

theatre at university:

a mirror and a Challenge

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As a director, he has, since 1962, produced performances with professional theatres (J.C. Brisville, H. Kipphardt, Brecht, Mrozek, Wittlinger, Obaldia, etc. ...) and with amateur theatres (Büchner, Frisch, Fassbinder, Horvath, Bond, Dürrenmatt, Kopitt, Witkiewicz, Stoppard, Valentin, Shakespeare, Brasch, Machiavel, Weiss, Erasmus, Grabbe, Pinter, Bernhardt, Ghelderode, Tremblay, etc. ... a total of over sixty productions.

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At the beginning of this decade, which is now coming to an end, the University Theatre (and by this, I mean the theatre as practised in Higher Education) questioned itself for the umpteenth time ... rigorously and sometimes passionately ... about its identity and its unity.

From 1990 to 1994, the Liège International University Festivals (RITU) have been a place for difficult, albeit at times fruitful, debates on the differences between statutes, objectives, methods and means of the university theatres in the different towns, regions, countries and continents. These discussions led among others to the First World University Theatre Congress, which was held at the University of Liège in 1994; this Congress set up the International University Theatre Association (IUTA/AITU). This important fact did not put an end to the debate. On the contrary, Jacques Lasalle had already said ten years before that "being an actor ... is to live off balance, to experience an identity crisis, a doubt about existing. Who am I and am I even?"¹ I am tempted to extend that definition to the whole university theatre itself.

First of all, a few words of history.²

1. The briefest inquiry into the origins of the university theatre tells us that performances were already given in the Middle Ages by students in Vilnius (Lithuania), in Poland, and probably in most big universities as soon as they were founded.

2. It is also usually agreed that the university theatre ... let us say 'modern theatre' ... was born in the thirties. Some famous examples in France: 1932 Student theatre, under the directorship of Franc Nohain and Jean Delage; 1933 Setting up the Group of the Medieval Theatre of the Sorbonne, called 'Les Théophilens' (because of their first production, *Le Miracle de Théophile*, by Rutebeuf) with the collaboration of Gustave Cohen; 1936 Roland Barthes and Jacques Weil set up the Group of the Ancient Theatre of the Sorbonne. At the same time, some companies, such as Les Comédiens d'Aquitaine (Bordeaux), les Escholiers

de Picardie (Lille), les Escholiers du Languedoc (Montpellier) ... were set up in the country. One could assume that Wallonia is a French province too, because, at this very same time the Arts Association of the University of Liège played Banville and also medieval nativities and plays by Euripides, in Greek, while the Germanic Philology Association was staging German, English, Flemish or Dutch authors in the original language. Moreover, exchanges between Liège and the Theophilans from the Sorbonne took place in 1935/36 (as an historical footnote, it is interesting to note that Gustave Cohen was born of a French father and a Belgian mother and that he graduated with a Doctorate of Arts at the University of Liège). All this led to the official recognition by the academic authorities of the University of Liège Theatre in 1941. (The 'TULg' has never stopped its activities since then, contrary to many of its European counterparts).

This university theatre (from France, Belgium, or anywhere else, for that matter) reflected this same principle: although performance was, of course, done as extra-curriculum activity, it quickly changed from a 'para-university' activity to a 'university' subject. Close to the subjects that were taught, and often with the collaboration of professors themselves, the theatrical activity was a way of delving deeper into and/or complementing the 'cherished study programme'. It was also a hobby, impregnated with the rigour, if not always with the strict nature, of studies, a ground for research-implementation, a way of performing 'practical teaching works'. This does not in any way detract from the aesthetic qualities of amateur productions. On the contrary, they were often extremely inventive from the theatrical viewpoint itself: the repertoire was varied ... a selection of 'unusual plays', with elocution and choreography, all carefully prepared. Sometimes, original musical works were even composed (for example, in Liège). An elaborate text-analysis was carried out before staging a play; this was to become 'dramaturgy', as it is often called now. Even with few means, the university

theatre tried to equal the professional theatre, although in somewhat different ways. On the other hand, it could be distinguished from the non-university amateur theatre by the deep intellectual analysis of the work and, sometimes, by the choice of the language.

Outwardly, this theatre was in harmony with its *milieu*, whilst inwardly it was perfectly integrated and even reassuring. But even if it directly helped teaching and research, the public activities of the university theatre made a crack in an ivory tower from which culture was almost, if not quite entirely, absent.

3. World War II, which was a huge and awful rupture (a break with tradition, a lack of culture, even destruction of human potential) was to cause an important and non-reversible upheaval in the way of practising the theatre at university, and, as we shall see, the theatre itself. You will not be surprised to learn that, just after the war, the university theatre was going to develop profoundly and quickly in Germany itself.

More than anyone else, young Germans felt the need to make up for the cultural void, caused first by the brown years ... as they are chastely called ... and later on by the War. They were at odds with tradition and suspicious of their elders, and that is why they were going to create not a new but 'another' theatre in their own way and image.

So, the first important International Festival of the University Theatre was born in Erlangen in 1949: firstly, it met a need to turn outwards, to make it up with Europe and the world, to make cultural discoveries ... secondly, it appeared as a redefinition of theatrical contents and forms in such a different world. For a long time, Erlangen was an extraordinary experimental ground for theatre 'makers' and for authors, and even for the audience, critics and researchers. The yearly theatre climax of Erlangen did not remain a local event ... it also had repercussions throughout the whole country. It would take too long to list all of the student theatre companies, and also the key figures who took part in the Erlangen festival: Adamov, Günter Grass, Claus Peymann Enzensberger, John Arden and a host of others comprise but a few. Because the 'International Weeks of the Student Theatre' amounted to more than a festival, more than a mere show of theatrical experiences, it also became a privileged place to share ideas and theories.

Those members of the media who did not miss that highpoint are in agreement: in the fifties, the student theatre deeply influenced German theatre in all fields at the Festival of Erlangen. The first European Union of the University Theatre was founded in 1954, also in Erlangen. The French FNTU (National Federation of University Theatres), which had officially been recognised in 1947, was one of its founders. And it seems quite plausible that the Erlangen festival influenced the foundation of the famous World Festival of the University Theatre of Nancy in 1963, now under the directorship of Jack Lang.

I think the two following events were important facts of the fifties: on one hand, the amateur student theatre, while asserting its specificity and quality in contrast to the professional theatre, obliged the latter to question itself about their own experience with regard to repertoire and to dramaturgy and even to their relationship with the audience. In so doing, the university theatre was going to lose a lot of their members who turned towards the professional theatre

Could one speak about 'perverse effect'? One of the best known examples is certainly Ariane Mnouchkine who founded the Student Theatre Association of Paris at the Sorbonne in 1959, which was to give rise to the 'Théâtre du Soleil' in 1964. On the other hand, the theatre grew in importance at the university, both from the academic point of view and from the students' viewpoint. In the sixties, students were going to use the theatre for political purposes, perhaps because ... among others ... of the increasing importance of the student theatre from Eastern Europe ... Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia ... but also because of the example of the young American groups emerging from the university campus (Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet *et al*) which ... through a new committed theatre ... reflected the society problems troubling the United States at this time.

According to Richard Monod,³ the blooming period of the French FNTU between 1964 and 1966 can be ascribed to the active, (although temporary) support of the UNEF (Union of French Students). In Belgium, in Brussels, for example, the MUBEF (Movement of French-speaking Belgian University Students) organised the first student theatre festival in 1964. In the programme you could read: 'Student theatres want to come into very close contact with the working world and to adapt their repertoire accordingly'. In Germany too, the student movement considered theatre as a means for social agitation. Questioning authority and tradition rendered the new aspect of the university theatres as a sort of vicious circle. The conflict between theatre as a means of artistic expression and theatre as a political means had to be resolved.

In Germany first, where the most radical part of the student movement clamoured at the end of the Festival for that which they would achieve in 1968.⁴ In France too, the FNTU privileged 'a very militant guidance of the University theatre: theatre-tract, agit-prop, joint productions',⁵ only giving up that position at the general meeting held in Clermont-Ferrand in 1975.

Certainly, during the fifties and the sixties, the student theatre had 'upset' the professional theatre by its dynamism. There was a lot of new talent and many among its number are now famous and well-respected actors. The student theatre had become increasingly more important, both inside and outside the university: the institution had no choice but to attach the greatest importance to this.

4. As a consequence, a lot of institutes of theatrical research appeared in nearly all the European universities in the seventies as if they wanted to make up for the lead that had been taken over by the Anglo-Saxon world in this field. In 1977/78, the FNTU asked for the systematic establishment of such institutes in every university and 'to take the works of the university companies into account for some university degrees'.⁶

A lot of institutions agreed. And that was only the beginning: the struggle continues.

5. To conclude my short historical approach, I must emphasise a new event in the eighties: the incredible number of International Festivals of University Theatre that I visit, either with our company or as an observer ... most of them are well-established and recurrent, from Vilnius to Manizales, from Tampere to Casablanca, from Montreal to Besançon or from Liège to Krakow. Not to

mention the festivals of the French 'Grandes Écoles'. It proves that student theatre is still very lively and that it wants to organise exchanges between people and to share theatrical experiences. The university institutions themselves back up and promote these meetings, as they reflect their own wish to open up (to sell themselves?) to the external world on every level. The crack in the ivory tower I was referring to above.

It also shows a slow yet sure change with regard to such a long indifference of the teaching profession towards culture.

6. When the story of the UT of the nineties will be written in the year 2000, two striking facts will doubtless emerge: first of all, the sitting up of the IUTA, which extends the communication on a worldwide level between the university theatres of the five continents; and then ... at least in Europe ... the increasing number of international joint productions sometimes gathering up to eight countries on the same project. For example, let us mention the project, *Cymbeline*, in Besançon, *Crossing the Border*, in Liège, Sofia and Graz, the joint productions between Morocco and Spain, between Spain and Great-Britain, between Great-Britain and Italy, etc., etc. All this will have to be more detailed when we have a sufficient historical distance, but it is obvious in any case that the university theatres of the nineties look mostly for openings and exchange.

The evolution I have just described in summary, mainly vs the place the theatre has had at university in different times. Yet it also reflects the great changes of the stage of university life itself. Until the war, the University belonged to an elite, living in a closed circle, where the theatre mainly reflected the vitality of a department and/or the aura of some masters. Then a general crisis in society challenged the whole system of relationships between teachers and learners, and led to an opening up to the social world. And now there is a need for the university to be more and more integrated in the world on a regional, national and international level. Therefore, new departments (Theatre, Performance, Media and Communication), new 'interfaces' are created to allow more links with the business world; for example, Erasmus, Socrates, Med-Campus, Lingua and ... Festivals. That's right: the university theatre has always been the 'mirror' of the place that the University occupies or wishes to occupy in society.

Of course, this does not fool me: by sketching the history of the university theatre and trying to emphasise its main issues, I take the risk of generalising in a reductive way. Actually, each university theatre has its own specificity: Liège is not Brussels, Dijon is not Besançon, Moscow is not Montreal. In the same way, Poland is not Italy and the history of the university theatre of both countries would need at least a whole book for each. Indeed, the theatre ... not only the 'finished products', but also the working method ... speaks much of the environment where it is practised. And that is why university theatres keep questioning their identity and role in spite of a rather positive evolution on the whole. The university theatre booming, the internationalisation of exchanges due to tours and festivals aroused a desire of unity, organisation and federation on the one hand and underlined the differences on the other. These differences have also made it more difficult for any wish to be merged together.

Actually, the university theatre is not monolithic. Already

in 1962, during a general meeting of the FNTU, the role of university theatre in France was discussed. Is university theatre a spare time activity for students? Is it an illustration of theatre classes? Is it the 'antechamber for professionals'? Thirty years later, in February 1992, a conference organised in Liège within the framework of the 9th International Meetings of the University Theatre raised the same questions, yet on an international level. The participants from seventeen different countries and three different continents were present at this conference (Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Great-Britain, Ireland, Lithuania, Morocco, Mexico, the Netherlands, Poland, Quebec, Russia, Senegal, Spain). Those participants were, in general, representatives of university theatres, but also of foreign associations, working as amateurs or professionals, for example AITA (International Association of Amateur Theatre), the Belgian ITI (French section), and also the National Theatre of Belgium, and the Festival of Cracovia. Whilst emphasising the differences, the debates ... often impassioned ... led nevertheless to a common definition with three terms. This definition seems appropriate to the different countries. It was very much the same as the one of the FNTU in 1962.

The following distinctions should be made:

- the spontaneous theatre: by groups of students of any origins;
- the directed theatre: practised by students under the directorship of professors and/or professionals;
- the pre-professional theatre: its aim is to form students in theatrical arts and/or in theatrical research.

The two first types of theatre have always existed and we all know their problems.

First of all, the 'mobility' of students, that is one of the main differences between 'student' and 'amateur' theatre. It is obvious that students will do all that they can to make their study at university as short as possible and few students, once in the 'working' life will go on acting. The differences in training, disparities in talent and motivation are other obstacles.

I would also like to mention a more recent change: in many universities, education requires more and more studying (more tests and over-abundant subjects to study). That's why those who go on participating actively in culture instead of being subjected to it deserve more credit than their fellow students who exhaust themselves working.

The further problem facing the directed theatre is to find the means to pass on a heritage and a quality, that is to say in a way to institutionalise, while preserving spontaneity. This type of theatre, often linked very closely to people, in general all volunteers, is always in a delicate situation.

Now, let us talk about the third category, i.e. the pre-professional theatre. Although this kind of theatre had existed for a long time in the Anglo-Saxon world, it suddenly gained in importance in our countries since the 'booming' of university theatre training. Its main problem is the search for good interaction between theory and practice. A search which has become more difficult due to the lack of financial support and/or of infrastructures and resources (rooms, material, staff etc.).

Although poverty is not a fault (as Grotowski would say)

it does not help university theatre to find a place on the market! So this leads to a complex (inferiority, superiority, frustration or a mix of all three!) which is reinforced by the professional business world (actors, directors, producers and even the public) which shows itself indifferent, at best condescending, at worst contemptuous, and even hostile.

Even the authorities in charge once with culture and then with education are 'stuck' in ministry partitioning and make this discomfort worse, as they usually apply the principle of non-communicating vessels.

Here is an example, which happened in the French-speaking area of Belgium ... it is almost a 'Belgian joke'. In 1983, the Executive of the French Community (Philippe Moureaux) introduced into the budget a new article relating to subsidies for professional, semi-professional and amateur theatre, for children and young people, for university theatres, and also for professional, semi-professional and amateur theatre of 'popular' education (9.7 million).⁸ When the next elections to legislature were organised, this article was divided into two distinct parts: firstly, subsidies for children and young people theatres and, secondly, subsidies for university theatres, professional, semi-professional and amateur theatres. In 1991, the administration gave the following explanation: 'The university theatres are especially mentioned in the budgets of the French Community because of their hybrid status, i.e. neither fully professional nor fully amateur'.⁹ This statement makes me wonder! Actually, it reveals more 'uncertainties' than it gives definitions of university theatre, or of a cultural policy.

The discomfort I have mentioned above has been a recurrent topic at the conferences organised in Liège. In fact, the discussions about the definition, particularity and image of university theatre are more than a matter of pure terminology.

What makes for the richness of student theatre is the variety, spontaneity and pluralism. Yet many also have the wish to professionalise this theatre.

Therefore, two notions are opposed:

1. The fear of the 'amateur' image, which has been inherited from the student theatre of a socio-cultural type. This image is, of course, out of date, but it is accepted as being the force and origin of what is today the university theatre.
2. The difficulty in underlining the specificity of the pre-professional university theatre as it is stuck between the pure amateur theatre and the pure professional theatre.

I will not conclude with a negative impression, which the listing of university theatre problems might give the reader. Therefore, I will remind that same reader of some well-known qualities which make the practice of theatre at university a real tool for education and learning.

Learning a 'language': traditionally, the drama, and consequently the theatre, is classified among the category labelled 'Literature' (and this often influences the choice of repertoire). We know that people in the theatre have now given a greater importance to spectacular effects. Yet, the dramatic text may remain an essential part of the show, which must also be taken into account. The literary analysis of a drama and the analysis of its performance are not incompatible: they complement one another.

Learning to be: who will question the importance of speech, voice, good posture and relationships with others in a human being's life? Who will deny the contribution of creativity to the intellectual and cultural development of everybody? Who knows how valuable team work is for each individual?

Learning how to organise oneself: all that one has acquired in practising theatre is to be extended outside the family circle: one has to face the audience, one's fellow students. Therefore, the participating students have to organise their study and work time.

In short, practising theatre at university is another way of living one's student life ... and, in my opinion, it is probably the best opportunity for students to express themselves. In doing so, our culture and education come from the bottom and not from the top of the pyramid. Of course, it is a training tool for students, but also a tool of research for the theatre itself. As it is free from any profit-making concern, the university theatre may take time to take some risks ... for example, in the choice of content and form ... or to attempt experiments that others cannot afford. As Mnouchkine has said 'searching for the theatre in complete ignorance and innocence is perhaps being a professional; it is not knowing in itself but knowing how to search'.¹⁰ The university theatre has already given enough evidence that it has been capable of achieving this.

A huge programme, but the stake is considerable and the gamble is worth taking.

The end of this paper will be Roger Deldime's words: 'Arts (theatre), as a language gain in importance in our over-materialised society. Artistic education might be a humanistic answer to this materialistic drift'.¹¹

References:

- 1: Lasalle, Jacques: « Un Vivier », in Theatre/public, Hors-serie 5 'Theatre universitaire: quel enjeu?' document presented by the FNTU, ed. Theatre de Gennevilliers, 1984, p.26.
2. In the same special issue of Theatre/Public, Marcel Freydefont, then President of the FNTU, gives a very useful historical outline of the French university theatre evolution from 1932 to 1984, p.8-12.
- As far as Liege is concerned, see Wathelet, Jeanne/Duysinck, François, Le Théâtre Universitaire Liegeois, in La vie Wallonne, Liege, Tome 54 (1980), p.144-153. For Erlangen and Germany, see Hübner, Marlies, Internationales Studententheater in Erlangen 1946-1968, Erlangen, 1989, 207 p.
3. Theatre/Public, Hors-serie 5, p.14.
4. It is noteworthy that the University Theatre of Erlangen, (1991) organised a new International Festival.
5. ibid
6. ibid p.11.
7. ibid
8. Espace Synthese, Bruxelles, Ministère de la Culture et des Affaires Sociales de la Communauté française, Bibliothèque d'information, n° 15/1991, p.61.
9. ibid
10. Mnouchkine, Ariane, "Savoir chercher", in Theatre/Public, Hors-serie, 5, p.23.
11. In Le Soir, Bruxelles, 27-8-92, p.2.