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"Floute me, Ile floute thee; it is my profession"
Early Modern Improvisation as Resistance

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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The Topic and the Aims of the Dissertation

The thesis examines the improvisational techniques of the early modern comic player from the perspectives of cultural studies, theatre studies and performance theory. The reason why I chose this topic was the strong concern that the understanding of the comedian's work has always been influenced by several prejudices and misconceptions in theatre history. For this reason, one of my main purposes is to analyse and interpret this negative judgement, which is present in those discourses that deal with the players work.

My intention is to present comic performance as a social practice, which exemplifies a constant resistance to current ideologies and power structures. In my view, comic players' activities were always carried out in opposition to certain systems, let those be 'official' theatre, textual authority, artistic decorum, or decent social behaviour. "Improvisation" marked in the titles of the thesis does not only refer to pure extemporary entertainment, but also – in a broader context – to a creative attitude, with which the performer can subvert and mock social boundaries.

This is why, in my argumentation, I do not only rely on theatre and performance studies, but I also apply those approaches of social sciences, which focus on everyday practice and creativity. The theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau were both applicable to my argumentation, since both "regulated improvisation" (Bourdieu 1977, 78) and "the procedures of everyday creativity" – that is, tactics and strategies – (de Certeau 1988, xiv) forecast a performative aspect. These notions describe those communal practices, with the help of which individuals adopt and resist to social structures in a creative way.

The concepts of Bourdieu and de Certeau can be compared to the idea of performance, which Richard Schechner defines as "restored behaviour"

(Schechner 2002). With these social and performative approaches, it is possible to reconsider the comic actor's art, which, so far, has only been approached from the documentary (and biographical) perspective of theatre history. This, in my opinion, is a crucial access in a broader context as well, because in this way, we can get rid of the "traditional insistence on privileging the humanist ideology of the aesthetic and by its ubiquitous theory/practice (even mind/body) split" (Dolan 2001, 66).

Thus, I am willing to introduce improvisation as a constructive social practice, which subverts and applies social regularities in a creative way. The contents of this act cannot be circumscribed precisely, since its referential point is always the given structure, i.e., those social circumstances that vivify it. The manners of the comic agent can be interpreted as a role-play as well, since he always pretends to accommodate to the system, but, in fact, he does the opposite. A good example to illustrate this is the fact that the image of the jester or the servant, that is, the "subordinate self" is an inherent part of Renaissance comedian's identity, and players use it for expressing their critical attitude to royalty and power. (The instances in my thesis include Richard Tarlton's court jests and William Kemp's mannered dedication of his *Nine Daies Wonder* to a noble lady.) The spectators witness this activity, and they become the comedian's accomplice so that they can acquire those improvisational techniques with which they can assist their own prosperity in society.

The Structure of the Dissertation

In the first, theoretical part of my thesis (*Chapter 2*), I introduce those aspects with which players and performers are usually interpreted. Traditional theatre history – especially the one concerning early modern theatre – has been interpreting the actor as if he was an agent being subordinated to the playtext and to authorial intentions, and from this

perspective, comic presence and acting are not analysed. Those interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, however, which started to look at the actor from social, psychological and cultural-historical angles, began to develop a non-aesthetic view of acting and performance, which concentrates more on ideological and political concerns. I find the results of performance studies crucial, since from this standpoint, I do not only consider players, but also spectators as performers. In my argumentation, it is a major perception that I regard performance as a social practice which involves all its participants. In Chapter 2, I also examine the concept of theatricality, which is often used in early modern (theatre) studies to describe spectacular and theatrical events/phenomena.

My main concern in *Chapter 3* is the early modern comic actor, whom I consider to be an archetypal player figure. Here, I show his contemporary reception with the help of Renaissance texts as well as iconographic sources. My assertion is that the comedian was either neglected or mentioned marginally (e.g., referring only to his popularity and fame) in the early modern academic context. He was not even interpreted in terms of court behaviour (cf. Castiglione), the dignity of Renaissance man (cf. Pico della Mirandola) or rhetoric (cf. Thomas Heywood) – none of the discourses that intended to give an explanation of the creative artistry of man. All these ideas can only be related to the tragic actor of the age.

Chapter 4 provides a thorough discussion of the early modern comic performance. To define the performer's identity, I apply Lesley Wade Soule's term, *persona*, which signifies all states when the player does not fulfil a mimetic-illusionistic (i.e., as I understand it, a completely role-playing) function on stage (Wade Soule 2000, 1). In other words, despite not playing in the strict theatrical sense, the comedian is always "in role". This is comparable to the conception of performance theory, which assumes that

our life can be described as a series of theatricalised/performative situations and activities. In this chapter, referring to the social theories of Bourdieau and de Certeau, I intend to define the creative performance characteristic of both actor and spectator with the term of improvisation, which, in my understanding, represents resistance to social structures and ideologies.

Finally, in *Chapter 5*, I give contemporary examples to demonstrate the ideas mentioned above. I analyse the texts of the three best known entertainers of the age: Richard Tarlton, William Kemp, and Robert Armin. I describe their comic identities with the help of their writings. In *Tarlton's Jests* (1613) – which I regard as the representation of cultural memory (Assmann 1999) – Tarlton mocks the manners of court, city and country behaviour in a way that he is also affected by these. In his pamphlet *Nine Daies Wonder* (1600), Will Kemp demonstrates against "all lying Ballad-makers", who disparaged him, while his nine-day long morris (which can also be related to rambling and vagabondage) represents oddity and resistance. Robert Armin's ars poetics in *Quips Upon Questions* (1600) is that the comedian should teach his audience to "flout" and "iest" at others and the given (social) circumstances.

Results/Contributions

In my thesis, I regard it as a major result that, with the help of the performance-oriented approach and the broad understanding of the term "improvisation", I managed to study the work of the early modern actor – which is traditionally characterised by a litearture/drama-centred perspective – in a more extensive way. This is not only significant as far as the early modern context is concerned, but also, it is a contribution to contemporary theatre and performance theory, which similarly neglects the comprehensive analysis of the comedian. Adjusting the differences between performance studies and theatre theory/history might help to terminate the

competition between the two fields. On the other hand, this complex approximation is profitable to have an ideological and political insight in the performer's work.

Examining the prejudices and biases concerning the early modern comedian (Chapter 3) is also significant, because, as I see it, these are retained at the present time as well, and they prevent us from analysing the actor's work in an impartial way. The stance that we do not identify improvisation as pure clownery, rivalry and unpreparedness might help us to understand comic presence as a useful, practical and intelligible artistic activity, which also bears aesthetic characteristics.

The branch of theatre studies that researches the early modern period is still indebted for providing the specified description of the comic "acting style". While the performative processeses of tragedians have been examined in a detailed way by authors like, for instance, Joseph (1951), Gurr (1966), Rosenberg (1968), Brown (1968) and Royce (2009), comic playing was rather identified with buffoonery and amusement. Discussing improvisation from the perspective of early modern theatre might contribute to the success of this investigation.

Understanding the complex identity of the early modern player can also bring us productive results. While theatre theory – especially by concentrating on psychological realism – puts the relationship of the dramatic role and the actor's civic identity in the focus of its attention, and examines the extent to which the player accustoms to the character, performance theory scrutinises social roles, and it disregards theatre events. As I see it, the comic actor can be investigated from both of these theoretical angles, what is more, myth making, gossips, legends, anecdotes and cultural memory (Assmann 1999) also add up to the perception of his identity.

As far as I am aware, the early modern texts I read – perhaps with the exception of Kemp's *Nine Daies Wonder* – have only been consulted from the aspect of historical-biographical (Wiles 1987) and literary-authorial (Johnson 2003) perspectives. Moreover, *Tarlton's Jests* and *Quips Upon Questions* have rather been used as textual references to discuss early modern playwrights' ouvre. Accessing these textual sources form a performance-centred approach, however, can encourage us to acknowledge early modern performers as real actors. Also, it can help us to consider the early modern period relevant and canonical not only in terms of its dramas and literary works, but also as a culture where (comic and social) performance could have occupied a central position.

Finally, conceiving performance and improvisation as social practices might make us understand why we can consider aestheticizing, asocial, apolitical theatrical forms – which separate players and spectators hermetically – outdated, empty and useless. Latest theatre movements (forum theatre, theatre in education, creative community plays, etc.), while blurring the distinction between player, character and spectator – and using the actors as moderators –, give the leading part to the viewer in order to revive/activate people's extemporal abilities, which are necessary to make our social constraints endurable, dupable and liveable.

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2010	**Társadalmi performansz, színházi felelősség** *Apertúra* 2010 nyár, hozzáférés: http://www.apertura.hu/2010/nyar/oroszlan
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Conference Presentations Pertaining to the Topic of Dissertation

2012	**25 éves a színházi képzés a Pécsi Tudományegyetemen – konferencia, PTE, Pécs, Irodalom és Művészetek Háza** A reneszánsz színész „méltóságáról" – korabeli elméletek a jelenlétről
2011	**„Jágónak III." Shakesepeare Konferencia, Szeged** What's in a Name? English John vs. Johnny English
2009	**„Jágónak II" Shakespeare Konferencia, Szeged** Színészmeghatározások és metaforák Shakespeare színházában

2009	**Színháztudományi Műhelykonferencia, Pécs, Modern Magyar Irodalom Tanszék** A reneszánsz színjátszás elméletei
2008	**The Iconology of Law and Order, Szeged, Magyarország** The Iconography of Renaissance Playing – Rules and Violators
2008	**'Mozgásban' Irodalomtudományi PhD konferencia, Debrecen, Magyarország** „A színésznek állapotja kritikus állapot". Játék, karakter és azonosulás a predramatikus és a posztdramatikus színházban
2006	**Shakespeare and His Collaborators Over the Centuries, Brno, Cseh Köztársaság** Shakespeare's Experimental Theatre in the 20th Century
2005	**HUSSE 7. Conference, VE, Veszprém, Magyarország** The Theatricality of the Masque in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*
2004	**HUSSDE 2. Conference, "Now you see it, now you don't." Hiding and Revealing in Text and in Performance. PPKE, Piliscsaba, Magyarország** The Great Pretender: The Transformations of Will Kemp
2003	**The Iconography of Gender, Szeged, Magyarország** „Actors in Barbaresque Mantells". The Blackness of the Female Performers in Ben Jonson's *The Masque of Blackness*
2003	**XXVI. OTDK Veszprém** „Mikor "víg a játék"? A komédiás sikertelensége a *Lóvátett lovagokban*"