

## Playing Without Rules: The Case of La Fura dels Baus

Diana COZMA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Artists have always emphasized the necessity to invent new languages capable of reflecting the mutations occurred in society as a result of successive accumulations of new knowledge in all fields of activity. Thus, in theatre, like their predecessors, the reformers of twenty-first century theatre aim to conceive new languages that address the actual spectator and, in this respect, La Fura dels Baus can be considered a revelatory example. From the beginning of their artistic journey, the members of the company have sought to discover their own artistic identity. Playing without rules, that is inventing their own rules, the artists have succeeded in creating their own Furan language.*

**Keywords:** *play; rule; novelty; Furan language;*

### Introduction

Starting from the definition of play formulated by Johan Huizinga, who considers *the play an important cultural factor*, we propose a brief analysis of the theatrical play and its rules. Our analytical and synthetic approach aims at identifying some innovative elements in dramaturgy and theatre, and here we refer, on the one hand, to the playwrights Victor Hugo, August Strindberg and Eugène Ionesco, and, on the other hand, to the theatre reformers Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba. In this regard, we make use of comparative analysis. At the same time, we bring into discussion the innovative Furan language that continues to influence the language of the twenty-first century theatre.

### 1. The theatrical play and its rules

So, Johan Huizinga proposes the following definition of play: “play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is ‘different’ from ‘ordinary life’. Thus defined, the concept seemed capable of embracing everything we call ‘play’ in animals, children and grown-ups: games of strength and skill, inventing games, guessing games, games of chance, exhibitions and performances of all kinds. We ventured to call the category ‘play’ one of the most fundamental in life”<sup>2</sup>. We note here some characteristics of the play that can also be found in the theatrical play: the freedom embedded in the play conceived as a voluntary activity, which takes place between certain space-time boundaries, based on a set of accepted and respected rules, and which generates a feeling of joy, of detachment from everyday life. For Anne Ubersfeld, “the notion of play is as ambiguous as other notions inhabiting the field of theatre”<sup>3</sup>. However,

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<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, diana.cozma@ubbcluj.ro.

<sup>2</sup> Johan Huizinga. 1949. *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p. 28.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Ubersfeld. 1996. *Termenii cheie ai analizei teatrului*. Traducere de Georgeta Loghin. Iași: Institutul European, p. 46.

Ubersfeld comes to remark that, after all, “the very idea of play includes the notion of freedom”<sup>4</sup>, which, in theatre, she attributes to the *actor’s invention*. Still, the actor’s inventiveness related to the scenic elements, such as building characters, thinking up scenic situations, improvising, is only one factor possible to lead directly and decisively to the suspension of the old rules in order to create new rules.

Referring to Huizinga’s description of the *play principle*, Patrice Pavis notes that this could be a description of theatre because it involves “fiction, masks, a defined stage and conventions”<sup>5</sup>. In Hans-Thies Lehmann’s definition of theatre, emphasis is placed on the fictional space-time shared by actors and spectators: “Theatre means the collectively spent and used up lifetime in the collectively breathed air of that space in which the performing and the spectating take place. The emission and reception of signs and signals take place simultaneously. The theatre performance turns the behaviour on stage and in the auditorium into a joint text, a ‘text’ even if there is no spoken dialogue on stage or between actors and audience”<sup>6</sup>. From Peter Brook’s perspective, theatre is *repetition, representation, assistance*: “These words sum up the three elements, each of which is needed for the event to come to life”<sup>7</sup>. Brook’s formula reveals the unfolding of a creative process, representation of the performance and the presence of spectators or witnesses to the theatrical act. Nonetheless “any formula is inevitably an attempt to capture a truth for all time. Truth in the theatre is always on the move. [...] In the theatre the slate is wiped clean all the time”<sup>8</sup>. Undeniably, one of Brook’s major contributions is to continually change the way theatre is approached and experienced. In the early years of experimenting theatre at the International Centre for Theatre Research, Brook starts his searches from the margins or from a baby-like beginning state that enters the world without knowing anything about it and gradually goes through a process of self-discovering and self-becoming. This journey can only take place on condition that the participants, who do not pay any attention to preexisting rules and models, know neither its destination nor its route.

In Huizinga’s terms, when referring to the play’s characteristics, we notice that the freedom contained in it is the first to be emphasized. But any play is based on rules that must be accepted by all its participants. Thus, the play itself consists in materializing a coexistence of opposites: freedom and rule. Through play, the individual detaches himself from his daily life, takes off his social mask and assumes a different hypostasis, that of the player. We say hypostasis, and not role, because the player, who allows himself to be completely absorbed by what happens in this world of the play, gets closer to the condition of Jerzy Grotowski’s actor, who (re)discovering himself becomes capable of *revealing his inner self in front of the spectators*. The moment the player loses the state of freedom he experiences during the play or the pleasure of playing, he leaves it. *Every play has its rules but the moment these rules are broken or transgressed, the play ends*<sup>9</sup>, the transfer from the fictitious space-time to the daily space-time occurs. It is, after all, the freedom to enjoy an extra-daily act that makes him throw

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4 *Ibidem*, p. 47.

5 Patrice Pavis. 1998. *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*. Translated by Christine Shantz. Foreword by Marvin Carlson. Toronto and Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, p. 268.

6 Hans-Thies Lehmann. 2006. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby. London: Routledge, p. 17.

7 Peter Brook. 1990. *The Empty Space*. London: Penguin Books, p. 156.

8 *Ibidem*, pp. 156-157.

9 Johan Huizinga, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

himself into the play. The play reality is meant to lead to a release of emotions and energies of both the player and the spectator and in order to attain this goal a lot of strategies are devised.

From a dramaturgical perspective, as Victor Hugo observes in the Preface to *Cromwell*, we are dealing with universal constants or laws and variables. It is Hugo who clearly states the need to break the old rules or models: “it would be strange indeed, if at this time liberty, like the light, should extend everywhere, except to the one place where liberty is more logically a native production than anywhere else in the world, the domain of thought. Let us take the hammer to their theories and systems and treatises. Let us tear down the old stucco-work which conceals the façade of art! There are no rules or models, or rather there are no other rules than the general laws of nature, which extend over the whole domain of art, and the special laws which, in every composition, result from the conditions peculiar to each subject”<sup>10</sup>. In his turn, August Strindberg referring to the *chamber plays*, emphasizes the need for freedom of expression, ignoring certain rules that predetermine both the creative process and the artistic product, focusing attention on the specific elements of the *intimate theatre*: “If anyone asks what an intimate theatre seeks to achieve and what is meant by chamber plays, I can respond by saying: in drama we seek the strong, significant motif, but with limitations. In the treatment we try to avoid all frivolity, all calculated effects, places for applause, star roles, solo numbers. No predetermined form is to limit the author, because the motif determines the form. Consequently, freedom in treatment which is limited only by the unity of the concept and the feeling for style”<sup>11</sup>. The innovative elements proposed by Strindberg have long since entered the common consciousness and practice of theatre people. A leading representative of innovative playwrights is also Eugène Ionesco, who embodies in his dramaturgical writing fundamental states experienced by the human being. Thus, anxieties and fears, emotions and passions emerge from a writing devoid of a concatenative thread.

From a theatrical perspective, the contribution of the theatre reformers consists precisely in suspending certain preexisting rules in order to reinvent theatre. Jerzy Grotowski redefines theatre when he states: “we consider the personal and scenic technique of the actor as the core of theatre art”<sup>12</sup>. Here, theatre is under the sign of research, experimentation. The actor becomes a sign-bearer of meaning, who is executing an act in the scenic present. From the beginning of his searches, Eugenio Barba translates for himself the theatrical terminology, questioning theatrical rules and conventions. Thus, he comes to invent a *dramaturgy of the performance* on three levels of organization: *the organic dramaturgy*, *the narrative dramaturgy* and *the evocative dramaturgy*. It is a well-known fact that in everyday life Barba rejects convention, refuses to submit to norms, always searching for his true origins, and that in the theatrical realm he seeks to identify the rigour of Disorder, the value of Error, throwing all work into an imbalance capable of arousing what he himself calls the *storm of creation*. After all, he breaks pre-existing rules and creates his own rules. The results obtained in the theatre laboratories of Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba have profoundly changed the theatre. Once with Artaud, the practitioners have been preoccupied with the *authenticity of the physical and concrete language of theatre*. Sharon Feldman notices La Fura dels Baus’s *thirst for authenticity*: “The presence in

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10 Victor Hugo. 1896. *Dramas. Oliver Cromwell*. Translated by I.G. Burnham. Philadelphia: George Barrie & Son, p. 26.

11 August Strindberg. 2007. *On Drama and Theatre. A Source Book*. Selected, translated, and edited by Egil Törnqvist and Birgitta Steene. Amsterdam: University Press, p. 127.

12 Jerzy Grotowski. 2002. *Towards a Poor Theatre*. Edited by Eugenio Barba. Preface by Peter Brook. New York: Routledge, p. 15.

*Accions* of the live nude body, stripped of theatrical attire and makeup, is perhaps the most vivid expression of this thirst for authenticity, for the real, for immediacy. Nothing is hidden. The performer does not conceal himself behind the mask of a dramatic personage; rather, everything is plainly visible, uncovered beneath the spectator's gaze"<sup>13</sup>. From this point of view, it is as if the spectator witnesses, during the performance, a laboratory work; it seems that we no longer deal with experiments conducted in isolation, but with experiments conducted in front of the spectators. Thus, the spectators witness a sort of dissolution of the boundaries between theatre and life. The performance elements come to emphasize even more the feeling of immediacy and organicity of the actor's act. The laboratory dimension insinuated in the Furans' performances creates the sensation of the absence of any predetermined rules of the play. It is as if the spectator does not witness a scenic event, but lives with the actor this event, directly participates in its creation.

In theatre, there are varying degrees of spectator involvement in the play and, in this sense, we can identify several types of spectators: *passive, active, participant, witness, spectator, co-author*. In Forum Theatre, for example, some of the spectators who are involved in debates, enter the actors' playing space, take their place and play physical and vocal actions to solve a crisis situation. In fact, the spectator creates his own play within the initial theatrical play. The transgression of the rules of the actors' play and the creation of new rules, those of the spectator, become evident. Making reference to the Living Theatre performances, deeply politically engaged, Martin Esslin questioned whether in this case we still deal with theatre. Sharing Esslin's reservation, we believe that from the moment the actors are replaced by the spectators during the course of the play, we no longer witness a theatrical act. The actor leaves the stage during the performance and is replaced by the spectator. It is as if during a football game, the players are replaced by their fans.

## 2. The Case of La Fura dels Baus

La Fura dels Baus succeeds admirably, even when actors and spectators share the same playing area, to keep the artistic act under control. As regards the involvement of the spectator in their earlier performances, Lehmann remarks: "One moment the audience is shoved together into a tight space, the next it is abandoned without orientation. A claustrophobic atmosphere arises in the theatre, reminiscent of situations during violent street protests. One is roughly jostled aside in order to make space for the next action, pushed on several sides by the performers and the crowd of other visitors. Deafeningly loud music and drums, glaring lights and noises, as well as pyrotechnic effects, surround the spectators; one begins to fear for the safety of the performers during seemingly brutal actions. After a while, however, the sense of threat lessens: one begins to observe that even the breakneck and risky-looking actions, such as the wagons being driven directly among the visitors, are precisely controlled. In this theatre situation the whole idea of the theatre space of former times has been abandoned. The body of the spectator becomes a constitutive part of the staging"<sup>14</sup>. In this context, it becomes obvious that the relationship with the spectator is established in order to generate catharsis. Undoubtedly, since his first performance, *Accions*, La Fura dels Baus has remained *a symbiosis of behaviours without rules*.

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13 Sharon Feldman. 1998. "Scenes from the Contemporary Barcelona Stage: La Fura dels Baus's Aspiration to the Authentic". *Theatre Journal* 50 (4): 447-472, pp. 449-450.

14 Hans-Thies Lehmann, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

For their entire artistic research, it is of great significance the fact that, according to the group, “*Accions* is a game without any norms, a ball kicked right in the face, a noisy racket, a release of light and pyrotechnics; it is the best way of destroying a car, a sharp blow, a brutal succession of hammer blows, a sonorous execution, a chain of limit-situations, a plastic transformation in an unusual area”<sup>15</sup>. Thus, in their performances, the human being himself, actor/spectator, seems to be treated as an elemental dimension, like all the natural elements, fire, understood as “a type of purifying ritual”<sup>16</sup>, water, air and earth that coexist with the supertechnological element.

The Furan language, made up of images marked by grandeur, cruelty and refinement, moments of exuberance, explosions of passion and vitality, is a language that combines *carnality with spirituality, technology with primitivism* generating in spectators not only the *awe* felt probably by the spectators of the ancient Greek tragedies, but also the exacerbation of senses experienced by the spectators of the Roman arenas. Witnessing the Furans’ performances, the spectators become aware that the artistic act is a dangerous act. The unconventional spaces wherein they perform, due to the powerful director’s vision, actors’ exceptional interpretation, expressive scenography and costumes, become authentic theatrical spaces. What happens before the spectators’ eyes is so powerful, so shocking, so passionate, so unpredictable, that the spectators immerse instantaneously in the Furan universe. The Furan language unveils new angles of approach and stage incarnation of texts and themes relevant for our times and at the same time reveals the qualities of a perfect *combinatorial art*.

In the Furans’ performances the spectators open themselves to the magic of the actors’ aerial choreography, and here we refer to their *human net* combined with projections that generate a sensation of unreality, with movements executed in dance rhythms. The scenic space seems to always be inhabited by humans in extreme situations. There is a fundamental relationship between the individual and the machine to be found in their performances. The scenic presences of the actors are part of the very fluid substance of which images are composed. The performances, results of their collective work, are based on shocking actions, spatial geometries and sonorities. The Furans’ attraction to Euripides or Shakespeare is akin to that of Ionesco who, in this respect, states: “My plays have never tried to say anything else. Just simply that man is not only a social animal, prisoner of his time, but he is also, and above all, at all times, different historically and in his particularities, but identical in his essence. Thus, if we can still hold dialogue with Shakespeare, with Moliere and Sophocles, if we understand them, it is because they are profoundly, essentially, like us. I find that the universal man is not of an abstract, general humanity, but of a true, concrete humanity; and man ‘in general’ is truer than man limited to his day, mutilated”<sup>17</sup>. In fact, the Furans’ approach, in depth, problematics of today’s society such as excessive technology, the condition of today’s individual, embodying them scenically through powerful tensions between the primitive and the digital human being.

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15 The program for *Accions* apud Mercè Saumell. 1996. “La Fura dels Baus”. In *Contemporary Catalan Theatre. An Introduction*, ed. David George & John London, 118-123. Melksham: The Cromwell Press, p. 119.

16 Duri Long. 2016. “Ritual and Contemporary Catalan Theater: The Work of La Fura dels Baus”. *Journal of Catalan Studies*, 1 (18-19): 15-51, p. 39.

17 Eugène Ionesco. 1963. “Notes On My Theatre”. *The Tulane Drama Review*. 7 (3): 126-159, p. 145.

### 3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we note that the problematic of rules traverses centuries of theatre history. Undeniably, old rules are subject to be changed according to the visions of the artists who invent their own new rules.

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