

Shame. Spectatorship Strategies in Historical Documentary Theatre

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Abstract: Taking as examples two recent theatre performances that use documentary techniques in order to deal with subjects of recent history (the largely ignored Holocaust in Bessarabia under Romanian ruling and the surveillance of private citizens, by the secret police, in Romania in the eighties), this article explores the strategies that documentary theatre employs for eliciting certain emotions among their audience. The approach takes into consideration the theories of the sociology of emotions and the theatre literature about the emotional effects of direct address in non-participatory performances, in order to develop a demonstration that for the performances given as examples, shaming/spectatorial shame response is a theatrical strategy actively chosen for its potential to overpass the conventional passiveness of the audience.

Keywords: documentary theatre, social emotions, empathy, shame, active spectatorship

What is the *outcome* of a theatrical experience, for the audience – in terms of intellectual projection more than empirical facts (hard or even impossible to get, taking into consideration the specific nature of theatre spectatorship)? Might artists actually anticipate, “programme” a certain kind of reaction, playing with spectatorial conventions and theatrical strategies, in order to trigger responses that go beyond the simple range of individual emotions associated with theatre experience?

What makes theatre special in terms of the impossibility to genuinely talk about spectatorship and the effects/outcomes of performances on the audience is its dual nature – as an extremely personal experience and a shared, collective one, provoking the individual spectator to negotiate his/her responses to those of the others (Grehan, 2009, 4) and to the audience group as a temporary, ad-hoc community. There are so many factors that play a role in

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individual responses – from the cultural context to personal experiences – that a certain efficiency of theatre, even when it actively seeks one (as it happens in engaged/political or community-based performances), is extremely difficult to measure and follow.

The psychological reaction (which qualifies for the purpose of this analysis, as we would see, as a social emotion) most often associated with theatre is empathy. Empathy is the most talked and written about emotional relationship generated between what happens on stage and those who watch the staged events – starting, of course, with Aristotle, and culminating with Brecht's aversion against the "emotional orgies" meant to free the spectators of their social guilt. While preserving some of the elements still considered today as defining for the affect/emotion of empathy – to feel/non-cognitively understand other persons' feelings, to share or respond to other people's emotional state, to make less distinctive the differences between the self and the others (parallel emotion, reactive emotion, empathic concern, personal distress – Davis, 2006) –, Aristotle's empathy is limited by his perspective on it as being *passive*. For the *Poetics'* author, empathy generates pity, for the tragic characters, and fear, for the consequences of acting, in real life, the same way as the characters (these two would be, in a modern interpretation, the outcomes of empathy) – both preventing the spectator to take social and political action.

The centuries passed by since Aristotle wrote about empathy and the immense body of theoretical writings and artistic practices focused on the spectator as an active player in the dynamics of theatre and social reality haven't totally displaced the passiveness induced in the audience through the theatre spectatorial dispositive. Mainstream contemporary theatrical conventions, highly influenced, as Nicholas Ridout notices (Ridout, 2006: 71), by the focus of the modern(ist), late-19th, early-20th century theatre on realism and naturalism, imply that the play on stage is a self-sufficient autonomous world emulating a different life – both the fourth wall and the Stanislavskian acting working towards this model and preventing the spectators from expanding the range of their emotions.

In his study on empathy (Davis, 2006, 450 and *passim*), Mark H. Davis designs a model of this social emotion as a "set of constructs that connects the responses of one individual to the experiences of another", according to which the interpersonal outcomes of empathy are "helping, aggression, social behavior". Empathy is a key element (and so are shame and guilt, both connected to empathy, which is a primary social emotion) in the sociology of emotions, which opposes basic (self-sufficient) emotions such as happiness or sadness to emotions that require a mental representation of others, are

linked to the development of social cognition (they imply the ability to describe the situation generating the emotions), and tend to be influenced by social norms (a person raised in an Orthodox Jewish community would have a feeling of guilt when eating non-kosher food that somebody not connected to that community would not experience). Relevant especially when talking about engaged/political/social theatre, social emotions are also moral emotions, because of their important role in moral behavior and moral decision-making.

For Davis (and again relevant when talking about theatre), the level of the empathic response varies according to the strength of the situation (a helpless person in emotional distress, for example), and the most important process (an advanced cognitive one) in “producing” empathy is *role-playing* or *perspective-taking*, understanding the other’s feelings by actively imagining them – something that modern theatre offers to intermediate, and the theatre in education practices actively explore.

Shame in documentary theatre

At some point in the first half of the Moldavian production *Clear History* (Laundry Theatre/Teatrul Spălătorie, Kishinev, 2012), the audience is asked to stand up and repeat what appears to be a pledge to the country. The number of people actually standing up varies (depending, I would infer after seeing the show in different cities and countries, on their degree of familiarity with participatory theatre and whether they recognize the text they are asked to repeat or not) but there are always people willing to cooperate.

The revelation of the true nature, anti-Semitic and signed by a notoriously infamous figure of the Romanian interwar politics (Marshall Antonescu), of the text they were supposed to assume by repeating has the effect of visibly shaming the standing members of the audience (visible, because shame as an emotion always has a physical component). They are going silent one after the other and sit back in awkward manners.

Well into the second half of Gianina Cărbunariu’s *X mm of Y km* (Colectiv A, Cluj, in 2011), which explores the possibility of finding the *Truth* in the files of the Romanian former secret police (Securitate), the spectators are asked to answer a question by moving their chairs on the side of the performers (if they agreed with the actors’ statement) or not (if they disagreed). Throughout the ten or so performances of this production that I saw, the willingness of the members of the audience to raise up, fold their chairs and move was always rather timid, and most of the ones that did it were either young or part of the theatre milieu. On one occasion, a spectator (who happened to be a theatre critic) loudly protested both the question and the invitation addressed to the audience.

Developed by theatre-maker Nicoleta Esinencu together with her regular team of actors, *Clear History* is a documentary theatre piece about the dispossession, deportation and killing of Jews following the entry of the Romanian Army in Bessarabia (currently the Republic of Moldova) during WWII. By the time the performers asked the audience to stand, the exact approach to the topic is still unclear, and there's no anticipation, yet, of the strong stance of the performance, blaming the Romanian nationalism and anti-Semitism (more than the alliance with Nazi Germany) for the Holocaust in Bessarabia. As very often in her artistic practice based on documentary materials, Esinencu combines a non-Stanislawskian, performative kind of acting (in which the performers are not playing characters/roles, they are using theatrical techniques in order to give testimony about the documented real facts) with a conventional stage dispositive.

X mm of Y km is a type of conceptual performance. Based on a five-pages long transcript of a meeting (secretly taped by the Securitate), in 1985, between a dissident writer, the president of the Writers' Guild and a communist official, it is a series of "failed reenactments" of how the meeting actually went, with actors continuously changing roles (they are casting lots initially, to decide who plays whom) in order to show the very relative nature of good and bad in a distorted social context. The line with which the performers invited the spectators to move their chairs (and the only moment when they directly addressed the audience) was: "Now (after 1990, *n.l.p.*) we have nothing. Those who believe that now we have nothing - take your chairs and come with me."

The examples are important in terms of how the "theatre of the real" (Martin, 2013) straightforwardly engages physically its audience especially because none of them is a participatory performance. Asking the spectators to actually (re)act to and interact with the actors in a performance that works within the framework of the conventional modern theatre tends to be highly atypical and marks a certain artistic strategy, connected to the political – and documentary – substance of the said performance. The documentary nature of both *Clear History* and *X mm of Y km* is important when taking into consideration their spectatorship, because of what Janelle Reinelt calls "the promise of documentary": "Spectators come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand" (Reinelt, 2011, 9). Hence, even if the documentary practice is not predicated on a zero-degree of theatricality (it is not entirely a "believed-in" theatre, as Richard Schechner calls the community-based theatre, in an article published in a 1997 issue of *Performance Research*), spectators are aware that any engagement of theirs in the performance has consequences and implications different than when dealing with pure fiction.

In retrospect, Gianina Cărbunariu herself notices the ambivalence of audience's reluctance to the direct address in *XY*: "They (the spectators, *n. I.P.*) had an issue equally aesthetic and related to content of the question, because for them, *back then* there had been something sinister, and now it's (somehow) better. Even much better, without any connection with what had been then" (Popovici, 2014). It is also worth noting that no press or Internet material commenting the performance spoke about that particular moment of the performance – hence, ignoring the only open reference to the present of the performance and the past and present social continuity. In the Romanian social context, suggesting that the present life, under a democratic order, is not by default superior, under any aspect, to life during communism is extremely problematic, even if the comparison takes into account social and health care, educational and job opportunities (and these are the elements which the actors refer to, in that particular moment of the performance). There is a distinctive potential of social stigma associated to criticism of post-1990 Romanian capitalism, especially in a discursive context not admitting the total discontinuity between the social realities from before and after December 1989, an attitude that Gianina Cărbunariu had taken into consideration when working on *X mm of Y km*.

The "aesthetic issue" that Cărbunariu refers to concerns less the actual aesthetics of her performance and more the expectations that the audience has regarding "regular" theatre (especially one that happens in a theatrical institution/a theatre building and is not explicitly marked as improvisational, interactive, participatory or community-based). Even if *X mm of Y km* is not constructed as a realist piece of theatre, the cultural context it addressed subjected its audience to the conventions of modern theatre in terms of audience passiveness. *X mm of Y km* was challenging this model in manifold ways: from the very beginning, the spectators were sharing the (lit) space with the performers (they were asked to take a folding chair and place themselves wherever they wanted in the performing space where the actors were already standing – and guiding the audience, if necessary). Because the conventions tend to be so strong, the spectators had the tendency to place their chairs in a circle, leaving an empty "stage" in the middle (in other words, reproducing the conventional modern separation between the audience and the stage). Then, the structure of the performance questions not only the possibility for a Securitate transcript to reveal the *Reality* and *Truth* behind it, but also the concept of Truth/Truthfulness on stage, the cornerstone of the Stanislavskian acting tradition. The show did this by experimenting with the practice of theatre rehearsals:

It seemed fascinating to get a text already written (...) and see what lies behind those words (...). In *XY*, this happens by testing the limits of the surveillance file as well as the limits of the theatre, through the resuming of text fragments. It's like in the theatre: you have a text, and from its data, you try to see how it could be transposed on stage. We were simply testing a reality through theatre means" (Gianina Cărbunariu in Popovici, 2014).

In comparison, just like most of Esinencu's productions (*antidót, A(II) RH+*, *Dear Moldova, May We Kiss Just A Little Bit?*, *American Dream*, etc., even *radical.md*, to some extent), the stage-auditorium separation is preserved in *Clear History* – a black box with frontal perspective, keeping the audience in the dark and the performers in full light on the other side of the fourth wall.

When writing about the predicament of the audience, Nicholas Ridout identifies the spectator's reaction to direct address with the affect of embarrassment, without identifying it with shame (he talks about shame later, following Giorgio Agamben's considerations on this emotion in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*). He clearly places embarrassment in the field of psychology and philosophy, not sociology and social psychology. For Ridout, embarrassment is a physical manifestation of shame, sort of a "shame response" (the awkward manners in which spectators sit back in *Clear History*), generated by the direct address breaking the "machine of illusion" and returning/reversing the gaze or suddenly placing the spectator in full light. This breaking is a form of violence, exposing the spectator and making her/him extremely conscientious of her/his body. Ridout quotes psychologist Silvan Tomkins (who shares with Agamben and Emmanuel Levinas this idea that shame is felt in relation to oneself, not the others or the failing to rise to their expectations) saying that "shame is an experience of the self by the self. At that moment when the self feels ashamed, it is felt as a sickness within the self. Shame is the most reflexive of affects in that the phenomenological distinction between the subject and object of shame is lost". (Ridout, 2006, 88)¹

This interpretation might apply, to some extent, to *Clear History*, but not to *X mm of Y km*, where the audience is sharing the same space and light with the performers during the whole time, their uncomfortable exposure being part of the artistic concept. Even in *Clear History*, the exposure is voluntary, the spectators stand up willingly, and they do it in good faith, accepting to

¹ Tomkins' book on affects was published in 1963, before the development of the theories about the social role of certain emotions, which explains, maybe, why he doesn't approach them in a sociological context.

share the experience with the performers. To some extent, they are knowingly betrayed by the artists, on the benefits of enhancing the emotional efficiency of the performance.

But the specific subject of *Clear History* – the Holocaust – makes shame its most relevant emotional outcome, especially in the philosophical way in which Agamben and Levinas see it (in the sense that these emotions are not triggered by the representation of other's feelings coinciding with the person's shame reaction and have no connections with the person's own actions). Guilt and its good friend, shame, are inextricably associated with how survivors and large parts of the public opinion in countries where Jews were persecuted react to Shoah, even in Agamben's interpretation guilt and shame having a dual nature: they are felt *by* somebody *for* somebody else's behavior, which means that these emotions are directly related to the act of witnessing – the exact type of experience that historical documentary theatre is trying to reproduce (this also means that the other spectators, who didn't stand up, share the feeling of shame with those who did repeat the anti-Semitic statement). A spectator (who was not a professional theatre critic) writes about *Clear History*: "Although I was not an innocent spectator, before this spectacle of State cruelty against its own citizens and that of ordinary people against their peers (of a different ethnicity), I was overwhelmed with a sense of *horror and guilt*" (emphasis added) (Negură, 2012). This phrasing openly calls in Agamben's view that shame is the constitutive affective tonality of subjectivity, and the experience of shame derives not from culpability but from the ontological situation of being consigned to something that one cannot assume (Agamben, 1999, 105).

Another difference between the direct address moments in *Clear History* and *X mm of Y km* is their reverse dynamics: for the spectators who stand up to recite what proves to be an anti-Semitic discourse, shame is the consequence of giving up the comfort of spectatorial invisibility, while in *XY*, the anticipation of shame was what potentially prevented part of the audience to act and move their chairs, even if they agreed with the performers' statement. One might consider that anticipation of shame was also what prevented other members of the audience to answer the invitation in *Clear History*, but in fact, the context in which that invitation to participation comes doesn't offer the possibility to foresee the outcome (what prevents most of the spectators to stand up is their general lack of disposition to expose themselves and get out of the convention), while in *XY*, the audience was already placed in a different convention, and taking action, agreeing with a socially stigmatic political stance, would have exposed them as "political outcasts".

In fact, both mechanisms behind the direct address in *Clear History* and *XY* have political aims, intending to offer to the spectators a personal experience (in the form of a strong situation, in Davis' terms) in connection to the story on stage going beyond the passive empathic response. It is obvious that, exposing the audience to the direct experience of how easy it is for innocent "by-standers" to associate themselves to anti-Semitic statements, "the show presents a possible mechanism of indoctrination, psychological mimicry (asking the spectators to repeat a fragment of a speech by Hitler – *sic*) (Stoica, 2014; the confusion that a professional theatre critic makes between Hitler and Marshall Ion Antonescu, the Romanian responsible for the local anti-Jews policies, says a lot about what it was at stake in *Clear History* in terms of perception of history and responsibility). And this mechanism is meant to extend the spectators' experience from witnessing to symbolically participating in the horrific facts presented in the performance.

"Shaming" the audience appears to be a strategy willingly used in performances such as *Clear History*, just like provoking the members of audience to face a marginal political stance (with all its "shaming" potential) is an active strategy in *X mm of Y km*. Unlike empathy in most cases, shame is a highly negative feeling that generates a pervasive emotional and personal distress with an increased level of self-awareness. How (or if) a powerful emotional response among spectators reflects on real action is obviously impossible to find or measure, but this not even why these performances originally chose to expose their audiences to this range of emotions. The *real* emotional discomfort that requires a reevaluation of the self and one's own subjectivity is, in fact, the most political outcome that this kind of theatre seeks.

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