

The article discusses the role of the playwright in contemporary site-specific drama and the role of the director of site-specific performance. The study aims at three main areas: the author's drama based on the recent history of the 20th century; the performative potential of the commonness and of oral history; and contemporary site-specific drama. As a playwright, the author focuses on the memories of witnesses and socially taboo topics. As a theatre director, she examines approaches for transforming into theatrical language the memory of place, the collection of data from oral history and burning issues. She looks at the relations between playwrights and site-specific performance. She observes the links among the topic, communication means and non-theatrical places.

This qualitative longitudinal art research is based on experience from theatre practice, analysis and comparison of theoretical knowledge. The author gives examples of authorial plays and reports on their productions, specifically stating these dramas: *Midnight in the Borderland* (3. /4. 5. 1950, a monastery), *Three Chairs* (Alzheimer's disease, a retirement home), *From Majdalenka to Madla* (World War II, cellar), *Hotel on the Corner* (1932-1989, old theatre building).

The study emphasises the need for a creative and attentive approach by the author, playwright, dramaturg and director to create a whole new world from the duality: ordinary and taboo. It turns out that the combination of a strong theme, an unusual place tied to the topic of the drama, and the participatory role (active/passive) of the audience can be an effective strategy and even "tactic" in strengthening the role of the author in drama after the year 2000.

Keywords: playwright, author's drama, site-specific drama, oral history

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Site-Specific Author's Drama¹

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The study focuses on the *synchrèse* of site-specific performance, authorial theatre and oral history. After an introduction to the socio-historical context and terminological definition of the area, it expresses the basic questions that serve as pillars of the mind map of the investigated phenomenon. The terms are elaborated on examples of specific site-specific performances – authorial theatrical, dramatic projects, i.e., site-specific dramas. It turns out that the dramaturgical-spatial symbiosis benefiting from the transcendence of the traditional theatrical framework has the potential to deepen the audience experience, especially thanks to the decomposition of the theme into many layers and subsequently their synthesis on a new scale, with different depth and focalisation concerning a particular place. The text does not infer universal rules or templates for site-specific drama but points to processuality, the breadth of multidisciplinary range, and creative possibilities.

About the Author's Approach

Since the 1960s, the forms of action art, happenings, performances, body art, land art, situationism, para-theatrical events and other related activities in atypical environments, industrial spaces or in nature began to appear in Czechoslovakia mainly on the initiative of artists and theatre-makers to develop the concept of a total artwork. Artists spontaneously left institutional galleries, followed people into the streets, parks and courtyards of apartment buildings, searched for abandoned spaces and paid attention to the openness of art. The artist Vladimír Boudník in the early 1960s, for example, had a major influence on the development of the happening in the Czech Republic. His actions on the streets of Prague were significant when he showed passers-by that art is all around us for every ordinary thing. He drew attention to abraded plaster, to peeling places where he saw new shapes. He also used the frames he placed in public places to make their poetics visible. In the 1980s, for example, a key event in the informal art scene in Prague was the Malostranské dvorky event. These site-specific installations, art interventions in public space or non-plot theatre

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projects were close to the then young generation of artists and sculptors (e.g., Jiří Sozanský, Eva Fuková, Čestmír Suška, Kolotoč Art Theatre, etc.). Not only did they exhibit works of art, but they also worked with masks and puppets, experimented with shadows, and generally approached the space in completely unique ways.

The tendency to restructure and redefine the arts grew stronger from within, and initiatives of this type, including theatrical and experimental forms, visibly began to break out of the established frame of reference. Alternative theatrical concepts were formed. The relationships to shared experience and collective creation were also renewed in the sense of the importance of the participatory role of the spectator, that is, the interaction with the audience, and to purist physicality, that is, a strong physical presence, experimentation was carried out at the limit of mental and physical forces. Originality was developed as a search for the distinctiveness of theatrical language; the textual structure was loosened with the aim of touching authenticity. Kazimierz Braun theoretically unified efforts to grasp the reformation of artistic territory in the publication *The Second Reform of Theatre*. On the articulation of space, he argued that it is desirable to perceive space and examine it not only as a tool for the realisation of our theme but, above all, so that the space itself initiates us on how to grasp it and “what” to put into it. Theatre researcher Andrzej T. Wirth introduced the term postdramatic theatre in 1987, and Hans-Thies Lehmann published his book of the same name at the end of the 1990s. Erika Fischer-Lichte called the transition to a non-narrative and non-staging event a performative turn. With the developing tendencies of European theatre, freeing itself from ordinary conventional spaces and the domination of the text, a wave of authorial approaches grew. Czech theatre researcher Jan Císař called this wave the creation of an autonomous reality of the stage (9). “Thus, since the 1990s (and more broadly since the 1960s), there has been a ‘reteatralization’ and de-literalization of theatre and its connection with performative forms of dance, music and physical theatre” (Augustová 13). Dramaturg Miloslav Klíma believes: “In the last century, the development of dramaturgy in accordance with the development of the theatre as a whole can basically be characterised as a transformation from the dramaturgy of titles to the dramaturgy of themes” (37). The initial dramaturgical motif for artistic activity can be the space itself, the identity of the place and the issue of the locality.

In the past, the authorial theatre was usually a type of theatre that worked with original texts. There was not much distinction between literary/dramatic authorship and the authorship of the production. According to professor Císař, the term “author” meant the personal attitude of an actor, performer or dancer. “Everything they perform is only their own, most personal manifestation” (106). Nowadays, however, the term authorial theatre can also refer to the fact that “this theatre is an expression of a distinctive, unique opinion and attitude of its creators to more general issues of

social events or a certain feeling of life" (Kovalčuk 6). However, it does not necessarily have to be a generational statement, political theatre, "devised theatre", or the abovementioned pure personal acting, but above all, an equalisation of all staging components, the origin of which can be not only the author, playwright, dramaturg but also a collective of artists of various professions who, with their creative approach, are looking for new starting points to grasp the chosen topic. "And he doesn't have to have literature [as a dramatic text] at all if it comes down to it, or he can treat it completely arbitrarily" (Čísař 9). Contemporary authorial theatre in the context we are examining may not, but it can still return to the word, situation and dramatic principle. Moreover, it also returns to the text, even to drama, and its interpretation, dramatic situations and role-playing.

The position of a dramatic text within the aforementioned theatrical systems can change through circumstances, from the superior to the equal to its complete marginalisation. For example, in some instances, great emphasis is placed on movement scores as metaphorical parallels to the source text, i.e., the transformation of a word or text source into a non-verbal, non-linguistic means of expression is continued. Theatre researcher Josef Kovalčuk stated: "One's own scenic creativity brings more independent, artistically distinctive values that are independent of the text level (which were not and could not have been at the level of the text) – which is related to the emphasis on the development of non-verbal means of expression and procedures connected with the search for new aesthetic possibilities of theatre and also with the search for distinctive theatricality as a means of new messages" (10). In this way, the text, the literary source, or even the drama can be put on an equal footing with the physical expression: see Jerzy Grotowski's "poor" theatre or the teaching method of the theatre pedagogue Jacques Lecoq. After all, we actually perceive space primarily through corporeality, movement and senses. Whether we stand still or express ourselves physically, we create tension, form a relationship and create a certain quality. The theatre researcher Jan Hyvňar broadened the concept of drama so that it was not "understood as narrowly specialised for the genre of drama and dramatic theatre, but rather as a basic existential category. We suppose that there is a tension between two forces, between necessity and freedom, between 'I am acted' and 'I am acting'" (102). Drama is generally a symbiosis of epic and lyrical, or objective and subjective, approach to a structured work, the prototype of which can be (and usually is) a story or narrative with a link to human history or universal existence. We can perceive drama as a sequence of situations, as a dramatic situation, or figuratively as a path that generates symbolic levels, reveals metaphorical images, acquires a mythical dimension and makes archetypal images may come to the surface. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, who focuses on action and, within it, free choice, theatre is supposed to present "a simple, human situation and a free individuality in this situation, choosing what it wants to be" (Sartre 43). From the theatre, he demands a universal and extreme

situation in which he rejects psychological motivation and fatefulness, but which encourages action, active search for solutions (by acting in a situation) to freedom and thus unifies the space of characters and spectators who become witnesses of the given situation. In his reflections on theatre, Jan Císař mentioned that he sees the essence of authorial theatre in an uncovered, naked and demonstrated distinctive approach to the world, art and people and characterises the author's principle as a demonstration of his own relationship to a specific life situation.

Who, then, is the originator of "authorship" in contemporary authorial site-specific theatre, and where does drama have its place? The director or dramaturg as creators of theatricality in its complexity? The author of the masterpiece in the sense of the author of a text, or a written structure as a "scaffolding" of the work, or a description of the movement libretto, or "only" an ideological delimitation of the area based on a memory, object, situation, etc.? A character acting in a situation or an actor dressed in a role (character, type, representative of the community, etc.)? The performative personality: is it a performer or a spectator? "The spectator can be alone, he can change the entire dramaturgy, initiate or take over the role – become the originator" (Václavová, Žižka 109). That is, the spectator as a self-agent, as well as the creators responsible for action, development and solving the situation in the space and in relation to it and the others. In authorial theatre, the hierarchy of creative approaches and expressive elements is naturally reorganised, but this does not necessarily eliminate the functional division of traditional roles and their content, such as the author, director, choreographer, composer, scenographer, performer, etc., nor does it disrupt the relationship to the dramatic text. With openness then inevitably comes the necessity of defining one's own conception of theatricality and drama, distinctive poetics, and a unique artificial reality in which the individual components not only complement each other but are able to further relate and point to other circumstances and levels.

About Space

In the past, the theatre space was generally created to communicate the performance. "Postmodern theory focuses on space, place and status. Recall that Gilles Deleuze, for example, speaks not of a space as an area but of a *spatia* that carries an ordinal meaning. It is a space determined by relationships, and they always come from a place that belongs to a person in a position. [...] In contemporary theatre and drama, more than ever before, the space and the position occupied in it become the bearer of meaning and its *raison d'être*" (Gajdoš 101–102). The conventional division into stages and auditoriums in the abovementioned history, but especially

from the 1960s and more dynamically since the 1990s, is disrupted by new scenic situations and by searching for unusual scenography solutions. The experienced phenomenon of the interdisciplinary character of site-specific performance is not perceived today mainly as an artistic, architectural, scenography intervention in space generating an aesthetic experience but as a comprehensive view of place (memory of place), people (beings) and things connected or related with it. It strives for uniqueness, artistic quality and appealing dimension in the social (historical, political, activist, etc.) context and relations in general. In the Czech environment, this type of theatrical production is also described as a theatre in a public or non-traditional space. For example, the conquest of space is discussed in connection with Jerzy Grotowski's concept. However, it was not until the 1990s, also following the example of the foreign ensembles Beweth, Dogtroep or Gob Squad, that the theatre became an organic part of the public space. Outbreaks took place in industrial localities, such as the ČKD hall in Prague, a former printing house, sewage treatment plant or factory hall, and in non-functional schools or at the railway station in Pilsen and elsewhere. In Prague in 1996, on the initiative of artists and active theorists in the field of site-specific performance, the 4 + 4 Days in Motion festival was established and soon became the flagship of alternative art forms in a non-theatrical environment. Each year of the festival is related to a specific place, such as the building of the former Federal Assembly, a sports stadium or the Prague Zoo and many others. In a collective monography devoted to the theatre in a non-traditional space, Roman Černík believes that site-specific in theatre theory "indicates theatre, theatrical path, a methodology that wants to be consciously in contact with a specific environment with all its qualities, uniqueness, but also with its history and conflicts. The site-specific approach is based on exploring the possibilities of a specific environment (place, building) through artistic creation" (Václavová, Žižka 88). In these cases, there is often a purposeful spatial solution, in which a defined area for play and a separate seating area for spectators do not automatically arise. Often the boundaries (traditionally perceived theatrical ramp) are blurred, and watching the action from a standing position, in walking or from close to intimate proximity is often related to the poetics of the work, i.e., they are an integral part of the concept and subsequently play a key role in creating an artistic experience. The creators consciously work with the properties of space, such as mutual distance, the direction of the observer's view, thermal and olfactory comfort, and visibility, because both the theme, the action and everything that surrounds the spectator and what touches him (metaphorically and directly) becomes one of the primary levels of the author's approach to the communication of the topic and shapes the observer's perception. "In non-traditional spaces, there is an emphasis on the chosen topic and its articulation about the specific addressees of a particular place. Associativity, decomposing the original source based on even

free associations, forms a new composition. This is necessary, especially in non-traditional spaces, in the variant of searching for topics, the essence of the place and social, cultural and other contexts" (Klíma 47).

Paradoxically, even with countless reruns or longitudinal concepts, site-specific performance is a unique event in many details and respects and in every moment, even while attempting to strict adherence to the structure of the work in all its components. "Site-specific unites everything – the interest of artists in the outdoor space in which they live, in archaeology and environmental history, in their own body, activating the spectator, relativizing the division of space into auditoriums and stages, uniqueness and authenticity, mixing disciplines, using new technologies, etc." (Václavová, Žižka 98). The situation includes not only the performer-actor but also the visitor, observer, participant, observer fit into the position of a witness of events, an executor of the will of the creators, a self-deciding actor in the intentions of the format. There are specifics here, including the so-called extra-theatrical theatricality, which is related to *scenology*, the monitoring of phenomena that are expected to be scenic and dramatic (Valenta 81). The spectator, who observes what is happening around him actively or only from a distance, creates other relationships and connotations with his presence and sometimes even engagement. The theatre researcher Július Gajdoš reflects in more detail on the role of the spectator in postmodern theatre:

In this type of theatre, the spectator becomes the protagonist. Its place inside is part of the show and is one of its components. The theatre of the event requires from him full participation and personal acceptance of the principles of the given direction. He thus becomes an actor of mundaneness, so that in everyday life he may discover its uniqueness, authenticity, and ultimately its essence, and thus its holiness (Gajdoš, *Postmodern* 21).

About Memories

A qualitative research method of oral history appeared in the domestic environment in the 1960s. However, we can talk about the broad-spectrum use of the method only from the post-revolutionary 1990s, especially after the turn of our millennium. Of course, the transmission of memories, stories and records of historical events has taken place since the ages. However, just as book printing significantly helped to spread the written word, in the second half of the 20th century, the invention of the tape recorder developed the principles of oral history. Suddenly, the availability of recorded speech, which humanises historical events, proved to be absolutely essential – it more easily conveys the atmosphere of the time and draws attention to the importance of individual experience. The pioneer of oral history as a socio-historical

discipline in the Czech Republic is professor Miroslav Vaněk. As early as 1990, for example, he showed an interest in archive recordings from the Velvet Revolution and actively sought out witnesses, as not all archives and documents from the previous period were available. Interviews with narrators complemented and even replaced many sources.

I perceive the memories of the witnesses for the author's theatrical work – the dramaturgical line of the reminiscence theatre – as a fundamental impulse and subsequently a source of inspiration as well as space, often in a direct relationship between space and the witness. Narrating memories carries emotions, recalls motivations for behaviour and actions and focuses on essential details of the reality of that time, character-forming aspects and the socio-historical context.

In 2016, when we were preparing the production titled *From Majdalenka to Madla*, it turned out that compared to the historical facts about the suffering of abandoned children during World War II, more telling were the objects and photographs used either directly from the witnesses or the placeholder objects inspired by their stories and the place of performance. The old wooden spools that resonated most in this production were, on a symbolic level, the unfolding thread of the story, the torn umbilical cord, the wires of the concentration camp, even the handlebars of the bicycle, etc. The story's main heroine was a baby (depicted on a symbolic level just by a thread spool) that the mother spontaneously put away in the house after the Gestapo called on the family to transport. We situated the creative process in the dilapidated building of a former village inn. Then we staged the performance not only there but also in cellars, abandoned industrial spaces, in the ruins of the castle, in the chapels. The choice of space for reruns had to be closely related to the narrative, always with one of the places that provided the child with temporary protection (a house, a monastery, a country farm, etc.). The audience watched the life journey of the child and their rescuers, i.e. the journey for life, and gradually they could join, share bread, warm up by an actual fire, darken the windows with us, etc. With the audience participation, we assumed (offered) involvement on the level of belonging. Our goal was not to confront the opposing sides in the war but to expand the circle of helpful people (out of compassion, conviction, faith, etc.), or at least actively present what they themselves thought about their own motivations to help and the courage to risk their health or life to save someone else's life. Thus, the dramatic situation in its classical form took place not only on the stage but also significantly among the audience.

A year later, we focused on the history of a place in the Czech-German-Polish borderlands. The production *Hotel on the Corner* was based on a collection of stories of witnesses connected with the town of Varnsdorf and their belongings, including clothes, photographs and building materials from 1932 to 1989. The

border zone still copes with the stigmas of history, such as the mutual displacement of the Sudetenland, the post-war decay of buildings and the theft of property, social decline, crime, national discord, poverty, etc. Therefore, the performance was situated in the local unreconstructed theatre building from the 1950s. The reason for choosing the theatre building took into account the fact that the original hotel on the corner succumbed to demolition. The main guides to the events became the hotel receptionist, maid and reporter of the daily newspapers. Through them, space-time was transformed, history progressed chronologically, and the spectators, like all other actors, became guests of the hotel or local residents. They were put in situations, usually socio-political, such as leaving the place due to the expulsion of German residents or whether to participate or refuse to participate in the strike and watch the nationalisation.

During the same period culminated the process of preparing a performance, which used artistic means to approach the individual phases of Alzheimer's disease. The playwright's work here involved not only collecting memories (from clients and their relatives, informal caregivers and workers, especially direct care workers in a residential facility) but also, above all, participating in observing and communicating with clients and in training in caring for a person suffering from memory impairment. As part of this qualitative research survey, I became a part-time employer in a home with a residential service and developed a concept in direct contact with clients. The production *Three Chairs* has been staged more than fifty times in many places in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Most often, these were specific spaces in residential facilities where the authenticity, proximity and comprehensibility of the communicated levels were guaranteed. At the same time, it blurred the distinction between actors, caregivers and clients. In addition to the emotional impact and aesthetic experience, the theatrical form served to break down barriers for a moment and fundamentally influenced the view of the disease and the care of a person losing cognitive abilities.

In 2018, as the author of the project, I participated in creating a collection of memories of witnesses to the past century. The publication entitled *222 and 2 Stories of the 20th Century* became an inspiring basis for subsequent dramatic work. The mention of the persecution of nuns and clergy in the 1950s became the core of two productions: *The Nuns* and *Midnight in the Borderlands*. The production of *The Nuns* was created in accessible monastery premises in the Hoješín area in the Vysočina Region. On the timeline of one human life, it elaborated the fate of the Franciscan spiritual order under the domination of totalitarian systems. The reruns, usually realised in sacral spaces, did not force audience participation based on a relationship with the Church but appealed to a moral civic (human) attitude.

In the case of the production *Midnight in the Borderland*, which premièred in 2019, the performative potential of the actual events of 1951 was developed by classical staging procedures with the director's authority in collaboration with the dramaturg and composer. However, even in such a tight work, there was room for the author's contribution of all participants, witnesses and creators. The piece *Midnight in the Borderland* became a turning point in the repertoire of the theatre of reminiscence, as it was a symbiosis of the memory of the place (Monastery in the Loreto complex in Rumburk), oral history (testimonies of witnesses and historians), taboo (evacuation of the monastery by Secret Police and the issue of displacement of Czechs and expulsion of Germans from the border). The original material for the two main characters of the drama was taken over. The other roles crystallised through a synthesis of details from chronicles, archives, memories and own feelings from the place itself. After preparatory, synthetic-analytical work with the collected data, the dramatic text was written in the monastery cloister and the church. The original drama was created in which each of the characters solves his dramatic situation against the background of a cold environment (literally, a church, cloister, chapel of the Holy Steps / metaphorically, the period after World War II), of relentless night time – seventy minutes remain until the evacuation of the monastery premises (nationwide disruption of monasteries and arrests of clergy).

At the same time, the dichotomy of morality and ego of individual characters is revealed. Like the author who originally wrote there, the spectators are placed in church pews and become witnesses of the events, while the plot takes place not only in front but all around them, below and above them, even in parallels. Spatio-temporal intertwining sharpens perception, diversifies attention, and increases the level of emotional experience. It continuously and unevenly disrupts intimate, personal and public space. The degree of participation – active observation – is then individual but, of course, undemanding. Drama – a dramatic situation is constantly mixed with dramatic events. In front of the spectator, whether demanding “art” or an occasional one, there is a complicated but also complex and, at the same time, action-packed view of a section of history and human destinies brought to them under the circumstances in one place at the same time. And yet, as with outdoor productions, there is an opportunity to leave the area. In this situation, the spectator's decision can turn into the actions of a witness of the event or a participant in the story. The spectator has the right to intervene – to stand up to a theatrical convention and act in the interest of his moral convictions, whether to defend the character or the space itself. The site-specific drama thus clearly enhances the role of the follower in the active observer. However, the follower can also take a passive, observational and even dismissive attitude of one's own free will. The reruns of the production *Midnight in the Borderland* took place both in the original space and in “foreign” churches and monasteries at the request of festivals and organisers. The paradox of the project is

that these events took place not only in Catholic stalls but also in evangelical or Old Catholic churches, not only in the Czech environment but also in Germany in German translation and with a mixed cast.

Conclusion

In my study, despite the mention of the importance of processuality and creativity, I try to confirm the hypothesis that the combination of *genius loci* – a space with charisma and the resulting strong theme – a close connection with the local community and the participatory role (active/passive observer) can be an effective strategy (tactics) in strengthening the role of the author in dramatic production after the year 2000. Therefore, the basic preconditions are an open creative approach through which the author or author team breaks stereotypes and seeks new solutions emanating from space, grasps the topic initially and encourages text in direct relation to place and creators. Therefore, empathy for the space, a generally burning problem and a strong feeling for the emergence of a distinctive symbiosis of all components of theatrical form are important, whether we call it site-specific drama, event or any other way differently. Thanks to the aspects described above, the site-specific author's drama has a demonstrable potential to appeal to such audience groups for whom a visit to a classical theatre or a production based on a dramatic text is unthinkable. "It offers an alternative to those who do not go to the theatre or exhibitions, either because they are bored with current cultural events or do not like the conventional ones in theatres and galleries. Site-specific-art will come to them on its own – in the square, in vehicles, in their jobs, in their streets or villages, in their homes" (Václavová, Žižka 87).

Moreover, such a spectator can often decide for oneself whether to receive such type of communication (art) or whether to interrupt one's monitoring or participation. The attractiveness of the format also includes the question of the spectator's freedom. A specific theatricality characterises such an event, i.e., ideally, a new visual-auditory language, a world created in the original (natural) environment, whether as an illusion of its reality or reality itself. The space and its theme, magnified under a magnifying glass, can make taboo areas accessible by artistic means as well as a theatrical art in general, generating new knowledge, an aesthetic experience, activating impulse. The territory of contemporary drama in the context of site-specific performance is very open and, simultaneously, limited, like its creators, space, audiences and their mutual relations.

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