portugal, theatre companies seem for the most part to ignore the big, difficult issues. Perhaps narcissism is to blame, or lack of ambition. But if theatre is still (is it?) dealing with representation, not telling these stories reflects on the quality of the democracy. Where is the Portuguese play “about” “race”? Where do we see black actors, or black politicians? Because race is symbolically invisible in Portugal, some say there’s no racism.

In the UK, a group of playwrights wrote - plays, not newspaper articles - about the cuts in the arts funding; I’ve recently seen a marathon production by a young Dublin company about the year of 2010, a show that had over 200 contributors talking about sex, drinking, snow and, yes, the financial crisis. It took four weeks to rehearse. Where can we find this kind of ambition and engagement here?

It’s true that there is a simple British recipe to do the “about” play. As Andrew Haydon (from whom we’ve stolen the epigraph that introduces this debate) explains:

you pick an Issue, any Issue; you then create a small group of characters, usually about six and put them in a situation in which they come into contact with The Issue. The Issue is then explored by the characters talking about It, their relationship to It. Possibly, if you’re lucky, there’s a story, how It changes them.

The problem with this model is of course a formal one - and therefore it’s political. Dealing with a “worthy” subject in an expected way, performers and audience share more or less the same views on it, and celebrate that communion. These are naive exercises in community making, the very community that theatre is supposedly all about to begin with (an idea that must be fought, as Jacques Rancière explains). These are self-fulfilling prophecies, relieving bourgeois guilt and doing nothing to change the world.

The answer is not in generating sympathy. The most powerful critique of this attitude is still Walter Benjamin’s *The Author as Producer*. The problem, again, is in spatial positioning. Benjamin rebukes Alfred Döblin for stating that the intellectual “should find his place *at the side* of the proletariat. But what sort of a place is that? The place of a well-wisher, an ideological patron. An impossible place.” *At the side of* won’t do. It has to be within, and that is why the author must think of himself first and foremost as a producer.

So before asking what an artist’s political opinions are, we should examine, still following Benjamin, what kind of politics he is making within his work. In Tim Crouch’s *The Author* we hear of a play about violence and abuse whose rehearsal process involved violence and abuse; and in his show *England*, which we also presented here, the fact that we were in an art gallery inside a bank was not only acknowledged but made meaningful in the play’s discussion of transplants and transactions.

Can we have it both ways? Is it possible to address the big issues in a formally innovative, or at least considered way? One final example: Teatro Praga’s very recent *Israel* created the expectation of an “about” play and then subverted it. It promised to be politically provocative - an apology for Israel - and it was so in a totally unexpected way. It was and was not about Israel, it was in English and in Portuguese, live and mediated, honest even in its insincerity. It suspended the decision on its “aboutness”. I would say it was about that.

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