



## A CONTROVERSIAL DEFINITION. WHAT IS A DRAMATIC TEXT?

### *O DEFINIȚIE CONTROVERSATĂ. CE ESTE UN TEXT DRAMATIC?*

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*În lumea incertă a teatrului, unde orice este posibil, câteva elemente rămân neschimbate, printre care și textul. Autoarea examinează mai îndeaproape ceea ce este textul dramatic, analizând unele din definițiile și caracteristicile sale. De asemenea, un interes aparte prezintă trecerea de la textul dramatic într-o reprezentare.*

Our priority question will be what a dramatic text is and what it is made of. If we start from the premises that **a dramatic text is any form of text that can formulate a theatrical act**, we will enter a blurry game of terms. The definition is generally accepted in the theatre world, nevertheless without investigating the consequences of the assertion. Actually, according to this definition, **a dramatic text** and implicitly the **dramaturgy** is every text that proves a theatrical act, namely unity, tension, conflict or theatricality (risking a term repetition). Then we could say for example about novels, poems, short stories or fairytales that they are dramatic texts, as it is easy to trace tensions, elements or nuclei of theatricality in some writings of these categories. This is where confusions start. Paths bifurcate. Strict theoreticians consider that only the play is a dramatic text. Other theoreticians extend the sphere and include all texts that bear the dramatic nucleus (that can be dramatized or that have a dramatic character). Consequently, the definition and the characteristics of the dramatic text must be searched for in other directions as well. The dramatic text grows apart from the epical or the lyrical text through its specificity, which is related perhaps to its shape, structure, language forms, or manners of sending the message.

The dramatic text has a double nature. It must be understood **textually** as a fiction dialogue falling into the reality convention, and **scenically** (at the performance level), when the text comes to life, it is materialized in a certain convention. This is the time when the specificity of the theatrical mimesis is established (by **theatrical mimesis** we understand the physical imitation of reality). On this line, we find support in Marian Popa's observation on the double status of the dramatic writing: "Dramaturgy belongs to the literary field through the expressivity of the language and of the auctorial vision, but it also involves the *performable* character of this language and of this vision"<sup>1</sup>. Under these circumstances, a dramatic text is a literary text conceived to be performed, it has a style that is deciphered during reading, and all its valences can be visualized in the performance. During reading, the dramatic text – as any other type of text, actually – creates mental images that are materialized only by the scenic representation.

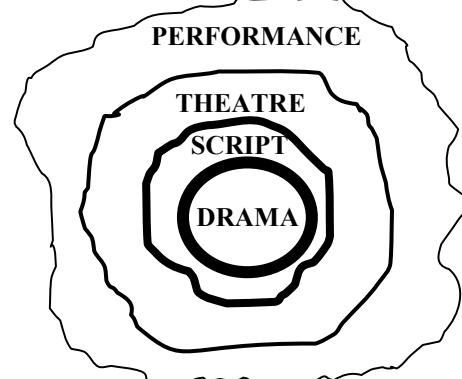
Under these circumstances, another question is raised: how much (or how

<sup>1</sup> Marian Popa, *Teatrul ca literatură*, Bucharest, Eminescu Publishing House, 1987, p. 14.

little) literature is there in drama? The Greek term *drama* is equivalent to “to do” or “action”, let alone the word *theatron*, which is very close to these notions, being translated by “a place where an action is shown”, “a place where something evolves”. If we are to follow the etymologic thread, we will easily realize how much we diverge from literature, however often there is mutual determination: drama needs text and text representation. Generally, there are numerous exceptions and if one of our arguments were a statement belonging to Anne Ubersfeld (“drama is not a literary genre, but a scenic practice”<sup>2</sup>), we would see that there is indeed no need to keep drama under the domination of literature, as it is an independent art that has no reserves for innovation. The current directorial tendencies confirm these considerations. The dramatic text can be completely absent from a performance. Some artists start from a simple idea that they develop and load with significances and with “tale”. When they put their thoughts down on paper – either in an organized manner or not –, they create a script, a sketch, not a dramatic text. This is how the Living Theatre Company worked for their performances from the ‘70s, which were impressive spectacles built on the improvisation and on the direct communication with the audience. This way, the text creates and recreates itself every time. Classic or “repertoire” theatres will always use texts in achieving performances, which is one of the few fixed elements of the ephemeral scaffolding of the act on the stage. Nevertheless, even the fixed character of the text is relative. The modern direction tends to “alter” it, meaning that directors combine, rewrite texts partially, let alone the

novel interpretations (correct or erroneous) given to classic works in order to update them. The basic text remains indeed, but it remains in the book, in literature, while the world of performance is a world of metamorphosis and continual change.

Richard Schechner saw a concentric relationship between the dramatic elements (that could be found in a dramatic text) and the large world of the theatrical performance. His schema places in the center of the concentric circles the dramatic nucleus (DRAMA), which is agglutinated by the SCRIPT (understood as a transposition of the language into its scriptural form); the latter is enclosed, in its turn, in a larger event – THEATRE (understood rather as the reception of the dramatic elements and the script by the actors and the work team); eventually, the representation act (PERFORMANCE) includes all the other circles, being equivalent to the duration of the show (from the entrance of the first spectator into the hall, until the exit of the last spectator from the hall). In fact, Schechner speaks about the art of theatre rather as an art of communication, than one of representation. For the act of representation would have no importance if it “said” nothing, if it did not transmit something and it were only an act for the self, not for the other, too.



**Image 1. Richard Schechner. Drama, Script, Theatre and Performance**

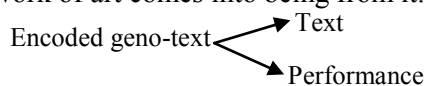
<sup>2</sup> “le théâtre n’est pas un genre littéraire. Il est une pratique scénique” (our translation), Anne Ubersfeld, *Lire le théâtre*, vol. II, Paris, Belin, 1996, p. 9.

But maybe beyond the written text there is another text (we could call it “unwritten”), a **geno-text**, as characterized by Julia Kristeva, an a priori text, thought or conceived before putting the words down on paper or before getting to scenic action (examples: in commedia dell’arte, improvisations must come into existence from the “nothingness”, the texts are not prepared beforehand; we are referring here also to any type of text that exists but it is undiscovered<sup>3</sup>, it exists unconsciously in the author/ director’s mind or inner self. The surrealist text is shaped according to the principle of searching in the unconsciousness, where the forces and inspiration unknown up to that moment should be awakened. The automatic painting<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Even back in 1878, Hypolithe Taine spoke about automatic painting in the preface of the work *About Intelligence*: “There is a man who, talking about anything or singing, writes without looking at the paper sheet enchaind sentences or even entire pages without being aware of what he is writing. From my point of view, he is the most honest man there is; but the person confesses that before starting to put the words on paper he has not got the faintest idea about what will happen in the end. When the man reads, he is amazed, sometimes he is frightened. We definitely notice in this case a doubling of the I; the simultaneous presence of two parallel reasonings independent from each other, of two action centers or of two moral persons juxtaposed in the same brain; each of these persons owns a work of art, one on the stage, the other one backstage” (our translation). In 1919, André Breton and Philippe Soupault wrote the first book according to the automatic method: *Magnetic Fields*. In 1933, Breton published one of the most important studies on automatic writing – *The Automatic Message*.

<sup>4</sup> The automatic trend stood out in painting between 1940 and 1960, and one of the most important representatives of this trend are Joan Miró, Jean Arp and the Canadian group of Automatists (led by Paul-Émile Borduas).

works in the same way, when artists are in a trance-like state draw lines on their canvas, coming to create meaningful images or interesting geometrical games. In music there are also “automatic compositions” and we are interested here in the free improvisations from the jazz concerts. The geno-text would be the starting point and the point uniting the text to the performance. The geno-text – says Kristeva – is neither something structured, nor something that will structure what will follow. It exists on an abstract level and the work of art comes into being from it.



We can look at the relationship between Text and Performance as it is rendered in the image above, namely both terms having a common point: that indistinct delineation from the human mind, the unsuspected impulse that makes the creator prefer certain topics, certain types.

Nonetheless, seen traditionally, **the path from the dramatic Text to Performance** could be described in phases, as follows:

Written text – Text read by someone else (director, actor) – Text enriched with impressions – Text enriched or impoverished during work on the stage – End product – Text reread by the Spectator.

Therefore, we can assert that we cross a considerable distance between *reading* and *seeing*, and if reading means imagination as well – the images taking shape in the reader’s mind according to his own will – then seeing means to a person in the audience, at least on the first reception level, taking the image formulated by someone else as it is. **The path from the text to performance is the path crossed from conceptual and from imagination to sensitive, physical and material perception.**

Once established the relationship between Text and Performance, and ta-

king into consideration the preference of some directors of working without a text recited on the stage, we will ask ourselves what the importance of word (text) is in the performance. In a staging based on text we will be tempted to watch and listen equally. The ear will make an effort to understand the word and give meaning to it. Meanwhile, in a choreographic performance or light show, the spectator tends to create his own story. And because in such performances the emphasis is on symbol and on analogies, the viewer will use these in their decrypting action. Usually, the word materializes (the story in *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*) is built from the text and the thread remains the same, there is nothing to imagine, other than the speculations made based on the proper story). On the contrary, the image in theatre can be very abstract and involves its understanding by finding similarities and by translating it. When the dancer adopts certain position, it must be identified with a real image. In *Wet Woman*, the ballerina and choreographer Sylvie Guillem transmits the states, the pulse and the emotions of a woman (an average woman), the rhythm and the movements of her body revealing the joy, sadness, and sensitivity that her “character” is experiencing. The movements that outline images must be translated, and the “translator’s” freedom is wider in such performances.

Going back to the text, we will ask ourselves what the importance of its quality is in staging, given that pro-

bably most theater professionals are aware of the fact that some stagings are good even if the text is not very consistent, and other stagings are poor, even though the texts are of high quality. In this matter, given its nature, it would be rather hard to establish a certain answer. The fact that direction thinks in images and uses their plasticity can save the lack of deepness of the word when necessary, but a competent spectator will always make the distinction between literature and staging, either during the performance or afterwards, when impressions are analyzed from afar. This means that if there are lacks, they will be noticed anyway. An issue to consider is the tendency of new writers and directors alike of organizing **reading performances**. Most of these are conceived also with the secondary purpose of testing the audience’s taste, or the quality, the impact of the text; thus, some artists also count on the quality of the work of art. The rules in the reading performance are quite random, and the moment would be between a stage rehearsal and the first contact of the actor with the text. On the other hand, thinking it over from the perspective of classic texts, we believe we can assert beyond a doubt that a work of art of the world literature confers power and deepness to the performance and makes the entire work team responsible, in some cases solving half of the staging success, and in others complicating the path of those who do not have an appetite or the necessary education to meet the great literary works.

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