

Maxi Obexer

**Ways to act before - and by the act of writing
a dramatic work**

What political and esthetic reflections should be undertaken before we write a drama.

**I. Acts by people - acts by words and their meaning for the
dramatic art of writing**

By naming some of the essentials of a drama: the action of a drama (storyline), the acts and the actions undertaken by the characters, you can immediately see how central this term is for the dramatic art.

Not only it leads to the main estetical means and to the practical guidelines for constructing a drama, but also to philosophical and political thinking.

The act - back then was considered as a central way to structure a drama - and to have an instrument in dealing with space and time. As only by creating a new act, you really could switch from morning into evening, from an internal space into an open space, change from being in a house into a space somewhere outside.

Time and space could not be cut or fragmented (if you think of the drama in five acts by William Shakespeare: Mcbeth)

You had to implement very precisely the time passing into the text: into the story, into the dialogs. Every hour, every little time leap you had to install on both sides: on the perspective of the characters, and on the perspective of the audience.

As with the the time, you had to work with the space - and changing it would mean that you had to change the whole stage design.

The act belonged to a time before the movie could do it much better and easier.

Today, as we work less naturalistically, the act has been replaced by the scene. Which is more fluend, and which also shows that we barely work with this huge construction of time and space any more. Another classical topos is the **action** of a drama, the whole storyline - if there is one.

All manuals for writing a drama are taking the action of a drama as a basis.

It is interesting that nowadays - as dramatians rarely work with classical plots anymore, the manuals for how to write a drama are now used for film scripts.

What still strikes me in terms of the action is: **What causes an action?**

When - and why does an action start?

Considering, that an action is something that changes the situation - or that is want to be changed: **What moves people into action? - In other words: what forces us to act - and what realities stay behind.**

What makes it fundamental for the dramatic art itself?

First

II. Ther's a conflict in between

Quoting Heiner Müller:

"I only believe in conflict. Otherwise I'm not believing anything."

The center of a drama is the conflict - a dramatic writer is mainly focused on conflicts - unsolvable, deep, hurting, damaging - generally speaking: it's our job to reveal the conflicts underneath peoples acting - showing, how we are struggling, fighting against them, or, by trying to hide them, to flee them, by trying to find a way out - making it worse or deeper.

We stop being good dramatists when we show the audience the way out. (This is what I would consider the main difference between political writing - and making politics.)

I'm talking about the most deep and constant conflict between the individual and the society. One can say the western european theatre was all about this topic: the defence of the individual against all different ways of submitting and controlling it by political, ideological and economical systems.

And in terms of defending the individual: it also must include the critical impact of how we conceive nowadays the "individual".

Second

By writing these individuals while they're into their actions, we switch into two perspectives: the perspective of the person who acts, and our own perspective, by looking at this person. With the blind spot in between: We don't know the person interly, we can only see what she is doing. Nor does the person herself entirely know all aspects of her decisions; she does not know the consequences, nor the causes. Just this: It will be changing the situation - maybe even the reality.

What does such an act include?

Does it also include words? Words that had been said?

I think dramatic art is all about words - as being acts who constitute and change situations, relations and relationships, with consequences on personal, social, political and historical levels.

Third

While we show and create people in their action - (and of course it is all about us) - by letting them face insolvable conflicts, letting them take radical decisions, which are making it worse, we start an open debate with the audience.

Dramatic art is by its origin directly communicating with its audience. Nevertheless wheater we work with an open structure - or a close drama, which shows up as a fictional universe by itself, there always will be a debate with the people in the audience. It is part of the language, language is imprinted by being spoken on stage - and by having this hidden or open talk with the audience.

III.

At this point I'm leaving the general aspects, by taking position for a theater understood as an art that responds to the present time, which always is in a changing state, moving backwards and forward coincidentally. By taking position for a theater which is offering to the society to look at our conflicts and what they are made of. And this seem to me one of the most important points: A theater that is critically aware of our current concepts, our narratives, our political and ecomomical systems - critically aware of our own knowledge - which is of course connected to our history. I think to

reflect our knowledge as historical - and never neutral, should be a crucial task for the dramatic art of today.

(Maybe I'm still generalizing - it is my personal opinion as a dramatist and writer - and because I find it generally important, I also created an institute.)

This corresponds strongly to what we are constantly facing, or what we constantly are fighting against - the attempts by powerful systems to gain the hegemony of opinion and perception, by their trying to make us believe what they want us to believe. By their continuing strong attempts to cover realities by building others. In this sense I'd consider that there's nothing more important than to reveal the hidden realities and those which are intentionally kept invisible.

And in order to do so, we also have to be critically aware of our own dramatic tools and forms, to question their inherent concepts, or their hegemony of structural laws - against those who are kept invisible.

What does that mean?

Among the dramatic art there's still a belief in literary rules about how to write a drama, which are still conceived as natural laws.

Beginning with Aristotle - a remarkable number of philosophers have elaborated "the natural law" or the "universal" laws of what is needed for the drama. Also the meaning of the dramatic art was - and still is considered as universal, natural, even though the 'universal definitions' get changed by any philosopher and theorist. Any of them, in any century, defines their own

universal and natural meaning of the dramatic art. And poses some rules.

Actually: There's nothing to say against the rules itself. All of them are smart as they reflect deeply what belongs to this art: the importance of time and space.

But none of the philosophers considers them as historical, belonging to - and being generated by their needs and demands of their time.

But dramatic structures that once were useful - can today be problematic.

The dialog-drama or the so called "well-made-drama" for example follows a very strong economic principle in its structure in order to approach the highest level of compression: there are (for economical reasons) only a few characters - assuming, that they would represent the whole society, and mostly shown in private space. Assuming again that the private is political as well. Mostly we have a typical relationship and a family. One can also say: it copies the perfect capitalistic system. I wouldn't go so far. But I would admit that the pattern of this form invites you to enter stereotypes or presumptions into the text even without wanting to. The concept of the individual, the concept of the family, of a man and of a woman, the concept of representation - of representing the whole society: which one? - we are living in multi cultural or highly diverse societies. We cannot assume anymore to represent the whole society by creating a male and a female figure, called Sven and Hildegard.

One can also ask: What are we missing by using the dominant dramatic form?

What gets hidden by it?

IV.

How? How can we be in this art when we doubt their forms?

There are few answers to this.

By constantly asking openly and onestly: what should the dramatic art mean for us in our time? - By asking: What meaning did this art have in its beginning - before we rarely had any dominating structural forms and laws?

My way goes back to archeology - to the greek teatre, to the ruins left for us to understand the very simple meaning: to bring up the conflicts with a public audience in a very basic, but well elaboradet artificial frame of architecture and language. With complex narratives, a relevant issue, single characters in dialogues, in scenes, and at the same time connected with the open stage, with the choir and with the audience. The social correlation is always there, visible and noticable. Its the same with the past - which is always present, narrarated in a variety of epic ways, like the poem, the report, the elegy, the prophecy.

I stop here. It's not because to copying or bringing back the ancient forms into into the present. But to open the field again. Compared to this richness of these ruins - offering you a multitude of expressive forms - one can see that our common forms are quite reduced. And hiding others as well.

And that might be the first thing I have to be aware of: by not reducing the material through a given form.

How can we act before writing?

We have to keep - or to regain an open relationship towards what we are showing, expressing, towards what we talking about, I call it the material. I think we have to be careful by reading the texture of the material, its own, deep reality.

It means that we have to find a way to let it speak on its own - to find a way to its own fabric, its own questions, maybe its own laws.

There is an iron proverb in literature saying: the form must eat the content. I started to doubt this concept. Which more and more seems to me a way of submitting - surpressing the content through the aim of the writer.

Why not leave the space open towards the material and the dramatic form?

One of my recent plays "Illegal helpers" is about people who help illegal immigrants, if necessary also despite laws that criminalize such assistance. It is about people who's work is invisible, hidden, and which is at the same time a political protest against national laws.

I know there are a lot of those who in their silent protest also show humanity towards those who got criminalized. There's another hidden moment in it: the role of the civil society barely get mentioned by the media when we talk about the so called refugee crisis.

I think it is obvious that it had to be a documentary: I would never allow myself to fictionalize them. Why should I. By presenting them - or letting present themselves, they give as a multitude of different ways to operate in this field, they give us

deep insights in this hidden world, about their different motives, about their failures, their pride, their battles and fights. It's a huge richness that appears - also due to the fact that they're all from different ages, professions, and social ranks.

There was another reason for me to document them, portray them: the conflict here is not in them - it is above them. With national laws that criminalize help - against universal human rights.

Among them there is one fictional figure: why? He is one of us: hesitating, disrupted by the gap between his moral attitude and his not acting. With him we enter in our own monologues - and there's nothing documentary about. It's the personal conflict in himself.

There's another important reason for the fictional figure: with him I introduce the sort of the ancient choir: although he is alone, he is the bridge between the audience and the scene, by bringing us into the scene too. In order that we would not stare at the heroes, but being involved.

I believe I can let the material speak for itself before 'I write it down' - when I'm carefully listening to it. It will offer me its own universe if I'm able to follow into its complexity and the questions they come out from it.

In this way the material expresses itself in diverse forms - just for this reason there can be no dogma in art.

In another work "the ghostship" I've chosen a high fictional form - you easily could make a Hollywood-Movie out of it. It's the perfect 'well-made-play', although it is based on a true story.

It is about a ship that went down quite close to the Sicilian coasts, with 283 casualties, refugees from Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The ship was denied by the Italian government, they pretended that it never existed, calling it "The ghostship". When I did my research in that village where fishermen had found parts of the dead bodies in their nets. I thought, it would be difficult for them to speak to me.

But I was wrong. They all wanted to talk. Frenetically, a lot of bullshit. And what they were telling me showed mostly that they had hardly thought for one moment on those who had lost their lives. No one would dare to get closer. They all were talking in terms of still hiding what had happened. Creating a big silence. There was no way for me to do a documentary: there was nothing to document on the surface. The conflict was in all of them, personally and politically hidden. The only way was for me to fictionalize them, by sharpening and exaggerating their language - in order that the words said by them would raise up the big silence underneath. From where I hope the dead could be heard.

V. Words that act

- In particular the political drama has always been the innovative drama as well, as, by being aware that the form is inherently political, the consequence is that it always needs to find new adequate forms. There's one strong development among the current political drama, by showing and expressing people who act by talking, by using words, sentences, phrases. By self-constructing them about language and terms. And by creating realities - by words. Even if they start as a lie - by neglecting reality, after a while the lie becomes reality, and creates the future.

Last summer when the word "refugee crisis" came up - no one could tell you exactly what the crisis was. The "refugee crisis" became reality even without being real. It stroke me to see how strongly words dominate our view at the present. How do they dominate us. Also: who determines these? What lurks behind the words?

For me it was the reason for the action "What crisis, what fears, what borders",

with posters that were spread to the northern region of Italy, from the Border - called Brenner, to Rovereto, and with statements collected from writers, activists, by everyone who wanted to contribute.

Again, I was reminded at the very old form of public political art: the manifesto.