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THE ANTITHEATRICAL DISCOURSE IN UKRAINIAN METADRAMA IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

KEYWORDS: antitheatricality, metadrama, critical discourse, self-reflection, illusion, modernism, actor, spectator

ABSTRACT: The article analyzes methods of implementing antitheatrical discourse in Ukrainian dramaturgy. Different types of antitheatricality in literary texts are distinguished on the basis of plays by M. Starytskyi, I. Karpenko-Karyi, A. Krushelnytskyi, V. Vynnychenko, Ya. Mamontiv, V. Cherednychenko, and M. Kulish. The authors define key vectors that the antitheatrical discourse follows: criticism of theater as an institution, criticism of the drama school / method, criticism of theatricality and acting, including in offstage situations. It is arguably reasonable to examine the phenomenon of antitheatrical prejudice in the context of the theory of metadrama as one of its factors. Artistic interpretation of the theater in an ironic or farcical vein, discussions over the repertoire that is no longer relevant, the aesthetic nature of stage technique, and discredit of acting as an occupation all generally encourage dramatic conventionality to double. Most common metadramatic devices used to implement antitheatricality in Ukrainian drama are believed to include a play within a play, adaptation of spectator's reception for stage, and intertextual references.

1. Introduction

Contemporary research into the phenomenon of antitheatricality in literature originates from the study "The Antitheatrical Prejudice" by J. A. Barish. The scholar presented a large-scale range of operation of this phenomenon in culture from antiquity to the middle of the 20th century and its emergence in religion, policy-making, philosophy, and art itself. The last section of the book focuses on theatrical self-criticism characteristic of the work of a number of playwrights (Barish 1981). Later works, especially by L. Levine, B. Reynold, M. Puchner, L. A. Freeman, and others, expand on and add detail to Barish's generalizations. For example, Freeman doubts the understanding of antitheatricality as a permanent phenomenon of culture, arguing that it is historically and socially determined (Freeman 2016), while K. R. Lehnhof opposes the illogical and eccentric nature of antitheatricality.

Arguably, antitheatricality not only had printable and regressive forms, but also served as a tool of raising critical issues of social and aesthetic nature in the plane of dramatic literature (Lehnhof 2016). Ā. Matuska believes “traditional figures of audience involvement” to be among the devices used to implement antitheatrical discourse. The scholar naturally arrives at R. Hornby’s metadrama concept, where antitheatrical prejudice is capable of “mixing the reality of the audience with the fiction of the play” (Matuska 2008).

To conceive the nature of antitheatrical discourse in drama, it is vital to position the essence of theater as a mirror of and, concurrently, a component of being. The long history of contradictory relations between theater and society, theater and religion, theater and authorities invariably becomes the subject matter of plays together with other real-life problems. This makes it obvious that antitheatrical prejudice is among factors of metadrama, which is characterized by orientation on self-reflection of the dramatic art. Naturally, antitheatrical discourse is most vivid in plays with distinct metadramatic poetics, including by authors such as B. Shaw, A. Chekhov, L. Pirandello, and others.

This study proposes to analyze antitheatrical discourse in metadramatic plays by Ukrainian playwrights of the early 20th century such as M. Starytskyi, I. Karpenko-Karyi, A. Krushelnytskyi, V. Vynnychenko, Ya. Mamontiv, V. Cherednychenko, and M. Kulish.

2. Historical origins of antitheatricality in the national Ukrainian context

Notably, forms of hostility to theater were historically determined in Ukrainian culture by religious taboos and moral prejudices. The aesthetic function of performance took centuries to emerge in Ukraine through dramatized elements of popular folk rites. With the establishment of Christianity, opponents denounced the actor’s embodiment as heresy despite dramatic touches of the religious service. Mystery plays became popular throughout Ukraine in the 15-16th centuries, but the clergy criticized theology students’ excessive enthusiasm for the productions of the so-called school drama, especially their interludes. A widely recognized theologian of those times, I. Vyshenskyi was indignant with seminarians who “don’t want to labour in church only put on an act and play” (Vyshenskyi 1986, 140). However, the domination of sacred arts was undermined by creative work of vagrant deacons focused on the element of laughter culture as soon as in the 18th century. I. Franko described the type of poet and actor out of “academia failures” as “an nomad and cynic element, a possessor of many jovial and shameless stories and songs, quick to make jokes and tricks and are greedy to eat and particularly to drink” (Franko

1983, 344). Lack of trust in representatives of the acting profession persisted into the times of establishment of secular theater.

The Russian Empire authorities also pursued an active antitheatrical policy in Ukraine in the second half of the 19th century. The crusade against the Ukrainian language, which “did not, does not, and may not exist” according to the Valuev Circular of 1863, became the Sword of Damocles for Ukrainian troupes. The Ems Decree of 1876 directly commenced the campaign for prohibiting stage performances. The Circular of 1881 allowed dramatic performances only on condition that they were first approved by censors and a special authorization was granted by top governorate officials. At the same time, the document introduced even stricter reservations against the development of Ukrainian theater: “Absolutely prohibit the establishment of specifically Little Russian theaters and the creation of troupes for staging plays and scenes in exclusively the Little Russian dialect” (Ukrainska identychnist 2013, 190). However, by being able to present mixed repertoire, performance fans set up vagrant amateur troupes that laid the foundations of professional Ukrainian theater.

Special features of the image of theater in Ukrainian dramaturgy are due to the marginal status of Ukrainian culture in the Russian Empire. The problem of inadequate development of the dramatic art, abuse of repeated and generally popular topics, low-standard plots and drama clichés, which caused certain groups to associate the Ukrainian drama art exclusively with the Hopak, horilka, and “hopeless love”, found a direct manifestation in dramatic literature. At the same time, Ukrainian plays actively use pan-European clichés and prejudices about stage life.

3. Antitheatrical potential of philistine stereotypes

Criticism of theater as an institution in Ukrainian dramaturgy mainly builds on an artistic reflection of philistine stereotypes, which hold it to be a territory of sin and foul intrigues. This image most often comes up in the rhetoric of outside observers who have no sentiment about the dramatic art, or of former theater fans who believe they have been deceived in the kaleidoscope of spectacular illusions. Ironically, it is through the inherent property of theater to create an illusion, an invariant of reality, that it is demonized. The call of Anton Kvitka from “Talent”, a play by Starytskyi, is telling: “Let’s run away from this magical but fumes nook, where make-up grimaces and grease-paint eyes are to the view, where feelings are false and words are perfidious and flattering...” (Starytskyi 1979, 199).

In this play, philistines condemn not only theater, but also actors and acting in general. Maria Luchytska, the heroine that was inspired by the then famous actress M. Zankovetska, leaves theater for the comfort of her home. However, the relatives of her loved nobleman bitterly oppose the marital misalliance, which organically

fits in with the antitheatrical discourse of dramaturgy. The philistine reception narrows down the gift of acting to functions of a swindler who can use his or her talent for lucrative purposes in an offstage situation: “She apparently forced to cry with borrowed roles, so she will easily cheat with her own one” (Starytskyi 1979, 211).

4. Moral issues of the actors’ environment and a complex of escapism

In turn, the elite caste of actor characters focused on the educational mission of their profession also raises the issue of the theater’s corrupt influence on the personality. In Mamontiv’s play “Above the Abyss”, the psychological discomfort caused by an imitation of virtues, intrigue, jealousy etc. drives the gifted actor Danylo Bilohor to drop his occupation, which condemns one to breathe in “air poisoned by all the miasms of theatrical centers and backstage curtains” (Mamontiv 1922, 23).

The actor Ivan Barylchenko makes an existential choice in favor of retreat from theater (Karpenko-Karyi’s play “The Life Sea”). A successful career brought the actor fame, but he gradually transforms into those typical light-minded darlings of the public, starts to lead two lives, cheats on his wife justifying himself by saying that his own moral taboos are ruined by the “life sea”, in the face of which the human is helpless. Inner emasculation affects Barylchenko’s professional acting qualities, with his past thirst for dramatic acting, faith in the power of word being marginalized by a mechanical creation of an image on stage to gain public approval and reap all dividends of recognition. It is for a good reason that his friend Stiopka Kramariuk, who plays the role of a jester in Barylchenko the King’s backstage suite, bitterly confronts the actor: “You ought to live the truth and talk the truth to everybody; but you are terrified of the truth, looking for any aphid’s hypocritical affection... You sermonize love, justice, all-forgiveness, but you by yourself are the decorated coffins” (Karpenko-Karyi 1989, 137). Selection of the family name of the jester’s character, which suggests a connection between plots of “The Life Sea” and the playwright’s earlier play “Vanity”, which combine into the author’s drama cycle, seems not accidental. In “Vanity”, the young Ivan Barylchenko called to cleanse the stage by using the Biblical allusion to the need for expelling misers “from the theater like the merchants from the temple” (Karpenko-Karyi 1989, 51). Instead, the self-seeking Kramariuk, who only exercises his abilities in the theater’s back rooms, becomes an intimate friend to the actor, who has already established himself. At the same time, one can see in Kramariuk the alter ego of Barylchenko, his “reduced copy, parody”, and even prospects of the “future” Ivan (Oladko 2012, 171). In the end, Barylchenko realizes that he is a buffoon who can only “entertain the public”, finding escape in natural Rousseauist life. Kramariuk instead observes that defilement by theater is irremediable, and the actor’s attempts at self-rejuvenation are futile.

Ukrainian playwrights frequently focus in their modern plays on the image of theater as a place of sexual promiscuity. For example, one of Krushelnytsky's protagonists regards the actress's job as "selling yourself to a hungry crowd", which discredits a decent woman: "...you don't even know what lust you aroused in men by the beauty of your body. ...what a shame..." (Krushelnytsky 1920, 92). So, the sublevation of theater to the status of a temple, which is professed by its naivest apologists, is transformed in mass perception into the brothel where low desires and fantasies of an average spectator are satisfied.

Theater did not change much after the 1917 Revolution, either. Sexual promiscuity assumes a grotesque form in "Khulii Khuryna", a play by Kulish which discusses the story of Prisia, who was raped by the theater supervisor for a free pass to the spectators' box. The undereducated new authorities believe theater to be an institution without an ideology, the place for narrow-minded bourgeois prejudices, and respond with a drastic proposal to rumors of outrages: "You've done your theater enough! Shut them all..." (Kulish 1990, 283).

In the minds of many, alcohol becomes an attribute of the acting bohemia. In Vynnychenko's play "Law", the heroine Inna blackmails her husband by threatening to join an operetta troupe. To look more convincing, Inna demonstrates alcohol propensity, which in her mind distinguishes typical behavior of a woman from a theater environment: "I'm an actress now; it doesn't become me to stay off liqueurs" (Vynnychenko 1993, 541). Working in the theater carries a subtext of masochist self-punishment for Inna, because there she will become a "toy" for numerous people and thus deaden her failure to be a mother.

5. Theater as a form of scam in everyday communication

Apart from a critical assessment of the actor's status, a number of plays feature scammers who actively use their skill of imitation in offstage life. In Vynnychenko's plays such as "Sin", "Lie", "Steps of Life", "Between Two Forces", "Law", and others, one comes across quite a few characters inclined to hypocrisy in interpersonal communication. V. Humeniuk observes that almost every play of the author features at least one character that "takes on the outlines of a puppet, unobtrusively emphasizing some puppet-ness, mask-ness and other characters" (Humeniuk 2002, 20). T. Sverbilova maintains that "methods of dramatic acting, manipulation with genre structures, devices, situations... have obscured dramatic collision" in the play "Natus" (Sverbilova 2009, 115-116). As the plot goes, the actor Chui-Chuhuienko and the actress Dzyzhka are asked to dramatize adultery. This design does not achieve its desired effect because Khrystia, Roman's wife, also turns out to be a "comedian" and, in response, performs her own farce play by engaging her son

Natus. The pseudo-adultery unwinds on stage by using metadrama techniques where both actors and the audience are aware of drama, gimmickry, so attention is directed to the skill of those involved in deceitful scheming. This play is rife with expressions such as “And how can I switch from role to real?”, “act to the end”, “performance”, “our famous tragedian” etc.

In his play “Prophet”, Vynnychenko was able to unveil the falseness of political hypocrites who use dramatic devices to gain power over the wider public and get rich. A worldwide performance unwinds in this work, and the “elite” decides to manage it by aptly using the myth about the prophet Ammar. By using metadrama techniques, Vynnychenko managed to show one of the faces of globalist *Theatrum Mundi*, which offers humankind an endless array of illusions.

As we can see, antitheatrical discourse is widely implemented in themed metadrama, which aims at reproducing a multi-aspect range of problems of the dramatic art and its social communication. Two opposite tendencies can be traced here: rehabilitating the actor’s status and debunking undeserved accusations leveled at actor characters, and portraying colorful cheaters who act like actors beyond the theater.

6. The image of the spectator and exposure of the theatrical sacredness myth

One of the common metadrama techniques which is often destructively directed at the myth of the art’s sacred nature, “on-stage rehearsal” gains an antitheatrical tinge. In Starytskyi’s play “Talent”, the appearance of stage personnel, hairdressers, trainees, their idiosyncratic jargon, and rude comments discredit posh stereotypes about the mystery of a performance’s birth. Some literary works also criticize on-stage acting techniques, which are not infrequently ridiculed indirectly or directly. Illustrative examples include Desdemona’s death rattle, satirized “Off the Bat” by O’Konnor-Vilinska and “The Life Sea” by Karpenko-Karyi. In the latter, the end of the interlude met with a complete fiasco: “The illusion disappeared; laughter – and all is lost!” (Karpenko-Karyi 1989, 515).

The spectator, a multifunctional factor of the metadrama structure in dramatic literature, is a vital part of the world of theater. Plays where the spectator serves as just another tool for desacralizing the world of theater by appearing to be a superficial, down-to-earth user of the dramatic product deserves attention in the context of antitheatrical discourse. For example, dramaturgy of the early 20th century records the phenomenon of claqueuring, which was widely spread in European theaters. Despite its self-interested and commercial nature, it is worth emphasizing the acting characteristics of this cultural phenomenon to which split personality,

pretense, and the playing of the part at hand are not alien. The nature of *claque's* activities was not concealed, so the common theatergoers were able to watch two performances – on stage and next to their seats. *Claqueurs* themselves are portrayed in “Talent”, a play by Starytskyi that stages a true battle between two audience groups marked as “dubious” and “fair” young people invited to compete in how skillfully they can support their favorites.

Obsessed fans who pursue the object of their obsession driven by their emotional and sexual motives are an alternative to the organized audience. Such types usually acquire a grotesque tinge, for example, fans who in the heat of passion eat up their hats, tear their hair out etc. Ignoring the boundaries of conventionality gives rise to the metadrama conflict between the on-stage performance, its reception, and reality. The audience's inadequacy causes actors to become aware of their own loneliness and unlikelihood of being understood. As a result, actor characters not infrequently resort to rude language while describing the public (“crazy”, “drunk”, “rags” etc.) to compensate for their condition of permanent stress.

Some playwrights critically evaluate the audience's priorities, for example, “Nowadays public's tastes have fallen, and indifference to the old literary repertoire has grown. There is a good, classical comedy – they say “boring”; there is a drama – they say “we have our own daily drama!” Give us naked women, give us fun, fun...” (Karpenko-Karyi 1989, 527).

7. Problems of aesthetics in the focus of metatheatrical reflection

If cultural communication between theater and society results in the criticism of theater as an institution, critical discourse in the world of theater itself is focused on evaluating on-stage aesthetics. A number of plays raise the issues of repertoire, with discussions over it becoming part of their plot. “Actress”, a play by Krushelnytskyi, uses the play within a play device, where the parenthetical element, which resembles Ibsen's “A Doll's House”, is experimental by nature and has a feminist subject matter that is atypical of the then Ukrainian repertoire. However, the actress and the Poet himself are not in fact prepared to become true voices of the emancipation idea and to put concepts they have declared in practice.

Having experienced disappointment and gender humiliation in her marriage, the “Actress” heroine does not wish to content herself with success, ovations, and flowers anymore. She opens the purpose of theater as a social pulpit, which is, however, used for profaning ideas and blindly following European theater tendencies.

The discussion play “Actress Without Roles” by Cherednychenko, which deals with the paths of development of Ukrainian theater under post-revolutionary ideological pressure, is clearly marked by antitheatrical tendencies. Cherednychenko's

play makes an impression of an artistic invariant of public dramatized disputes in Ukraine in 1922-1927. This piece voices the opinions of apologists and critics regarding different schools of the dramatic art in the early 20th century: democratic grassroots theater, modern theater, including Kyiv-based symbolists and futurists, proletarian theater. "Actress Without Roles" centers around a dynasty of actors that represents a conflict of generations, which always takes place in the progress of theater. The family's disputes are dominated by the position of Anna, who defends the values of proletarian theater. The heroine believes that traditional theater has been exhausted and become an anachronism that belongs "in the museum of panhuman culture" (Cherednychenko 1923, 51). She is of an equally critical opinion about the popularization of outstanding playwrights (Molière, Galtman, Lessing, Ibsen and others) on the Ukrainian stage as harmful "bourgeoisiation" of theater. Instead, the classical theater can promote the expansion of proletarian world outlook to the wide masses of its fans. Alla is convinced that plays of highly dramatical substance were produced at those times "in a huge troupe" (the Bolshevik Party) "under the authority of the strictest director" (Lenin). Ironically, she calls her former colleagues in the acting arena "mannequins of the old age" with revolutionary contempt and instead proposes a reform which should turn the entire theater into a puppet of the communist system. With hindsight, the antitheatrical discourse of Cherednychenko's play acquires a tragic tinge because the totalitarian repressive machine annihilated a number of gifted representatives of the Ukrainian theater in the 1930s and made it impossible for playwrights, directors, and actors to pursue multiple vectors in their artistic endeavors.

8. Conclusion

So, antitheatrical discourse is organically incorporated in the storyline of plays by Ukrainian playwrights in the early 20th century. Key forms of artistic implementation of antitheatrical prejudice include, firstly, criticism of theater as an institution, an establishment of culture (in an ironic or farcical form); secondly, theatrical discussions in literary texts which criticize not the theater in general, but a specific "wrong" theater which represents the previous age, a competing school/method, a hostile ideology, which is contrasted with the "right" theater. Thirdly, antitheatricality finds an expression in the criticism of dramatization on the everyday level where the acting of characters who are not actors, have rejected the stage, or use their skills off the stage is interpreted as immoral, which eventually comes down to discrimination of theater itself. At the same time, the forms referred to above are elements of the plays' metadrama structure which has become widely popular in Ukrainian modern drama.

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