

A short note on theatre and theatricality

The American pedagogue, theatre director and writer, Paul Castagno states that the hybrid form is intrinsically theatrical. He also speaks of the re-theatralisation of the play, and of the theatre.

One could say that this calling a play theatrical would be pretty obvious, since all theatricality stems from the notion of theatre. A play would necessarily have to be so too. That is of course true, but what Castagno means by theatrical is not the same as something “for the theatre”. Castagno does not tie this re-theatralisation to the staging of a play, but to the writing. To the theatrical qualities in language itself.

Theatre is make-believe.

It is dressing up, masks, stage sets, makeup, grand entrances and thunderbolts.

All this is a part of the essence of theatre. Its soul so to speak. At the same time there has been a tendency in theatre to want to free itself from all of this. To tune down the effects, to keep the spectacle to a bare minimum. To make the action feel “real” and to strip it of its “artefacts”.

The need for the theatrical and the need for the real lives side by side in the “drama” – and when we google the term, this becomes evident.

The free dictionary online defines theatricality, when experienced outside theatre, as a kind of misplaced or unnatural behaviour, and as exaggerated self-display. In other words, affected (). Yet other definitions I have found emphasise its connection to acting, faking, or “pretending”. I find synonyms like artificial, pompous, spectacular, or extravagant, or histrionic, and theatrical within the theatre-space or a performance is defined as affectedly dramatic gestures or behaviour, and theatrical *theatre* as something amateurish.

In other words, it is often understood as a form of contrived theatre. As “too much”, and bad or badly made theatre.

Definitions like these show that one views theatre as realism. “Good” theatre mimics life and a performance is best when it portrays something “true” or “real”. They see theatre as a mimetic artform showing real people acting out real emotions in situations that we can relate to and recognise. An artform that should represent or portray life “as it is”, and where what is clearly seen as acted out, will be understood as “bad” theatre or “bad” acting.

Gyldendal’s Danish online lexicon points to another understanding of the term. Here theatricality is a specific theatrical language with its own sensibility that opposes the realistic illusion of reality. In this lexical article, the author goes on explaining that during the historical avant-garde, the theatre has gone through a process of re-theatricalisation. This process has brought pure performative elements and meta-perspectives into mainstream theatre.

Due to this re-theatricalization, contemporary theatre is no longer a dramatic or mimetic artform. Theatre is just as much a place where the artificial or the strange operates as a quality, and therefore the article concludes that (my translation): *Pragmatically, theatricality can be understood in a wide range of expressions grading from the everyday to expressionism, from the mimetic to theatrical in extreme (baroque and excessive) dancelike expressions and different effects, that either serves as the foundation for the style of a performance or stands as an effect in itself but is incorporated into the whole of the performance ().*

According to my understanding, theatrical means that the material takes the form of “theatre”, or display. As something other. Something artificial played out and constituted in the reality created by the dramaturgy of the composition.

One can say, despite the danger of over-simplifying it, that the postdramatic theatre put a new emphasis on this aspect of theatre, while drama placed mimesis at its core.

This is not a given dualism. There is a flux between the two, but let's call them tendencies.

In the hybrid form these two meet. Creating a tension between the "realistic" situations and the obvious show of display. Creating a cross-feed between the two.

The way I see it, the terms re-theatralisation and theatrical language must be seen in light of this.