

# ESTABLISHMENT OF STAGE

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*Small clearings in the woods,  
like stages in theatre.*

M. Nilsson, *Land of Horseradish*

In its initial meaning, theatre is *theatron*- a place for watching, or beholding. The space in a theatre building is divided into two spaces substantially existing alongside one another: the stage and the hall. The hall is an ordinary room, accommodating the audience, while the stage is a metaphysical room with a meaning, where everything can happen, principally. Time and space differing from the stage realities are projected there. The concepts of the hall and the stage can also be applied in case of open-air spectacles lacking distinct specification, provided that we speak of the stage as the seat of acting, which is more or less separated and elevated from the surrounding neutral room. Proceeding from the above, one might indeed inquire whether a different terminology could be applied here in relation to the same phenomenon, such as words like *frame*, *picture*, *work*, *exhibition*, etc. Obviously it is possible, but the stage seems to challenge us with a more sophisticated question, as both the stage and the processes occurring there are three-dimensional, often lacking a distinct boundary, or frame, often natural, or non-artificial and often dissolving and dynamically disappearing into the daily flow of life. At the same time, compared to the "documental essence" of a motion picture, theatre is perceived as the ultimate generalisation of reality (Lotman 1990: 203).

Theatrical phenomenology considers the stage as the place where entity appears, which could, after Martin Heidegger also be called *a clearing*, (i.e. *die Lichtung*). "We call this openness that grants a possible letting appear and show *clearing*" (Heidegger 1993: 441). Madis Kõiv perceives in his theatre of cold reasoning "a public presence of recognition" (Kõiv 1993). Luule Epner explains this as an epistemological theatre: "The stage is indeed both the same-substance prolongation of reality (here, now and actually) as well as the location separated from it, a specified location. This is the place where spiritual states of mind be-

come physically perceptible. This is a place prepared for the recognition and comprehension of meanings." (Epner 2000: 17.) Theatrical semiotics also stresses the semantic saturation of the stage processes compared to the surrounding space (see e.g. Lotman 1990: 192).

Nevertheless, in relation to the crisis in theatrical semiotics, the approach somewhat inclined towards the esoteric has gained popularity again, stressing involvement in the performance as an experience, the energy and powers travelling between the participants of the performance, actors' charismas, etc. Next, I too am making an attempt in this direction, interpreting the meaning of the stage in theatre and in Nature in light of a book by Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane. The Nature of Religion* (Eliade 1959). I would herein like to recall the original connection of theatre and religion as well as the original connection of theatre and ritual, their common roots and the fact that the theatrical figures of the 20th century, Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski, tried, in their own ways, to restore the sacral essence and meaning of theatre in society.

I believe that compared to the spectacles arranged by men, the spectacles of Nature might be more grandiose, but, in the best cases both display a profound theatrical and exciting element, offering apocalyptic recognition. I have participated in two mystical nature experiences, confronted collectively. One of them happened in the familiar Urvaste, and the other in the mountains of Northern Norway. By no means was it just a tourist aha-experience, nor a recognition of the spirit of the place (*genius loci*), but an elevating experience limited in time, revealing the metaphysical quintessence of the Universe. In both cases, the spatial and temporal boundaries of the revelation were established by a stupendous, heeding light and an extraordinary movement of atmospheric flows. Landscape, which had been elevated, i.e. staged, from its customary context/surroundings by alienation, manifested itself in its scenic quality. I think that artists depict just such moments and experiences in, say, landscape paintings. At least in the best cases, it is not just scenery as an aesthetic object, but landscape as such, a generalisation of a landscape.

Still, can one be sure that such a juxtaposition of theatre and Nature is not a little bit violent as well as accidental, and what really forms the basis for comparison? I am appealing to the similar potential of events and experience. It means that in addition to an uncomplicated aesthetic experience, theatre and Nature, by placing common objects and events on the stage as a place of acting,

and thus alienating them from the common experience, offer the spectator an option to experience them in a novel, or dissimilar manner. The reasoning of Yrjö Sepänmaa, comparing the relationship between a subject and a landscape with the relationship between the spectator and stage activities, a theatrical encounter, implying a certain distance between the object and the experiencing subject, at the same time when the environment absorbs the spectator, lends support in explaining the meaning of stage in Nature (Sepänmaa 2000: 15). Thus, the environment is like a theatrical space or a theatre building and the landscape is like the stage inside the theatre, displayed to the spectator. The introduction of the term *environment* also implies a comment on the environmental theatre. Environmental theatre is a performance where a fictional space, i.e. the stage space is projected around the spectator(s), and the latter often have to make their own choices on where to focus their attention. Kõiv uses the theatrical concept *location of play* in an almost similar meaning as the stage in order to explain *genius loci*. "It is not so important in relation to the *location of play* that a play is acted there but the fact that it is a location where the place sets categorical imperatives of its things – it is a location for initiation." (Kõiv 1994: 688.) Thus, both the stage and the location of play are restricted in space and due to their specific spatial quality, possess a sacral meaning for the subject as a location of manifestation.

Depending on the outlook, the entire world can be regarded as a stage and men as the toys of the god(s). In this article, nevertheless, the stage as the space saturated with meaning or existence is contrasted with the common space. Thus, for an atheist, the stage in Nature is primarily an (accidental) location of manifestation, while the stage in theatre is a location where manifestation is (consciously) induced, although induction may sometimes fail.

Thus, we have reached to the methods for establishment of stage as a fictional, meaningful and non-profane space and for guiding the attention of spectators. Since the attention of the researchers of theatre has moved from the narrower drama discourse towards performing arts in general and the word *actor* has almost unanimously been replaced with the word *performer* during the last decade, I will in the following also discuss the stage in this wider meaning, referring both to the theatre and to various other performance situations. For establishing a stage, one or several of the following options can be applied:

– Physical marking of the stage (e.g. elevated stage, space surrounded by chairs)

- Empirical marking of the stage space (e.g. highlighting the stage)
- Establishing the stage by the action of the performer (e.g. religious followers on the street, a lecturer during a lecture)
- Establishing the stage by alienation (it is valid both for the organisation/design of space as well as in relation to the performers' behaviour, e.g. a sofa on the street or people wearing masks)
- Mental frame created by the spectator around the space, person(s), object(s) in the process of reception or interpretation.

It is the latter aspect which is the most important, thus it is the spectator who finally establishes the stage, in the theatre and in Nature.

Quoting Eliade: "Man becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane. [---] From the most elementary hierophany [manifestation of sacred mysteries – *A.S.*] – e.g., manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone or a tree – to the supreme hierophany (which, for a Christian, is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ) there is no solution of continuity. In each case we are confronted by the same mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world, in objects that are an integral part of our natural 'profane' world." (Eliade 1959: 11.) Thus, an experience of Nature, fully desacralised, is said to be of recent origin, and a phenomenon available to few (such as men of science). Eliade also confirms that in the Far East, aesthetic experience has still retained a religious dimension, the experience of cosmic sacredness can be transformed until it becomes a purely human affection, such as manifesting itself in *l'art pour l'art* (Eliade 1959: 15–18).

Therefore, a scheme could be drawn – a triangle, the base of which is formed of the profane common world and the apex of the sacred absolute (Fig. 1). Nature and theatre could also be depicted as triangles, with their bases and wider plane directly or indirectly resting in the profane sphere, while their apexes reach out towards the sacred. The extent to which Nature, as well as performing art, are related to the profane world, much depends on the outlook and environment of a specific person. The following scheme has been envisaged from the viewpoint of an urbanised Estonian of the 21st century. Nature, in the more general sense, belongs quite directly to the sphere of everyday life (e.g. through the daily firewood). There are nevertheless objects and areas which are connected to the sacred sphere for various reasons: ecological reserves, endangered species; sacred

places related to the national, state or personal histories and sacred places related to pantheism, etc. Theatre as art and as an institution has been elevated in this scheme above everyday life. While not denying the theatrical element in the profane sphere, it still seems that the vocabulary related to theatre is mostly applied for identifying fictional or extraordinary situations distinguished from the daily routine. The apex of the theatrical triangle is formed of the so-called major theatrical experiences, which allow the spectator to recognise some fundamental truths on the stage, to "become a seer" or experience the performance as a magic ritual uniting the performers and spectators into a community, as the creation of a "theatrical miracle." Theatre makes an incision into Nature provided the landscape becomes a part of performance, as often happens in the case of open-air performances.

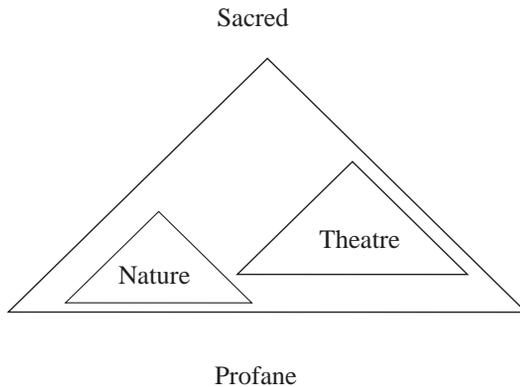


Figure 1. The position of Nature and Theatre in relation to the Sacred and the Profane.

Eliade argues that the establishment of the sacred space, "the sanctification of territory," is nothing but the repetition of the act of Creation – on the level of the microcosmic (Eliade 1959: 32–36). Yuri Lotman notices: "Onstage, like in any other space closed in ritual, specifically the semantic coordinates of the space are emphasised." (Lotman 1990: 200.) Staging, as the creation of a fictional world and putting it onto the stage, making it visible, could be compared to the creation of the world and each presentation could be a repetition of the act of creation, since a staging as an ephemeral universe is never completed, requiring continuous evocation from the shadows and re-establishment. The stage as the place of revocation, the space connecting the two worlds, one real and another fictional, has, at least in traditional theatre buildings, a sacred meaning. This is indeed partially related to the instable and unpredictable nature of the art of drama and the

resulting prejudice of the practitioners of drama. Nevertheless, there are established rules specific to the stage: according to general opinion, one must not whistle on the stage without reason or wear street shoes. Those restraints are, nevertheless, not practical but mythical in essence. Theatrical memoirs abound in examples of ritual and magical actions of the actors before performance. It means painstaking efforts to repeat the terms and events, which have preceded a success on the stage with meticulous care, hoping thus to secure good luck on the stage.

Much talk is dedicated to a mystical theatrical miracle. E.g. Voldemar Panso recognises in his master's thesis that if one shoots the performance and reviews it later, something is lost. "And this most important phenomenon again – a fascinating miracle created by a personality, a living man. A miracle which was created in the communication between men, mutual radiation between the hall and the stage. The miracle, which started with the rising of the curtain, blossomed much later during some pause, organically like a flower. This miracle contains the advantage and power of theatre, the secret of its eternal life." (Panso 1995: 216.) In the drama criticism, the birth of this miracle could be denoted by such words as *credibility* and *infectious* describing the outstanding work of a performer. Those words demonstrate both the entrainment of the spectator in the fictional world of the performance, as well as his belief in its reality. If a man is, even for a short moment, made to believe in something he usually is not very sure it exists (either by means of natural forces or the exceptional power of suggestion or human imagination), it causes reverence and admiration towards this powerful subject, as well as towards the respective situation and place. Therefore, such a specific experience related to theatre and Nature could be compared to hierophany and the terms *anthropophany* and *naturaphany* could be applied. The singularity and specific uniqueness of the event, as well as a shared delight in communion, play an important role in case of a theatrical and natural revelation.

Neoplatonists have pointed out that art presents the fundamental and eternal forms rather than the appearances of the world, and aesthetic experience satisfies the intellectual needs for true reality. Kantians assume that aesthetic pleasure is based on the expressional process of an earlier non-formalised intuition. (Csikszentmihalyi, Robinson 1990: 11). Based on the above, I dare to maintain that in principle, a spectator may perceive certain fundamental forms or truths in daily primitive situations. But, set on the stage, an object (situation) is distanced from the subject and can thus be seen more clearly. The act of setting on the stage is usually

accompanied by a certain alienation, since in case when all is "self-evident," understanding is simply discarded (Brecht 1972: 9). Recognition of substantial truths creates a feeling of being the chosen, the initiated, and fills the spectators with reverence and gratitude.

Next, some words about the direct encounters of theatre and nature. Open-air performances in the specially chosen places create a theatrical frame, directing attention to the landscape as well. Provided a decision is made in favour of an open-air show, usually an attempt is made to find a so-called self-performing or a special site. Amphitheatres which were located at the top of a hill so that in addition to the performance, the spectators had a magnificent view of the landscape and the town are an example of the kind. Vargamäe, which has proved a very popular place for open-air performances in Estonia, is another example. Vargamäe is a place with a strong *genius loci* saturated with cultural meanings. A performance at Vargamäe provides a dual cause to visit the place (theatrical + nature experience), but also allows Vargamäe to be seen and interpreted from a novel viewpoint (e.g. the venue of *Judith* by A.H. Tammsaare), i.e. to have a more profound experience. In addition, the performance draws on the temper, energy and meaning of this location. Thus, a process of mutual amplification is experienced.

From this point on, one could speculate on the subject of modern revelations, the phenomenon of UFOs. In science fiction movies, extraterrestrial alien objects have contact with humans mainly on roads between cities or in nature: in any case, away from civilisation. Often the heroes encounter a temporal or spatial cell, which is similar to the religious, Christian or pantheistic apocalyptic experience.

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