

Hungarian University of Fine Arts Doctoral School

A subjective examination of experimental theatre spaces

How did Pál Lukács Kiss get to the underpass?

Theses of DLA dissertation
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Theses

One of the issues of the dissertation involves exploring the appropriate place, space and site for the theatre performance. The dissertation sets out these *space-exploring* – spaces which were created over the last twenty years in classrooms and gyms of former school buildings, movie theatres, industrial buildings or on sites which had lost their original function – based on subjective criteria.

Leaving the traditional theatre building, the fixed relation of stage and auditorium ceased to be: in the new sites, spaces changed into three- or four dimensions. These new situations redefined the relationship of stage and auditorium and beyond this, also forced the creation of new connections between spectator-performer, spectator-spectator, performer-performer etc.

The direction of the research was basically determined by the process of creating the “masterpiece”: a scenography designer’s questions regarding the performative “occupation” of an urban public space. During the writing of my doctoral dissertation and the preparation of the “masterpiece” the two sides – research and creation – were in dialogue with each other. Problems and resolutions influenced one another creatively.

1. Some theatre performances – over the course of theatre history – sought to experimentally rewrite the rigid relation between stage and auditorium, which is typical in the traditional proscenium theatre.

Every attempt – with its own solutions to spatial modification – aimed to bring spectators and the events of stage closer together: moving across the boundary into each other’s spaces, making the two poles palpable and more sensitive to each other. The requirement of change created *fundamental changes* in the traditional theatre system. Leaving the two-dimensional space and thinking in three or four dimensions, the previously immobile relationship lost some stability. The new situations have generated a presence demanding the definition of new relationships: “*between audience member as individual and audience as mass, between audience member as individual and performer, between audience as mass and performer, between performer and performer, between performer and architecture, and so on.*” (McLucas, 1998. November 21.)

Some of the changes focused on the physical transformation of the theatre building with proscenium arch or attempted to unite the auditorium and the stage physically. Other endeavours transformed external sites: natural or urban spaces.

The dissertation surveys these endeavours in reverse chronological order. This is because my questions lie closest the most contemporary progressive form, the so-called “*Immersive Theatre*”, as well as questions of “*audience participation*”. I discussed about this among others through my scenography collaboration with Kava Cultural Association. This group

has its own brandname: “*Theatre of the Participant*” (in Hungarian: *A Résztvevő Színháza, ARS*), and they use a special theatre form: the “*participatory theatre*”.

I carry out my investigation starting from here and I arrive at the (Renaissance and Baroque) forms of theatre where, in my view, the problem may have started.

Otherwise, the quality and measure of “participation of audience” is a basic problem of every theatre and performance production which plans a performance outside the traditional theatre building.

2. My scenography designs – like experimental theatre history – led me from performances which were played in traditional theatre buildings with a proscenium, to leaving the theatre building altogether.

My designs led from the performances played in a traditional theatre building, to a performative site-specific plan in an urban space. I went through different stages of leaving the traditional stage space, and my designs had a similar creative path – not intentionally, and thus only partly consciously – as the examples of theatre history. The starting point for this path was the type of “*black box*” theatre stages and led through the “*participatory theatre*” to the use of “*urban space as a dramatic place.*”

In my thesis, within this context the study and review of a historical process has become clear, in which I have highlighted the performances, artists, theatres and performative situations and processes which were relevant to the issues raised during my own works.

3. Performances that do not take place on the stage but outside, may belong to the category of the *site-specific theatre*. This “specific” place requires a special attitude from the scenography designer, one which is completely different from the traditional designer’s attitude and tasks.

The thesis is based on a stricter interpretation of “*site-specific theatre*”. According to this, the only performances that can be considered to conform to this type are those in which case the performance is based explicitly and exclusively on the visible (physical) and non-visible (different aspects such as historical, sociological etc.) of the chosen place and cannot be separated from them without damaging its meaning.

This definition involves the task of design, finding the “layers” of the place – the “layers of meaning” –that could serve as the basis for the planned performance. The “spirit” of the performance and the chosen layers of meaning of the place may be interrelated, but it could (also) be a very distant relationship. The “specific” place requires a special attitude from the scenography designer, one which may be completely different from “traditional” designer’s attitude and tasks (designing for a traditional proscenium stage).

One of the *final task* of my research was to map (describe, define) a special theatrical form which rather than merely involving the viewers of the performance in two-dimensional space (in the type of proscenium-arch theatre, where the relation of spectator and actors is regulated), instead extends the “place of stage” and “place of audience” into three or four dimensions. This type of (special or new) theatrical form involves the spectators not merely through two sensory channels (seeing and hearing), but it could affect in a complex “visceral” manner. During the process the central question became the *location of spectators and performers* (or where the “auditorium” and “stage” are), and the constant change of *relation between them* because of the above-mentioned purpose. The results of the research were summarized in the practice of the doctoral “masterpiece”.

4. The concept of “Host, Ghost and Witness” was developed by the performance of *Tri Bywyd* (“Three Lives”) (Brith Gof theatre company, UK) in the design framework of Clifford McLucas. Understanding this helps us to understand the specificities of designing the “specific” location and the creative process behind this.

The notion of “Host, Ghost and Witness” covers the chosen place of performance (“Host”), the story (or stories) of the performance (“Ghost”) and the spectator (“Witness”). This trinity is created within the limited time-frame of the performative event. The three are in fusion and strengthen each other's effects.

The *Tri Bywyd* was an experimental, new composite performance for *Brith Gof*. This performance also led to new discoveries in the theoretical and practical areas regarding the operation of *site-specific theatre*.

5. During the process of my doctoral research, I adapted a specific research method (PaR – *Practice as research*, PAR – *Performance as Research*) into the research process.

While I was researching for my doctoral work (both practical and theoretical sides) I discovered that researching for a process of artistic creation is not the same as the *practice of researching art*. Every artistic creation process also involve research, but in this case the knowledge (*the artefact*) which is created has many multiple additional meanings, and additionally because of the individual interpretation of viewers, the knowledge thus created cannot be called a knowledge base that is equally knowable to everyone.

In the case of *art as research*, we are dealing with a form of research based on artistic creation, and whose findings create a knowledge base that is verifiable. The findings of art as research (PaR – *Practice as research*, PAR – *Performance as Research*) are thus manifested *through the creative work* and that is why they are inseparable from *the artefact* that is created for understanding.