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# On the role of theatre in current discourse of cultural literacy

Ulrike Hentschel

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Το άρθρο αυτό μπορεί να χρησιμοποιηθεί δωρεάν για έρευνα, διδασκαλία και προσωπική μελέτη. Επιτρέπεται η αναδημοσίευση μετά από άδεια του εκδότη.

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# On the role of theatre in current discourse of cultural literacy

Ulrike Hentschel

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A preliminary note: In the following text I will frequently use the word “Bildung”. It is a German term for which there is no corresponding term in English. The English terms such as “formation”, or “cultural literacy”, which are normally used in translation, reflect only one aspect of what is meant by “Bildung”. So I asked my colleague Antonis Lenakakis from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki for a Greek translation and he told me that there is a word in the Greek language that corresponds to Bildung. This word is “morfofis”. Therefore, the term “Bildung” in the following text will be translated by morfofis. In my lecture today I would like to explore why I use the term morfofis/ Bildung and especially aesthetical morfofis instead of education through or learning by theatre.

Within the scope of the processes of education that can be related to the playing (and watching) of theatre, a dilemma may be illustrated: In order to take part in the contest to qualify the next generation for a competitive society it has become expedient, under the conditions of scarce resources, to rationalize the existence of any given subject within education as a deciding factor in the achievement of desirable skills.

For this purpose the act of playing theatre is justified as an ideal form of training to achieve the targeted competencies such as flexibility, team skills and self-management. This is what we can call a legitimizing discourse.

In order to reach the mentioned aims, playing theatre must be made compatible; it thereby runs the risk of being exploited in a pedagogical context, in which it would be reduced to a mere methodology. In terms of a formal legitimating process, the subject “theatre” in comparison to the goal (the target competences) becomes, if not completely irrelevant, certainly of secondary importance. It may be replaced at any time by a substitute, if another “training method” proves to be “more efficient” in relation to the achievement of the goals and targeted skills in question.

Critical questions about the correlating “body politic” (Foucault), that is, about new practices of disciplining the body with regard to the mentioned soft-skills, remain unasked. From the standpoint of its critics this educational practices of training skills are closely linked to dominant power structures, corresponding to shifting social circumstances, to conform and assimilate its subjects. Thus, under the auspices of neoliberalism, the related aims of autonomy, self-fulfillment and emancipation/liberation may also be interpreted as skills for flexible self-management and self-optimizing under given conditions of dominant politics and economics.

In contrast to these formal justifications of theatre for the processes of Education, to which the legitimating discourse is attributed, I will now introduce *a concept of aesthetical morfofis/Bildung*.

Starting from the singular attributes of playing theatre, I will examine the associated aesthetical experiences and possibilities in Bildung/Morfofis, for theatre audiences and for non-professional players. I will do this in three steps:

First, I will briefly introduce the issues in this approach and try—for all practical purposes – to bring the relevant key terms.

As a second point, I will consider the question of the singular attributes of playing theatre: What distinguishes productive theatre creation?

Based on these questions, I will thirdly examine which experiences within the productive and receptive involvement in theatre are possible, and what processes of Bildung/Morfofis might be stimulated by these experiences.

## 1. Inquiries

For the intention of *aesthetic Bildung/ Morfofis*, in contrast to the justification model for playing theatre as mentioned above, the argument changes direction. A concept of this kind does not ask *what* can be learned by

playing theatre, neither regarding the subject matter to be taught, nor the target competencies. It is of much greater interest to ask *how* playing theatre functions, and only afterwards what potentials playing theatre might have for Morfosis/Bildung (Hentschel 2010).

Therefore I suggest a shift in perspective:

Instead of basing the approach on the subject to be educated and the potential qualifications that it is supposed to acquire, I start with the *object*, with the playing of theatre. I look for the particular characteristics of this art form as a background to consider, so as to inquire on a second level which specific possibilities for aesthetic education a productive involvement with this art form has to offer. The assumption therein is that certain processes of Bildung/Morfosis are inherent in playing theatre, yet they cannot be determined beforehand as normative “learning goals”.

With the term aesthetical Bildung/Morfosis I refer to processes related to art practices, theatre, music, dance, visual arts. These processes constitute a specialized part of cultural literacy. In the discussion on Bildung/Morfosis, this distinction plays an important role, since artistic practice is not identical with cultural practice but borrows from the culture surrounding it, refers to it, and plays with its symbols.

The approach to aesthetic experience introduced here, and the resulting aesthetic Bildung/Morfosis within theatre pedagogy attempts thus to consider both as constituent sides of the process: the specific experiences of the players in a productive involvement with theatre-making, but also, the particular materiality and method of production of the art of theatre.

At this point, I arrive at the second part of my reflection.

## 2. What is the specific art of theatre?

What makes the art of theatre distinct, which specific experiences can one have in the perception and creation of theatre? At the creative level in acting, the fundamental structure of the theatrical system of expression is characterized by the fact that the subject, the object, and the material of creation cannot be separated from one another. It is well known that in playing theatre, the created object stays physically bound to the body of its producing subject. Therefore, players are always acting simultaneously on two levels: a referential (representational, indicative) level, and a performative level (based on fully carrying out the concrete actions of the players). In classical acting theories of the past century, this experience was described as the double existence of player and character. Even while this distinction is no longer relevant to many contemporary theatre productions, still the fundamental available presence of two levels, the level of the performer and that of the performed or of the portrayer and that of the portrayed, cannot be denied. The American theatre anthropologist Richard Schechner speaks in this case of a double negative that distinguishes the uniqueness of theatre play. At the moment of performance, the player is not himself and is not *not* himself (Schechner 1990: 10).

This image of the double-sided nature of theatrical expression is grounded on an understanding of “play” that is not defined as the ontological opposite of reality, as “as if” or quasi-reality. According to Bateson (1981: 241), play may be signified as a meta-communicative agreement that places the play activity within its own established framework, and thereby designates it as belonging to an autonomous world. The act of playing constitutes an independent world and affirms its presence alongside everyday reality. Those involved in playing are capable, or here through play, they become capable, to position themselves simultaneously in both realities: “map and territory”, “actor and character”. Their perception virtually oscillates between both of these levels of reality. In this sense, the act of watching theatre can also be understood as play.

The essential point of all this is that the players and the audience stay constantly aware of the simultaneous existence of both layers of reality; in other words, that it is not only a matter of perceiving a double existence, but also, first and foremost, of perceiving the difference *between* the two layers of reality.

## 3. Playing theatre and the experience of differentiation

The mode of experience that goes along with playing theatre may be summarized under the key phrase “experience of differentiation.” According to my understanding: Within this form of differentiation, in the perception of the difference between the player and the character, performing and performed, there lies one of the most significant singularities of aesthetic experience that can be had—both by the players in a production, and by the audience in the reception of a work of theatre. This experience is the central experience of Bildung/Morfosis in playing and watching theatre. Namely: the insight into the dual nature of theatrical expression makes it possible to experience performing as performing, and in the search for appropriate creative materials, to choose those which fit with a particular artistic intention. This, in turn, is linked to the experience of having to find symbols for one’s own intentions that are not identical to the portrayed object, and come to terms with each specific creation procedure in theatre. Through the fundamental insight into the construction of

(medial) reality, and through the necessity of finding creative possibilities for one's own intent, the aesthetic abilities of the players are expanded, as well, through their involvement with various forms, intentions, and media of performing or acting. Just as theatrical action allows the construction process of staged reality to be experienced, it also points out the impossibility of a direct depiction of reality.

I would like to go one step further, and presume that the capability of perceiving difference, the perception of the distance *between* the various levels of play, must go hand in hand with the very capacity for aesthetical perception and indeed, for the perception of art as a special case. In addition—and this is a singularity in the work of theatre pedagogy—this process of productive theatre creation can be physically experienced with one's own body. For in this interspace, in between Not-me and Not-not me, between the player and the character, the artist shows *how* he performs what he performs (Seel 2003: 271).

Starting from this mode of experience in differentiation that is so fundamental for playing and watching theatre, it is now possible to formulate assumptions of its effects upon the linked processes of Bildung/ Morphosis.

At the individual level, it may be supposed that the experience of differentiation that accompanies theatre play initiates then a reflective activity, which does not need to be additionally stimulated afterwards; which, therefore, takes place inseparably from the staged, physical action. This arises out of the necessary for a conscious association with one's own body between the various levels of performing and is the result of a crucial exocentric observation of one's own self in the process of playing theatre. Here we may speak, in the sense of the philosophical anthropologist Plessner, of an interconnection between having and being a physical body, as it can be observed and experienced for example in playing theatre. This practice of self-distancing challenges one to a process of reflection. Theatre can thus make possible a meta-experience, which is viewed as the basis of all processes in Bildung/Morphosis, namely, the experience of *how* I experience physical creative process, *how* I experience time, rhythm, *how* I experience the space, and so on.

Beyond this individual level, the practice of theatre-making potentially offers—through the experience of *physical* production of theatrical reality—insights into the constitution of social reality.

The presentation of theatrical reality through one's own body allows for sensory experience in the fundamental constructed-ness of physical stance and actions. Thereby, it may also be possible to experience seemingly natural and self-evident embodied societal relationships (mentioned here in terms of Bourdieu's habitus) as historically developed and changeable. In the sense of Bourdieu, everyday activities, actions in social space, may be compared to learning a native language; the speakers are unaware of structure of the language. On the other hand, Bourdieu compares playful activity to learning a foreign language, a process by which the language may be perceived as language, as a random system of symbols. "In play, the field (...) shows itself distinctly as it is, namely, as an arbitrary and artificial social construct" (Bourdieu 1993: 123). Thus, playful creation may lead to a chance to gain insights into the reality- and subject-constructing functions of societal practices of conduct.

In this way, within the "laboratory situation" of theatre, the basic construction of physical attitudes and activates can be made visible. At the same time, possibilities for the construction and reconstruction of reality through practice of physical performance can be shown. Those very practices, in other words, which serve as training for socially desirable means of behaviour (in a Foucaultian sense: practices of subjectification), might thus become, through their re-performance in a theatrical framework, the medium of their transgression.

By this way the aesthetical Morphosis may gain a critical impact on contemporary social circumstances and an inherent political impact.

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