

In the paper, the authors discuss the concept of staged readings, arguing that they are the predominant performance format for presentations of young playwriting. However, such presentations should not be understood as an intermediate stage between reading and performing but as a fully-fledged and independent artistic genre. Many staged readings thus lose the function of "first information" about the text and its author. Instead, they have become a proper way of performing a text, thus opening up a wider area for theatrical experimentation. Using concrete examples, the authors will reflect on practices characterised by the text becoming the main or even the only thing necessary for a theatrical event and reading (in all its possible ways and forms) becoming the key theatrical means.

Keywords: young generation, staged reading, experiment, generator, staging, reading

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THE GENERATOR:: for Any Number of Staged Readings

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Introduction¹

During the last decade, staged readings have become the dominant performance format for presenting young playwriting. For most authors, however, this format has become the only way for them to present their texts as a public performance. For this reason, it is necessary to stop considering staged readings as a kind of intermediate stage in the development of a text, a prelude to some potentiality that has yet to be realised, something that is thus postponed into the future since, for young authors, this often means nothing else but an indefinable tomorrow that never comes. Many such productions, therefore, no longer serve as the “first information” about the text and its author. Instead, they have become a true and proper staging of the text, thus opening up the space for theatrical experimentation.²

The notion of the theatre experiment is so broad that it is almost impossible to explain it here without great simplification, roughly condensing a multitude of divergent and branching performative practices or by an imprecise, almost violent unification of numerous singularities under a single common denominator. Nevertheless, despite this diversity, the theatrical experimentation of the last century, at least in its predominant part, seems to point in one general direction, a common thread, namely, the attempt to dethrone the theatre text, that is to say, to deprive it of its primacy preserved by theatre literature in comparison to the stage. Blaž Lukan notes that the alliance between the text and the stage, which primarily involved the domination of the former over the latter – although it was never exemplary or unproblematic – shifted into a competitive

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² Of course, this statement does not imply that staged readings have not been present before and do not appear in other cultural spaces. However, this goes beyond the intended scope and context of our research. That is why we deliberately focus below on the research of staged readings only in the context of the dramatic writing of the young generation.

relationship in the 20th century. This shift coincided with the emergence of theatre direction and the autonomisation of theatrical approaches (*Gledališka* 185–87). For this very reason, we perhaps should not look for the goal orientation of theatrical experimentalism in this newly established relationship but rather for a foundation, a basis for the stage to be able to speak through its own language or through everything that can be part of this language. This new relationship, of course, opened up an infinite number of possibilities for exploring the potential of performance, that is, of everything that theatre can be or do. As a consequence, dramatic writing itself was fundamentally changed. It is impossible to list all the significant changes that have taken place. To mention but a few, one trend becomes particularly obvious: as the director's theatre has become more established, the playwright has lost their dominant role, and numerous new practices have emerged, many of them expanding the meaning of theatre or even emerging from strictly speaking, non-theatrical artistic spheres, for example, happenings and performance art. Ultimately, however, playwriting itself also changed, which soon called for new terminological designations, such as “no longer dramatic texts” or “postdramatic texts”, each of which in its own way testifies to the supposed end of (classical) playwriting.

In contrast to what has just been written, we will follow a particular turn in exploring the layers of what a theatrical experiment can be. This approach does not mean that we will try to reassert the primacy of playwriting and return from performance back to textuality. We are not trying to advocate for a theatre text that would bring the author and their text back into the theatre and make a turn away from the performative turn. Doing so would be nothing but a conservative appeal for a return to the alleged good old days when everything was just like it should be. On the contrary, we are still interested in the performative potentials of the stage. However, we intend to consider them in a surprising conjunction between reading and staging. We will follow the creative practices that preserve the interest in the staging, not at the expense of the dramatic text but precisely within its own framework. This calls for a specific shift in the underlying paradigm. Thus, the theatre text for us no longer merely represents a vehicle or source of meaning but a full-blooded and independent agency. We thus understand staged readings as a performance of a theatre text, a performance that uses the body of the text and its materiality instead of the actor's body, exploring all that can be done with it at this intersection and what are all the performative potentials that a simple reading can have.

We, therefore, see experimentation primarily as an attempt and risk to do something differently. If experimentation is established as a deviation from and an alternative to the already existing and, above all, to what is recognised as dominant in a given artistic, social and political context, then we question whether the aesthetic empowerment and re-functionalisation of the genre of staged readings is not precisely one such area of experimentation. Staged readings are becoming an alternative to the status quo on at

least three levels: Firstly, in a situation where the majority of texts by young authors are never actually performed, they represent an alternative option, perhaps even an “escape route” for performing such texts. At the same time, however, they are much more than merely an “escape route” since they also represent an alternative to the prevailing performative methods (a staged reading, namely, no longer requires costumes, a set design, props, a stage, etc.; all that is necessary seems to be the text itself and its potential audience). Furthermore, when understood in this way, that is, as full and complete *performances*, staged readings contradict and present an alternative to the prevailing understanding of this format as merely an intermediate stage in the development of a text and, therefore, only a kind of a “semi-performative form”. Finally, staged readings also allow for an alternative to the existing dramaturgies of theatre texts and the possibility of a different textuality since they raise the question of what a text *can be* and how it can communicate with us. While the dominant way of staging texts is to try to translate them into stage signs and thus dissolve them into the “language of the stage”, staged readings radically insist that the text is the principal, essential and even the only thing necessary for a theatrical event and that reading is, therefore, a key theatrical means. This understanding, of course, allows for the development of fundamentally different dramatic scripts, as it finally suspends the criterion of performability that is to some extent still dominant to this day and is undoubtedly also very limiting.

In the paper, we focus on staged readings and relate this issue to the questions of how to still generate experiments today, who can generate them, and what is the young generation’s position in such experiments. We examine whether it is the case that it is precisely staged readings that generate the theatre experiment today and, at the same time, relate this to the question of the status and positioning of drama and its authors. Thus, we first try to define “staged readings” and what it means to establish this type of performance as an independent performative format. We will then ask where this surge of staged readings emerging among young authors in a certain period comes from, noting that the popularisation of this format is most probably closely linked to today’s precarious economic situation in which (primarily but not exclusively) young artists are currently working. Since staged readings require minimal resources, they often represent the only chance for staging a given text, which, despite minimal production conditions, can still be aesthetically fulfilling and worthwhile. In the last part of the paper, we attempt to show this through concrete examples of different practices of young women playwrights.

Reading as Performance

The notion of “staged reading” immediately arouses interest. It meshes together what is supposed to be incompatible. It associates reading with staging, even though reading is precisely the radical opposite of staging, according to the classical

theatre model. Staging supposedly begins only where reading ends, that is, with the translation or transposition of the words written on paper and intended for reading into “stage language”, for example, stage movements, light design, the choreography of movements and gestures, set and costume design, music, etc. Theatre rehearsals – the process by which a dramatic text transforms from its literary status into a full-blooded stage performance – are usually structured along the path from reading to what is supposedly a real performance. Thus, the rehearsals usually start with “reading at the table”. After a while, in a later and presumably more mature phase, they “move into the space”, at first perhaps with the actors still holding the text in their hands as an aid, and finally without it altogether. At that point, the reading is over, and this is supposedly when the time is ripe for the real theatrical event.

It seems that the dual status of playwriting, torn between literature and theatre, is also linked to this split. This aporia is typically established by two great and influential aesthetic theories: Aristotle’s and Hegel’s. Although they approach the opposition thus established from opposite ends and advocate completely different positions, they nevertheless share the understanding of “performing” and “reading” as two mutually exclusive possibilities, of which only one or the other can be chosen. However, it is impossible to consider them along the same aesthetic line, that is, intertwined in a reciprocal relationship, into *reading as a type of performance*. Aristotle, for example, argues that the spectacle, the so-called *opsis*, is the least important of the six elements of tragedy since “the tragic effect is quite possible without a public performance and actors” (2321) and that “from the mere reading of a play its quality may be seen” (2340).³ Hegel, on the other hand, emphasises the necessity of performance, stating that “no play should really be printed but should remain [...] in manuscript for the theatre’s repertory” (1184). These words should perhaps be read in the context of Hegel’s time in which the so-called closet drama (*Lesedrama* or *Buchdrama*) emerged, aimed only at readers, not spectators, as it was not intended to be made into a performance. All of this, however, merely reiterates and reinforces the notion of a binary relationship between performance and reading as an *oppositional* relation, that is, a relation of opposition and even mutual exclusion. Nevertheless, although there is, of course, clearly a difference between reading and staging – silent reading in solitude, for example, is not yet sufficient for a theatrical event – and although it is true that in “staged readings”, a *particular* relationship is established between reading and staging, we are here principally interested in conjunction, a kind of dialectic between the two poles, Hegel and Aristotle, reading and staging, literature and the stage, that is, an attempt to position one within the other.

Today it seems that we have overcome the dichotomy between text and stage, per-

³ As Florence Dupont points out, the very title of Aristotle’s text, *Poetics*, “indicates a technique of writing a play or epic poem” (17), rather than a ritual stage event.

haps it even appears meaningless and outdated, and thus it might be useful to reject it. In the field of theatre theory, this has, in fact, already happened from both sides, that is, on the side of the text, which Gerda Poschmann defined by the notion of the theatre text and attributed to it “an immanent performative, theatrical dimension” (102), and on the side of the stage, which, according to Bruno Tackels, can be understood as a blank page to which directing is applied as “a kind of writing, a stage writing or a writing of the stage (Fr. *écriture de plateau*)” (81). Thus, just as theatricality is an intrinsic quality of the text itself, so too is directing a kind of stage writing, which contains “a grammar, language, vocabulary, style and rhythm of its own” (Tackels 81), and therefore presupposes the existence of the spectator as a “stage reader” (88). In short, instead of continuing to insist on the aporia between the text and the stage, the stage itself can already be understood as a kind of text. At the same time, the text can be considered in its inherent theatrical dimension.

Similarly, we will not consider staged reading as a phenomenon split between these two extremes. For if we put a notch between reading and performing and separate them into opposite poles, a staged reading cannot really be one or the other; it can only be something in between, a kind of third way that is *no longer just a reading* (since actors or performers are involved and an audience is present, the reading is often supplemented by interpretation and often also by some kind of directorial intervention). However, it is *not yet a real performance* since it is still “just” a reading of the text, after all. The staged reading is thus considered to reside somewhere in the middle of the process, from the creation of the text – usually written in the solitude of the author’s workspace – to its public performance in front of a theatre audience. It is thus only a kind of intermediate stage in a work-in-progress. While the author already offers his text to the public, this is not yet done in a way that would constitute a “proper” performance; the function of the staged reading is only informative. This way, the playwright can receive information about their text, which they verify by, on the one hand, putting their words in the actors’ mouths for the first time and, on the other hand, by collecting the reactions of the audience and perhaps also their critical opinions. At the same time, the audience also receives information about the text and often about its author as well, particularly the “interested” public, among them, of course, primarily those who could potentially perform the text or at least decide to perform it or publish it in printed form, for example, directors, producers, theatre company directors and editors. For the author, the staged reading thus represents only a developmental stage in the writing process; it gives them valuable and often even the first feedback on what they had written, based on which they can complete, correct, improve and modify their text. To the potential “theatre agents”, the staged reading also represents only an intermediate step in deciding to stage a text and/or engage its author. This point brings to mind the image of a theatrical

marketplace where authors offer and sell their wares to potential clients, whether their text or themselves.⁴

A side effect of the concept of “staged readings”, understood in this way, is that this artistic genre becomes rather uninteresting, both performatively and theoretically, because it is reduced to a mere function and is intended only as a way for the text to pass the first test or experience of the stage, which is only the first step on the path to the final goal: the publication or performance of the text. Such “semi-performances” may be of interest to the authors and to a rare, but first and foremost pragmatically oriented, audience, that is, people who are hoping to find a new quality text or at least a potentially interesting theatre collaborator, and in the best case scenario, also to a few theatre enthusiasts who, for some unexplained reason, like to stay informed about the current production of dramatic texts. However, since staged readings are virtually the only possibility for many (mainly young) playwrights to have their text performed at all, many of them renounce this functionalist understanding and instead attempt to establish the aesthetic autonomy of this artistic genre. Such reframing is the only way for them to be able to consider staged readings as anything else but a poor consolation prize, a makeshift substitute for authors who can hardly hope for what is supposedly a proper fulfilment of a text, which is either its performance on a theatre stage or its publication in a journal or book.

Rather than juxtaposing reading and staging as opposed to each other and insisting that they are necessarily mutually exclusive, we propose to position them both on an aesthetic continuum. Perhaps the most effective way to illustrate this relationship is the metaphor of the Möbius strip, where, as one gradually progresses from the starting point, one sooner or later finds oneself on the opposite side. On this (s)trip, we will be most interested in the point of intersection, the junction at which one plane passes into another, and reading itself thus becomes a fully autonomous performance.⁵

4 Blaž Lukan has written extensively on this subject, which also brings to mind a rather telling image of a marketplace: “The first problem thus lies in the attitude adopted by the mostly unestablished authors themselves, as staged readings with zero budget or minimal material investment allow them to offer their potential ‘value’ to strong ‘buyers’ who might purchase it in the aesthetic or real market. This means that the authors expect to turn a ‘profit’ which can materialise in the form of potential employment, ‘commission’ or even mere recognition of the aesthetic value of the offered item as an investment into the future. In any case, we are talking about precarious (economic) categories. The second problem is the attitude of the addresses, i.e., the potential ‘buyers’ or ‘commissioners’, as staged readings (unless they organise them themselves) enable them to easily find potential candidates (with no particular investment or effort on their side, i.e., inquiries, competitions, grants or investment into ‘talent’) for their own investments (and invention), which to them can bring a completely different kind of ‘profit’ than to the authors” (*Gledališka* 176, 177).

5 This can also be taken quite literally, as some staged readings no longer involve interpretive reading aloud or play with who is reading (Lukan, *Gledališka* 174). Lukan points out some contemporary examples of staged readings that no longer fit the dictionary definition (173, 174), which not only raises the need for a revised dictionary entry but perhaps also the question of appropriate terminology. Perhaps some examples of contemporary staged readings that go beyond the classical definition of the phenomenon would need a new terminological term or at least a prefix to be added to the existing one (such as post-reading performance or no longer reading performance). This question is only offered for consideration at this point.

This idea would mean that, under certain conditions, a reading could become a very real theatrical event. These conditions are surprisingly minimal. As early as the 1980s, for example, Blaž Lukan noted at a public reading of Ivan Mrak's work that it revealed "theatre in its original sense", even though it required as little as, say, "a chair and a table, an open book on it, modest lighting and distant music" (Dramaturške 23). This confirmation is particularly encouraging for (young) playwrights operating in today's precarious conditions, as they often have no choice but to work in barely adequate production to stage their texts. Fees are low, so there is little time for rehearsals, and the pool of potential co-workers can also be very shallow. There is also little money to invest into lavish costumes, sets and props (if any), and often no stage since authors usually find space only in marginal and alternative venues, where lighting options are also poor and minimal, rather than in proper institutions. In such conditions, it is impossible to stage one's text as a "spectacular" theatre production. Any such attempt could only fail miserably. It would also be ideologically somewhat problematic since it would be in perfect harmony with the prevailing logic of capital, which wants to make as much profit with as little input as possible. This is precisely why such an approach would be counterproductive: if it proved possible to produce performances with so little investment, there would be no need to invest more than that into performances. If, by contrast, we assume that staged readings can be a completely independent and fully-fledged artistic genre, then there is no need to make them into something "more" than what is possible, given the (mainly financial) limitations. Thus, this type of production can be quite honest about the fact that it is produced under precarious conditions, that this is a kind of poor theatre, in a sense, albeit poor only in terms of the conditions of production and certainly not in terms of their aesthetic value. Again, the latter can only be achieved if we first acknowledge staged readings as an artistic genre or as having any performance potential. The space for exploration only opens up by abandoning the idea that staged readings are merely an intermediate stage between reading and staging. Only in this way can reading be perceived as a potentially interesting theatrical means worth exploring and promising to create a fully integrated theatrical event.⁶ Thus, we should ultimately resist any ambition to make it appear that staged readings are being produced in good, perhaps even institutionalised, working conditions. However, we should not resignedly abandon all performative ambitions in advance on account of the modest conditions. The point is that staged readings, insofar

⁶ Blaž Lukan has written and spoken about this on various occasions, including at the round table on the independence of staged reading, organised by the KUD Krik association at Nova pošta (The New Post Office) in 2019: "A staged reading looks for the possibilities of staging within the text itself, on many different levels. Not only at the level of interpretation of the text but also at the level of the medium itself, the graphic notation, the way of presenting the text, its projection, the establishment of a relationship with the text, the involvement of the audience in the creation of the text live in front of us. In fact, what we see here is the birth of theatre out of the spirit of the text precisely in this primary form. This opens up a vast field of possibilities, but it also takes time. The worst form of staged reading is that which is considered to be merely provisional, substitutes, consolation mini-performances. This marks a degradation of the staged reading" (qtd. in Potočan 21).

as they truly remain *readings* (and no more than that), are also a performatively attractive artistic format while at the same time reinforcing their aesthetic dimension with a political one, since, by pointing out rather than concealing the conditions of their production, they communicate something along the lines of “Hey, these are the conditions in which we can work at the moment”.

Generators of Experimentation

As an experimental form, staged readings have emerged in different periods. Below we consider when artists have turned to this format and why.

Experimental and even guerrilla-style staged readings appeared during the time of the PreGlej group. Its members at the time (playwrights including Simona Semenič, Simona Hamer, Peter Rezman et al.) understood the format of staged readings primarily as a response, a commentary or even a critical gesture to problematise the state of contemporary Slovenian drama, its writers and, above all, the methods and procedures of their performance. Due to economic conditions, and even more so due to the scarcity of production resources, PreGlej’s authors appropriated the format of the staged reading, which became their hallmark format, and the creative freedom offered by this approach eventually gave rise to some of the most prominent contemporary playwrights in Slovenia.

It would seem that the establishment of these artists and more frequent stagings of their texts in institutions marked a quieter period when staged readings were not so frequently presented. This situation changed with the founding of the journal *Adept* and the Vzkrik Festival of Dramatic Writing – with other initiatives eventually following – by a new generation of writers to challenge the status quo. Between 2017 and 2021, staged readings again started to appear in larger numbers in the context of various festivals and projects: for example, the New Readings programme at the Slovenian National Theatre Drama Ljubljana and other supporting programmes in institutional theatres; during the COVID-19 lockdowns, even video streamings of staged readings appeared in the production of the Prešeren Theatre Kranj under the title *Couch Monologues*; staged readings were traditionally organised by the Week of Slovenian Drama Festival, the *Adept* journal and the Vzkrik Festival; and platforms such as *Instant Drama* appeared, etc. Nevertheless, staged readings often remained at the level of classical interpretive readings without further conceptual or performative considerations. They filled a gap in supportive programmes while at the same time giving the impression that the state of contemporary Slovenian drama and the position of playwrights was improving significantly. In reality, such productions were often mere substitutions for supposedly “proper” performances of texts, making them

a kind of staging in deferment. This potential had yet to be fully and truly realised. The same goes for this year's 2022/23 theatre season, in which more than five competitions for plays are actively open, a record number. Just a few, however, also offer the staging of selected texts in addition to the prize money. Therefore, the frequency of staged readings seems to directly correlate to the frequency of publishing and staging the authors' texts, or even to the possibilities for this happening at all, and at least partly to specific individuals' personal ambitions and enthusiasm. Perhaps this is why the need for such experimental gestures is gradually disappearing when the generation changes (Jernej Potočan, Nina Kuclar Stikovič, Iza Strehar, etc.), and even more with the gradual establishment of the authors in more institutionalised spaces.

Particularly interesting are the cases of the Vzkrik Festival of Dramatic Writing and the journal *Adept* of the University of Ljubljana, Academy of Theatre, Radio, Film and Television.⁷ Both initiatives were launched at a time when interest in playwriting among younger authors was surging, while it was also becoming increasingly clear that there was a lack of space in which they could present their texts publicly. In the independent scene, the text is usually created during the creative process. In contrast, in institutional theatres, devised projects are usually combined with older (often canonical) texts and commissioned texts, usually by established authors. This is why it became clear that the young generation had to establish its own platform for continuously staging new texts. It is also why the Vzkrik Festival ran for several years with the eloquent slogan, "If you refuse to stage us, we will stage ourselves!" Nina Ramšak and Žan Žveplan pointed out a similar problem in the editorial "Don't just read it, use it!" of the inaugural issue of *Adept*. The journal was conceived to dedicate one of its two annual issues to the publication of plays by authors of the young generation. From the outset, it resisted the idea that it would be intended merely for "linear reading from beginning to end" (Ramšak and Žveplan 3). Instead, it encouraged reading in relation to a potential staging. For this reason, each issue in which the plays were published was followed by a public presentation in the form of staged readings, which were conceived from the very outset in a broader sense, that is, "not merely as a step on the way to the final product, but rather as an autonomous form worthy of exploration" (3). This was also the fundamental starting point of the Vzkrik Festival, which organised workshops under the mentorship of established playwrights throughout the year, where participants wrote and refined their texts. When the workshops ended, these texts were also presented as staged readings. These stagings were not conceived to serve only the function of presenting the first information about the text, however, but rather as a proper and independent performative event, which was indicated already by the initial definition of the project as a *festival of dramatic writing*, and this ambition was ultimately confirmed by good attendance and media coverage.

⁷ The Vzkrik (Eng. shout) Festival ran from 2017 to 2021 and had four festival editions, during which 28 new plays were produced. The first issue of *Adept* journal was published in 2014, and the journal is still being published to this day.

Gestures and Shouts⁸

What these staged readings have in common is that they do not consider reading only as an interpretation of texts but rather as their main staging concept, making the text the most important (if not the only) theatrical element. There are, of course, many similar cases of staged readings. One is also the performance by the Bulgarian playwright Alexander Manuiloff, *The State*, presented at Nova pošta (The New Post Office) in 2019. The audience was seated in a circle in the auditorium, with a box of letters placed in the middle of the circle. The audience determined the performance's pace, dramaturgy and course, like as a community or a state. They also read the text by themselves and finally finished it. Although *The State* was labelled as a full-length theatre performance, it was still possible to discern the main elements of what we ourselves understand by the notion of an experimental staged reading, as the text was placed in the foreground and used as the only theatrical tool, which meant that it was only the text and the spectator who were confronted with each other on stage.

As far as our theatre space is concerned, experimentation, especially in young playwriting, is most evident in the inclusion of autobiographical elements and the involvement of the author's presence and corporeality in the act of public reading. The latter is thus no longer merely a reading of a text but also a reading or decyphering of the author and their status context. Such was the case, for example, with the staged reading cycle *Ko se žgem [When I Burn (Myself)]* at the 57th Maribor Theatre Festival, in which Nina Kuclar Stikovič, Urša Majcen, Helena Šukljan and Manca Lipoglavšek presented their interpretations and adaptations of Hans Christian Andersen's famous fairy tale *The Little Match Girl*. Šukljan and Lipoglavšek did something similar in staging their text *Dramakurbija (Dramawhoring)*. Since the abovementioned cases are mainly experiments created in the context of study courses, it is perhaps interesting to mention also the staged readings of the author Anja Novak, who inserted simultaneous textual, visual, audio, interactive and staged readings of her poems by other artists on QR codes in her book of poetry entitled *Rane rane (Wounds Wounds)*. She also continued this practice in the context of public presentations and readings of her poetry, intervening in public events with her poetry in the role of her alter ego Anjuta, a bride, offering herself and her subjectivity to be read. Novak used sonority and music as one of the main principles for reading her texts – a kind of concert staged readings – also in her work *My Body, My Cage*, in which the text was reduced to a few dozen words and sentences. The reading was supplemented with the sound of her bones cracking and the use of spaghetti as a sound source, thus underlining her inner state of anorexia. A similar example of a concert reading was also Nina Dragičević's performance, which supplemented the reading with bass guitar accompaniment, thus conceptualising her text *ljubav reče greva (Love Says Let's Go)* as a score of rhythm and atmospheres.

⁸ Cp. the footnote no. 7.

All of the examples mentioned above are experimental in that they abandon their supposedly primary function of reading rehearsals and interpretations and instead engage with the overall performativity of the text. At the same time, staged readings can also be experimental regarding the social gestures they produce. Here, their experimentation refers primarily to the position of the dramatic text and its author. Nika Švab created one such gesture in a series of participatory staged readings of the text *Delo in deklica I–V: Drame tlačank* (*Work and the Girl I–V: Drama of the Oppressed*). As a dramaturg and writer, the author applied for funding at the Ministry of Culture's Authors' Opus call for proposals, usually intended for directors and performers with their ideas for full-length productions and performances. Švab resisted this by applying a dramatic text and a concept for a series of staged readings, thus challenging the prevailing notion of performance production units while at the same time establishing staged readings as an autonomous performative format, competing on an equal footing with other performative and theatrical events in the call for proposals.

The dramaturgical structure of the text, divided into five scenes, was followed by the conceptual design of the staged readings. There were five of them, so each day between 15 and 19 November 2022, one scene was read, and each evening a new audience and other invited theatre-makers, seated on a grandstand in the auditorium, read the text and commented on it with the author herself. The events were organised at The New Post Office, with no additional elements but a large screen on which the text was projected. The only theatrical element on stage was thus the text itself, which was read *prima vista* without any interpretation or preparation. The course of the reading was not predetermined; the readers themselves decided when they wanted to stop it with their questions, reflections and doubts about the quality and intelligibility of the text, and with suggestions for potential approaches to staging it. The reading and the conversations it sparked were recorded and later transcribed into a new documentary performance text entitled *Nevarno razmerje dramatike in gledališča* (*The Dangerous Liason between Drama and Theatre*). This text was created in medias res during the staged reading and the accompanying analytical commentary on another text. The event itself – the reading and the analysis of what was read – thus became the material (and not just the basis) for creating a new theatre text. Lukan says that when staged readings take place on several levels, not merely on the level of interpretation of the text, “what we see here is the birth of theatre out of the spirit of the text” (qtd. in Potočan 21). In the case of this particular staged reading, however, we saw not only the birth of theatre but also the birth of an entirely new text. The logic was thus reversed: suddenly, the staged reading was no longer an “escape route” for texts that, while written, are not performed but rather become a theatrical event in their own right and even the generator of new texts. Not only can a staged reading function as a full-fledged performative format, but it can also even function, so it seems, as a fully autonomous theatre text.

Conclusion

To summarise, it is obvious that the staged reading is established as a space of experimentation (and perhaps also a gesture of resistance) when that which is supposed to be polarised is overcome, not by abandoning the two supposedly opposing poles, but by radically reconciling them in the same place. Thus, the best cases of staged readings are those that do not appear as something in-between in the relationship between reading and staging but instead function both as the one and the other at the same time, however, not in a way that simply merges one pole with the other, but so that it establishes one pole *within the* other. We have tried to illustrate this concept with the metaphor of the Möbius strip. It does not mean including both a little bit of reading and a little bit of staging, but rather that reading – under certain conditions, of course – can be established as an autonomous form of performance, and this is where the experimentation can start: in exploring all the potential forms of performance that can be produced by reading. Something similar could be argued about the opposition between the literary and the theatrical, as seen in the case of Nika Švab's project. A theatrical event can – again, of course, under certain conditions – also be the generator of a new literary text. It is not the case that theatre and literature are completely opposed to each other, that there is an unsurmountable gap between them; at some point, they can overlap, and perhaps it is precisely at this point that an infinite space for experimentation opens up.

At the same time, establishing staged readings as fully autonomous theatre events can also have substantial consequences for the precarious situation of (young) authors. If staged readings were no longer perceived merely as something transitory, intermediate and temporary, if they could generate experimentation, and if they could be acknowledged as a comprehensive way of staging dramatic texts, then it should not be left to the particular will of individuals to undertake such a project, let alone depend on the sad fact that texts by young authors usually do not get to be presented on “big theatre stages”. Instead, staged readings should be adequately funded and thus systematically encouraged, as it is obvious that they can be a generator of new and different writings and perhaps even new authors. Adequate funding and systemic support would prevent staged readings from emerging and disappearing in more or less contingent waves and create a sustainable space for exploring new forms of playwriting. Paradoxically, however, it turned out that staged readings could begin to experiment precisely because of their self-sufficiency, as their creators were not bound to anyone else except themselves. Although systemic support is welcome, it should not come at the expense of artistic autonomy. True experimentation can only begin in a field that operates autonomously and without limitations.

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