VERBATIM: A NEW TECHNIQUE IN CONTEMPORARY DRAMA

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes verbatim as a new technique in contemporary drama. It gives historical background for developing of verbatim in Russia, and presents a brief review of verbatim pieces in modern Russian theater. Verbatim in Russia created an opportunity to break with classical repertoire theater and traditional means of reflecting the reality. Giving voice to the marginal, verbatim, to certain extent, conducted the mission of social therapy, paving the way to open discussion of the most topical issues. The majority of verbatim texts cannot be reviewed stand-alone without methods of their adaptation. The main generic principle of docudrama is the incorporation of genuine document into the dramatic text in order to substitute fictional a plot by real events. Verbatim plays are often mono-plays or plays with the limited amount of characters. Verbatim aroused indisputable interest and inspired Russian playwrights to create plays of various genres and topics. For Russian New Drama verbatim signified not only experimentation but an opportunity to break with classical repertoire theater and its traditional means of representing the reality.

Key words: verbatim, Russian theater, documentary drama, classical repertoire theater

1. INTRODUCTION

The end of the 20th century traced a revival of interest in the genre of documentary drama. It is generally believed that art addresses document in pivotal moments of history, during the scientific and technological breakthroughs drastically changing the face of the world. Being an era of ideologization, when major ideological systems went through rise, opposition and collapse, the 20th century saw a vast number of crucial shifts and social clashes [Prokhorova, 2014]. It inevitably resulted in the reciprocal change of artistic direction from fiction towards fact and document. As a result of this process, verbatim drama, which emerged at the height of non-mimetic art, came into being.

“Verbatim” involves the recording of real events drawn from word-for-word interviews with people selected due to their belonging to certain social group (profession, age, etc.). In other words, verbatim shifts theatre to a sociological survey, which goal is to achieve authenticity by moving away from fiction and fabrication in construction of reality. “Fact becomes more important than image, its interpretation and estimation” [Zhurcheva, 2011].

2. METHODS

Methodological base of the issue is based on the theories of drama by T. Zhurcheva [Zhurcheva, 2011]

3. TRADITIONS AND PREDECESSORS

The emergence of the form in different countries was brought to life by a wide scope of reasons. Among the fundamental ones T. Zhurcheva outlines the pursuit of actualizing theater, drama, and Art in general in order to give voice to ordinary people living here and now, as well as an ambition to reflect real life of modern society and to meet the demands of time. The scholar justly points out the leading role of social component in verbatim theater with its focus on marginalized groups of society, thus, indicating that verbatim is based on technique originating in sociology rather than creative practice. Verbatim theater tends to document an individual voice and an individual life, unique, however typical it may seem (everyone is in line with others but bearing his own truth and pain). The scholar argues that the very social and historical reality of the 20th century with its catastrophes and atrocities bringing to light the notion of “catastrophic consciousness” turned out to be the prerequisite of verbatim theater. Wars, revolutions, mass slaughter of people paradoxically but naturally resulted in understanding of pricelessness and indispensability of stand-alone human life [Zhurcheva, 2011].

As an esthetic phenomenon verbatim theater has a rich heritage to draw on. The obvious analogies may be drawn to Jerzy Grotowski’s Poor Theatre, Antonin Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty, drama of Angry Young Men, contemporary English In-You-Face Theatre, Danish cinematographic school Dogma, Russian drama of New Wave and creative work of Ludmila Petrushevskaia in particular, “documentalism” of Peter Weiss and Rolf Hochhuth, and modern German-speaking drama (E. Jelinek, etc.).
4. RESULTS

While verbatim theater as a part of documentary theater has retained the traits of previous theater practices, it has tended to move away from them in terms of dramatic form and audience address. It is essential to distinguish between verbatim plays and documentary plays incorporating the technique of "immersion" into certain sphere of social life, when the author spends much time in the environment and then shapes the play on the basis of acquired experience. In such a case, collection of the material is a preliminary stage, whereas in verbatim drama it is the main part of creative process since the testimonies are used without change.

5. DISCUSSION

The renaissance of documentary theater at the end of the 20th century in Germany is closely connected with the creativity of young German playwrights. A new approach to documentary theater was demonstrated by the members of the Rimini Protokoll theater. The performances of Rimini Protokoll can be treated as a kind of verbatim theater, albeit not an orthodox one.

Development of verbatim theater in Great Britain was a part of a tendency, which was characterized by Derek Paget as "New Documentarism". According to Paget, while it "has retained aspects of previous Documentary Theater practices, it has moved in contrasting directions in terms of production methodologies and audience address" [Paget, 2008]. Among the distinguishing features of British verbatim theater the scholar mentions that "it has provided a platform in which accounts of public events alternative to official ones are registered in language that mostly escapes the "official" media of newspaper, radio and television" [Paget, 2008: 130]. Contemporary British documentary theater is notable for its topicality and prompt response to domestic and world events. Thus, recent verbatim pieces have addressed the privatization of British railways ([The Permanent Way by David Hare, 2003]), the problem of migrants who live and work in London ([The illegals by Christine Bacon, 2009]), the Arab and Israeli conflict ([The Arab-Israeli Cookbook by Robin Soans, 2004]).

Some authors, referring to Stephen Bottoms, claims that the recent revival of documentary tendency in Britain was closely connected with the events of 11 September, 2001, in the US ([Talking to Terrorists by Robin Soans being one of the emblematic examples]). Undoubtedly, the US theater immediately responded to the tragic events by the documentary plays ([The Guys] by Anne Nelson and With Their Eyes [2001] by Annie Thoms). And yet, the response of the US theater to the events would rather take the form of grotesque satire rather than documentary reflection.

6. DRAMATIC FORM AND PERFORMANCE

Typologically close to docudrama it may seem verbatim drama possesses its distinguishing peculiarities. The main generic principle of docudrama is the incorporation of genuine document into the dramatic text in order to substitute fictional a plot by real events. Verbatim plays are often mono-plays or plays with the limited amount of characters. Decorations are absent as well as theatrical make-up and costumes. The performances are based on the text and presence of the actor, whose objective is to create an illusion of complete identity with the character.

The authenticity of the narrator’s verbal image is one of the criteria of topicality in verbatim drama. The main goal of the verbatim piece is to mirror the personality of the interviewee, thus, the attention of the playwright is focused on what is said by the characters rather than what is going on the stage. As Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky point out, "The author’s presence in verbatim is minimized, reduced to the work of interviewer and editor" [Beumers, 2009]. This focus on “linguality” [Beumers, 2009] may well account for the importance of the interview for verbatim pieces. It is often the performer of the verbatim play who conducts the interviews, as far as personal communication with the interviewee is of vital importance. It attunes the performer to the rhythm, intonation, accent, and speech mannerisms of the actual person represented by the character giving an opportunity to create “the linguistic photography” (in Beumers and Lipovetsky’s term) which gives critics the ground to speak of “the weakness of traditional dramatic forms” in verbatim pieces [Beumers, 2009].

Alongside with cognitive function of the verbatim theater, all researchers of the phenomenon mention that its goal is to raise the audience’s feeling of ethical and social responsibility. Verbatim provides an arena for overcoming social problems, including the improvement of the life of marginalized story-tellers [Gromova, 2006; Zhurcheva, 2011]. The 1992 play of the American actress, playwright, lecturer and sociologist Anna Deavere Smith Twilight on racial riots in Los-Angeles favored reconciliation of conflicting parties. The author interviewed approximately 200 representatives of various social groups, age, gender and race, and then chose 25 of the story-tellers. The play followed the pattern of one-person dramatization as Anna Deavere Smith performed as a playwright, director and actor herself. The dramatist preserved genuine names and presented real appearance, speech mannerisms, background of the story-tellers, and setting of the interview. The voices were interwoven against the background noises surrounding the interviewees, which found its reflection in stage directions. The transcript of the characters’ speech was presented by the lines of different length representing the pieces of discourse between the pauses. The polyphonic effect created the feeling of “real”
speech capturing its intonation patterns and rhythm. All the aforementioned gave ground for treating the text by A. D. Smith as an “orthodox verbatim”.

7. VERBATIM THEATER IN RUSSIA

In Russia verbatim theater pioneered in the late 1990-s. The Russian theater community was first introduced to verbatim technique by the representatives of Royal Court during the workshop organized in Moscow by British Council in collaboration with the founders of the Golden Mask festival. The workshops of the New Writing Association, held in 2000, resulted in creation of Documentary Theater that hosted the first same-name festival. The events of the festival included readings, performances reviews, discussions of problems facing modern documentary theater. One of the focus areas of the festival was the analysis of verbatim plays created by Russian playwrights, theater directors and actors, for instance the documentary pieces Geologists First ... (The Coalfield) by Kemerovo Lozha theatre, Crunch Time by E. Sadur and G. Genoux, The Month of Dead Sun by M. Kuzmina, Submergence by E. Narshi. Next year trace new experiments in verbatim drama, for instance, Soldiers’ Letters produced by theater Baby in Chelyabinsk, and Fishing by I. Falkovski. During the following years a wide range of verbatim plays appeared, among them Crimes of Passion by G. Sin’kina, Sober PR by E. Narshi and O. Darfi, War of the Moldovans for a Cardboard Box by A. Rodionov, Doc.tor, The First Man, I’m afraid of Love by E. Isaeva, Manager by R. Malikov and N. Denisov, The Beauties. Verbatim by A. Zenzinov and V. Zabaluev, A Hundred Foods of Love by V. Levano, etc. In 2002 non-state, non-profit, independent documentary theater Tete.r.doc was created to become a testing ground for verbatim in Russia.

It is necessary to mention that “classical” verbatim in Russian cultural space is comparatively rare. It is no coincidence that the representatives of Royal Court accuse Russian colleagues of “needless artistry” and “poor actuality”. According to M. Gromova, “the authors often add up to the texts, endow symbolic sense to the monologues, incorporate plot lines, and find the material to create psychological characters. The texts seldom contain generalized, anonymous characters like ‘The First’, ‘The Second’, ‘Young woman’, ‘Miner’, ‘The Homeless’, ‘The Fisherman’ [Gromova, 2006].

Russian verbatim theater seeks to address topical social, psychological and ethical problems and gives voice to the people whose fates usually are left beyond the boundaries of traditional drama. Thus, the first verbatim play Geologists First ... (The Coalfield) was created by members of the Kemerovo Lozha theatre K. Galdaev, E. Sytyi, A. Belkin, S. Nasedkin based on the interviews with the miners in the town of Beryezovsky (Kuzbass). The play introduced the audience to the miners’ routine, everyday dangers, tokens and superstitions, tragic and comic events.

Verbatim pieces tend to be provocative, as the playwrights are concerned with marginal layers of society, choosing as characters the homeless, convicts, homosexuals, migrant workers.

The exceptions are verbatim plays Submergence by E. Narshi, dedicated to the tragedy of the Kursk submarine in August 2002, campaign Nord-Ost: the Fortieth day, organized by G. Zaslavski in commemoration of the terrorist attack in a Moscow theater in 2002 during the musical Nord-Ost, September.doc by E. Gremina, which represents the events in Beslan in 2004. Such traditional themes for documentary drama as landmark cases and biographies of celebrities seem irrelevant for Russian verbatim theater. The authors focus on “documentation of speech acts” rather than on “documentation of reality”.

The playwrights are attracted to verbatim because it utilizes real speech, texture, sound, the very “nerve” of life. The language is often as provocative and inflammatory as the topics raised. The taboo vocabulary has often become the reason for many debates which sometimes become the only topic for discussions of plays and their stage versions.

The majority of verbatim texts cannot be reviewed stand-alone without methods of their adaptation. The stage directors implement a wide scope of methods, for instance, “life-game” (improvisational presentation of characters’ lives before and after the performance in front of the audience), “in-depth interview” (the actor arrogates the documentary material provided by the interviewee and takes the shape of the character, giving the interviews and answering the audience’s questions on behalf of the character), etc.

8. SUMMARY

Having analyzed some of the recent Russian verbatim pieces, we can point out that verbatim dissolves the boundaries between reality and art. The key notion in verbatim theater is not “creation” or “interpretation” but “recording” and reproduction of verbal testimony. For Russian New Drama this method signifies not only experimentation but an opportunity to break with classical repertoire theater and its traditional means of representing the reality. Notwithstanding its pessimism, and presentation of the victims and the marginal, it carries the mission of social therapy. Focusing on topical social problems and social and psychological dilemmas of common individuals, verbatim favors open discussion and sometimes even overcoming of the problem under study.

9. CONCLUSION

The phenomenon of New Drama is extremely interesting for researchers. Its unique plots and methods give great opportunity for the discussion.
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