

**UNIVERSITATEA „BABEȘ-BOLYAI”**

**CLUJ-NAPOCA**

**FACULTATEA DE TEATRU ȘI TELEVIZIUNE**

**ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE TEATRU**

## **The Project of the Total Theater (1919-1970)**

### **Summary**

**Conducător de doctorat:**

**Student doctorand:**

**Prof. univ. dr. Mihai Măniuțiu**

**Cristian Teodor Rusu**

**2014**

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*The Schema of Total Theater* is an interdisciplinary research aiming at analyzing the notion of realizing a *Total Theater*, viewed as an expression of the Total Artwork (*Gesamtkunstwerk*). Starting with theoretical developments by Wagner, Craig and Appia, this thought arrives to materialization by way of the avant-garde in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in most different forms and contexts. This research meets, by the nature of the topic, the research of avant-garde theater, stage design and architecture: all these movements desired to abolish the frontality of the Italianizing Theater and to create a *place* in which the space of the stage would merge with that of the spectators.

Modernism may be defined as an immense *Project* (cultural, political, social, ideological – these domains being always inter-connected); similarly, the project of the total theater can be conceived as an exemplarily modernist project, through the prism of analyzing the form, the language with which they have tried operating, finally, through the bold message of the utopia it desired to materialize. The total theater remains a beautiful modernist utopia, as it speaks about the theater of the future, stage technique and the building dedicate to this project. Without a determined and allocated place, the total Theater could not exist even as a concept.

This research focuses on the fundamental component of Theater – *space*, in its most general meaning as a *place dedicated, allocated to theater*. At this point, the definitions of what space could mean in theater multiply: *the place* is the space that contains the architectural component, which includes the stage and the space of the public, and dictates directly the concept of stage design. This is the space allocated to theater in the vision of this research. The specific traits of the utopian theater will emerge out of the proposed analyses and will give an overall picture of the phenomenon, by marking all fundamental aspects of the projects: authors, context, influences, style, stage technique, all tied to the realization of *The Total Artwork, The Total Spectacle*.

The turn whereby the concept of *Total Artwork (Gesamtkunstwerk)* passes from the conservative-metaphysical register (Wagner, Appia) to the social register of leftwing visions in the 1920s is rather sudden. WWI has been a decisive factor in this change in the nature of the concept, because of the change in the political-social-cultural ideal, through re-centering the critical discourse of the arts on their profound democratization, this idea has rapidly transformed into a technological-social project exposed, as a rule, to excessive politicization. Theater,

however, viewed as a *par excellence* social art in the interwar period, could not stay untouched by these dramatic cultural metamorphoses. In other words, if theater contains both poetry and visual arts, it also contains image, music and dance, the avant-garde manifesto would over-race the role of theater in the aesthetic revolution, it would present it as a pioneering art of the avant-garde project.

In defining the project of total theater I identified some common aspects to all projects analyzed, internal traits such as *circularity*, *techno-centrism* and *the large number of spectators* (the mass theater). Modernism, a *par excellence* a technical age, imprints these aspects on the project of total theater. Circularity, seen as a sign of community and democracy, would combine perfectly with the idea of democratizing theater, which would need to speak to a number of spectators as large as possible. The removal of boxes (signs of “bourgeois” type division of the public) encouraged circularity. And the perfect form of this morphology would become the sphere, cultivated both in theory (Souriau) and in the most imaginative projects of total theater.

The timeframe I use came from many factors: 1919 is the year when European culture re-launched itself after this dreadful war, also operating, in a peaceful atmosphere, theater projects. 1970 is the year when a first spherical theater has been created by Jacques Polieri at the Osaka World Exhibition.

In chapter 2, *Premises of clarifying the notion of total theater in modernism*, one can identify two great “inventions” that would specify the cultivation of the notion of total theater: abstract art and use of film in the theater. Abstractionism has said its creative word by bringing in both the idea of abstraction in theater (Kandinsky, through his *Sonorité jaune* project in 1909) and abstract spaces (El Lissitzky’s *Proun* space), a fact that caused an acceleration in theater reform, so necessary in that period. The second factor, the emergence of film, scared many people of the theater, but simultaneously the most daring of them have started to use it on stage as a booster of expressiveness and political / social message (Eisenstein, Meyerhold, Piscator), a fact leading both to the birth of “multimedia” spectacle, as well as of the imperative necessity of equipping utopian theater projects with large canvas projectors.

Chapter 3, concerned with the total Theater in the Weimar Republic follows the idea of total theater in German culture. I present the general situation of theater in that period, keeping in

mind that German Theater has been the most advanced in terms of aesthetics and technique in the whole world. More radical forms of total theater naturally emerged in this effervescent environment. The first analysis deals with space in Max Reinhardt, the first director who has used circular or alternative spaces in his shows. Reinhardt directed in circus buildings, that is, in circular configurations, simultaneously developing the theory of the *Theater of the Five Thousands*, a theory of a mass, communal theater with cathartic forces for the public. This theory and its experiences were obviously noticed by both people working in theater, and architects. They started independent theater projects for the masses (*Volkstheater*), as well as a series of experiments in and with the space of the stage. The most interesting of them took place in Bauhaus, where Oskar Schlemmer and László Moholy-Nagy dreamed about the conceiving of the mechanic-abstract Spectacle in which the role of humans would have been reduced or even eliminated. Moholy-Nagy is the one who uses, in this context, the term *Theater der Totalität*. In their enthusiasm, the Bauhaus architects conceive of the most daring spherical theater, which were only reveries, as we do not have any specific ideas about how they could have been built or how they would have worked. It was also at the Bauhaus that Gropius' *Total Theater* project had been prepared for director Erwin Piscator (1927). Piscator, already a distinct name on the Berlin stages, experimented, in his turn, with using film in theater, conferring a well-defined dramatic role in what he has called *Documentary Theater*. Being "conditioned" by stage technique, he dreamed of a building dedicated and capable of technically supporting large-scale shows. This is how Gropius' project, which contained an unheard-of mobility of elements, and next to a huge system of projections become a genuine "theater-maker machine," as the architect put it. Never built, it has rapidly become a landmark in thinking for the total theater project.

In the chapter reserved to Russian constructivism and to Meyerhold's theater, one can witness the formation of a notion about a society of spectacle, in which theater shows have a special place. It was the "spectacle of history", initiated by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution. In the new society, the spectator as such (*the new man*) would become a performer, in redefining reality, especially via mass theater shows, all with deep ideological connotations. The gigantesque shows such as *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (Ereinov, 1920) or Meyerhold's project, *The Fight and the Victory* (1922), have primarily an ideological goal, that of forming a new aesthetics, a new art. Soviet "utilitarian" art, started in all domains, found its expression in theater through special, unheard-of formulas: an austere stage scenery, geometrical,

often kinetic, and through biomechanics, a completely original way of acting. Meyerhold has been the standard bearer of these ideas, via extraordinary directing in theater or via unrealized projects. Just as Piscator, Meyerhold has dreamed of a fully equipped theater building for the necessities of his art. The architectural project has started, but it was never completed in its original form. In the 1930s, project competitions in new theater have started, and they combined sophisticated stages with spaces for mass rallies that could host thousands of people. The answer of the architects has been one of the most originals, but their theater projects have been never realized.

I describe futurist projects in chapter 5. These can be split into two large periods: the period of the manifestos (1909-1919) and the fascist period (1919-1944). The period of futurist manifestoes is marked by an aggressive effervescence, the traits of futurism being well-known (mechanic, nationalist, warmonger). The approach of theater by futurists (Marinetti, Prampolini) has been rather similar. Without creating grand-scale shows, their ideas stay strictly within the pages of their manifestoes. After 1919 (when the fascist party has swallowed the futurist movement), more concrete ideas about new, futurist spaces in theater, such as Prampolini's *Magnetic Theater* (1925), a theater that, consistent as an avant-garde discourse, would have been a huge device / installation of which nobody knew how it would function. More concrete mass theater projects emerge, however, after 1932, when Mussolini's state policy decrees the doctrine of *The Theater of 20,000 people*. This idea has also been influenced by the presentation of Total Theater of Gropius in Rome, architects learning in a direct fashion about this theater. Of course, there were projects of utopian theaters. But the sole achievement of this period is the *mise en scène* of a mass show in Florence in 1934, titled *18BL* (a brand of Fiat truck), an ideologizing story of this type of truck, which was a star of the WWI. The show presented the humanized "fate" of this truck in Italy's recent fascist history and was an aesthetic and propagandistic failure.

Viennese projects, emphasizing those of Frederick Kiesler, are analyzed in chapter 6. Against the background of an unheard-of creative effervescence of post-WWI Vienna, there were set into practice many technical theater projects, with unpredictable solutions, especially because they had the opportunity of being presented in three great Exhibitions of Theater Technique in Vienna (1924), Paris (1925), New York (1926), all three organized by Kiesler.



Thus, we have a *Theater with a ring-shaped stage* (a collaboration between the architect Strnad and director Reinhardt), *Theater without viewers* (Moreno-Levy – Hönigsfeld), a rather conceptualist project, being a form of therapeutic theater or a *Cube Theater* (Fritz). But the most spectacular is the *Endless Theater* of Kiesler, indeed, a spatial concept (a spiraled ramp), which has been installed in Viena in 1924 and in which there were actual shows. Developed in several versions, this concept will follow Kiesler also in his American projects, after his self-exile in 1926. *Endless* will develop in 3 decades into the *Universal Theater*, his last project in 1962, an immense cultural complex that would have overcome the well-delimited area of theater.

The interwar Polish theater also has some interesting answers to this topic (chapter 7). Through Andrzej Pronaszko and Szymon Syrkus, the total theater project receives a ring-shaped state theater, called *Simultaneous Theater* (1927-1929), in which the public is surrounded by two mobile rings on which the formally abstract scenery has been installed. A praised project at the time, this has been blocked at the stage of a scale model. Syrkus, as an architect and stage designer, projects a theater studio with mobile elements (podiums, chairs), whereby he manages to configure a completely mobile space, a spatial theater in which the scenery is spread throughout of the entire space, creating several points of playing. Pronaszko, in his turn, initiates a mobile, transportable theater project for popular representations. Called *The Mobile Theater* (1934-1935), this would have had the sector of mobile public, surrounded by a fix circular stage with scenery. This project was part of the popularization program of theater initiated by the Polish government. Also this theater has remained in the stage of a scale-model.

Chapter 8 discusses American projects, with an emphasis on Norman Bel Geddes' creation. The situation of American theater around the 1920s has been obviously backward in comparison to European theatrical culture. This determines stage designer Robert Edmond Jones and art critic Kenneth MacGowan to travel in Europe twice and to publish two books, extremely valuable as documents: *Theater of Tomorrow* (1921) and *Continental Stagecraft* (1922). These two books describe the situation of contemporary Theater in those years (from text, scenery, space, lights to stage architecture and stage play aesthetics), precisely for propelling the renewal of American theater through these vivid examples. Because of these two books, the two authors can be viewed as two pioneers of modernizing American Theater. Norman Bel Geddes, a polyvalent artist, is the one who desires to implement spatial innovation in Theater, projecting

various types of theater. After an exceptional stage design experience (*The Miracle* directed by Reinhardt in 1924 in New York), Bel Geddes projects 6 theaters that he presents at the Chicago World Exhibition in 1933. These completely innovative theaters bring different morphological solutions, imposed by the function of each building (*The Repertory Theater*, *Intimate Theater*, *Divine Comedy Theater*, etc.). None of them have been built.

In chapter 9 I present two Dutch total Theater projects and the Romanian contribution to this type of theater, Ion Sava's *Round Theater*. Hendrik Wijdeveld's project (1919-1920), strongly influenced by antroposophical philosophy, desired a church-like monumental Theater, having externally a strongly sexualized shape – one of the most original theater shapes ever projected. The other Dutch project, that of Renaat Braem (1934), belonged to the branch of projecting utopian urban spaces, in his case, a city 100 km long, provided with all facilities of production and social life. *The Total Theater*, with a circular stage and moving armchairs, was supposed to find its place in such a city. Ion Sava's *Round Theater* project (1944) comes as a necessary answer to the modernization of Romanian theater at a moment when the building of the National Theater of Bucharest has been destroyed already. As many people dealing with theater in the interwar period, Sava proposes a theater reform by re-shaping the space where theater is performed. His project supposes a ring-shaped stage, while the public sits in the middle, for he believes that this shape (as in the case of Polish *Simultaneous Theater*) is the most dynamic and capable of reforming theater space. Even though it appears after a certain delay in the landscape of Romanian avant-garde, this project demonstrates, however, the avant-garde's genuine concern for researching new forms of artistic-theatrical language.

*The Total Theater Project in the French Theater Culture*, chapter 10 and the last, analyses such interests since approximately the time of WWI and up to 1970, when Jacques Polieri has built *Théâtre de Mouvement Totale* at the Osaka World Exhibition. However, the situation of French avant-garde theater is special. The immobility of French avant-garde Theater is widely known, as is also known its “traditional” resistance to restructuring and problematization. However, the pioneers of these attempts are Jacques Coupeau and Louis Jouvet, who, at the *Vieux-Colombier Theater*, try to create a new type of stage, the architectural stage, building a fix device. Jouvet, in his turn, imagines since 1922 projects of total states and moving halls, being a real visionary in this field. Then, the Auguste and Gustave Perret brothers

project a theater for the Paris World Exhibition (1925), a theater that should have been very versatile as a space, but what finally came out has been a great disappointment. The *Laboratoire et action* group was probably the most constant in its proceedings to change the French stage, but also them, projecting a *Théâtre de l'espace* inspired by that of the Polish Syrkus, lamentably failed. Then the time for a different approach to the topic has come, through Artaud's theories (1932), who imagined the totality of a play through emotional, poetical and ritual levers, and not through rationalist approaches, as up to now. The impasse immediately showed itself after the WWII, when the emergence of a dramatical text called the "absurd" (Ionesco, Bekett) encouraged Theater to become more abstract, hoping for a possible renewal. But this has not happened: people working in the theater, but also architects, dramatists, stage designers, sociologists have started debating this critical situation in which French theater has been lingering, searching for a solution by organizing two large conferences (1948, 1961). In 1948, under the title *Architecture et dramaturgie* two possible ways of renewing theater have been debated: the dramatic text and the space of the theater. By launching fabulous but speculative ideas (such as in Souriau's *The Cube and the Sphere* lecture), there were presented in opposition space and function models of the cubical stage, and a possible *spheric stage* with all consequences resulting from here. There were proposed theater models, the Italian model has been debated. Nothing concrete happened, but a new conference in 1961 on the topic of defining *the theatrical place* (*Le lieu théâtral dans la société modern*). This conference desired to stabilize a definition of theater space, from which the consequences of its reformation would spring, again through architecture or other means. This was, again, a perfect intellectual exercise, without any concrete consequences. There were, however, timid attempts at a reform, such as the practice of circular theater (Villiers), but at a small scale, due to the smallness of theaters, or the establishing of the Avignon Festival (1947), in which Jean Vilar did nothing else but changing the frame of the stage play, moving it into open air, for thousands of people, but without bringing anything new in the deep substance of theater space.

An unheard-of direction of the French avant-garde theater must be searched for in the creation of Jacques Polieri, a mysterious self-taught man of theater, stage design and architecture. Strongly influenced by avant-garde art, which he has managed to catalyze as organizer of three editions of an Avant-Garde Art Festival (Marseille, 1956, Nantes, 1975, Paris, 1960), Polieri has attempted in theater, through his stage directions and published texts to create

an original system of communication through theater, for he conceived of theater as a dynamic communication code. In matters of theater architecture, Polieri excelled by installing a ring-shaped stage for a visual spectacle (1960, Paris), and together with architects as collaborators he has built in Grenoble a hall of theater with a moving chairs system in which the public has been mobile (1968) and has developed the concept of *Théâtre de Mouvement Totale* (1957-1970). This last project is one offspring of the spherical Bauhaus theaters, and it is the only one that has been built, in 1970, functioning only during the Osaka World Exhibition.

The Conclusions of the research on the project of total theater are that this immense modernist project has been born from a real necessity of a change in theater, the most “backward” of all arts and the most difficult to reform. With the inexhaustible modernist imagination, the projects are seductive, but utopian, for they would have needed special technologies and stage techniques of transposition, some invented from scratch. But architects and stage designers hurried to draw them, to make them visual, ignoring a number of details that should have made them work. This is the common aspect of all analyzed projects. But sometimes, imagination and creativity are more important than technical determinations. This is why *The Project of Total Theater* reflects the great creative potential of modernism.

**Keywords:** total theater, avant-garde theatre, Modernism, Abstractionism, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, theater architecture, mass theater, theater stagecraft