



SOUTH-WEST
UNIVERSITY
·NEOFIT RILSKI·
BLAGOEVGRAD, BULGARIA

VOLUME 16
2019

SCIENTIFIC Research

ISSN 1312-7535

ELECTRONIC
ISSUE

The Dramaturgy of TV theatre

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Abstract:

This article refers to the specifics of the dramaturgy for TV theatre: The beginnings of writing original works for television; the different aspects of composition, themes and objectives between screenplay writing and playwriting; and summarizes the basic features of the television theatre.

In the cinema a good frame can replace a lot of text. Television does not possess this visual potential. Colours and nature do not have the same impact here. On TV action is in the focus, and man is in the centre of action. The necessity of a brilliant dialogue, a dynamic plot and outstanding actor's performance, which present problems make TV dramaturgy a difficult task to fulfil.

In some countries there are textbooks which reveal what should happen at the 5th, 10th, or 20th minute. For some this might look mechanical, but it is based on a bulk of experience proving that empty space cannot exist on television. Neither the musical scene, nor natural scenery can fill dramaturgical gaps. Plot vacuum cannot be compensated for by anything else.

"The generic specificity of drama requires that it should be built on the basis of conflict – sharp and implacable, open or hidden in the soul, but tense and intensive". (1. Panova Snezhina, Theory of Drama, 1970, p.112)

The absence of a dramatic situation, of different moral positions and an inner struggle, of a collision of outlooks ensures a play's failure from the start. In practice we witness cases in which the conflict is clear but is elementary presented. We should not forget that drama has reached us through the centuries because it has narrated mainly bright, great, heroic events.

It is a well-known fact that dramaturgy as literature is quite scarce. However, we can console ourselves with the fact that serious "stores" have been created in the course of centuries and that well written drama has a long life. Unfortunately, rich heritage and what has been staged does not solve the problem of the repertoire of TV theatres.

We can find interesting data in OIRT bulletins from the end of the 60s. There were about 40 playwrights-editors working for the TV of the German Democratic Republic, each of them collaborating with 10 playwrights for the creation of a repertoire. The former went through over 1000 scripts per year for the creation of TV plays. Over 250 scripts were worked on in France, and in England, especially for BBC – 500 scripts were worked on. These are amounts which greatly outnumbered movie repertoires of film studios and those of all the theatres of a given country taken together, for several years. All this seems quite logical if we consider the leading place of TV dramaturgy in TV programs.

It should be pointed out that TV at that time had not won recognition as a separate art form. Despite all difficulties, it hired some world-famous names such as John B. Priestley, Ray Bradbury, Arthur Miller, Leon Kruchkovsky, Andre Maurois, etc. As TV playwrights fame was achieved by John Osborn, Reginald Row, Rolf Shneider, Layosh Meshterhazy and others.

With the amount of plays of the TV theatre it cannot be expected that TV will work only with its “own” authors who are well acquainted with the specificity of TV dramaturgy. Authors were requested to write plays which can be staged in the theatre, broadcast on TV and be transformed into movie scripts. The proper TV work was later done by TV editors and directors.

In what Ray Bradbury shares about his job as a TV playwright he says that the TV theatre is the most untheatrical of theatres so far but at the same time it is here that the wonderful world of the ordinary finds its most active interpretation.

The requirements to TV dramaturgy mostly overlap with those of dramaturgy in general: tight dialogue, verbal and non-verbal versatility of characters and action, immediate speech, anti-theatricality, simplicity of outward action.

It is interesting to quote the opinion of J.B.Priestley himself about the nature of TV dramaturgy. He says that its major characteristic is the contemporary theme, while the second one is the text itself. He is convinced that a TV play should not be performed at the theatre because in a TV play everything is focused on the “unspoken” or the “transistor” relationship with the viewer, on “semiconductors”, on “hinted issues”. (2. “The Specifics Of Theater In Television” - creative conversation - Magazine “Theater” - 1970, No.5, p. 14-22)

To Priestley, television dramaturgy features few actors bearing a great deal of dramatic burden with vivid internal conflict and a continuity of action. The

action must keep the TV viewer in constant tension, and he or she should be involved in a co-partnership on the problem or the task that the character has.

The new television production has to be in harmony with the psychological attitude of the viewer "in slippers". The specific requirements of television dramaturgy are for chamberness, briefness and a gripping intrigue at the start.

Chamberness does not mean limitation in the depiction of the action, but the desire to reveal a significant conflict in the clash and the behaviour of several persons. It has been proven that TV viewers like to identify themselves with what is happening on screen, to watch a story that has happened or might happen to them. This also leads to the requirement for a greater concentration of action, few actors, a storyline without many deviations.

Briefness as a limitation of time is due to the fact that the perception of a television programme as a whole imposes a certain strain on the mental and spiritual powers of a person. When the limit is crossed, the tension changes into fatigue. Therefore, there is no possibility for a rich and circumstantial plot, and the composition must be clear of all details and episodic images.

A gripping intrigue is a powerful weapon for grabbing the attention of the viewer. An expressive start would detach the viewer from their household chores.

It is very important for a television show to be accepted by the viewer as a work of art, as an author's summary, without merging with the information flow. Documentation is considered a significant feature of television. According to researchers, it should be looked at in two directions: first, as plotting upon real facts, and second, as a style of interpretation that gives the impression of reporting an actual event. Soon, however, the closeness to facts and the truth of the image no longer satisfies practitioners and they begin to look for an unusual situation and overwhelming circumstances.

Soon, however, the accurate representation of the facts and the credibility of the image do not satisfy the practitioners and they start looking for the unusual situation, the insurmountable circumstances. Even stories based on court files and newspaper articles seek the extraordinary. Viewers' demands and the growing trust in the artistic possibilities of television theatre make its creators turn more often to the themes of major literary works. The viewer 'holds in high regard events and facts, the documentation but they want to be shaken out

of the vanity of the day not an illustration, but a revelation. (3. Snezhina Panova, "Gropings and Questions", The Theater Magazine, 1988, No 1, p.28-30)

According to the Czech director Jiri Hubac, the purpose of a television play is to discover the poetry of the ordinary day and to find the extraordinary in the mundane routine. ' The television writer should compose his plays with much more immediacy and less stylization. We cannot ignore authenticity as it is often the viewer's main criterion for evaluating the credibility of the image and the conflict. (4. Hubac Jiri, The Family through the perspective of TV, The Theatre Magazine, 1982, c.7, p.54-56)

In other cases television theatre focuses on works created for the drama theatre, with their stage biography. It is extremely hard to give a possible new interpretation to a writer's text or to find a different director's approach which conveys the idea of the unexplored, the unknown . This would only make sense if a more thorough reading was produced through the use of television tools for creative expression.

In his essay "Ah, Mistake!", subtitled "The Playwright and TT," author David Hughes states: 'One of the first lessons we learn is that the play is not a sacred and immutable property of the author. Anyone who has something to do with it has a say. And this either drives the author to despair or forces them to revise it. According to the author Julian Mitchell the result of this is not bad at all - TV plays become far better written and constructed than many published novels, as with them emptiness is avoided ".

For years, the topic of television theater repertoire has been the subject of research for theater scholars. We can summarize the important findings as follows:

1. Television theatre is required to create its own, television - theatre dramaturgy, which will promote its development as an independent theatrical art.
2. Creating works based on drama theatre texts helps to win public acceptance of their television version only if the specific television intervention focuses on the main features of the work,
3. Every classic title should surprise us with something new not only in its contemporary interpretation, but also regarding the ideas we have had so far about the author and his/her work.

Television, unlike drama theatre, is not limited within the percentage division of the repertoire by subject, genre and nationality of the playwright. The directors in it had more freedom to apply their ideas, as well as time for serious preliminary work on shaping the concept behind the show.

Over the years, television theatre has had a great variety of genres - not only transitions from the comic to the tragic, but also mixed genres that use dramatic miniature as well as television reportage, the author's presence of the actor as well as his/her transformation into the character, the performance of literary texts along with pure acting improvisation, or even commentaries on the role in the viewer's presence in various literary programs, alternating scenes, text reading, author's performances and reflections on his/her creativity. Often theater dramaturgy defies the laws of the screen. Most of the performances are staged in a theatrical style - frontal mise-en-scène, the predominance of verbal action, and so they are neither a theatrical production nor a screen adaptation. A prerequisite for creating a good production of a theatrical play is to achieve a synthesis between the importance of the word and the expressiveness of the image on the screen.

A striking example of such a spectacle, which was broadcast on our tv as well, is the production 'Nora Helmer' by Fassbinder based on the exceptional Ibsen's play 'Puppet House'.

Adaptation has begun as early as the level of dramaturgy. The play has been re-composed, even entire episodes have been removed. The title itself shows clearly that it is an author's version. The main ideas of the production are conveyed precisely through the television camera. The numerous mirrors on the set create the opportunity for a serious demonstration of excellent cameraman skills. The angles unambiguously express a certain attitude towards the characters. The dramaturgical situations are interpreted by the installation of the large close-ups of the actors, their mirrored reflections and the images form the camera directed towards the interior. In this performance, Ibsen's powerful message and the director's skillful handling of tools of expression exclusively used in television excite equally.

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