

The main arguments of the PhD thesis

**DRAMATIC AND STAGE SPACE
IN THE FRENCH BAROQUE-CLASSICIST TRADITION
AND THE NEW THEATRE**

Mária Pallai

Supervisor: Dr. Tivadar Gorilovics, professor emeritus



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN
Doctoral Program of Literary Studies

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1. Specification of the topic

The concepts indicated in the title of my thesis traditionally refer to two significant periods in the history of French drama, namely that of the 17th and 20th century. Both periods are characterized by a prioritized position of theatre and drama, both of which proved to be an adequate form of communicating views of man and his status in the world. We think the privileged status of the genre of theatre in both of the periods can be interpreted as a basic mutual point of relatedness. The 17th century was not only the period of the development of the classicist doctrine, but it was also then that theatre came to realize its own existence, when due to the Baroque ‘world-theatre’ theatre became a metaphor of the world. Theatre obviously searches for new forms (such is the dramaturgical device of ‘theatre within the theatre’). The search of radically new forms also characterizes the New Theatre appearing in the 1950s. The expression itself may require some explanation. Geneviève Serreau, in her book titled *Histoire du „nouveau théâtre”* (Gallimard, 1966), puts forward in details the advantages and disadvantages of using the numerous definitions (theatre of the Absurd, avant-garde theatre), of which the term New Theatre seems to be the least ambivalent and restricted in meaning.

The attitude to the Aristotelian principles is a significant aspect of the genre of drama in both periods. Their rejection so characteristic of the Baroque aesthetics, as well as their determining role in the development of the classicist doctrine and aesthetics make their present even more essential in the 17th century. It seems the theatrical practice and the drama of the 20th century cannot define themselves irrespective of the Aristotelian tradition: the revolutionary nature of the New Theatre can basically be grasped in the omission of and even in the consistent denial of the *verisimilitude* (vraisemblance) - the very requirement placed above all in the Aristotelian approach. Thus the joint study of the two periods so distant from each other in time is justified not only by their distinguished statuses in the history of French drama, but also by the significance of their attitude to the Aristotelian principles. In the study this aspect mainly appears as the attitude to the principle of *reason* and *imagination*, which so greatly determine the structures of the dramatic and stage space as well as the use of stage props. In choosing the dramatic texts this aspect was of key importance: they functioned as sources of examples most suitable to clarify this problem, and the texts are not examined in their entirety. In the 17th century part of the corpus I include works by Corneille, Racine and Molière. Following Geneviève Serreau’s classification, dramatic texts of the 20th century are those of Ionesco, Beckett, and Genet.

The dramatic and stage space are in the focus of the study as topic as well as a guiding principle, since space in a dramatic text is of a specific significance: theatrical representation becomes three-dimensional. The text, having some significance beyond itself, can serve as the base of a theatrical performance, eventually contributing to the realization of a three-dimensional scenic reality. Therefore the formal and contextual nature of the text is closely connected with the theatrical performance, which performance exceeds the dramatic text and is outside its literariness, and operates according to its own regularity. In the dramatic texts there may be references to a visible as well as an invisible dramatic space, either real or probable (existing historically and geographically), and also a virtual and imaginary space. As for the spaciousness we have to make the distinction between the *dramatic space* manifest in the text (the space of the action also belongs here, where the story is set), and the *stage space*. The theatrical space is construed first of all from textual elements, and is also a coded picture of a certain part of the world. It is not only determined by the theatrical conventions of the period and the locality, but also by the social medium of the time; the stage space at the same time structurally maps the outside world as comprehended by the people of the day.

Since it is an artificial space that was meant to be meaningful, all space-forming elements of the stage space (such as the set, the stage props, the actors and even the lighting) are of utter importance. In our study these space-forming elements were guiding principles when highlighting and also revealing certain aspects of the two periods and the genre in question. Three significant aspects served basically as starting point of the study, namely the costume, the stage props and the set. However, it is by no means the space-element that was of our main interest. In a theatrical performance there are living and inanimate elements present, and inanimate objects on stage may come to life, they acquire new meanings, and become *active* agents of the performance and the drama. It is the space-element entering the play that is actually the focus of the study in all three chapters. It seems that relatedness to the character as well as to the actor himself/herself is a determining factor in terms of taking part in the action, and having an active scenic presence. The nature of this relation differs due to the several functions of the space-elements, and is always related to certain dramaturgical problems.

2. The aims of the thesis

In my thesis I do not intend to analyze the relations of dramatic texts and their certain theatrical adaptations, but in terms of the circumstances of the period as we know it I intend to

highlight those ever-present aspects of the dramatic texts that may refer to the potential staging of them. This scientific approach is justified by the fact that the theatrical performance requires certain recording, which denies one of the most significant aspects of a performance - namely the 'here and now' nature of it.

Following the discussion of the relevant concepts (I. Introduction) the first chapter deals with the character as well as the identity in terms of the costume (II Character and identity). The physical aspect of the human body appearing on stage makes the body the potential place of the visual representation of the identity as well as making it the dramaturgical device of playing with this identity. On the level of representation the character becomes three-dimensional due to acting therefore the *character in text* can be distinguished from the *character on scene*.

How does estrangement with the Aristotelian principles - i.e. a brave, hero-like *character* consistently constituted, according to the tradition (Aristotle, *Poetics*, XV) - affect the constitution of the character, and how is this effect manifest in the use of stage props? The overall aim here is to map the relations between the constitution of the character as well as the attitude to the identity and the ways of the scenic realization of the character.

In the following chapter (III Relations between objects and characters) the main focus is on the relation of the stage props or objects and the characters. The nature and quantity of the objects indicated in the text already, and also of the objects appearing on stage can refer to certain connections in terms of the given period as well as the aesthetic principles and the dramaturgical concept. However, to study stage props used in the two periods would exceed the limits of this thesis, therefore here the analysis shall concentrate on the objects that somehow change owners, or are transferred from one character to another. Rising from the topic itself I examine the hierarchy of props in a certain anthropological approach, in which the main point of reference is *Study of the gift* by Mauss (*Sociology and Anthropology*, Osiris, Budapest, 2000).

This chapter aims at highlighting and clarifying the concept of stage props as a sign, and also at analyzing how the internal relations of a certain play can be represented through the transfers of objects among characters. Moreover, I will also analyze how the degree of agreement with the Aristotelian concept influences these relations and their scenic realization.

The relations depicted are necessarily connected with the ways of representation of the individual, the individuality and the identity.

The third rather large area studied is the structuring of space originating from the set and the character's relation to it, with special emphasis on its relatedness to verticality (IV Stage machinery and verticality). In the 17th century there were significant changes in terms of stage technology especially that of the stage props, as well as the way they used the space. Movement and continuous changes so typical of the Baroque aesthetics, and also the enchantment of temporariness naturally bring about certain requirements for the stage space.

Although change of space can occur without the visual transformation of the scenic space, merely on account of acting and relying on the spectator's imagination, with the appearance of aesthetics that appraises the appearance, the *trompe-l'oeil*, and the spectacle in general, there appears to be a demand for a stage space in which any change of the set is possible and imaginable. This will be manageable with the technique of *décor à compartiments* and the *pièce à machines*. Changes of the set as well as changes or even steadiness of the scenic view offer a number of aspects for this study. One of these techniques, which stage technologic device had a revealing importance in the 17th century, is the starting point in this chapter, which technology - due to its close relation with the actor (and thus with the character) - has a dramaturgical significance that distinguishes it from other stage techniques. A rather baroque-like example of coincidental meeting of stage technique and character so irrational in its nature is the human body hanging in the air disconnected from the set basically. This element is not unfamiliar in the New Theatre either (for instance in *Le Piéton de l'air* by Ionesco). The use of the lifting equipment in this case also functions to emphasise the vertical axis as well as the layered notion of the space. In the structure of the space there are several parallel layers included. If we accept that the structuring of space as indicated in the text refers to the general concept of how they mapped space in that period, we will observe that the potentialities of ascending and descending are there in these worlds as well, existence is imaginable on a number of levels.

In this chapter the relation of character and verticality as well as the scenic realization of this relation is studied. How is the relation of the *high* and the *low* specified, what stage devices are characteristic of the Baroque theatre, which does not only leave the unified and unique set (*décor unique et unifié*) of the classicist aesthetics behind, but also ignores the

unity of space, and prioritizes movement and action, and what stage devices are there in the New Theatre with its often non-realistic or up-side-down spaces?

3. Methods and devices applied

In the course of the study - apart from some exceptions - the dramatic texts served exclusively as sources of information for mapping the methods and devices of the potential staging. Contextual information with reference to the staging can be manifest in the authorial stage instructions (explicit didascalia) and also in the dialogue (implicit or concealed didascalia). In the case of the 17th century dramatic texts, which had generally few stage instructions, construing or reconstructing the stage space can be problematic, whilst in the study of 20th century texts the fact that they are 'over-instructed', and the instructions which carry no practical information, require special consideration. In 17th century texts didascalia with reference to the scenic view, the acting and the attitude remain the main source of information. Dialogues occasionally clearly indicate acting as well as props on scene or costume (like in the case of the description of Mascarille's costume in *Précieuses ridicules*), at other times only scenes or the drama itself help to decide if certain prop appears on stage or nor (like Don Diègue's sword in *Cid* in the scene after the duel). Apart from the elements referring to acting and costume, the name is attached to the character both in texts and on stage, which name functions as the device of theatricality. We study the relations of character and identity as well as character and action through the information about the scenic constitution of the character. Change of identity as well as metamorphosis of character (characteristic of both the Baroque and the New Theatre) can occur through change of costume, name or attitude/behaviour. With reference to the scenic props, apart from the representation of certain props the textual indications of their dramaturgical importance are also of our interest. The dramaturgical importance of the vertical dimension in a certain drama can be examined with the help of the explicit as well as the implicit didascalia referring to the set, the scenic view and their changes, taking into consideration textual elements that refer to the relation not indicated on stage with space-elements in connection with the notion of the *high* and the *low*. Since in the relation of text and stage the concept of and use of space refer to both the stage and the dramatic space, apart from the study of explicit elements with potential representation on stage elements without stage representation must also be considered. Aspects studied in certain chapters will only become well-rounded this way.

4. Results/Conclusions

1/a) In the case of the classical tragic hero (*Phèdre* by Racine) information referring to the appearance - more precisely the lack of information referring to changes - suggest certain stability, the text uttered and textual elements that refer to the behaviour emphasize the tension between this unchanged appearance and the quarrel within the self. This suits the dramaturgy of the classical tragedy, in which in the core of action there is the inconsistency of the protagonist and the outer world as well as the impossibility of communicating it.

1/b) In the characteristically Baroque genre of the tragicomedy (*Le Cid* by Corneille) the intervention of the rather changeable fate or destiny twists the course of action, which is here also indicated with the changing of the protagonist's name - he obtains the name Cid.

1/c) Leaving *genre sérieux* behind the number of references about visual elements increases in frequency, and there appears the disguise completed with the change of the name, and the recognition that follows it (*Les Précieuses ridicules* by Molière) as well as the multiplication of the level of illusions, the character's change of name and costume and his total metamorphosis through acting (*L'Illusion comique* by Corneille), which is also followed by recognition. Whilst in the comedy that came after the classicist aesthetics the disguise contributed to the creation of the levels of illusion, in the Baroque tragicomedy the disguise creates a kind atmosphere that is vibrating on the borderline of reality and illusion, depicting the typical Baroque topic of endurance and changeability.

1/d) Estrangement with the Aristotelian principles and with the tradition affects the notion of character as well. Play with the identity, new techniques of the depiction of the identity in the New Theatre often underlines the 'flatness' of characters without psychological depths. Stability of the character's appearance and his costume, once so characteristic of the classicist aesthetics, partly refers to his self-sameness (also in his social role); on the other hand it is simply a theatrical convention. Nevertheless, the cliché-like appearance in the New Theatre, the dominance of the appearance leads to the high number of characters lacking psychological depths (*La Cantatrice chauve* by Ionesco), as well as it refers to the complete lack of recognition (as an Aristotelian twist) combined with the utter instability of the identity, also with the impossibility of remembering and the forgetting of names (*En attendant Godot* by Beckett).

1/e) In the late works of Ionesco the change of identity emphasized with signification in the appearance becomes more frequent (*Rhinocéros*), and so does the multiple identity, which creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and changeability, and which is actually a Baroque trace (*L'Homme aux valises, Voyages chez les morts* by Ionesco). Here the dominance of changing

the appearance in order to indicate change of identity functions as a bizarre and surprising element, apart from contributing to the atmosphere of uncertainty, which aspect also reminds us of the Baroque aesthetics in its priority of remarkable visual effects.

1/f) It is a rather significant characteristic of the theatre of Genet that estrangement with the concept of character in the Aristotelian principles is manifest in the play with the identity, the use of disguise, and the role-play. There is also a very frequent use of several masks and costumes with strong visual effect. However, the instructions and gestures indicated exactly in certain sounded parts of the text as well as the intonation can also function as disguises, and obviously indicate the place of the change of identity (*Les Bonnes*, *Le Balcon* by Genet).

2/a) The notion of gift is present in the dramatic texts studied both thematically and as a means of communication, irrespective of the texts' indebtedness of era, genre or aesthetic tendency. However, while in the Baroque texts the gift and the object appearing on stage usually stand for itself as well as it serves - in terms of imagination - as the manifestation of unique powers pointing beyond itself (thus being opposed to verisimilitude), in the classicist aesthetics the donation of as well as renunciation of certain abstract concepts such as authority, friendship, love etc., is more and more typical. These concepts do usually not materialize on stage, or only in the form of a symbolic object. Change in the New Theatre, although somewhat similar to change in the 17th century dramatic texts in terms of the topic, appears, however, in a totally different way: it is often subdued with irony, or communicates the impossibility or lack of communication itself. Therefore we can claim that whilst in the relation of Baroque and classicism the nature of the objects transferred as well as that of the abstract ideas and concepts may differ from each other, the exchange itself follows a rather 'regular' form, and realizes its communicative function; in the New Theatre the possibility of exchange itself is questioned. The uncertainty of identity as well as the changeability and the fickleness can obviously be traced in the conditions of exchanges. Thus there is a consistent tendency leading from the estrangement with the Aristotelian principles and from the disintegration of the character to the fact that the acts of exchanges and gifts become less and less frequent in the New Theatre.

2/b) The gift of love appearing on stage can obtain a rather important dramaturgic function, i.e. it can serve as the starting point of the intrigue, and can also generate further twists in the action, increasing thus the tension between appearance and reality, casting light on the changeability of emotions - a Baroque theme *par excellence* (*Mélite ou les fausses lettres* by Corneille). In the course of exchanges that strengthen emotions the exchange of characters as

well as creating relations between families are also rather typical (*Les Fourberies de Scapin* by Molière). The very same notions in the New Theatre appear with an ironic undertone, the gift misses its target, and receives no return (*Scène à quatre* by Ionesco).

2/c) Scenic presence of a magic object - characteristic of the Baroque aesthetics - that changes owners, and brings danger to the new owner (*Médée* by Corneille), which notion can be observed in the New Theatre as well, surprisingly fulfilling the same dramaturgical function (*Les Bonnes* by Genet).

2/d) Closer in time to the aesthetics of the *genre sérieux*, (especially in the case of the tragedy meeting the requirements of the classicist ideal), there is a tendency observable leading from the particular to the abstract as for the nature of the objects presented, desired or rejected (*Le Cid*, *Polyeucte martyr* by Corneille). Abstract objects or valuables exchanging their owners can be for instance *power* or *kingdom*: these obviously have both tangible and abstract aspects, and can be signified with particular objects such as a *crown*, a *sceptre* or a *sword*. Most frequently the sword can be found both in dramatic texts and on stage. As the metaphor of honesty and power it can fulfil rather significant dramaturgic functions in this genre.

2/e) These objects and due to them the concepts of power and strength also appear in the New Theatre, but in a particular way they come to represent on stage the theme of deprivation - quite the inverse of the gift. Closely related to this there is a special stage- and acting-technique (especially in terms of the texts studied), in which the sounded text represent certain objects, and their lack will have a dramaturgic function (*Le Roi se meurt* by Ionesco). The deprivation, and the rejection of donation as well as a faulty donation, when one of the three agents of the act of giving (giver, given, and the gift) is missing, especially characterize texts of the New Theatre (*Le Roi se meurt* by Ionesco, *En attendant Godot*, *Fin de partie*, *Acte sans paroles I* by Beckett).

3/a) The unified and unchanging set - characteristic of the classical dramaturgy - accounts for the insignificant amount of didascalia referring to the scenic view in the relevant texts. The motif of ascend and fall is mainly represented through acting, and appears on stage visibly through the proxemics (*Esther* by Racine). The vertical view of the world is stable hierarchically, in which a God almighty has control over all, with the ruling monarch having power over all men. Divine powers and divine justice are depicted scenically with several visual effects as the classicist aesthetics is left gradually behind, such as a flying spirit, a kind of magic element (*Dom Juan* by Molière).

3/b) Plays depicting mythological themes with intervening divine and human spheres are not unheard of in the Baroque theatre, the topic itself involves using spectacular scenic devices. Movement along the vertical axis can become a guiding principle that structures the action (*Psyché* by Corneille-Molière-Quinault). This notion can be observed in the New Theatre as well, and its scenic representation can occasionally take place with the help of rather similar spectacular devices. Such is the usage of a stage-crane as well as the flying human body in the air (*Le Piéton de l'air*, *Amédée ou comment s'en débarrasser* by Ionesco). Concepts associated with the *high* and the *low* and the scenic view that depicts them shows a number of similarities among drama texts of the two periods. An important difference is, however, that whilst *high* and *low* as well as *positive* and *negative* can be mutually and consistently be related in the 17th century texts, in the New Theatre ascend can suddenly turn into a descend into hell, or will not necessarily mean the opportunity of a spiritual/moral/mental advancement.

3/c) Texts in both periods include actions based on the tension between the horizontal and the vertical levels, in which ascending represents possession of supernatural powers as well as being different from the everyday world of man, and also indicates a kind of escape route from an unfavourable situation (*Médée* by Corneille, *Amédée* by Ionesco).

3/d) Spectacular and surprising elements are there both in the theatre of the Baroque and the New Theatre. However, studying 20th century drama texts, we can notice another tendency, which is actually manifest in the trinity of place, action and time. This can be interpreted as a kind of approach to the classical dramaturgy. The problem of high versus low appears in these texts. The structure of action and space here retains a notion of the ritual as well as follows a linear direction, where movement along the vertical axis and the change in the set usually indicate decline and connects to the concepts of burials; the *high* will also acquire a negative connotation, relating to the motifs of loneliness and isolation. Set-elements can literally cover the stage, burying as well as hiding the actors in their roles (*Les Chaises*, *Le Nouveau Locataire* by Ionesco, *Oh les beaux jours* by Beckett).

3/e) In a world turned upside down the desire to ascend and to belong to the chosen ones becomes entangled with the desire to be buried, which will scenically be represented as a ritualistic descend (*Le Balcon* by Genet).

In conclusion we can claim that the similarities and the differences pointed out of certain aspects examined in the dramatic texts of the two periods unambiguously relate to the Aristotelian principles, especially to that of verisimilitude, in their relation to the principle of

reason and *imagination*. At the same time, however, in the relation with the Aristotelian principles as well as between dramatic and stage space, we cannot rely on predictable and generally justifiable correspondence. Similar, occasionally identical stage props may as well support dramaturgically dissimilar concepts. Whilst in the classical dramaturgy the stereotypical and unchanging nature of the appearance of the character indicates certain stability and steady identity, in the New Theatre the cliché-like appearance characterizes characters without certain or own identity, and characters lacking psychological depths. Although as for the change of objects the different types of exchanges can be detected in drama texts written both in the 17th century and in the New Theatre, in the case of the latter the gifts or donations are mostly faulty, or are a failure. This notion is closely connected to the topic of unfulfilled communication. Although the scenic realization of verticality has a number of similarities, it must be emphasized that the motif of the *high* and the *low*, so frequently there as a stable set of values in the 17th century texts, becomes distorted and unpredictable in the texts of the New Theatre, and the presence of motif of degradation and being buried gains in importance. It can be claimed, however, that the vertical nature of the stage space indicated in the texts expresses a certain metaphysical direction. The fact that the borderline between the *high* and the *low* can be crossed can be interpreted as the desire to ascend, ascending usually meets difficulties, or turns out to be an illusion: the high does not count as a higher quality. Obviously these aspects and the texts chosen could not provide full representation of the theatre of the periods, but could only demonstrate some opportunities of the parallel study of the two periods.

5. Publications related to the topic of the thesis:

Moderne et postmoderne dans l'oeuvre d'Eugène Ionesco, Actes du 8e Séminaire international d'études doctorales, Presov, 2004, p. 99-101.

La métamorphose dans le théâtre baroque et le théâtre de l'absurde, Acta Academiae Pedagogicae Agriensis, nova series tom. XXX. Sectio romanica, Eger, 2003, p.139-148.

La reconnaissance dans En attendant Godot de Beckett, Revue d'Études Françaises, N° 15 – 2010, 225-231.

Verticality in Baroque and New Theater in Psyché by Molière–Corneille–Quinault and in A Stroll of the Air and Victims of Duty by Ionesco, Filológiai Közlöny, Volume 3/2011, p255-270.

6. Further publications:

L'intentionnalité dans Huis clos de Jean-Paul Sartre, Rencontres Françaises, Actes du 6e séminaire d'études doctorales, Brno, 2004, p. 33-38.

History, images, notions (review), Klió, Volume 13, 2004/2, p. 3.