

Teaching Theory and Criticism of Scene Design

Dr. Tatjana Dadić Dinulović, Associate Professor

Sladana Milićević, Teaching Assistant

Faculty of Technical Sciences, University of Novi Sad, Serbia

ABSTRACT

Term scene design relates to professional, artistic, curatorial, theoretical and ideological practices developed from the expanded meaning of scenography – as semantic category and artistic discipline. The first researches in this area in Serbia started in 1996 with the series of exhibitions and theoretical symposia dealing with the phenomenon of spectacle in the contemporary world, and resulting in scene design being defined as a joint process of conception, creation and realisation of a scene in the broadest sense of the word. Or, more precisely, as a creation of a complex synaesthetic environment, physical or metaphorical, much broader than actual theatre space, in which scene can be build or thought. Introduction of this interdisciplinary field into the education system in Serbia, first at the postgraduate level (as MA and DA programmes), and most recently at the undergraduate level (as BSc programme at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad), resulted in the need to establish and publish a theoretical platform through which relevant ideas and phenomena, identified in the research process, can be explained, argued, classified and systematised. Above all, there was a need to define the actual term of scene design, having in mind all of its potential meanings – within the professional theatre practice environment, artistic and curatorial practices, as well as the contemporary society. The real challenge, however, was set in the area of teaching scene design as theoretical discipline, followed by the need to critically analyse many of the artistic practices. For this purpose, the broadest theoretical discourse was developed through a series of definitions proposed by a number of scene design practitioners from various fields, placing scene design in the wide creative field – from theatre to contemporary practices in arts and culture in general. This process resulted in a wide phenomenological and debatable map, consisting of a large number of theoretical issues, but with no aspiration to be final or completely determined. In that sense, this map should be seen as the starting point for the analysis of scene design phenomena. Further challenge or even provocation started with the formal introduction of the course “Theory and criticism of scene design” at the MA programme entitled “Scene Architecture and Design“. The main question was not how to teach actual theory but to teach *about* theory. Initiated as an experiment, the debate challenged various aspects of the field, resulted in thorough reconsideration of many of the theoretical issues. More importantly, it made us understand that scene design as artistic discipline can be defined as eventful art, while teaching theory can be seen as event on its own.

Keywords: scene design, scenography, spectacle, theatre space, theory of scene design

INTRODUCTION OF SCENE DESIGN INTO THE EDUCATION SYSTEM OF SERBIA

In the contemporary social and cultural context recognised as society of spectacle, scene design becomes increasingly important and valued – it relates not only to theatre and performing arts, but also to various aspects of urban life, visual culture, communication and other phenomena of contemporary human existence. The first researches in the area of scene design in Serbia started back in 1996 with the series of exhibitions entitled “Biennial of Scene Design” and theoretical symposia “Spectacle-City-Identity”[1] dealing with the phenomenon of spectacle in the contemporary world. This process resulted in scene design being defined as a joint process of conception, creation and realisation of a scene in the broadest sense of the word. Or, more specifically, as a creation of a complex synaesthetic environment, physical or metaphorical, much broader than actual theatre space, in which scene can be build or thought.

Term scene design relates to professional, artistic, curatorial, theoretical and ideological practices developed from the expanded meaning of scenography – as semantic category and artistic discipline. In contemporary theatre practice, scene design connects several artistic disciplines – design of a performing space and set, costume, sound and light design, joint together in a process of creating theatre performance. As artistic and curatorial discipline, evolved from the practice of exhibiting and presenting of scenography, scene design represents an open model for research, belonging to the interdisciplinary field which connects theatre, architecture and visual arts.

Essential foundation for creating such a broad field for artistic and scientific experiment lies in the system of education. In Serbia, first phase of developing scene design as specific research tool and ideological system started in 2001 with the MA, followed by DA postgraduate study programmes at the University of Arts in Belgrade. Main aim of the programmes was to shape a generation of teachers who would be able to carry on with the research of all relevant issues through their own theoretical, artistic, educational and public activities. Thanks to the engagement of the former scene design students who started applying acquired experiences and methodology as part of various study programmes at faculties in the region, as well as within their regular professional environments, broad new space was created for exchange of ideas. Variety of institutions and levels of study programmes and modules to which the method of scene design was applied additionally illustrate the educational potential of the discipline – from teaching architecture, theatre direction, acting, photography and design in the broadest sense of the word, to management in culture, arts and media [2]. This process developed simultaneously with the work of the already practicing teachers who, for some time, had been using the methodology of scene design at various courses. Throughout the years, full scope of results achieved in various education processes became nationally and internationally relevant and acknowledged. On the other hand, it is even more important to stress that those achievements and results generated the need for re-thinking of the existing study programmes at all educational levels. This is how for the first time in Serbia new programmes were introduced as part of the education system which, apart from those oriented towards curatorial and artistic practices, aimed at professional environment in theatre and cultural production in general, as well as towards teaching theory [3]. If we take into consideration circumstances and nature of the context in which scene design started to develop – as critical but also constructive reaction to professional, educational, social and ideological contexts of Serbia at the last

decade of the 20th century – such outcomes should be particularly stressed and evaluated. In that sense introduction of BSc studies of Scene Architecture, Technique and Design at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad should be seen as a conclusion of a long and complex process which started back at the beginning of 1990s. At the same time, this programme represents the platform for new research and creative space for scene design – in professional theatre production, artistic practices, theory and education, as well as culture in general, in Serbia and the region of ex-Yugoslavia.

THE NEED FOR ESTABLISHING FORMAL THEORETICAL PLATFORM

Introduction of this interdisciplinary field into all three levels of education system at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, resulted in the need to establish and publish a theoretical platform through which ideas and phenomena, identified in the research processes, can be explained, argued, classified and systematised. Above all, there was a need to re-think and, even, re-define the actual term of scene design, having in mind all of its potential meanings – within the professional theatre environment, artistic and curatorial practices, as well as the contemporary art and society in general. The fact that, in spite of 41 MA and 10 DA theses in scene design written and defended previously at the University of Arts in Belgrade, there was only one official definition of scene design, written and published by art theorist Miško Šuvaković [4], strongly contributed to the need. For this purpose, the broadest theoretical discourse was developed through a series of definitions proposed from a number of scene design practitioners from various fields, placing scene design in the wide creative area – from theatre to contemporary practices in arts and culture in general. This process, initiated as part of a PhD thesis research [5] resulted in a wide phenomenological and debatable map, consisting of a large number of theoretical issues, but with no aspiration to be final or completely determined. In that sense, the map should be seen as the starting point for the analysis of scene design phenomena.

The real challenge, however, was set in the area of teaching scene design as theoretical discipline, followed by the need to critically analyse many of the artistic practices. It officially started with a formal introduction of the “Theory and Criticism of Scene Design” course at the MA level. It is important to note that this programme aims not only at students coming from various educational backgrounds such as architecture, theatre, visual arts, new media and cultural management, but also who’s work is orientated towards “diversity of artistic outcomes, forms and means of expression, variety of performing environments and types of audience, as well as specific circumstances in which works are created” [6]. In this situation the main question was not how to teach actual theory but how to teach *about* theory. Initiated as an experiment over a period of twelve weeks, the process challenged the idea of teaching theory through creating and realising an event – a debate which would examine and analyse various aspects of the field and, possibly, reconsider some of the already existing theoretical issues, including students’ proposal(s) for new definition(s) of scene design.

TEACHING PROCESS

Main method of the teaching process was based on discussions with the focus on scene design within theatre practice. Since scene design developed from the expanded meaning of scenography and, at the beginning, was strongly influenced by the ideas of the British scenographer Pamela Howard [8], it was logical to start from theatre. Furthermore, we argued that curatorial and artistic practices of scene design, initiated

and developed at the Prague Quadrennial, rely not only on scenographic means of expression but, also, on scenic way of thinking. This is why we thought that students first should analyse and fully understand theatre performance as a complex scene design environment. As the main source for discussion we used the already mentioned series of definitions written by theatre practitioners, among which the most influential one proved to be Slovenian theatre director Tomi Janežič. His interpretation of scene design represents an important contribution to practical, theoretical and critical understanding of the discipline. Main reason for this is the fact that his perspective comes from the position of a total author who, above all, is a theatre director, but also takes other roles in the process of creation and realisation of the performance. This authentic approach is based on his knowledge and application of various theoretical suppositions and artistic practices developed through personal research within and outside theatre work. For all those reasons we considered his views as specific ideological platform. At the same time, the most intriguing theatre performance in Serbia was Janežič's work on Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's "Seagull" at the Serbian National Theatre in Novi Sad – seven hours long performance, played each time in front of the full house, with the spectators repeatedly coming each month – an event which stirred the cultural audience not only in the region, but also in Europe and USA. Two course sessions, 135 minutes each, were necessary to be able to thoroughly analyse, discuss and argue Janežič's theoretical ideas and compare them with his practical work. Main issues were raised around his extremely challenging idea about the dual character of space - Janežič explains this through the relationship between the "body of the performing space", e.g. external space of the theatre (which can be any architectural physical environment – stage, auditorium, relationship among performers, theatre building, ambient, city, etc) and the "space of the performer's body and its expression". By becoming spatially contextualised, actor "performs" the space or interprets the relation towards it – within him/herself and from him/herself, by which he/she establishes internal physical and spiritual performing space. Investigating this theory and comparing its elements to the actual theatre work challenged students to go back to the performance of the "Seagull" and test their own views and ideas from the sessions. Additionally, we selected a number of critical reviews on Janežič's theatre work, including his recent piece "Apology of Socrates" by Plato, performed at Dubrovnik Summer Festival in 2013. The reason for this choice was the fact that "Apology" strained already existing relation between Janežič and his views about purpose of the contemporary theatre with those of the mainstream professional critics. Furthermore, this performance provoked one of the key postulates of the theatre – presence of an actor. Janežič's stage is "empty" in sense of a physical presence of a performer and, therefore, violates all expectations of the audience.

Second challenge was to connect study of theatre aspects of scene design with those of artistic practices. Main references used were those related to developments of the Prague Quadrennial, especially ideas of Sodja Lotker, dramatist and artistic director of the PQ. Additionally, we introduced a number of texts from the "Scenography Expanding" series of conferences which Lotker initiated as theoretical platform in preparation for the PQ 2011. Explaining the idea behind the "Intersection project" – an experiment investigating exhibiting of contemporary scenography within the public space - Lotker claims that it relates to "a 'drama' – a 'conflict', a 'dialogue' of visual arts and theatre..." [9]. Exhibiting scenography addresses relationship between theatre and visual arts because scenographers are (mainly) visual artists working in theatre, she says, but it also requires curatorial strategies towards creating and re-creating exhibiting

contexts. We thought of the idea of a context as particularly important - an exhibition represents a complex dramaturgical unit of relations which can not ignore the original theatre performance, as well as socio-political context in which the work is made. At the same time, exhibiting scenography requires creation of a new environment, based on scenic way of thinking, which needs to enable spectator with the new contextualised experience. As a result, we introduced the idea of the performance space being not only a “built” but, also, a “though” environment, wanting students to think about performing space which goes far beyond theatre space – in terms of physical boundaries and means of expression. In order to examine those ideas we surveyed and discussed a number of study cases, mainly DA works of the former scene design students, all publicly shown or performed, as well as some artwork usually classified as multimedia art, cross-over, inter-media art, conceptual art, etc. We also analysed a series of articles and critical reviews dealing with those works.

At the final stage of the process students were asked to write two seminar papers, dedicated to presenting, analysing and evaluating scene design in respectively theatre and artistic practices. They were offered to choose from the list of proposed topics representing a selection of relevant works in both areas. Additionally, they were asked to propose their own definitions of the term scene design which could serve as starting points for theoretical parts of their MA theses.

THE OUTCOMES

Shaping a session as an event proved to be stimulating but demanding task. Accustomed to ex-cathedra lectures throughout their education experience, students were not easy to provoke and activate. Each session required a special preparation in terms of dramaturgy – it started with a presentation of an idea or hypothesis and was then build up in dynamics, similarly to an actual theatre performance. It was a sort of a “cultivated chaos of performance modes” [9] which left enough space and time for development of students’ own views and thoughts. Over a period of time, we managed to create a layered system resembling the puzzle – it was up to them to leave as many missing parts as they wanted, but also to try and complete their own systems of ideas and actions. Interestingly enough, this method proved to be very stimulating for us since we started to further question our existing phenomenological and already arguable map of various theoretical issues. The main tool we used in this process was a debate. Modest at the beginning of each session, it expanded over time and, at certain points, developed as a very live and demanding act. Therefore, the closing of each session had to be carefully thought of since we did not expect any final conclusions but, at the same time, wanted students to leave with the sense of achievement and desire to investigate further.

Connecting individual thoughts and theoretical knowledge with examples from various artistic practices, and confronting them within the group, probably, was the most important achievement of the whole process. On the other hand, expanding theoretical map of the scene design phenomena was equally important, especially because each student managed to formulate his/her own definition of the term, regardless of the fact how thorough or debatable it was. It is also important to note that all of the proposed definitions were based on the student’s educational and professional background which, to our opinion, strengthens the idea of having an open field for further discussion and investigation.

The idea of including criticism into the curriculum, however, did not prove to be a good decision, main reason being the fact that one semester left enough time just for investigating theory. Coming from different fields of education and professional environments, and without thorough understanding of diverse theoretical issues, it was very difficult to proceed with critical reviews of various art works. Students' seminar papers proved the same – presentations of theatre performances or artworks, interpretations of the contexts in which the works were created, as well as understanding of the scene design elements and their relation to many of the definitions and theories, were strong points; on the other hand, critical analysis proved to be the weak one. As a conclusion, it is our view that this part of the curriculum should be taken to the PhD level where it would be given enough time for full development and better results.

Finally, this process made us understand that teaching theory of scene design can be seen as event on its own – as an open and active environment in which both students and teachers gain by changing positioning – this is why we believe that exchange of places influence the way we see and understand things.

REFERENCES

[1] Series of six exhibitions entitled “Biennial of Scene Design” were created, organised and produced by Yustat (Yugoslav Centre for Scene Design – OISTAT Centre for Yugoslavia) and Museum of Applied Arts in Belgrade. Series of international symposia “Spectacle-City-Identity” were created, organised and realised by Yustat and Atelje 212 Theatre in Belgrade.

[2] Since 2005 scene design as education tool was applied as part of the various study programmes throughout the region: Marina Radulj used it in teaching architecture at the Faculty of Architecture and Civil Engineering in Banjaluka (Bosnia and Herzegovina), as well as Miljana Zeković, Tatjana Babić and Višnja Žugić at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad; it was also used by Daniela Dimitrovska at the Faculty of Drama Arts in Skopje (Macedonia) as part of the Theatre Directing programme, same as Dina Radoman at Nova Academy of Arts in Belgrade with students of photography, theatre directing and acting. As part of the cultural management curriculum, scene design as educational method was used by Mia David and Romana Bošković at the Faculty of Drama Arts in Belgrade, while Tatjana Dadić Dinulović applied it to almost all study programmes she taught at – MA programme at the Faculty of Applied Arts in Belgrade, attended by students from all modules, Academy of Fine Arts as part of the management in culture and media curricula, as well as at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad as part of the PhD in Architecture programme.

[3] Since 2013/2014 study programmes of scene design are available at the Faculty of Technical Sciences in Novi Sad, at the Department for Architecture and Urbanism, at all three levels – BSc in Scene Architecture, Technique and Design, MA in Scene Architecture and Design and PhD in Arts (Scene Design).

[4] Šuvaković M: *Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti (Art Theory Thesaurus)*, Orion Art, Belgrade, Serbia, 2011, p. 634;

[5] Dadić Dinulović T: *Fenomenologija spektakla – scenski dizajn kao sredstvo konstrukcije događaja (Phenomenology of Spectacle – scene design as event construction tool)*, PhD thesis, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia, 2014, pp. 70-85;

[6] MA course in Scene Architecture and Design started in 2013/14 academic year; Teaching Theory and Criticism of Scene Design course was taught in the spring of 2014.

[7] Dadić Dinulović T: Showcase – Scene Design Space, 4th International Conference “Theatre Space after 20th Century“, Thematic Proceedings, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Department for Architecture and Urbanism, Novi Sad, Serbia, 2012, pp. 274-281;

[8] Howard P: What is Scenography?, Routledge, London, UK, 2002

[9] Lotker S. and Černá A (eds.): Intersection – Intimacy and Spectacle, The Arts and Theatre Institute, Prague, Czech Republic, 2011, pp. 8

LITERATURE

Aronson A (ed.): The Disappearing Stage – Reflections on the 2011 Prague Quadrennial, The Arts and Theatre Institute, Prague, Czech Republic, 2012

Brejzek T (ed.): Expanding Scenography – On Authoring the Space, The Arts and Theatre Institute, Prague, Czech Republic, 2011

Dadić Dinulović T: Fenomenologija spektakla – scenski dizajn kao sredstvo konstrukcije događaja (Phenomenology of Spectacle – scene design as event construction tool), PhD thesis, University of Novi Sad, Novi Sad, Serbia, 2014

Dadić Dinulović T: Showcase – Scene Design Space, 4th International Conference “Theatre Space after 20th Century“, Thematic Proceedings, Faculty of Technical Sciences, Department for Architecture and Urbanism, Novi Sad, Serbia, 2012

Howard P: What is Scenography?, Routledge, London, UK, 2002.

Lotker S. and Černá A (eds.): Intersection – Intimacy and Spectacle, The Arts and Theatre Institute, Prague, Czech Republic, 2011

Šuvaković M: Pojmovnik teorije umetnosti (Art Theory Thesaurus), Orion Art, Belgrade, Serbia, 2011