

Sodja Zupanc Lotker

THE ESCAPOLOGIST CASE: Transformations of Practice in Contemporary Theatre
Towards Spacial Dramaturgy

Doctoral thesis peer review by Ewan McLaren

Sodja Zupanc Lotker's doctoral thesis sets out to reveal, through examination of a key five-part multi-locational performance work by Hungarian director Arpad Schilling and his group Krétakör called *Apology of the Escapologist*, how dramaturgy has evolved away from text-based dramatic theatre and Aristotelean unity of narrative in traditional theatre buildings without audience participation, to focus instead on a more active political role of performance in awakening the audience to its own agency through the arrangement of various elements and narratives in multiple phases and nomadic spaces both found and public. Her concept of "spacial dramaturgy" allows us to understand the opportunities performance makers now have to unfold multiple narrative vectors in varying directions in varying spaces, contexts and times, while positioning spectators so that they come to realize not only their own point of view in the context of others' points of view but also their agency, their ability to act. By examining thoroughly Schilling's strategies and comparing them to contemporary performance theory (and to a limited extent, her own practice) she points to relatively new options in creating live performance that instead of telling a sessile audience a newly interpreted old story, moves the audience into new spacial and contextual relationships to potentially rediscover its leading role as an actor in society.

I am grateful to study a work that puts into words so much of what a key leading contemporary performance creator has tried to achieve in recent years in addressing new needs for new communications and community cultivation. Zupanc Lotker's work opens the reader's mind to important ideas such as *dramaturgical consciousness*, *social scenography*, *strategies of encounter* and her innovation, *spacial dramaturgy*.

A key step in Zupanc Lotker's thesis in leading us to understand spacial dramaturgy, is the idea of *rhizomatic fragmentation* of narrative, thus *rhizomatic dramaturgy*. (Instead of a top-down, hierarchical strategy with one main narrative, in which dramaturgs and directors keep finding new ways to interpret set stories created by playwrights, to be consumed by audiences in a theatre building with audience seating divided from the stage areas, dramaturgs and directors like Schilling can, like the tiny filament roots or *rhizome* of a wider fungal ecosystem, passing nutrients and information in multiple directions along a network, tell multiple contrasting stories in multiple directions at once. The audience's awareness can pass back and forth between these different narratives, allowing it to compare and contrast rather than simply consume one story.) Zupanc Lotker cites Diana Gonzáles Martin as a source of this idea of the *rhizome*, but since Gonzáles Martin has not been the only writer since 2004 to reference Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the

rhizome in the philosophical work *A Thousand Plateaus* in relation to live performance I am interested in how Zupanc Lotker herself, alone or in consultation with others, arrived at the idea of calling this special type of dramaturgy *rhizomatic*.

There is a fugue-like pattern of repetition to Zupanc Lotker's descriptions in her thesis of how the work *Apology of an Escapologist* progressed through space and time that at a certain point seems redundant and not adequately substantiated with first-hand evidence. Again and again she shows how the work moves from an intimate, at home dramaturgy about our disconnected solitude in the city, through shared theatre experiences about real city denizens in contrasting versions, into meetings with children, teenagers and senior citizens of the company's home city district, to public events in authentic space intended to empower audiences to both cherish their differences and realize the potential of become active participants in society. She first shows this pattern in the introduction, naming the eight spaces where sections of performance took place, then again briefly in the section about rhizomes and the "bloody mess", then in greater detail she relates what happens in each space in the section about dramaturgical architecture, then again in the escapologist main description, then again in the section on multiplicity of character, then again about its rhizomatic fragmentation, to say nothing of the sections about Spatial Dramaturgy, Positioning and Relating. By pages 131-133 (the Spatial Dramaturgy section) it is beginning to feel redundant. While new concepts and angles of view of this are introduced with each repetition, we begin to feel that the expected impact of the performance's events on audience is not being satisfactorily backed up with evidence. Zupanc Lotker would also do well to corroborate claims she presents by herself, Hungarian critic Tamás Jászay and the playwright/ director himself with more first-hand accounts of the effect of Krétakör's performance on its audiences, (preferably from another critic and at least one member of the public). While a full analysis of why the *Escapologist* did not "succeed" with most writers and the general public would indeed have to be the subject of another thesis, and Zupanc Lotker makes clear in the introduction that "my descriptions and analysis are beyond establishing success and failure" even a moderate amount of first-hand evidence will at least underline her idea that this dramaturgical approach has the potential of activating the audience, truly creating a sense of community, making it truly more aware of its own mental and physical position and of the fact that "others have their own specific positions". With hindsight we can see how very well *The Escapologist* project worked as a contrast to the centralizing tendencies of Hungarian government, but what can we learn from this case about what really empowers the audience of such a performance? At the very least Zupanc Lotker's work could point to the some of the conclusions another writer's future thesis might come to in this regard.

In my opinion the work also lacks at least one example of another multi-locational live performance work, not necessarily from a central European context, which has either stimulated a community of individuals to become aware of their agency or at least significantly pointed the way to it. Zupanc Lotker is sure to know of such projects and at least one of them would serve as a great contrast or comparison to

the experience of Arpad Schilling and his artists and audiences with the *Apology of the Escapologist*.

I also have a question related to the political potential of live performance because it relates to my own practice as a dramaturg, curator and director, but would surely be useful to many others as well. In light of more recent developments in not only Hungary but neighbouring Poland, where plurality of opinion is being systematically suppressed (or in other countries where there is malicious influence of democratic elections by spreading misinformation that divides people while fanning disruptive emotions) one wonders whether making the audience aware of their own mental and physical position, “understanding a certain relativity of their position... understanding that others have their own specific positions” and “allowing the audience to establish themselves (sic) as autonomized individuals before entering a group” (according to Zupanc Lotker an important political move) can actually work to counter political forces that exploit individual differences between elements of society to subvert opposition. The “authoritative homogeneity of watching” can be a very bad thing, but don’t we need *shared* values to combat authoritarianism and homogeneity?

I was surprised to find in Zupanc Lotker’s description of the term *vector* that her definition of it matches up quite closely to a term used in English speaking world which is *action, dramatic action, the action of a play* in twentieth century directing technique (e.g. in William Ball: *A Sense of Direction: Some Observations on the Art of Directing*. Hollywood: Drama Publishers, 1984.). While the term *vector* has its own special poetry, using a term like *action* might be more readily understood by readers from the English-speaking performance world.

Sodja Zupanc Lokter’s doctoral thesis is written in English. The submitted draft of the work is not consistent throughout in its English editing and clarity of communications. In parts of the thesis there are grammatical issues ranging from missing articles to incomplete or run-on sentences as well as occasional spelling mistakes, all of which will need to be very thoroughly dealt with before this work could be published. I see this as key because expectations among multiple top international artists and theoreticians will be very high for a published version of Lotker’s work. Additionally a seminal performance like Schilling’s *Apology for the Escapologist* piece really needs the published reflections of such a thesis to keep its ideas alive and propel them into the future.

With the addition these recommendations the work will be of strong interest to a wider professional audience.

I recommend Sodja Zupanc Lotker’s dissertation thesis for oral defense and recommend her for the title of “DOCTOR”.

19.9.2017 Ewan McLaren