

Theatre as Critique

Congress of the Society for Theatre Studies, Frankfurt and Gießen, 3.-6. November 2016

Organisers: The Institute for Applied Theatre Studies, Justus Liebig University Gießen (Professor Dr Gerald Siegmund), and the Theatre Studies Chair of the Institute for Theatre, Film and Media Studies, Goethe University Frankfurt am Main (Professor Dr Nikolaus Müller-Schöll), in collaboration with the Hessian Theatre Academy (HTA), the Frankfurt LAB and the Künstlerhaus Mousonturm.

Under the heading “Theatre as Critique”, the organisers of the 13th Congress of the Society for Theatre Studies invite researchers to examine theatre as a critical practice. With the crisis of the classical groundings of both theatre and critique in mind, the congress aims at a reconsideration of, on the one hand, the history, theory and issues of theatre and, on the other, the concept of critique. At the heart of the debate, therefore, is not just the subject matter of theatre critique but rather critique itself. Plenary speeches and shorter contributions on 8 different subject areas will be complemented by performative formats, visits to the theatre, talks and scenic contributions from students of the Hessian Theatre Academy (HTA).

One quality of the figures of thought reoccurring throughout the discourse of the occidental theatre is that this theatre – especially where it deals with aspects of the political but also with social practices and tradition – can be seen as a critical examination of that tradition. Theatre as critique is a revision of decisions made elsewhere, a negotiation of the myths picked up upon in the theatre, of historical events and of processes. It is a scenic articulation of an *It should be different* (Theodor W. Adorno) – even when there is no apparent alternative to that which is being propagated as the one and only solution. Philosophers, church dignitaries, dogmatists and guardians of virtue hostile to the theatre have all contributed to this view of the theatre – those who fear the subversive power of the stage, who seek to demonise the theatre and its practitioners – as have those who speak out in favour of the theatre, who in it see a means to criticise both personal and social transgressions, an institution that is able to unsettle authorities that have been constituted elsewhere, that can criticise untenable ideological positions and dissolve patterns of order and doctrines of any kind. Theatre – in accordance with a view widely held until recently by theatre practitioners and commentators – is a critical practice.

This view has very recently found itself on shaky ground. It has been radically questioned by two schools of thought, both with regard to the concept of theatre that it idealises as well as in relation to the often all too simple definition of the term ‘critique’.

– The notion of the theatre as a critical entity is idealistic, as it renders a certain concept of theatre absolute. It conceals the material conditions of theatre as well as its, at best, indirectly critical purposes of entertainment, pleasure and cheerful evening activity. On an individual level, it puts aside the satisfaction of one’s own narcissism frequently connected with the theatre, and, on an institutional level, it ignores all sorts of aims pursued with the theatre. Moreover, critical theatre – therein comparable with political theatre – must ask itself if its critique, as a rule, is little more than a kind of *preaching to the converted*. Its references to its own critical potency seem to self-legitimise an institution that not infrequently reaffirms and solidifies norms – precisely in the critical mode. On the other hand, that which marks theatre as an autonomous art form undermines the heteronomous aims it follows, including critique. Thus, perhaps behind the concept of theatre as a critical practice, there lies hidden a charged relationship whose two poles are theatre and critique.

– Additionally, the generally accepted idea of theatre as critique seems too simple with regard to the concept of critique perpetuated within this idea, which has been radically shaken in the last few decades, and not without reason. We refer here to the radical criticism of traditional Marxist ideological critique undertaken by Adorno/Max Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Adorno once again takes up in his oft-cited essay “Cultural Criticism and Society”. Secondly, we bear in mind Foucault’s genealogy of critique, which he carries out as a proponent of, on the one hand, desubjugation in relation to forms of the art of governing human beings and, on the other hand, of the rejection of every fundamentalist critique, which Judith Butler has taken up in more recent times. All three have enquired into the foundations on which critique is based, as well as the possibility of *post-fundamentalist* critique (Butler). The task of shaking the foundations, for which critical theory and post-structuralism both stand, affects, as they illustrate, not least all traditional forms of even proto-totalitarian critique.

Only one sentence from Adorno’s essay “Cultural Criticism and Society” is usually cited – the one that has been declared a “dictum”, according to which it is barbaric “to write a poem after Auschwitz.” In the continuation of this thought, Adorno makes it clear that “this”, also corrodes “even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.” (Adorno 1981, 34) In initially surprising unison with Martin Heidegger’s elaborations on the nature of the modern technology established at the beginning of the 17th century as “Ge-stell” (Heidegger 1991, 32), Adorno speaks about the “absolute reification”, “which presupposed intellectual progress as one of its elements [and] is now preparing to absorb the mind entirely”. (Ibid.) “Critical intelligence cannot be equal to this challenge as long as it confines itself to self-satisfied contemplation.” (Ibid.) Michel Foucault and Judith Butler take up this “Leftist critical tradition” when they assign the critic the “double task” of showing “how knowledge and power work to constitute a more or less systematic way of ordering the world with its own ‘conditions of acceptability of a system,’ but also ‘to follow the breaking points which indicate its emergence.’” (Butler 2001)

In the strict sense of the term, critique is closely associated with the Enlightenment. In allusion to Immanuel Kant, Foucault defines critique as “the art of not being governed quite so much.” (Foucault 1997, 29) Using one’s own reason to ask the question of how one would like not to be governed or, more precisely, not governed “like that and at that cost” (ibid.) means using one’s reason in the sense of criticising the given state of affairs. Thus, Foucault understands critique as an objection to clerical, state and parental laws, and therefore as a fathoming of the boundaries of governability. “[C]ritique will be the art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially insure the desubjugation of the subject in the context of what we could call, in a word, the politics of truth.” (Ibid., 32) In as much as critique in its resistance to “every government” “[puts] forth universal and infeasible rights” (ibid., 30), it is subject to the very same danger that Adorno and Horkheimer describe in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The rationality of the Enlightenment, unenlightened in terms of its own limits, will run the risk of deteriorating back into its supposed opposite, the myth, or of degenerating into instrumental reason. Furthermore, critique seems to have implicitly and continuously conducted itself in relation to a norm that it keeps up *ex negativo*, even when it sets out to work it through and suspend it. This also poses the question of which claim to validity critique can have at all, if it is always in a charged relationship between the general, which must deliver the standards of critique, and the particular, which receives specific criticism. To which normativity is critique attached explicitly or implicitly and how is this attachment problematised? Alongside its relationship to normativity, every form of critique is accompanied by the potential of a utopia of some kind. Those who criticise appeal at least implicitly to something better, to an other,

even if it is not the task of critique to develop universally valid alternatives or solutions to that which it is criticising. If critique inevitably draws up an other, how can it prevent itself from terrorising that which resists its ideas? How can critique prevent itself from becoming another of the “great narratives” (Lyotard) ending in terror and catastrophe, like the great narratives of the 19th century that Lyotard warned against?

Critique opens up a spectrum of tensions between the norm and its degeneration, the general and the particular, the utopia and the given. From this, central observations can be derived with view to artistic practices and the theatre. The question that Judith Butler poses, picking up on Foucault’s definition of critique, is that of the possibility of “desubjugation” and thus the transformation of conditions. How can critique launch a “desubjugation” and thus a “desubjectivisation”, considering that subjectivity is not possible without subjugation? Foucault substitutes this mysterious agent with the “originary freedom” of the human being, which he cannot ground, but which serves him, according to Butler, as a necessity of thinking – placing a “not knowing” inside of discourse (Butler 2001, 18), setting the conditions and the subject itself in motion. Freedom is a purely strategic or even, as Foucault says, fictional presumption that has very real consequences for the subject, since it produces actual freedoms. Foucault’s description of critique as “art” is – against the background of this train of thought – more than just a rhetorical way of speaking. Instead, it is directed at the core of the matter: Critique, which “risks one’s very formation as a subject” (ibid.), is an aesthetic practice. As an aesthetic practice it evokes that which it risks and risks that which it evokes. The “natural freedom” of the human being is its aesthetic freedom. This is accompanied by the question of whether critique as a practice is first and foremost a question of the individual – of the individual artist, who in his or her unique theatre sets him or herself in opposition to traditional forms and entrenched institutional processes. This involves, in Butler’s sense, an ethics of critical practice, for which the individual must take on responsibility.

In this sense, theatre as art is a critical practice because it is a practice that suspends truths. Criticising the conditions is thus not primarily dependent on a certain content that the theatre negotiates but rather lies in the way that the theatre itself exists. The task of the critique of the Enlightenment is to “[have an] idea of our knowledge and its limits” (Foucault 1997, 35) and thus the limits of knowledge, power and the subject. How does this challenge the limits of knowledge? Which strategies emphasise its constitutive conditions and fractures? Which role do affective, emotional, corporeal or idiosyncratic elements play? Which role does materiality play in relation to the rationality of critique? What would another form of critique look like – one that is not left exclusively to the discretion of the rationality of reason, as Kant wanted it?

In opposition to the twofold, radical questioning of the legitimacy of theatre as critique is an increasingly more urgent quest, above all since the turn of the millennium, for new forms of critical practice in the theatre, performance and action art. Theatre as a critical practice is driven by the wish not just to relate to reality in the modus of a contemplative doubling, but rather to assert theatre as a critical examination of untenable conditions, policies and normalisations, as an alternative concept to existing realities, a site for protest, political intervention and utopia. Without forgetting the aporias of the classical grounding of critique and with view to the questionability of traditional and contemporary approaches in critical theatre today, the congress will discuss the question of how we can reconceive theatre critique, understood in a double sense: How does theatre criticise? Which kind of critique could be formulated with view to today’s theatre practices?

These questions can be discussed in various sections at the Congress of the Society for Theatre Studies. The following thematic emphases are thinkable:

1. Critical practices in contemporary theatre

A number of different practices in contemporary theatre see themselves as critical. But what is being criticised concretely, by which means, with which right and on which basis? Which effect or potency can be described? Which reality runs counter to these approaches? How does the critique articulated on the level of referentiality behave in relation to its performance? What do the forms of production and the organisation of critical theatre practices look like and how are they related to the positions argued on the level of content and criticised object? What is even being criticised and from which perspective?

2. Critique and normativity

If critique always maintains a relationship to the norm that it criticises, the question must be posed about the norm-stabilising tendency of theatrical practices. Theatre is called in time and time again in times of crisis, in order to defuse conflicts through negotiation and representation. Theatre has a valve function like at the carnival; it creates freedoms to think and act, which, however, cannot be separated from the institutions that these freedoms finance. Theatre can be thought of as the critical practice of the ordering of things itself, which accepts that the ideal self-image of this order is being appealed to and which, in return, leads to a transformation of that order. However, this process of critical transformation implies that the order is being kept alive, albeit differently. What, therefore, is the relationship between critique and affirmation? Which relationship does the subversive potential that is often associated with the theatre entertain not only in the dissolution of existing norms and orders but also in their stabilisation?

3. Critique of the dispositive of the theatre in the past and the present

When theatre is conceived of as an apparatus in the Foucauldian sense, we can then ask with Agamben how theatre practitioners have worked on what he calls “profanation” and on the evocation of the ungovernability that is co-original to the theatre (Agamben 2009, 24). What did the scenic, practical and theoretical ungovernability of the theatre’s own dispositive or its profanation in decisive times of change look like, for example during the theatre reformation of the mid-18th century, at the Weimar Court Theatre, at the beginning of the 20th century, in Brecht’s Epic Theatre, in Einar Schleefer’s choric stagings or in the so-called concept dance at the turn of the 21st century?

4. Theatre as a critical practice of thought and action

Since its beginnings, theatre in the occidental tradition has not just been understood as a critical practice in the narrow sense of “theatre”. It appears – in the polemics of its adversaries as well as the defences of its advocates – to be a form of critical practice of both thought and action. How can this critique be grasped more precisely in view of texts as well as scenic practices – a critique that, above all in the last few years has led to talk of a thinking of the stage, of artistic research and oppositional bodies.

5. Critique of critique

When critique itself is subject to multifaceted critique, it affects both the theatre as a critical practice in the broad sense as well as the postulate of critique in the narrow sense. Theatre critique, which noticeably disperses in favour of fleeting recommendations or no less fleeting slating reviews, is affected by a more general critique of critique. Which aporias of critique can be accounted for in a

critical discourse about critique? Which perspectives does the critique of critique open up for other related practices, as they have been developed in the past few years – of resistance, of deconstruction, of citation/repetition, of parody?

6. Theatre studies as a critical practice

In which respect can theatre studies be grounded as a critical practice? To which extent can they be based on the traditions of Critical Theory, the Frankfurt School or other French and US-American schools of thought that in part compete with but in part continue these traditions – for example Butler, Jacques Derrida, Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy? How do practical problems, the experience of suffering and knowledge of the social mediacy of one's own position as well as the observed objects and practices and societal contexts as a whole enter into a kind of theatre studies that considers itself critical? How are theatre studies as a critical practice related to other critical practices? Which questions do they pose to other forms of knowledge and the archiving of and inquiry into the theatre?

7. Critique and the public sphere in the theatre

The practice of critique as a consequence of the Enlightenment – especially in the theatre – is connected with the development of the public sphere and its counter-public spheres. In Lessing's Hamburg Dramaturgy, he demonstrates that critique as the constitution of a new public sphere always serves the development of the self-image, values and norms of a social class. How can the relationship between theatre, the public sphere and power be described historically and currently (in the pre-March period, in the Third Reich, in divided Germany post-1945)? At which public spheres is critical practice directed and which does it shape? Which norms and values come into play? Which role does journalistic theatre critique play as a representative of the public sphere in the fight for the recognition of theatrical aesthetics? How are the rise and fall of theatre critique connected with general structural change in the public sphere?

8. Hostility towards the theatre

What kinds of critique has the theatre faced throughout history, from Platon to Tertullian, from the Jansenites and Rousseau to Guy Debord and contemporary performance art? Which arguments have been voiced against certain theatrical practices in which contexts, for example against historical as well as contemporary theatre forms and aesthetics? How does philosophical critique of the theatre behave in relation to the theatre inherent to theory, to the linguisticity and staging that are inseparable from theory? What is the relationship between the theatre-critical discourses of clerical critics and the fathers of the church they based themselves upon from the 18th to the 20th century? How is the critique of the spectacle and the media related to traditional forms of theatre critique?

Significant academics and artists are intended as keynote speakers. There will also be a group of young academics that will present the results of their discussions in a keynote speech. Alongside the classical keynote and panel formats, the latter with three lectures of 20 minutes, the congress would like to encourage contributors to try out other contribution formats. We are also seeking suggestions for lecture performances or group presentations at a length of 60 minutes, given by up to six academics with a discussion afterwards. Alongside single talks, entire panels with three corresponding lectures may also be suggested, although the organisers reserve the right to enlarge

or reconfigure the panels with respect to the suggestions they receive. A special young academics forum is not planned, although young academics are particularly encouraged to take part in this congress with their own contributions. Furthermore, one elementary component of the congress is mutual visits to theatre performances in local theatres as well as scenic contributions from students of the Hessian Theatre Academy.

The congress will advance the internationalisation of German-speaking theatre studies by putting on a series of panels in English that will run parallel to the German-speaking panels. We would thus like to encourage contributors from abroad to submit abstracts. We will endeavour to provide funding for the travel and accommodation costs of contributors from abroad from the German Research Community (DFG). In order to be eligible for this funding, please submit your abstract **by the 1st of April**.

For those of you who do not need funding, please send your abstract or suggestion for a panel (max. 500 characters) **by the 30th of April 2016** to the following email address:

congressgtw@theater-wissenschaft.de

The organisers will arrange the financial means to free those whose suggestions for a lecture or a presentation are accepted from the conference fee, inasmuch as they do not have the opportunity to receive this funding elsewhere. Please tell us when you send us your suggestion if this applies to you.

For hotel reservations, please check the list of hotels on the congress homepage **from the 1st of May on**:

www.theater-wissenschaft.de/kongresse

If you want to take part in the congress, please register on our website **from the 1st of June 2016 on**.

Literature

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