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“Creative betrayal” in theater. Creative potential of literary prose in the light of modern Polish staging practices

The analysis in this study focuses mainly on adaptations of canonical works, which have a certain - longer or shorter - tradition of staging in the Polish theater, but are still creatively processed/reinterpreted. An important aim of the dissertation is to present a range of staging strategies adopted by theater creators in order to bring out different kinds of “dramatic” (in the broad sense of the word) values of given prose works, and often also to give them (in some aspect) deeper or new meanings.

The first part of the dissertation, which focuses on the staging of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's and Leo Tolstoy's masterpieces, concerns the ways in which polyphonic and homophonic prose (according to Bakhtin's criteria) are transferred to the stage. The enormous “dramatic capital” of the work of the author of “The Idiot” is evidenced not only by the constant presence of his works in theatrical repertoires, but also by the multitude of methods of their reinterpretation. In this context, one of the most important conditions for staging seems to be the polyphonic nature of Dostoyevsky's works, which results in a great number of dialogical tensions, bringing the novels closer to the dramatic form. This makes Dostoyevsky's novels both “susceptible” to translation into the language of theater and a field in which new staging solutions can be created.

The opening chapter is devoted to the two realizations of “The Brothers Karamazov”, which use the potential of the dialogue (inherent to the literary original) in completely different ways: Krystian Lupa's performance from 1991 and Janusz Opryński's from 2011. Lupa's many-hour-long performances are constructed in such a way as to present each of the characters as a specific “carrier of ideas”. The director mainly performs the scenes of “great conflicts” contained in the novel, especially the disputes reflecting the moral and ideological split of the characters. The extended scenes of dialogues and monologues, interrupted by long periods of silence, allow the viewer not only to closely observe the conflicts between the characters, but also to follow the transformations that occur within them. Opryński, on the other hand, starts from Dostoyevsky's concept of the protagonist as a human-raskol - torn by internal contradictions, existing in a constant state of ideological and emotional split. The fact that the staging was not based on any of the existing translations, but on the translation by Cezary Wodzyński prepared for the production, is also significant. The philosopher-translator's research interests include both the Russian Orthodox culture and Dostoyevsky's philosophical thought. This “brisk” translation, rich in colloquialisms, turned out to be a very effective text on stage, allowing to, among other things, display a suggestive performance of the dynamic and expressive dialogue scenes.

The next chapter of the first part of the dissertation is devoted to “Crime and Punishment” directed by Andrzej Wajda (1984). In this case, the director decided to extract from the novel only those scenes which are directly linked to the main plot. He did this in order to reduce the material which would serve as the basis for the dramatization, but above all to take a microscope-like look at the relationship between the investigator and the criminal. At the same time, the director abandoned the scene of the murder of the loan shark, transforming it into Raskolnikov's confession, which closes the play. As I have tried to prove, this inversion, combined with the appropriate choice of staged fragments of the novel, allowed Wajda to look at the protagonist from a completely different perspective from that presented in the novel, emphasizing other contexts of the cruel crime.

The third chapter of the first part is an analysis of “The Death of Ivan Ilyich” directed by Jerzy Grzegorzewski (Television Theatre, 1994). The director decided to almost completely “dismantle” the structure of the original and to assemble it into a new, authorial version of the work. This procedure, which I have called “restructuring,” changes the form of the original work in a very radical way. In addition, the protagonists of the story are “removed from the power of narration”, and the figure of Ivan Ilyich Golovin himself is subjected to a kind of split into “three Ilyichs,” shown at different stages of life and at the process of dying. Thus, I show how Grzegorzewski “transforms” the essentially homophonic prose into a stage polyphony that calls for a multifaceted interpretation.

A slightly different approach to a prose work was presented by Jerzy Jarocki. In adapting Witold Gombrowicz's “Cosmos” (2005), the director sought to create a dramatization that would not lose the epic nature of the work. To achieve this, he condensed the novel's plot and “retained” the first-person narrator. Apart from bringing to the fore threads with dramatic potential, the director paraphrased the characters' monologues, extracting dialogues from the narration and adapting them to the new medium.

The deconstruction of the structures of an adapted work is, of course, the domain of post-dramatic theater. In my thesis I decided to analyze a performance by a director who is deeply rooted in this tradition - Krzysztof Garbaczewski. The director, while preparing "The Possessed" (2008), based on Witold Gombrowicz's novel, broke the structure of the novel using parataxis, but above all - as I try to prove - reinterpreted and at the same time updated Gombrowicz's game with the conventions and aesthetics of the original. Garbaczewski accurately exploited the motifs and themes characteristic for the author's pre-war work, inscribing them into contemporary reflections on identity.

The director used a different strategy in a production from almost a decade later "The Peasants" - based on the novel by Władysław Stanisław Reymont (2017). Garbaczewski did not aim for a "monumental dramatization" of the novel, which could become the stage equivalent of a peasant epic. The overriding sense of the staging in this case told about the relationship between humans and nature and about contesting the contemporary understanding of folk culture. While exploiting the novel's social message and giving it an ecological overtone, the production did not relinquish its purely artistic qualities. Interestingly, the director translated Reymont's impressionistic narrative into a stage image, omitting the evaluative narrative elements, often used in earlier productions of "The Peasants" as the voice of the community, a kind of "folk choir".

Another type of staging, which is described in the next chapter, updates novel senses in the represented by Krystian Lupa's "The Trial" (2017). This director often creates budding adaptations, in which he selects certain novel plots and then expands them in an authorial way. In this production, Lupa decided to fill in the "gaps" in Franz Kafka's novel with elements taken from the writer's biography, fusing these elements with the real context that accompanied the work on the staging (circumstances related to the conflict between the acting troupe and the management of Teatr Polski in Wrocław).

Each of the chapters of the work has been supplemented to a greater or lesser extent by comments on the function of space in shaping the world presented in the performance. Everything that makes up the stage image - the organization of space, props and lighting - intensely affects the viewer. I believe that the image, usually remaining long in the memory of the viewer, is one of the most important elements in shaping the world presented in the theater. Stage design is therefore an area of stage activities; it functions as a means of artistic expression, often becoming a vector of symbolic interpretation of the staged work.

The dissertation closes with a reflection on the function of space, which is complemented by a section entitled "The sense-making functions of stage space in the staging of novel prose (and more)". The first chapter is devoted to the overscaled scenographic elements and the role they may play in shaping the stage space. The second chapter, based on Krystian Lupa's scenographic renditions, concerns the use of transparent objects. I show, among other things, that these types of structures can function as an internal frame of a theatrical work, signal isolation or act as a sign of the "fourth wall".