

The article provides an overview of performances on Slovenian stages that have used odour to stimulate the audience's senses and arouse transformational effects. Representing the first research of this kind into Slovenian culture, the author demonstrates that odour was used as a means of sensory perception, especially in experimental theatre practices since the 1970s. One of the first such works was *Cimetova vrata ladje norcev in druge spremembe* (The Cinnamon Door of the Ship of Fools and Other Changes), a performance art piece directed by Tomaž Kralj at Glej Theatre in 1975. In the 1990s, the interest in olfactory perceptions grew among theatre-makers who successfully used odour to implement the aesthetics of the real in post-dramatic theatre and achieve the immersion of the spectator. This role of odour in theatre also continues in the 21st century. Barbara Pia Jenič began deliberately and continuously developing the poetics of scent at the Sensorium Theatre, which she founded in 2001 with Gabriel Hernandez. In her creation of sensorial events, Jenič relies on the methodologies of Enrique Vargas, with which she became acquainted as an actress and scent designer in his group Teatro de los Sentidos and creatively developed them at the Sensorium Theatre. As a scent designer, Jenič has collaborated with other Slovenian theatres, among others, on the 2015 operatorium, *The Tenth Daughter* (Deseta hči) by Svetlana Makarovič (based on the libretto by Milko Lazar, directed by Rocco) at the Slovenian National Theatre – Opera and Ballet Ljubljana.

Keywords: odour, smell, sensorial theatre event, performing arts, Slovenia, experimental theatre, post-dramatic theatre, Sensorium Theatre

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The World of Odour in the Slovenian Performing Arts¹

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Odour as a means for sensory research

This article will focus on those events in the Slovenian performing arts that have used odour to stimulate the spectator's senses and arouse transformational effects of all participants, the performers and the spectators. Such events can be found especially in the experimental theatre practices that tore down the fourth wall and relied on the audience's holistic perception, which includes all five senses: sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell. Today, we will focus on those which primarily addressed the spectator's sense of smell. The article aims to provide a chronological overview of such events, examine their role in developing new stage languages and audience addresses and define their significance in the history of Slovenian theatre as well as in its present.

As Erika Fischer-Lichte notes, theatre has deliberately used odours since naturalism. The aim was to co-create the atmosphere of the event and make it as convincing as possible (192). The atmosphere is what flows in space between the object and the subject and what the spectator can physically experience while attending the event. Odour is namely "one of the most powerful effective components of the atmosphere" (194). For this reason, it is all the more surprising how little attention has been paid to odour in theatre-making and theatre research. In fact, odours (such as those of lipstick, powder, perfume, the sweat of the actors as well as the spectators) are always an involuntary accompanying phenomenon of theatrical events; theatre spaces are always imbued with them (192). However, odours can also be used consciously and deliberately as part of the process of performing. As Fischer-Lichte notes, the main reason is "that, with their smells, spaces, objects or people can directly penetrate the body of the smell-perceiving subject" (192). Using odours on the theatre stage takes a lot of knowledge, skill and experience. Odour escapes control. The moment it spreads around the room, it can no longer be controlled. Light and sound, for example, can instantly change the atmosphere of the event. Compared to other means

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of performing, odour is more or less uncontrollable. Perhaps this quality makes it the most powerful and profound means of atmosphere creation.

More precisely: odour is used as a means to achieve an effect of the authenticity of the atmosphere. As Alain Badiou would put it, authenticity is a central principle in all performing types or genres driven by a passion for the real. After naturalistic theatre (at the turn to the 20th century), the tendency towards authenticity again became relevant in the performance art of the 1960s, as well as in ritual forms of theatre, community theatre and paratheatrical practices at the crossroads between art and daily life.

The use of odour on Slovenian stages

One of the first examples of the deliberate use of odour in Slovenian theatre can be found in *Cimetova vrata ladje norcev in druge spremembe* (The Cinnamon Door of the Ship of Fools and Other Changes), a performance art work directed by Tomaž Kralj and friends² (the work had a guest performance at Glej Theatre in 1975). The event shows “several elementary harmonising qualities of joy”, as Tomaž Kralj puts it (6), stressing that the concept is based on *The Book of Changes* (Yi Jing)³, an ancient Chinese text. He explains the title of the piece in the following way: “THE CINNAMON DOOR means a not yet realised instance and the direction towards this instance [...] THE SHIP OF FOOLS means the spaceship of planet Earth and its movement [...] CHANGES: change implies time” (Ibid.).⁴ Among other things, the changes were triggered by the intoxicating atmosphere created by cinnamon scattering. Tomaž Kralj published and schematically depicted the concept of the performance in *Tribuna* magazine:

As an e n t r o p y, the basic network of this performance gets filled with materials that are functionally objectified (Meyerhold, Brecht) and variable. In this way, the performance becomes a medium shift from skill to ready-made actions presented in a slowed-down and analytical manner and interrupted in this context (stop motion). It shifts from expressiveness to the objective. The materials include people, props, 2D cinematic information, sound information reproduced from pre-tape and a music group that generates sounds in real-time and communicates with the delayed reproduction of its own

2 This is how the cast was defined in the announcement of the event in *Delo* newspaper (20 February 1975). The performers were: Slobodan Valentinčič, Maruška Krese-Šalamun, Olga Kacjan, Maja Boh, Nomenklature, Tomaž Kralj. Chris Johnson is stated as “witch with lights” and Tomaž Pengov as “musical navigator”. The group of the musicians is stated in more detail in *Tribuna* magazine, i.e., Tomaž Pengov – guitar; lute, double bass, recorders; Tomo Pirc – recorders, percussion; Bogdana Herman – voice; Jerko Novak – guitar; Aco Razbornik – sound mixer). The recording is archived in the Radio Študent audio collection.

3 Translated by Maja Milčinski: *Yijing – Knjiga premen* (Yijing – The Book of Changes) (Mladinska knjiga, 2011).

4 “The scheme of THE CINNAMON DOOR is comprised of 6 unions, which were dictated by the Book of Changes as the 6 lines of the CH’IEN / The Creative hexagram. Image: THE MOVEMENT OF THE SKY IS FULL OF STRENGTH. THIS MAKES THE NOBLE STRONG AND TIRELESS. Each union has its own metaphorical trait” (Kralj 16). In the continuation, Tomaž Kralj elaborates on the characteristics of the individual unions and the relations between them.

sound (play-back in real-time). None of the information channels has greater conceptual worth and a wider significance than any other information channel (“Dve predstavi”).

The critic Rapa Šuklje candidly denoted the event as a spiritualist seance “that evades the criteria and vocabulary of theatre criticism” and “does not awake in the middle-aged spectator the desire to establish a dialogue with it (at least not at this level)” (“Izredno puščobne norčije”). Despite her reserved stance towards the performance, she presented the action objectively. It took place without text, which,

in addition to soothing music and lighting effects, as well as more or less improvised movement was enriched with the use of many simple objects – bowls and cups, spectacles, a giant candle snuffer, small plastic and paper bags, candles – which, taken out of their everyday context, achieved a suitable effect. [...] The lit candles even gave rise to a moment of much-needed magic. Intended to add to the intoxication were three little bags of cinnamon and an abundance of white powder scattered on the stage (Ibid.).

The cinnamon scattering started in the packed hall at a quarter past nine, and the event ended at half-past ten.

Odour was probably used to co-create the atmosphere in other experimental types of performing of that time, probably before Tomaž Kralj’s performance art piece. For example, in ritual forms of theatre such as the so-called meetings as conceived by Vlado Šav. Without a doubt, however, odours played their part in the performance *Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilček*s (Pupilija, Papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki) (the smell of blood in the ritual slaughter of chickens on stage, the scent of fragrances in the bathtub scene). However, the role of odour in shaping the aesthetic image of these theatre events can only be subject to speculation. The odours arose from the actions performed (for example, the tea-drinking ritual, candle lighting, incense and other props in performing rituals). Critical and other records of such events do not specifically mention odours. Notably, Rapa Šuklje’s review is one of the earliest testimonials to the aesthetics of using odour on Slovenian stages.

More frequent use of odour on theatre stages can be noticed in the 1990s, namely in post-dramatic performances, which co-shaped the aesthetics of the real. As Hans-Thies Lehmann notes, postdramatic theatre deliberately broke the fourth wall with elements of the real. In search of the new expressive possibilities of the authentic in a globalised and mediatised world, the directors, especially those of the younger and middle generations, also aimed to achieve the effects of the real through odours (and not just through the types of acting, direction and use of other stage elements). For example:

- Vito Taufer brought a ram and chickens to the stage of the Mladinsko Theatre in 1990 in *Odysseus and Son or The World and Home* (Odisej in sin ali Svet in dom);
- In 1997, Emil Hrvatin’s *The Banquet* (Banket) threw a feast for the spectators,

who enjoyed the scenes with the actors while eating;

- In the 1997 tear-donating session, *Camillo – Memo*, Emil Hrvatin evoked memories and tears from the spectators using onions and their pungent smell;
- In 1999, Tijana Zinajić created the effects of the real in the performance *The Pencil Writes with Its Heart* (Svinčnik piše s srcem) at the Mladinsko Theatre by means of the actors preparing food in front of the audience;
- The same goes for *Love to Death* (Ljubezen na smrt), directed by Matjaž Pograjc in 2007, conceived as a dinner in which the actors were also the cooks;
- In the performance *Perfume* (Parfum), based on the famous novel by Patrick Süskind, which took place in 2009 at Cankarjev dom, Borut Bučinel stimulated unconscious associations in the audience using pleasant as well as highly unpleasant odours.

In the function of the intrusion of the real, odour has also frequently appeared in performances directed by Tomi Janežič: *King Oedipus* (Ojdip, 1998), *Foundling Simeon* (Nahod Simeon, 2006), *Romeo and Public* (Romeo in publika, 2008), *The Threepenny Opera* (Opera za tri groša, 2014), and *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (Smrt Ivana Iljiča, 2015).

In all of these performances, the odours – be it inadvertently or intentionally – accompanied the stage action. In the 1990s, however, the poetics of odours started being deliberately and continuously developed by Barbara Pia Jenič at the Sensorium Theatre.

The Sensorium Theatre

In 2001, Barbara Pia Jenič and Gabriel Hernandez founded Sensorium to create sensorial events (Jenič 8). In these activities, she relies on the methodologies of Enrique Vargas, with which she became acquainted between 1996 and 2004 when she collaborated with Vargas's group Teatro de los Sentidos as an actress and scent designer. She first got acquainted with scent design in 1999, when Teatro de los Sentidos toured to Zurich. According to Jenič, at that point, scent designer Antonella Cirigliano had decided to leave the group; Cirigliano and Vargas agreed that Barbara Pia Jenič should take over her work. Thus, between 1999 and 2004, Jenič designed the scents for all the performances. Each consisted of about thirty scenes and twenty actors (as each character had to have their own scent). She designed the scents for the performances *Oraculos* (Oracles),⁵ *La Memoria del vino* and *Hilo de Ariadna*. "For each performance, I made a research and a concept with elaborations on how the scents affect the audience and as well as the poetics of each scene. I inherited a few decisions

⁵ The performance *Oraculos* was created by the director Enrique Vargas for the Exodos Festival in 1996. It premiered at the Old Power Station venue in Ljubljana.

from Cirigliano but quickly started following my own way in the design” (Jenič 80).

In Jenič’s view, the poetics of scents is the kind of use of smells “that comes not only directly from the action on stage (the use of food, religious props, the natural odours of a particular space) but one that opens up new imaginary spaces in the scenes through sensual synaesthesia” (Ibid.). Odours, namely, “represent an important bridge between consciousness and the unconscious as well as between memory and imagination” (Jenič quoted in Krkoč Lasič, “Vonj kot simfonija prizorov”). They create an atmosphere that we perceive at an intuitive level, beyond reason, which directly affects our perception and understanding of the scenes (Sedej, “Vonj je atomska bomba med čuti”).

Jenič developed the poetics of odours in the productions of Sensorium Theatre. Notably, in sensorial events, such as *We Are the World: Waterman* (Mi smo svet: Povodni mož) (from 2013), but also in non-sensorial theatre performances, including *Cro-Magnon* (the 2013 staging of Gregor Strniša’s poetry), *Gothic Windows* (Gotska okna) (the 2014 staging of Dane Zajc’s poetry), and *Merlin* (a 2015 children’s performance). As a scent designer, she has also collaborated in performances of other theatres. Perhaps the most interesting is her collaboration with the Slovenian National Theatre – Opera and Ballet Ljubljana in 2015 when she designed the scents for the operatorium, *The Tenth Daughter* (Deseta hči), by Milko Lazar (based on the libretto by Svetlana Makarovič and directed by Rocco). This unique aspect of the performance also won critical acclaim.

Conclusion

The list of performances that have used odour as a means of stimulating the spectator’s senses on Slovenian stages is by no means complete. Their examination, however, reveals that odour was used as a means of sensory perception at least as early as the 1970s. The interest in olfactory perceptions grew among the theatre-makers in the 1990s as an element used to successfully implement the aesthetics of the real in post-dramatic theatre and achieve the immersion of the spectator. This role of odour in theatre also continues in the 21st century. It can be expected that, in a mediatised society and culture where live events are increasingly valued, the use of odours on the theatre stage will also increase.

Translated by Urška Zajec.

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