Editorial Remarks:

New Terminologies, Old Truths, and New Insights

It is refreshing to see that there is no end to the quest in performing arts studies for sense and meaning, and if new and often esoteric terminologies are an integral part of this search, so be it. It is well known that very often it is sufficient to paint an old fence in a different color in order to rediscover it, as the Prague Formalists have pointed out long ago. Gone is old Mother Nature, Long Live Ecology; Anthropocene age has apparently replaced industrial age, though there is still an ongoing debate as to its birth date. Lies have faded away and so has disinformation, and the notion of “fake news” has replaced them to universal acclaim. The enouncement of a new term and the naming of a new category seek to put order into an apparent chaos by bringing to life an entity that demands to be approached as something new, something that should obliterate existing systems of beliefs and values, be they ethical or aesthetical. Unmistakably, the use of a new jargon is expected to change imbedded attitudes.

In our own field, thanks to the use of new technologies and the ever increasing role of scenography, we are supposed to bathe in the light of a postdramatic theatre, a transmedial theatre, a postreal theatre, or an immersive theatre that are supposed to provide us with deep insights into the human condition like none before and uncover multiple modes of reality. However, to claim that the uncovering of multiple modes of reality and their expression in performing arts is the achievement of the past thirty years or so is to forget the use of rhetoric figures -- such as metaphors, signs, symbols, ambiguity, and so on -- in the past, figures intended to point to such modes of reality. Nor should we ignore the use of other visual elements, like movement, costumes, props or lighting to this end; likewise, we should be sensitive to the still vital but unacknowledged impact of such concrete theatrical expressions as those of the Symbolist, Dadaists, Futurists, or Expressionists (much too easily assembled today under one tag, the Modernists) or of the once popular happenings. In addition, we should know better since mimesis, with its explicit articulation of a double faced reality, has been the very staple of theatre. A double faced reality that bears basic human truths. Or, in Shakespeare’s words “If you prick us, do
we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? If you wrong us, shall we not revenge?” These basic human truths are not an endangered species: they have been affecting us for thousands of years and our classics have given them an everlasting expression. Today, thanks to available technologies, we can artistically embody and visualize different modes of reality that bear basic old truths and do so simultaneously and from different angles. When the fascinating veil of spectacular technologies is lifted up, we may find that the immersive, postdramatic, or postreal recent forms of theatre bring us back to that enduring property of theatre, the make believe, whose affect is certain although it cannot be effectively measured. Beside their entertaining role, the spectacular technologies serve also as beneficial epistemological tool, because they encourage theatre artists, students, and scholars to reflect on currently prevailing aesthetic notions and theatrical forms, even when they disregard their historical past. The new technologies at hand facilitate such a quest for sense and meaning and may help us look for new approaches to designing space for performing arts as well as devise new experiments in our quest for adequate expressions of basic truths. (Should we name these basic truths non-lies, fake lies, post-lies, or post-untruths?)

Currently, in scenography design for the performing arts, the use of dynamic multi-spatiality (new term!) is expanding, though it cohabits with more traditional stage forms and styles such as the Italian box, the revolving stage, and realistic, expressionist, or Brechtian styles among many others. Even Peter Brook’s poor theatre has its followers, as in the 2015 performance of Haendel’s Tamerlano at the Théâtre de la Monnaie in Brussels, where the performing space and the costumes were designed by Patrick Kinmonth. Here, the stage was empty but for a single chair and the performing space was bordered by thin tall columns, which visually remind of Gordon Craig’s cubes and kinetic stage. The chair acquired and expressed various significations according to the dramatic situation and the performers’ movement, becoming an acting accessory where needed – a simple seating tool – or a throne. Interestingly, the tall columns bordering the space in Tamerlano bring forth another important aspect of contemporary scenography at work, that is, the relationship between the performer and the performance space, its meaning, and its critical impact on the audience -- especially within the dynamic multi-spatiality that conquers the stage today. But this is a topic that has to be addressed elsewhere on its own, especially because of the sensory overload that the dynamic multi-spatiality may entail.
Finally, should we balk before new terminologies? No, if they lead us to reconsider things past. No, if they engender new insights into the present. No, if the current use of dynamic multi-spatiality is here to stay.

We are glad to include in the current issue of Theatre Arts Journal Fabrizio Crisafulli’s lecture delivered on the occasion of the Honoris Causa Doctorate Degree he received at the Roskilde University in Denmark. The lecture is a short and illuminating introduction to his oeuvre. Ewa Kara’s essay on Kerl-Ernst Herrmann innovative scenography at the Berliner Schaubühne introduces us to an artist who was one of the most important creators in this field during the second half of the 20th century in Germany. Nebojša Tabočki’s research on the design of a burgeoning and widely popular performing art in China, the aquatic theatre, brings forth the vital role of scenography in bringing theatre closer to the masses. And Anthony Shay’s essay addresses the art of Isadora Duncan, who shared with Gordon Craig her deep interest in Ancient Greece.