

Stimulating Theatrical Reflection on Morality and Fairness

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Abstract: *This paper explores how theatre stimulates the examination of morality and fairness within the scenic context. To this end, examples from various historical periods have been employed. In Sophocles' Antigone, the moral dilemma arises from the conflict between divine law and man-made state laws. Shakespeare's Hamlet presents ethical questions tormenting the Prince of Denmark as he philosophizes about revenge and death. Bertolt Brecht, through the technique of distancing (Verfremdungseffekt), proposes the idea that justice is a social construct, and in The Caucasian Chalk Circle, justice is defined and applied within a social context. Contemporary theatre continues to address themes such as discrimination and abuse of power. Furthermore, theatre serves as an important instrument in the development of empathy, critical thinking, emotion, and morality.*

Keywords: *morality; fairness; emotion; stage; theatre;*

Introduction:

Over time, theatre has proven to be a valuable medium of artistic expression for the study of fundamental human values: "[...] Greek tragedy was born from a chant. In other words, it began as a liturgical expression, much like other practices found in public ceremonies and religious worship. This explains its strongly religious character, and also the attention that - from its very first manifestations - the State has consistently paid to it"². The conflicts between good and evil, justice and abuse, individual morality and social laws have all been mirrored in what we call theatre. The collective nature of reception transforms theatre into an ideal framework for reflection and civic engagement. This process has played a significant role in shaping and developing ethical consciousness within society. Throughout history, both the individual and the community have required a space conducive to the resolution of conflicts, and through scenic action and dramatic tension, spectators have found themselves reflected in various situations. As such, theatre possesses the unique capacity to provoke introspection and to stimulate inner dialogue. It encourages reflection on core human values. From Ancient Theatre, Medieval Theatre, the Renaissance, Classicism (and Neoclassicism), Romanticism, Realism and Naturalism, to the Avant-garde and Modern Theatre, and further into Contemporary Theatre, each stage has contributed to the formation of a dynamic and evolving context, well-suited for scholarly inquiry.

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² D.M. Pippidi (coord.). 1958. *The Greek Tragedians. Anthology*, [Tragicii Greci, Antologie]. București: Editura de stat pentru literatură și artă, p. 5.

1. Ancient Theatre –the conflict between moral law and state law

The great tensions that have shaped the human condition were born in ancient Greek tragedy. The works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides clearly delineated this space of major conflicts. Greek tragedy, an integral part of public life, invited the audience to reflect on moral and political conflicts. “The tragedy of Prometheus thus becomes the tragedy of the beneficent genius of humanity. At a time when the Athenian people proclaimed the victory of the democratic regime over tyranny, Aeschylus created a tragic character who dares to confront the tyrannical authority of Zeus”³.

The artistic force of the problems of Athenian society, still tentative in the works of the “father of Greek theatre,” took shape in the works of Sophocles: “With Sophocles, Greek tragedy entered a distinct period; he was the man of the golden age of Athens, an era linked to the name of Pericles, protector of Athenian democracy”⁴. The theme of the conflict between moral law (related to tradition and religion) and state law (supported by political authority) is developed in one of the most famous tragedies of antiquity, *Antigone* by Sophocles: “With that fine sense of the most delicate nuances of the soul that characterizes his art, Sophocles presents Antigone in a triple role: as a devoted daughter to her unfortunate blind father, as a sister who – risking her own life – fulfills a pious duty toward her brother Polynices, and finally as a determined and courageous woman who protests against tyranny”⁵.

The Greek heroine is faced with an unjust and illogical choice: to obey the decree issued by King Creon, which forbids the funeral rites for Polynices, Antigone’s brother and Ismene’s brother, and orders that his lifeless body be left to the beasts. These restrictive rules are violated by Antigone. Her defiant but fully assumed gesture clashes with the intransigence of the state, which regards this action as anarchic. However, Antigone is not merely a rebel against the system; Sophocles gives her a profound philosophical meaning. Her struggle is waged in the name of a higher order – that of the gods and eternal justice. Here intervenes the conscience of the individual beyond his obligations to the state. The message of this play can still be deciphered in modern performances today, being interpreted as an allegory of civil disobedience, the defense of fundamental rights, and opposition to abusive authority.

Ancient tragedy is a space where critical thinking generated essential meanings.

2. Shakespearean theatre – between moral ambiguity and ethical uncertainty

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (16th century – early 17th century), theatre experienced a flourishing cultural period, particularly in the performing arts. This era saw the construction of the first permanent public theatres, among which the famous Globe Theatre in London, built in 1599, stood out. The Globe was a circular, open-air building that could host approximately 3,000 spectators and became renowned through the works of William Shakespeare. Elizabethan theatre was accessible to a wide audience regardless of social status.

Within this context, the tragedy *Hamlet*, written around 1600, brought to the audience’s attention themes of revenge, betrayal, moral and political corruption, inner conflict, madness, and morality. Shakespeare’s characters are complex, charged with emotional tension, inner turmoil, ambiguities, and moral uncertainties. Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, symbolizes the inner conflicts

³ Ovidiu Drimba. 1973. *Theatre from Its Origins to the Present Day* [*Teatrul de la origini și până în prezent*]. București: Editura Albatros, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 15

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 17

related to morality. He embodies the struggle between reason and emotion, between duty to family and individual conscience: "According to a consensus among leading Shakespearean scholars, including T. S. Eliot, *Hamlet* may lack the poetic qualities that place *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* among Shakespeare's greatest tragedies. However, it possesses fundamental qualities that allow it to serve as the quintessential tragic test of our civilization in its social and theatrical manifestations"⁶.

Questions regarding the meaning of suffering, the acceptance of the choices we make, and the ethical conditions of each individual's life are reflected in Hamlet's famous monologue: "To be, or not to be: that is the question:/ Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer/ The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,/ Or to take arms against a sea of troubles/ And by opposing end them. To die - to sleep,/ No more; and by a sleep to say we end/ The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks/ That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation/ Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep - /To sleep - perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub!/For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,/ When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,/ Must give us pause - there's the respect/ That makes calamity of so long life"⁷.

The idea of choosing between life and death is, in fact, the decision to live either in action or in passivity, in guilt or in forgiveness. Everything comes down to the choices we make: "Hamlet seeks a new standard that would allow him to coherently confront and resolve the situation he faces. (...) Hamlet deliberates and examines, in the light of conscience, what is being asked of him. His doubt is, first and foremost, a thirst for knowledge a desire to understand the reason for his own existence. For the first time, conscience is shaped within the character, rather than by the author. This is a tragedy of conscience deliberate and devoid of fate's intervention, free from mystification or divine justification. It is no longer about interpreting divine will, but rather about taking control of one's own destiny, being accountable first and foremost to oneself, to one's own emotions, and, ultimately, to the action that must be chosen"⁸.

In Shakespeare's plays, there are no definitive verdicts. The spectator is invited to judge a situation, reflect on it, and then question that judgment restarting the process anew. In this way, theatre becomes an instrument of introspection and inner dialogue.

3. Brecht and alienation as a tool for social reflection

The theatre of the twentieth century proposes a diversification of theatrical forms. Absurd theatre, epic theatre, and documentary theatre reconfigure the trajectory of the theatrical art by emphasizing the reflection of social, political, and existential crises. The modern era is the period in which directors and playwrights such as Brecht, Beckett, and Ionesco, through their works, redefined the significance of theatre, reinterpreting it as a space for thought and analytical awareness. In this regard, B. Brecht advocated for epic theatre - with the objective depiction of events being its reference point: "... theatre must not steal the spectator away, enchant him, or completely immerse him in the fictional world created on stage. Theatre must be a school of critical lucidity. Neither the text, nor the staging, nor the actor's performance, nothing should anesthetize the audience's critical lucidity"⁹.

⁶ Vito Pandolfi. 1971. *History of World Theatre [Istoria teatrului universal]*, vol. 3. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 92.

⁷ William Shakespeare. 1965. *Hamlet [Hamlet]*. București: Editura pentru literatură, p. 21.

⁸ Vito Pandolfi. 1971. *History of World Theatre [Istoria teatrului universal]*, vol. 3. București: Editura Meridiane, p. 93.

⁹ Ovidiu Drimba. 1973. *Theatre from Its origins to the present day [Teatrul de la origini și până în azi]*. București: Albatros, p. 306.

Aristotelian catharsis is eliminated; emotion must be removed and replaced by reflection and action. Thus, the aim is to cultivate a type of spectator who consciously accepts that the theatrical act is an artificial, non-natural concept.

“His later and better-known plays, such as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1954) and *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1949), present the audience with difficult dilemmas, placing the responsibility on the public to question and evaluate potential ways to improve the characters’ conditions. (...) Brecht sought to break down the fourth wall through various techniques: having the decisions made by his characters and the context in which they were made brought to the surface, revealing the narrative techniques and exposing the processes through which performances are constructed (for example, the actor on stage does not disguise the artificiality of his role)”¹⁰.

Bertold Brecht proposes a theatre of reality, transformation, and responsibility: “... the main goal of Brechtian theatre is the liberation of the spectator - the restoration of their full personality - and not their blind submission to what is happening on stage. That is why Brecht believes that the dramatic event, the one that acts as a trigger for a situation or an incident, should no longer be included in the drama itself but should be narrated. The spectator should not be drawn into the action of the play but should be compelled to reflect. In classical theatre, the playwright controlled the will of the spectators. Epic theatre must awaken the audience. Those who attend a theatrical performance should not be overwhelmed by emotions; what is essential is that they are able to make their own judgments about the rightness or wrongness of what they see. They must gain awareness, not experiences; they should be offered rational arguments, not be manipulated. The plot should unfold before them, not capture them. [...] Epic theatre seeks to make people respond according to their reason, not act based on instinctive impulses”¹¹. In this vision, theatre becomes a social laboratory where mechanisms of power, inequalities, and possibilities for change are analyzed.

4. Contemporary theatre – documentary, political, civic

Contemporary documentary theatre does not limit itself to merely presenting facts; rather, it creates a space where spectators become active participants in the process of understanding and moral judgment: “As is well known, at the beginning of the 1960s, a new dramatic form took shape - thanks to playwrights like Peter Weiss, Rolf Hochhuth, and Heinar Kipphardt, and directors such as Erwin Piscator and Peter Brook: documentary theatre or the documentary play. Sometimes, in this genre, we are dealing with the verbatim reproduction of transcripts; the play is not fiction, but simply a staged slice of reality”¹². By showcasing authentic, often painful testimonies, the performance becomes a moment of confrontation with the sometimes uncomfortable reality of the world we live in. This form of performing art calls the audience to reflect on deep issues such as racism, violence, abuse of power, and social exclusion, while deliberately eliminating fiction. In doing so, the theatrical act transforms into a medium through which marginalized voices can be expressed.

¹⁰ Paul Allain, Jen Harvie. 2006. *The Routledge Guide to Theatre and Performance* [Ghidul Routledge de teatru și performanțe]. București: Nemira, pp. 61-62.

¹¹ Bertold Brecht. 1958. *Theatre* [Teatru]. București: Editura de Stat Pentru Literatură și Artă, p. 17.

¹² Mircea Zăciu, Ion Vartic. 1998. *The Trial of 'comrade Camil': Documentary Theatre in Its Natural State* [Procesul "tovarășului Camil" : Teatru Documentar în stare Naturală]. Cluj: Editura Biblioteca Apostrof, p. 15.

Political theatre is a form of dramatic art that reflects and critiques the social, economic, and political realities of an era. Through it, the stage becomes a platform for civic debate and awareness. This type of theatre seeks to provoke the audience into reflection and action. Political theatre critiques war and social injustice. Its performances raise questions and invite dialogue. Frequently, at the end of such performances, spectators actively participate in discussions, debates, workshops, or community initiatives. In this way, theatre extends beyond the stage and becomes a social force. The political in theatre is not merely a theme, but an approach that highlights the responsibility of artists to expose injustice, stimulate change, and promote democracy. At times, these performances generate controversy or strong reactions, thereby underscoring their active role in social and political life.

Civic theatre is a form of artistic expression dedicated to social and community engagement. It addresses current and socially relevant themes, encouraging dialogue and active audience participation, while fostering civic consciousness and collective responsibility. Through its performances, civic theatre becomes a catalyst for social change, involving communities in the artistic process and promoting collaboration and solidarity. By directly involving citizens as actors or co-creators, performances become authentic manifestations of social reality, offering people the opportunity to tell their own stories and claim their rights. For example, Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed* emphasizes the active participation of the audience, transforming spectators into "spect-actors". The *Theatre of the Oppressed* promotes social change through theatre and upholds the belief that art should be accessible and relevant to all, with the public not merely as consumers, but as active participants: "The *Theatre of the Oppressed* is based on two fundamental principles: first, to transform the spectator - a passive, receptive being, a mere repository - into the protagonist of the dramatic action, into a subject, a creator, a transformer; and second, to not be content with simply reflecting on the past, but to prepare for the future. [...] For the *Theatre of the Oppressed* to be effective and useful, it must be practiced on a large scale; a performance here and there, once or twice, is not enough. [...] In order for the *Theatre of the Oppressed* to be practiced widely, we must understand that artistic activity is a natural trait of all men and women"¹³.

Thus, contemporary documentary, political, and civic theatre all contribute to transforming reality by fostering social awareness and civic engagement, extending beyond the boundaries of artistic space. In this way, theatre becomes a means through which society examines itself and seeks paths toward progress.

5. Theatre and the development of moral empathy

Theatre possesses a unique power in fostering empathy and ethical thinking. This process engages both the cognitive and emotional components of morality. The live presence of actors on stage and the collective absorption of the audience create an authentic space where emotions and critical thinking can develop harmoniously. Spectators are invited to step into the shoes of the characters and confront complex moral dilemmas within a safe environment, free from real-life risks. In doing so, they are able to reflect on choices, values, and the consequences of actions—an experience that leaves a lasting cognitive and emotional impact: "You don't need to be a sociologist to notice the steadily growing number of spectators in our theatres in recent years. It is an encouraging reality - but one that did not come about on its own. It has taken shape and

¹³ Augusto Boal, 2005. *Games for Actors and Non-Actors: The Theatre of the Oppressed in Practice* [Jocuri pentru actori și non-actori. Teatrul Oprimărilor în practică]. București: Fundația Concept, p. 9.

defined itself as a mass phenomenon as a result of sustained concern and continuous efforts, for more than three decades, to educate the broadest segments of working people in the spirit of their need for spiritual nourishment, with full awareness that, under these conditions, this contributes to raising their level of civilization and to a deeper understanding of the world, ultimately. The modern individual, regardless of their field of activity, is today in our society a knowledgeable and consistent consumer of cultural goods - a passionate reader, a fervent theatre-goer, a conscious cultural participant”¹⁴. Unlike abstract experiences, theatre provides a concrete and tangible encounter with suffering, joy, or conflict, enabling a profound and authentic understanding of others. Moreover, through the process of identification with characters and emotional engagement, spectators can expand their capacity to understand perspectives different from their own, which is essential for the development of moral empathy. Additionally, the theatrical context stimulates social dialogue by offering opportunities to discuss the moral dilemmas and values presented on stage after the performance, thereby reinforcing ethical awareness and learning.

6. Conclusions

Throughout history, from the Greek tragedies that explored conflicts between fate and responsibility to contemporary documentary theatre that presents harsh realities and current ethical dilemmas to the audience, theatre has always been a space for fundamental questions about justice, equity, and responsibility.

Through the power of its stories and characters, theatre challenges spectators to question their own beliefs and to develop empathy for the experiences of others. In a world marked by social and political polarization, complex ethical crises, and heightened fragility in human relationships, theatre provides an indispensable framework for dialogue and understanding. And this plea about the purpose and need for theatre in stimulating reflection on morality and justice cannot be concluded without mentioning the king of the stage—the actor: “[...] a healthy atmosphere, discipline, and ethics are not created with a pencil stroke, by issuing a directive, a rule, or a memo. They are not established, so to speak, in bulk, as usually happens in corporate environments. What I’m talking about is done - in detail. It is not group work or factory - style labor, but rather an artisanal craft.”¹⁵ More than a form of entertainment, theatre is a cultural and social force capable of shaping consciences and inspiring action. It remains an essential pillar of civic and moral life, a mirror reflecting humanity with all its virtues and flaws.

Without theatre, we would live in a world poorer in meaning, and our capacity to understand and resonate with others would be significantly diminished.

7. References

¹⁴ Constantin Cubleșan. 1983. *Theatre Between the Civic and the Ethical* [*Teatrul între civic și etic*]. Cluj-Napoca: Editura: Dacia, p. 9.

¹⁵ Konstantin Stanislavski. 2023. *The Actor's Work on Himself: Ethics* [*Munca actorului cu sine însuși. Etica*]. București: Editura Nemira, p. 496.

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