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Philosophical Theatre: Some Reflections on the Concept

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Abstract: The article deals with the question of how to define and understand the concept of a philosophical theatre, in order to apply it productively to performances. To this end, theoretical reflections and the analysis of several productions of Greek tragedies that might qualify as philosophical theatre, are related to each other. Proceeding from Brecht's ideas on a philosophical theatre, Schiller's reflections on an aesthetic education and Goethe's deliberations on *Bildung*, a first tentative definition of the concept is undertaken. In order to further substantiate the understanding of the concept, the tentative definition is applied to two productions of Greek tragedies that were mounted in order to realize the respective ideas – Brecht's *The Antigone of Sophocles* (Chur 1948) and Goethe's *Ion* (Weimar 1802). In light of the perspectives opened up by the conclusions regarding the concept, still another production of a Greek tragedy is discussed – namely, Klaus Michael Grüber's *The Bacchae* (Berliner Schaubühne 1974), which the director never claimed to be philosophical theatre. Still, from it important insights regarding the concept can be derived that demonstrate its crucial, even if ever-changing meaning.¹

“The future of the theatre is a philosophical one” (Brecht 2015: 43–45, at 43), Brecht writes in the opening paragraph of a short note entitled “Latest Stage: (1 February 1929) ‘Oedipus’”. What did he mean? In order to make sense of this statement, let us first take a look at the production to which the note refers: Leopold Jessner's *Oedipus* (4 January 1929) at the Staatliche Schauspielhaus Berlin. It comprised *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Most critics discovered some surprising novelties in it, as the critic Herbert Ihering discerningly noted:

¹ Some of the arguments brought forward by this article have already been published in my book *Tragedy's Endurance* (2017).

there are moments in this performance that should be developed further, wonderful moments, for which everyone ought to see this *Oedipus*, wonderful moments belonging to the most powerful and the simplest contemporary theatre. Those are moments in which Jessner found an unperturbed stillness and strength that is not stylized or stiff. *An almost explanatory representation and unfolding of actions* when Oedipus and Jocasta face each other [...]. Stimulation through simplicity, drama through *the juxtaposition of actions*, unnerving through its stillness. Here Jessner and Kortner have for the first time found a way to go beyond the beginnings of their collaboration. Here discretion is not understatement, an outburst is not an explosion. Here is a beginning. Kortner manages to unnerve through his matter-of-fact tone [...]. An evening that [...] is [...] full of potential. Jessner finally once again raises questions for discussion: for this he must be praised. (Ihering 1961: II, 376–377, my emphasis and translation)

Others, too, noticed these novelties. They reminded the critic Felix Hollaender of a matter-of-fact newspaper report on a sensational trial: “The individual actions and facts are rendered as soberly as it perhaps corresponds to today’s taste – the effect is more cerebral than celebratory – which means it is intellectual and excludes any ceremonious force” (Hollaender, qtd. in Rühle 1988: II, 921).

In “Dialog über die Schauspielkunst” (Dialogue on Acting, 17 February 1929), Brecht singles out another such moment when he described Helene Weigel, who played the maid announcing Clytemnestra’s death, as “an actress of this new sort”: She

announced the death of her mistress by proclaiming ‘dead, dead’ in a completely emotionless, piercing voice, her cry of ‘Jocasta is dead’ was devoid of any sorrow, but pronounced so firmly and inexorably that the bare fact of her mistress’s death created a more powerful impression at that precise moment than could have been generated by any grief of her own. (Brecht 2015: 45–48, at 47)

Referring to such moments, Brecht in “Latest Stage: Oedipus” (2015: 43–45) surveys the arts with regard to the development of theatre in the Weimar Republic. He identifies two trends – one dealing with aspects pertaining to subject matter (*Stoff*) as initiated by Piscator, and the other addressing the question of form (Brecht 2015: 44).² While the first had reached a dead end, “the most significant advance of the year was the attempt to master the great form. Latest stage: Oedipus” (Brecht 2015: 44). Brecht defines ‘great form’ as having ‘epic’ qualities: “It must report. It does not need to believe that one can understand our world through empathy, and it does not need to intend this either. The subject matter is vast, our dramatic writing must take this into account” (Brecht 2015: 44). In his view, this did indeed happen in

² This is a typically Brechtian simplification. Piscator, proceeding from the question of how to deal with a certain subject matter on stage, invented new forms and thus created a new aesthetics.

Jessner's *Oedipus* and, he goes on, as a result the production should be regarded as 'this latest stage' in the contemporary development of a 'great form':

Important aspects: 1. The great form. 2. The techniques in the second half (*Oedipus at Colonus*), where a story is told with great theatrical effect. Here, words, which till now have been notorious for being lyrical, become theatrically effective. Here, the 'experience', if it comes from anywhere comes from the philosophical realm. (Brecht 2015: 44–45)

Jessner's *Oedipus*, according to Brecht, pointed forward to and indeed anticipated the future of theatre. Brecht felt that by using a Greek tragedy as his material, Jessner not only succeeded in creating a 'great form' but also in turning theatre into a philosophical institution.

This brief overview does not provide clear guidelines on how to understand and explain the concept of a philosophical theatre. However, it highlights the need for a new theatre aesthetics that enables a different art of spectatorship. In his philosophical dialogue *Der Messingkauf* (Brecht 2014: 1–96), which Brecht began in exile and never completed, he further developed and refined such a concept, though he stopped working on it in 1951.

In this dialogue with theatre professionals, a philosopher argues against the theatre of imitation, identification and empathy. Instead he develops a counter-model, which later became known as Brecht's epic theatre. As already hinted at more or less openly in "The latest stage: 'Oedipus'", the form of philosophical theatre Brecht envisaged more or less corresponded to his theory of an epic theatre. The philosopher, in particular, emphasized the spectators' new attitude: They were to witness the actions unfolding on the stage from a distance, similar to a scientist watching the progress of an experiment. They were to never let themselves be overcome by emotions but remain critical observers. In order to become a philosophical institution, theatre was to transform into a kind of laboratory. By no means was it to imitate 'nature' or 'reality' but it had to allow the spectator to analyse and recognize what was happening and why (cf. Jameson 1998 and Puchner 2010: 106–112).

In his *Short Organon for the Theatre* (Brecht 2015: 229–261) Brecht concisely summarized his lengthy reflections on the future of the theatre and the theatre of the future, which he had previously developed in *Der Messingkauf*. Although Brecht had mounted productions of his plays in the Weimar Republic and even, albeit infrequently, in exile, he had not yet realized his idea of a philosophical theatre. That is not to say that he had not experimented with certain devices that would enable such a theatre with regard to their effect. However, the results could not pass as philosophical theatre.

While finishing his *Short Organon*, Brecht began work on his first production after his return from exile. His old friend Hans Curjel, then chief director at the

theatre of the small Swiss town of Chur, offered him the possibility of staging a production there. Brecht agreed and, together with another old friend, the stage designer Caspar Neher, set to work on mounting *The Antigone of Sophocles* (2003). It premiered on 15 February 1948 – Brecht’s first production in his native language after his many years abroad. His wife Helene Weigel played the part of Antigone – her first opportunity to appear on stage since their return.

Keeping in mind that Brecht envisioned the theatre of the future as a philosophical one by taking recourse to a performance of a Greek tragedy and that he had spent the years before that working on *Der Messingkauf*, Brecht’s choice of the play suggests that he wanted to experiment with a new aesthetics in this production that would correspond to this concept of a philosophical theatre.

This idea is further substantiated by the “Foreword to the *Antigone-Model*”, in which Brecht and Neher write: “Greek dramaturgy uses certain forms of estrangement, notably interventions by the chorus, to try and rescue some of that freedom of calculation which Schiller is uncertain to ensure” (Brecht 2003: 203–210, at 204–205). This is an interesting statement for at least two reasons: The first is Brecht’s argument that ancient Greek tragedy inherently enables the estrangement (*Verfremdung*) he was striving for, particularly through the chorus, which interrupts the action and grants the spectators a certain freedom to distance themselves from the action and to reflect on it. The chorus therefore appears as a foundational element for an aesthetics that aims to realize a philosophical theatre. Does that mean that a theatre of the past – in this case Greek theatre, which developed this particular estranging device – can be understood as an early example of philosophical theatre?

This brings us to the second interesting point in Brecht’s statement – the reference to Schiller, which, rather surprisingly, distorts the latter’s ideas on the chorus. As Brecht would have known, Schiller introduced the chorus in his tragedy *The Bride of Messina* (1803) to “bring calm into the action [...]. For the spectator’s feelings must retain their freedom even amid the most vehement passion” (1962: 10). Schiller went on to explain:

What common judgement finds objectionable in the chorus, namely, that it dispels the illusion and shatters the emotional power of the effects, is just what serves as its highest recommendation [...]. The chorus, by holding the parts separate and by intervening between the passions with its calming observations, gives us back our freedom, which would otherwise be lost in the storm of emotional agitation. (Schiller 1962: 10–11)

Schiller considered the chorus one of the most effective means for the spectator to maintain an aesthetic distance, the prerequisite for calm reflection. Just as Brecht fought against *Einfühlung* – empathy – in theatre, so had Schiller – and Goethe – almost two hundred years earlier. They not only “declared openly and earnestly

war on naturalism in art” (Schiller 1962: 7), as Schiller wrote in the Preface to *The Bride of Messina*, but also demanded a completely new attitude of reception from the spectators. This called for a new aesthetics. Dramatic characters, who speak in verse and are not “real beings [...] but ideal personages and representations of their species” (Schiller 1962: 8) do not allow the spectators to identify and empathize with them. By reviving an element that was constitutive of ancient Greek theatre but unimaginable on the modern illusionistic stage of Schiller’s times, Schiller went even further and opened up a particular space and time for reflection in the reception process.

If we link Schiller’s suggestion for new aesthetic devices to be developed for drama and theatre back to his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, it becomes evident that he conceived theatre as a philosophical institution. It was only in that form that theatre would be able to realize its fundamental function – to restore wholeness and totality, lost to mankind in the historical process of civilization since the times of the ancient Greeks. Theatre is regarded as essentially playful, maintaining the balance between the laws of nature and the laws of reason that usually fight each other: “Man shall only play with Beauty, and he shall play only with Beauty [...]. Man plays only when he is in the full sense of this word a man, and he is only wholly Man, when he is playing” (Schiller 2012: 80). This quotation reveals why theatre is capable of fulfilling this function only when it creates the possibility for the spectators to cultivate “the whole of our sensuous and intellectual powers in the fullest possible harmony” (Schiller 2012: 99) in the aesthetic distance of their reception process. That is to say that theatre can be philosophical in so far as it enables this possibility. It must allow the spectators to grasp the idea of Man and to reflect on it.

Undeniably, this idea of Man strictly differed from the idea of Man underlying and advocated by Brecht’s theatre. Still, if we compare the type of theatre both Schiller – alongside Goethe – and Brecht had fought, the similarities stand out. In both cases their battle was directed against a theatre of identification, empathy and strong emotions overpowering the spectators. While in the case of Schiller and Goethe – particularly with regard to their cooperation at Goethe’s Weimar theatre – this meant going against the realistic-psychological theatre developed all over Europe since the middle of the 18th century as the theatre suitable for the educated middle class, Brecht confronted the continuation of this kind of theatre as it evolved and was theorized at the beginning of the twentieth century, mainly by Stanislavsky. In both cases, this meant inventing and applying theatrical devices that enabled the spectators of their respective eras to maintain a certain aesthetic distance towards the actions unfolding on stage and to reflect on them. In this respect, one could regard both kinds of theatre as philosophical. That is to say, Brecht’s philosophical theatre as theatre of the future took up a project begun

by Schiller and Goethe but developed it to a completely different end and through other aesthetic means.

While Schiller envisaged theatre as ‘play’, balancing the laws of nature and reason, Goethe conceived of it as a means to contribute to the *Bildung* of the individual, i.e. to the unfolding of one’s full potential, and in this sense to one’s self-cultivation. They both agreed that their aims would not be realized via a realistic-psychological theatre that encouraged or even demanded that the spectators identified and empathized with the dramatic characters. Rather, a particular kind of ‘estrangement’ was deemed necessary in order to enable a certain distance as well as freedom for the spectator. As Goethe explained in the essay “Das Weimarsche Hoftheater” (The Weimar Court Theatre, 1802):

the spectator should learn to perceive that not every play is like a coat, which must be tailored precisely according to his own current needs, shape, and size. We should not think of satisfying our actual spiritual, emotional, and sensual needs in the theatre, but we should instead see ourselves as travellers who visit foreign places and lands, to which we travel for the sake of learning and delight, and where we do not find all those comforts which we have at home to shape our own individual needs. (Goethe 1887–1919: part 1, XI, 72–85, at 82, my translation)

Aesthetic education as propagated by Schiller and the idea of *Bildung* as promoted by Goethe resulted in the demand for the autonomy of art. I would go so far as to argue that autonomous art was proclaimed as the German answer to the French Revolution.

In fact, Goethe was not in favour of the French Revolution. In search of a force against revolution he developed his ideas on the autonomy of art and of *Bildung* that would grant individuals the possibility of developing their full potential. Schiller, on the other hand, had initially welcomed and embraced the French Revolution but was deeply shocked when it turned into a reign of terror, after which he began to search for a solution that would secure the freedom of the individual alongside an independent state that operated without violence and barbarity.

In his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* Schiller developed corresponding ideas: He was convinced that without a new political order the individual’s chance of unfolding their full potential was limited. Citizens would be able to realize this goal only if the state permitted them to do so. However, “because the State is to be an organization which is formed by itself and for itself, it can really become such only insofar as the parts have been severally attuned to the idea of the whole” (Schiller 2012: 33).

The interdependence between individual and political freedom raised the question of priorities. Schiller answered it in favour of the individual: “I hope to

convince you [...] that we must indeed, if we are to solve that political problem in practice, follow the path of aesthetics, since it is through Beauty that we arrive at Freedom” (Schiller 2012: 27). The autonomy of art was ultimately to serve the goal of enabling the individual’s *Bildung* (Goethe) and thus, in the long run, a free state (Schiller). This is how the demand for an autonomous art was seen as an answer and viable alternative to the French Revolution. Insofar as theatre as an autonomous art was conceived to provide aesthetic distance and a space for reflection, in this sense as a philosophical theatre, we can even go so far as to propose that philosophical theatre was to take the place of revolution and achieve what the French Revolution had failed to bring about.

The Weimar Theatre, led by Goethe since 1791, served as stage for creating performances as autonomous works of art and for developing a philosophical theatre. From the very beginning it functioned as an experimental stage devoted to identifying a corresponding aesthetics. It was supposed to allow spectators to unfold their potential and, by the same token, to undergo an aesthetic education as advocated by Schiller. A series of experiments, which on their own were received rather positively or partly even highly praised, led to the formulation of a new aesthetics. Following the general principle of the picturesque and musicality, a new acting style was developed that changed the prevailing realistic style into a very stylized form of gesture, movements and blockings and emphasized the musical principle in declamation. Goethe’s *Theory of Colours* was applied to the costumes and his stage design. Masks were introduced. All these innovations were made sparingly, step by step, one new element being introduced with every production.

Goethe dared to realize all of them together for the first time in a production of a Greek tragedy. Euripides’ *Ion*, adapted by August Wilhelm Schlegel, premiered on 2 January 1802. If we regard the aesthetic devices developed in Goethe’s theatre until then as a means to achieve aesthetic distance, it does not come as a surprise that he chose a Greek tragedy to apply them collectively. While held in the highest possible esteem by the educated middle class when being read, Greek tragedies around 1800 did not yet have a performance history on German stages – except in school theatres. For a regular theatre, aiming at empathy and identification, they appeared too strange or even foreign, as the Philhellenist Johann Gottfried Herder put it in an article on the “*Verpflanzung der Griechischen Tragödie auf unsre Bühne*” (“Transplanting Greek Tragedies on to our Stage”), in which he writes:

The Greek customs are not like ours, especially in terms of the relationship between the sexes. [...] We don’t want women, debased to a certain extent, blemished in such and such ways, practising such and such wickedness, in tragic theatre. (Herder 1804: 367, my translation)

Perhaps Goethe's choice was inspired by that very strangeness that would reinforce the aesthetic distance, which appeared necessary for attaining *Bildung*. This 'foreignness' of the tragedy coupled with the striking distancing devices of the performance might have aroused an aesthetic pleasure in the spectators and at the same time encouraged them to reflect on tragedy as a meaningful representation of the historical process, making them aware of the temporal distance of the play's origins while allowing them to define their own position. Had this really happened, we could have confidently labelled Goethe's *Ion* an example of philosophical theatre. And it seems that the philosopher Schelling, who was in the audience, had in fact received the performance in this vein. He states: "I don't remember ever having had the pleasure of experiencing such a harmonious vision in the theatre" (Schelling, qtd. in Fambach 1958: 579). For the philosopher at least, the production had succeeded as philosophical theatre.

Generally, however, *Ion* was a failure. It was performed before an almost empty auditorium for a second time – its last presentation in Weimar. It seems that Karoline Herder spoke for the majority of the spectators when she wrote:

The newest law of theatre that now reigns and becomes more shameless and impertinent day by day, considers dramatic art to be representation and declamation only. The content of the play is either entirely subordinate or disregarded in relation to the spectators. We are supposed to sit in the audience like wooden puppets and watch and listen to the declamation of the wooden puppets on stage, until we leave feeling drab and empty. (qtd. in Herder 1861–1862: 301)

Herder's wish to identify and empathize with the dramatic characters was thwarted, while the focus on the beauty of the stage actions and its stage design as well as the harmony between all elements left her 'empty', failing to arouse any reflection and thoughts on their possible symbolic meanings. She was not the only one who received the performance in this way. As the documents suggest, most audience members did not want to pass aesthetic judgement and reflect on what they perceived but preferred sharing the feelings of the dramatic characters (cf. Fambach 1958: 564–650). Therefore, *Ion*, while possibly conceived and staged as philosophical theatre, did not succeed as that. The spectators rejected it (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2017: 19–43).

This seems all the more surprising since between 1792 and 1807 a host of publications appeared that tried to make sense of the seeming contradiction that, on the one hand, Greek tragedy is deeply rooted in the time and space of its origin, but, on the other, it is able to speak to the citizens of the modern world – at least in its written form. Out of this discussion the philosophy of tragedy and the tragic emerged, based on the understanding of cultural difference. The most important protagonists of this discussion were Schiller, Schelling, the brothers Friedrich and

August Wilhelm Schlegel, Hegel and Hölderlin. Goethe's production of *Ion* was no doubt meant to contribute to this discussion, rendered suitable for this purpose by its particular aesthetics that aimed at challenging the spectators to maintain a position of distance and to reflect on the fundamental cultural difference.

However, this did not happen. The production, likely conceived as philosophical theatre by Goethe, failed, because the spectators refused to receive it as such. Goethe's attempt to turn theatre into a philosophical institution had flopped.

Let us now return to Brecht and his attempt to achieve a similar goal. As Goethe had done one and half centuries earlier, Brecht, too, realized a new acting style: the actors 'demonstrated' the dramatic characters instead of embodying them. This was to a great extent determined by objects such as the huge board that, once Antigone was arrested, was fastened to Helene Weigel's back with openings for her hands, so that she could not move them. The chorus used masks on poles. Moreover, Neher's stage design featuring a curtainless stage as well as his sketches for the blockings, specific configurations and the masks were decisive for the production. The model-book put together by Brecht, Neher and the photographer Ruth Berlau suggests that the production did indeed realize epic theatre in the sense of philosophical theatre: The spectators were not invited to empathize and lose themselves in the illusion; rather, the techniques used were exhibited nakedly, so that the spectators could delight in their professional application as well as in the beauty of the objects. The method of estrangement allowed for an aesthetic distance that would open up the possibility to reflect on the reasons, background, motivation, situation and contexts of the actions, and, thus, on the performance's social and political implications.

However, it seems that the production was received by audiences in Chur and later in Zurich in a similar way as Goethe's *Ion*. The chief director of the theatre summarized the reception as follows: "[...] the educated expressed their silent opposition to the intellectual and optical hardness that confronted them on stage, so that the few performances took place before empty seats" (Curjel 1988: 193, my translation). As was the case with *Ion*, some of the critics understood the aim of such a philosophical theatre – "a form kindling an undeniable, tense interest in the spectators while turning them into distanced observers" (*Neue Zürcher Nachrichten* 16 March 1948, qtd. in Hecht 1988: 209, my translation) – but the spectators belonging to the 'educated' middle class left "feeling drab and empty", as Karoline Herder had written after seeing *Ion*.

As a matter of fact, the aesthetics developed and presented in Goethe's *Ion* and Brecht's *Antigone* differed significantly. However, they are comparable as regards the purpose for which they were applied. In both cases, the spectators were to avoid identification and empathy, and be granted the freedom to reflect on the actions they were witnessing. Both performances were not meant to convey

to or even impose on their spectators a particular kind of *Weltanschauung*, ideology or even philosophy, but to enable and encourage them to individually reflect on what they were seeing. In this sense, both were intended as examples of philosophical theatre as understood and defined by Brecht, and both seem to have failed with their audiences in this very regard.

Let us pause for a moment and reconsider what insights we have gained so far on the concept of a philosophical theatre. Proceeding from Brecht's first sketch of it and examining it with regard to Brecht's *Antigone of Sophocles* and Goethe's *Ion*, two conclusions seem particularly important: Following Brecht's distinction between subject matter and form, we argued that theatre can become philosophical not so much because of a performance's particular subject matter but because of its form via its aesthetic devices. From this we can draw our first conclusion, i.e. that it is not a subject matter's particular philosophy that makes a performance philosophical. In other words, putting Platonic dialogues, such as *Phaidon* (1986), *The Symposium* (1995, both Schaubühne Berlin, Probebühne Cuvrystraße) or even Brecht's *Messingkauf*, which premiered at the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in Berlin (GDR) on 12 October 1963 (cf. White 2004: 248), on stage would not necessarily result in philosophical theatre in the Brechtian sense. Rather, it is a particular form that grants the spectator aesthetic distance and, through it, the freedom to reflect on what is presented and how. That is to say that a philosophical theatre comes into being as the result of particular aesthetic devices.

However, the application of such devices does not guarantee the emergence of philosophical theatre. As long as the spectators do not feel free and willing to seize the opportunities for reflection provided by these specific aesthetic devices, the performance cannot qualify as philosophical theatre. For this comes into being only on the condition that the spectators recognize their freedom to reflect and make use of it. In case they recognize it but feel disappointed, disturbed or even insulted by it – as was clearly the case with some spectators of *Ion* and *The Antigone of Sophocles* – the performance will fail as philosophical theatre. Its success ultimately depends on the individual spectator who can and wants to fully exploit the possibilities for reflection granted by the particular aesthetics of the production. That is to say, the artists involved in a production may strive for the realization of a philosophical approach but are unable to control the result. There has to be at least one spectator who is responsive to their devices and makes use of the freedom granted to her/him for it to become philosophical theatre. As this was indeed the case with *Ion* and *The Antigone of Sophocles*, perhaps it is more accurate to say that they did not fail entirely but neither did they fully succeed as philosophical theatre.

A performance's basic condition is that it comes into being out of the encounter of actors and spectators, and philosophical theatre, too, can only emerge out

of this encounter. Even Brecht had to admit that an aesthetics that is ideally suited to philosophical theatre fails if the spectators do not receive it as such – it comes into being only on the condition that both parties involved, artists and spectators alike, agree on certain presuppositions. Most importantly, theatre must be deemed fit and suitable to serve as a philosophical institution, enabling the spectators to distance themselves from the action unfolding on stage in order to reflect on it. Another, no less important condition refers to the aesthetic devices conceived to this end, which have to be invented and developed anew for each production, setting and audience, as there is no guarantee on what devices will have the desired effect.

There is no specific aesthetic device that automatically transforms a production into philosophical theatre. Even the chorus, highly praised by Schiller and Brecht alike for its capacity to put the spectators at a distance and grant them the freedom to reflect, is not an inherently philosophical device. Reinhardt's choric theatre from before World War I may serve as an example here. It was meant to bring about temporary aesthetic communities and employed in the Weimar Republic and during the Third Reich to create not only emotional but, first and foremost, ideological communities out of actors and spectators, which reveals that the chorus here neither served to allow the spectators to maintain a certain distance nor did it function in this manner (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2005: 122–158).

If we accept aesthetic distance and the freedom for reflection as the fundamental conditions for philosophical theatre, it follows that there is no definitive list of aesthetic devices that could guarantee just that. To find examples of philosophical theatre we therefore must not examine productions that were hailed as such. Rather, every performance that granted spectators the possibility to reflect could potentially qualify as philosophical in this respect.

In order to substantiate this claim I shall refer to another performance of a Greek tragedy – Klaus Michael Grüber's production of Euripides' *The Bacchae* (1974). Unlike *Antigone*, the most popular Greek tragedy to be performed on German-speaking stages since the 19th century, *The Bacchae* barely had any performance history at all in Germany at the beginning of the 1970s. To my knowledge, the first productions of the tragedy were mounted in 1973 – one by Hansgünther Heyme in Cologne, and another by Luca Ronconi in Vienna. The audience at the Schaubühne thus would have hardly had specific expectations based on having seen other productions of the same tragedy in former years.

Grüber's production took place as the second part of the first Antiquity Project of the Schaubühne. The first part was Peter Stein's *Exercises for Actors*. I shall restrict my reflections on Grüber's production to certain staging principles that in my view qualify the production as an example of philosophical theatre (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2014: 93–115). Although some of the critics found it difficult “to

read the production” (Rühle 1974: n. pag.) or decipher and make sense of it as they watched, they nonetheless identified the principles I am going to address when they stated that the production confronted them with “dreamlike images, which never tell a story but simply unfold, which are entirely unrealistic but still deal with reality in which one is at once actor and spectator” (Baumgart 1974: 49). Unlike *Ion* or Brecht’s *Antigone of Sophocles*, the irritation the performance caused did not result in failure but led to a discussion among the critics and to a resounding success with the audiences. This was partly due to the principles mentioned in Baumgart’s review: the dreamlike images that did not tell a story but created a particular ‘reality’ in which the spectator was spectator and actor at the same time.

The performance space itself provided the first ‘dreamlike’ enigmatic image. The Antiquity Project took place not in the small theatre of the Schaubühne at Hallesches Ufer but inside the Philips Pavilion, a huge exhibition hall at the Berlin fairgrounds. The space was redesigned for the four-hour *Bacchae* performance by Gilles Aillaud and Eduardo Arroyo. A huge white-planked area delineated the stage. It was flanked on two sides by the spectators seated at right angles to each other, so that they could not only watch the stage but the other audience members as well. The back wall of the stage had four openings. On the left, a road-sweeping machine was parked and manned by workers in yellow plastic suits, their faces covered by fencing masks of sorts; in the middle were two openings – one, a hatch, was closed, and the other, a door, stood open to reveal a man dressed in a tuxedo, drinking a glass of champagne and watching the arena. Later on, he would reappear in a white summer suit. On the right, two horses were positioned behind a glass pane. A ventilator hung from the ceiling and fluorescent lights lit the hall brightly. The space had a cold, sterile, ‘clinical’ atmosphere, as many critics described it, keeping the spectators at a distance and alienating them. On the other hand, the space raised a number of questions the spectators had to address. What to make of the juxtaposition of the road-sweeping machine, including those meant to use it, and the horses? And what was the role and function of the man in the tuxedo – a kind of representative of the spectators in the auditorium, mirroring their act of spectating and watching the stage?

When the music set in, the questions only multiplied. Excerpts from Stravinsky’s *Apollon musagète* filled the space. One of the masked workers in yellow pushed a stretcher onto the stage through the open middle door. On it lay Dionysus (Michael König) holding a woman’s shoe of a dark colour in his hand. He was naked except for a thong, which made his penis appear artificial. All male figures in the performance were dressed in this way and thus recalled ancient Greek statues. A dark stripe, reminiscent perhaps of Zeus’s lightning, ran down the right side of Dionysus’ body down to his toes. When the stretcher came to a

halt, light from a dark lampshade, which was lowered from the ceiling, illuminated the god. Dionysus began the prologue stammering, searching for the word 'I'. He giggled, babbled incomprehensibly, caressed the shoe, and then began to speak. While delivering the line "the tomb of my mother" (Euripides 2016: l. 5), he flung the shoe away as if in a fit of madness and, almost instantly and accompanied by wild, imbecilic gestures, directed his attendant to bring it back. Clutching the shoe with both hands he continued his monologue, partly in German, partly in ancient Greek. The act of speaking the words "Thebes must learn its lesson, like it or not" (Euripides 2016: l. 39) seemed to trigger convulsive spasms in his body that made the stretcher topple, depositing Dionysus on the floor. At the line "[s]o I must teach this Pentheus, teach all of Thebes, what kind of god I am" (Euripides 2016: l. 48), Dionysus stood up, gathered the different parts of the stretcher and put it together again. He climbed back on, ending his prologue by repeating the first line "I am the god, Dionysus. Dionysus, son of Zeus" (Euripides 2016: l. 1) while caressing the shoe.

What were we to make of such an image? Was this a hospital? A madhouse? Was the man on the stretcher a shoe fetishist, fantasizing about being Dionysus? And why was he brought onto the stage to the tune of *Apollon musagète*? Each of the elements evoked different associations, but they did not complement each other in ways that allowed for a coherent attribution of meaning. The image offered a particular experience to the spectators and, at the same time, turned out to be an intellectual challenge. It allowed for an attitude of contemplation and provided the time to develop it, combining different associations, memories, thoughts and experiences in a highly individualistic manner.

This was most notably the case with one image much later in the performance, when the second messenger appeared on stage to report what had happened. He entered through the middle opening, where he remained standing until he left the stage in the same manner as he had arrived, long after finishing his report.

During his report the man from the beginning had taken up position in the horses' area. Now he was dressed in a trench coat and black trousers, wearing a dark hat and sunglasses. The bacchants were spread out all over the space, most of them standing, one sitting on the floor, another leaning against the wall. They were positioned to create the impression of a picture painted according to the central perspective principle. They formed two uneven diagonal lines that ran from the front of the stage to the middle opening, thus fixing the messenger as the centre of attention. The messenger reported the events in the Cithaeron mountains, which culminated in Pentheus's dismemberment, all the while remaining almost motionless as brownish-yellow slime dripped from his naked body.

He spoke excruciatingly slowly and in a somewhat singsong tone of voice. Not once did he change his position – only his face was grimacing and one could

see how his chest rose and fell with every breath. When he repeated Dionysus's words "[w]omen, I bring you the man who mocked me, / denied my sacred mysteries, / the man who mocks you now" (Euripides 2016: ll. 1079–1081), he drew out the vowels to an extent that was almost unbearable and physically painful for the listeners. It took him more than half an hour to deliver his report, which was accompanied by a very low music playing on an organ or harmonium. After having told the story of the killing he erupted in long screams, 'alah, alalah', punctuated by the organ, which was now clearly audible.

This scene revealed a reflection on painting and opera, and was composed in the manner of a painting. The spectators were confronted with it for a very long time, so that they could contemplate many of its elements. Yet the report was delivered as a kind of aria in a melodrama, accompanied by music, even though it was not always audible. The composition as a whole – that is, the relationship between the visual and aural components – recalled a seventeenth-century opera performance by alluding to its staging conventions: the virtuoso at the center, displaying his marvellous skills of vocal delivery, framed by the chorus, watching and admiring his art along with the other spectators. This extensive, tortuous yet fascinating scene not only imprinted itself on the spectators' perception and memory but also made them aware of the act of watching as witnessing.

The critic Volker Canaris regarded this scene as an example of how Grüber turned shared time, one of the two fundamental categories for theatre to happen, into an object of his staging process:

This report is lengthy, seemingly endless – the length, the passage of time, is made to be experienced through an elementary materialization in the scenic situation. The body of the actor is covered in a mud-like mass, which slowly slides off him. A temporal process becomes visible through the spectator's consciousness of monotony, i.e. of stasis, and, at the same time, of change, as in movement. Something abstract is made concrete scenically. Simultaneously, the situation provides additional decipherments: of a concrete narrative nature, for example – the messenger emerges from the muddy ground of pre-civilizational wilderness; or of an emblematic-symbolic nature – the slow creation of human consciousness takes place through this report – a process of releasing language out of a bodily materiality. (Canaris 1974: 34, my translation)

Moreover, the notion of watching and spectatorship was multiplied and augmented. It was not only the man initially dressed in a tuxedo who observed the monologue – and perhaps also the other spectators in the audience. The bacchants, too, watched and listened to the messenger. Since the monologue continued for so long, the spectators in the auditorium were granted ample time to contemplate the situation as well as the content and manner of the messenger's report.

The performance ended as it began – enigmatically. Agave and Cadmus sat on chairs, illuminated by the same lamp that had been lowered from the ceiling

over Dionysus on the stretcher in the first scene, between them a silver tray on which “the rest of my [i.e. Agave’s] poor son” (Euripides 2016: l. 1298), ripped to pieces, lay piled up: stand-up collar, white gloves, white sleeves, white handkerchief, and a pair of grey patent leather shoes with shoe trees – all items of clothing that the man in the tuxedo had worn in the beginning. While Agave spoke her lines, alternating between German and Greek and beginning with the sentence “Father, you see how changed my fortunes are” (Euripides 2016: l. 1329), which she repeated as her final words, Cadmus took a glove from the tray and began to sew. After Agave’s last words, string music swelled up. When it died down, both sat silently in the cone of light shining down from the lamp, sewing together the pieces from the tray without ever coming to an end.

This finale did not answer any of the previous questions posed by the performance but only raised new ones. Why was Pentheus’s head replaced by a stand-up collar? And why were the pieces of Pentheus’s dismembered body represented by the pieces of the suit worn by the man in the tuxedo drinking a glass of champagne and watching the stage as well as parts of the auditorium – the same person who, dressed differently from but still clearly identifiable as the spectators’ contemporary, was also present during the messenger’s report on Pentheus’s death? Why did Dionysus not reappear in the end, explaining once more the reasons for what had happened? Why did Agave alternate between German and ancient Greek as Dionysus had done in the opening scene?

These and related questions can hardly be answered by referring to the tragedy’s text or any interpretation of it. They were posed by the performance not in order to provoke the spectators – at least as far as I could tell, they did not look or act as if they felt provoked. Rather, the scene stimulated an attitude and atmosphere of contemplation. The performance did not provide answers to the questions it posed. Instead, it was entirely up to the spectators to come up with them.

I wish to argue that Grüber’s *Bacchae* can be regarded as an exemplary case of philosophical theatre. The enigmatic images invited the spectators to contemplate on them without any obligation to link them to previous images. Rather, they opened up spaces in which every spectator was granted the possibility to connect what they perceived to their own experiences, memories, thoughts and associations emerging out of this process of perception. To immerse oneself in such images in an act of contemplation is by no means the same or even similar to being overwhelmed by emotions triggered by feelings of identification and empathy. It is best described as an instance of focussed attention directed towards what is perceived without the spectator being prodded or even forced down a predetermined path. By and in the act of contemplation the spectators are set free to reflect not only on what they perceive but also on all their associations and

memories that emerge in them during this process. In such acts of focussed attention or contemplation the enigmatic images may unfold their philosophical potential. Such enigmatic images can therefore be regarded as the enabling forces that may set in motion a process of philosophical reflection.

In addition to the enigmatic images, the constant reference to the act of spectating further qualified the performance as philosophical theatre. The spectators not only witnessed what was happening on stage but were also free and often encouraged to observe each other's behaviour. They also perceived the figure of the contemporary actor-spectator on stage. This could potentially be identified as an estrangement effect. In any case, it is an aesthetic device that challenged the spectators to reflect without nudging them in a certain direction, allowing them the freedom to arrive at a multiplicity of answers to the questions raised by the performance.

As the discussion among the spectators after each performance as well as the different critical interpretations that followed demonstrated, the production was successful with audiences and spectators did in fact realize the challenges and possibilities to reflect enabled by its aesthetics. It can therefore be defined as philosophical theatre, no matter whether the director labelled it that or not.

Goethe's *Ion* and Brecht's *Antigone of Sophocles* failed as philosophical theatre, because in both cases the majority of spectators saw the respective aesthetic devices as placing unreasonable demands on them, despite the directors' proclamations that they would grant the spectators the freedom to reflect. Instead, these devices made them feel uncomfortable, disappointed their expectations and enraged them. Both directors acted in a rather authoritarian manner, imposing a new aesthetics on an audience that was at a loss when confronted with it.

In the case of Grüber's *Bacchae*, there were many moments that clearly left the spectators feeling puzzled. Yet they were still willing to engage with the enigmatic images. As many spectators reported to me afterwards – which corresponded to my own experience of the performance – these images remained deeply inscribed in our memories for a long time after that evening and challenged us to reflect on them anew. Here, philosophical theatre did in fact take place.

This situation once again highlights the general problem regarding philosophical theatre. Since a performance comes into being out of the encounter between actors and spectators, philosophical theatre cannot be planned and designed merely at a theoretical level. As the proof of the pudding is in the eating, as Brecht was wont to say, so the proof of philosophical theatre is in the performance. When it fails, it makes little sense to blame the spectators for their shortcomings that prevented them from receiving the performance as intended by the directors. Even if they are convinced that they know their audience very well and that they have prepared them thoroughly for the demands of philosophical

theatre – as Goethe obviously believed –, they cannot know with certainty before the first night whether the production will in fact succeed as philosophical theatre. Conversely, a production that was neither intended nor designed as philosophical theatre could turn into just that. Given our definition of philosophical theatre as a performance that allows the spectators to maintain a certain aesthetic distance and grants them the freedom to reflect on what they are perceiving on stage in various respects, it might well be the case that the kinds of performances that ultimately succeed as philosophical theatre vary greatly for different spectators. That is to say that, ultimately, a production can be deemed philosophical theatre only if one has attended a performance of it or if there exists sufficient evidence of the spectators' responses, as is the case with Goethe's *Ion* and Brecht's *Antigone*.

It would thus be a mistake to formulate a theory of philosophical theatre as a kind of universal recipe to be tried out and applied to all production processes. Yet the theory is not falsified in case a performance fails as philosophical theatre, which would only demonstrate that the devices used did not have the intended effect on the spectators. The theory itself must be discussed on its own terms. The question of whether a production mounted as philosophical theatre achieves its goal, however, can only be raised and answered by examining the performance. This is not to say that performances of philosophical theatre do not affect its very concept. On the contrary, they contribute to it by broadening, pinpointing or even changing it decisively, challenging existing theories and thus becoming instrumental in their transformation.

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