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Languages, theatres, nations: the problem of national theatre histories and the case of Switzerland

In recent years projects of a national theatre history have been debated in many European countries. France, Germany, and Denmark have new histories;¹ in Finland and Switzerland work on them has started; in the Netherlands, in Belgium, in Sweden, and elsewhere, work has reached various stages. This state of affairs cannot be a coincidence; yet why, at this historical moment, there should be a particular interest in national theatre history is not obvious. One important motive, I am going to argue, is the following: historiography creates stability and reassurance, particularly at moments of crisis, when events seem to be taking an exciting or perilous turn. It familiarizes what may have seemed dangerously unfamiliar by placing it in the context of a sustained and orderly narrative; and it fixes in social memory what has been familiar but seems in danger of being lost.

The theatre in European countries is at such a critical moment, due to two factors; they concern the theatre as a cultural form, and the nation as an institution. As elsewhere, the theatre as a cultural form has faced increasing pressure from new dramatic media since the beginning of the twentieth century, especially from the cinema and television. They have changed, specialized, and diminished its social role; they have increasingly taken over its former domain of debating and passing on social values. The loss of much of its social and political prestige has meant that the theatre has become more dependent on public subsidies and has found it more difficult in recent years to obtain them; the growing political appeal of more popular cultural forms, like football, has had its share in this. At the same time, and for the same reasons, the theatre as

¹ Fischer-Lichte, Erika, *Kurze Geschichte des deutschen Theaters*, Tübingen and Basel: Francke, 1993; Jomaron, Jacqueline, ed., *Le Théâtre en France*, 2 vols., Paris, 1988; Kvam, Kela, et al., eds. *Dansk teaterhistorie*, Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1992.

an art form has also been released from the restraints imposed on it by the need of being, in some way, representative of the community as a whole.

The second critical factor concerns the nation as an institution. European countries have faced double pressure: like elsewhere, globalization, both economic (the World Trade Organization) and cultural (McLuhan's global village), has weakened their coherence. But in addition to this, their coherence has also been weakened by the emergence of the European Union, which has strengthened regionalism in all European countries. Nation states are withering between the two institutional layers of the region and the Union. One of theatre's traditional roles, as creating, reaffirming, debating, and celebrating national identity, has therefore become questionable as well. Writing the theatre history of a European nation today may therefore be viewed as one attempt to cope with a critical moment in its cultural and political life, as an attempt to reaffirm, debate and celebrate its identity. As such it draws on, but also parallels the role of national theatres themselves.

But even though the need for national theatre histories may be strongly felt, writing them has become difficult, for a reason that concerns historiography in general. Reliable master-narratives, as they used to be offered by the histories of major theatres, major productions, and major theatre artists, are no longer available, and there are, so far, no alternative, generally acceptable narrative patterns that can be imposed on the historical material.

The general points made here can be illustrated by the situation in Switzerland, which, just because of its specific complexities, has been particularly affected by the crises mentioned. Here I shall first sketch some conditions usually taken for granted for the establishment of a national theatre and see how they apply to Switzerland. I shall then give a short outline of a specific theatrical form produced by Swiss cultural and political history. And I shall conclude with the discussion of a project that, not surprisingly, reflects all the urges and problems mentioned here.

Three features are usually taken for granted for a national theatre to thrive, even though we cannot expect all of them to be present at the same time: a shared language, a shared center, and a shared mythology.² Those considering themselves part

² I prefer *mythology* to the term *ideology* frequently used in such contexts. The reasons are spelled out in my book *Poetry and Community*. Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1990, 58-71.

of the nation are aware of sharing these features, and they take these features to distinguish them from other, foreign people. Since the beginnings of nationalist thinking, a shared and distinct language has been considered vital for constituting a nation; language is supposed to be expressive of the national character. A cultural and political center also favors a national theatre: from there cultural initiatives will spread all over the country, or, conversely, initiatives will get their stamp of national approval by being taken up there. This cultural center is usually the political capital of the country as well; and it is there that the National Theatre as an institution tends to be located. Finally, a shared mythology can be used to inculcate, debate, and celebrate national values. In most cases, this mythology is articulated in terms of the nation's own history, in terms of where "we" come from, who "we" are, and where "we" are going.

In the case of Switzerland, all three features mentioned are problematic. There is no shared language; instead there are three languages, French, German, and Italian,³ which are also the languages of large and influential neighboring states, from which it is important to mark off oneself. Language therefore cannot play its national role, both because there is no single national language, and because the languages used do not distinguish the country from others.

There is no cultural center either. The federal constitution makes culture a matter of the cantons, a privilege jealously guarded by them.⁴ Theatres are therefore entirely supported by the cantons, which, in turn, tend to delegate this task to individual communities. No Swiss theatre system has developed; rather the theatre systems in the various language areas tend to reflect those in neighboring countries, where also many, sometimes a majority, of those working in the theatre

³ *Rhaeto-romanian* is the only language considered to be indigenous; it became a national language in 1937. The German-speaking Swiss speak dialects which deliberately mark their language off against speakers of High German; they may even claim that Swiss German is a language of its own. But this language is obviously not acceptable as a national language to speakers of French and Italian.

⁴ Especially in the French-speaking part of the country, where the Federal government is easily seen as being dominated by the German-speaking majority. In recent years, two attempts to give the Federal government a role in cultural policies have been rejected in popular votes. Exceptions are film, national museums, and the upkeep of historical buildings.

come from.⁵ In French-speaking Switzerland single productions tend to be performed en suite, in the German-speaking part there tend to be ensembles and repertories.

Under these circumstances there are a number of theatres in various cities which may be comparable in the range and quality of their offerings, but none of which is acknowledged to be representative of the country as a whole. But there is also a huge number of independent amateur theatres, which together play to audiences larger than the subsidized professional ones.

The only feature left then is the third: mythology; and this is quite developed. Politically this mythology is dominated by the values of independence and direct democracy, culturally by the notion of unity in diversity. Even the center of the country is mythological: the mountains of "Central Switzerland", as it is called, the scene of its origins. Mythological history is crucial in celebrating these values: Schiller's William Tell, a play based on the folklore of central Switzerland, became the national drama in the course of the nineteenth century.

Apart from circulating such mythological material, what role could theatre play in the service of the Swiss nation? Up to the invasion by French revolutionary troops at the end of the eighteenth century, Switzerland was a loose alliance of states, which all upheld their own cultural traditions. In the Catholic parts of the country there was a lively tradition of popular (often school) drama; while, at a distance of only thirty miles, in Protestant Zurich, theatre was banned for more than one hundred years (1624-1730). In 1848 a new constitution was adopted, one essentially still in place, and a single, more coherent federal state was created, but cultural matters, as indicated, were left in the hands of cantons. This produced the need for specific forms of celebrating a fragile national unity. The form best adapted to this purpose proved to be the Fest, a large public function taking place at regular intervals in various places in the country. A Fest usually marks the centenary of a historical event like a decisive (usually successful) battle, or it may be associated with national exhibitions, as they have been regularly organized since 1857, the latest of them in 2002.

Usually, these functions take place in the open air. They involve displays of prowess among riflemen or gymnasts, performances by brass bands, grand processions, often in historical dress, and the consumption of large amounts of food

⁵ On the intricacies of the situation, also of the relationship between theatres and the public institutions subsidizing them, see Andreas Kotte, "The Theatre System of Switzerland", in van Maanen, Hans, and S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre Worlds in Motion*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998, 620-67.

and drink. So important has the institution of the Fest been that it would be justified, in the case of Switzerland, to add it to the features that favor a national theatre, beside a shared language, a center, and a mythology.

Theatrical events have had a crucial role to play on such occasions. Festspiele⁶ have regularly been performed. They are usually based, as is to be expected, on mythological or historical material (history mythologized by the ritual of performance); its didactic dimension is reinforced by the introduction of allegorical elements.

These Festspiele serve the community in several ways. They are written and produced for a specific occasion; they never go on tour and are rarely revived (except when they are performed again also to commemorate their own first production). The setting chosen for them is always a familiar landscape, which is (re-)mythologized in the process. Their largely amateur casts come from the communities celebrating themselves. Their audiences consist of the members of the community. Often the boundaries between the stage and the auditorium are deliberately negated at crucial moments in an attempt to transform the audience's empirical reality into the mythological one represented on stage; everybody present may, for example, be expected to speak a prayer or an oath of allegiance.

The centenaries of the country's foundation illustrate the way these Festspiele have been used to promote national community.⁷ It has so happened that these centenaries could always be used to negotiate a critical moment in the nation's history, ever since they were first celebrated. In 1891 the year 1291 was first marked as the date of the country's foundation (before that other dates had been preferred). But the year also marked the final reconciliation between the parties that had

⁶ There is no equivalent term in English, except perhaps "community play". The closest parallel is probably the "pageant", as outlined in Percy MacKaye's *The Civic Theatre*, New York: M. Kennerley, 1912 and *Community Drama*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917. For a discussion of the Festspiel and its traditions, see Engler, Balz, and Georg Kreis, eds. *Das Festspiel: Formen, Funktionen, Perspektiven*, Willisau: Theaterkultur-Verlag, 1988.

⁷ On the following see several articles in Engler and Kreis, and my article "Abschied vom nationalen Theater; die Schweiz 1991" in Kotte, Andreas, ed. *Theater der Region--Theater Europas*, Basel: Editions Theaterkultur Verlag, 1995, 47-54.

fought a civil war in 1847.⁸ There was a Fest with a Festspiel in Schwyz, in central Switzerland, not far from the pasture on Lake Lucerne where the nation was supposed to have been founded and which figures prominently in Schiller's William Tell. In 1941, on the 650th anniversary, a Festspiel was again produced in the same place, marking a critical moment of quite a different order: Switzerland was surrounded by countries under Nazi and Fascist domination, and its position, resistance or submission, towards the "new world order" was at stake. Loyalty to the ancestors, renewal of the old covenant in their spirit, and devotion to an ideal Switzerland were to be the maxims guiding the celebrations.⁹ Conservative circles tried to use this situation for promoting their notion of an authoritarian corporate state, and the Festspiel played a crucial role in their endeavors. Political interference went as far as the minister of the interior personally insisting on changes to be made to the text of the play, removing or toning down references to the needs of being generous in accepting political refugees, and of realizing the democratic ideals on which the country was based.

In 1991, when Switzerland celebrated its 700th anniversary, there were problems of a different kind. They were the ones mentioned earlier: globalization and the weakening of national states by the European Union--a development threatening the very cohesion of the country. Not surprisingly "identity" was chosen as the central theme of the celebrations. The question whether there should again be a national Festspiel was hotly debated in the period leading up to the celebrations. To some it had become a definite feature of the celebrative ritual; others felt that the role of creating national community had been transferred to the media, especially the public television service. The play that was finally performed showed that the national mythology on which previous Festspiele had been able to rely no longer carried, but also, that there was nothing to replace it: the central figure (called "a wandering question-mark" by one critic) had a car-accident at the beginning and was then taken through a world between life and death, where he encountered historical and mythological figures from the Swiss past. The enterprise ended in critical disaster; one paper called it "Switzerland's

⁸ Politically this showed in a member of the defeated conservative party entering the national government.

⁹ See Charbon, Rémy, "Die Bundesfeier von 1941" in Engler and Kreis 1988, 166-85, 169. The account given here follows Charbon's detailed account.

most expensive riddle. It is our Festspiel; it cost ten millions; and nobody understands it."¹⁰

The failure of this Festspiel casts an interesting light on the possibilities of a national theatre; and if the writing of national theatre history may be seen as a parallel enterprise in creating coherence and identity, as I have claimed above, it also raises difficult problems for such a project. Where there seems to be so little that is shared, how can it be shown that it all hangs subtly together?

There was some gesturing towards a Swiss theatre history in the past, but in recent years an ambitious project has taken shape. The Swiss Association for Theatre Studies, originally founded in 1927 to promote popular patriotic theatre, started collecting material on theatrical traditions in Switzerland; and much of its rich publication program has been dedicated to historical topics. It also helped to found the Swiss Theatre Collection in Berne in 1976, and promoted the establishment of theatre studies as an academic discipline. But since 1992 there has been an Institute of Theatre Studies at the University of Berne, the only one in the country, which has made the history of theatre in Switzerland its main research project.

The prospectus for the first publications in the project carries a slogan on its cover that is typical of the situation: "Swiss theatre should no longer be a footnote in the theatre histories of her neighboring countries"; it confirms what has been said above about the possible role of theatre history creating coherence and identity.

Two problems in particular have to be faced in tackling the project: the disparate wealth of material, and the lack of a master-narrative that could serve as a basis. At a conference in 1992 possible procedures were discussed. In his opening lecture Andreas Kotte, who heads the project, sketched solutions by comparing them to two possible models.¹¹ One is Heinz Kindermann's influential Europäische Theatergeschichte (1957-74), based on climactic achievements, concentrating on single theatres, famous productions and personalities. As Kotte pointed out, it would

¹⁰ For references see my article "Das Ende des nationalen Theaters: Die Schweiz 1991" in Kotte 1995, 47-54.

¹¹ Published as Kotte, Andreas, "Theatergeschichte der Schweiz--eine methodische Annäherung", *Mimos* 44, 1992, 2, 1-6. The histories used for comparison are Kindermann, Heinz, *Europäische Theatergeschichte*, 10 vols., Salzburg: Otto Müller Verlag, 1957-74, and Müller, Eugen, *Schweizer Theatergeschichte*, Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1944.

be easy to produce such a history: take the five most famous theatres, the ten most famous directors, the twenty most famous productions, and the thirty most famous performers, add some stage and costume designers and stir well. It also means leaving out many phenomena, as Kindermann does, like the popular theatre, the relationship between the theatre and other forms of display, audiences, the institutionalization of theatre, etc.

The other model available is Eugen Müller's *Schweizer Theatergeschichte* (1944), which writes theatre history as a contribution to Swiss history. It takes traditional periodizations for granted and describes theatrical productions as emanations of political and cultural history. This neglects the internal dynamics of the theatre as an institution, a dynamic in many respects more powerful than external factors, as the development of the *Festspiel* as a genre may have illustrated.

In the absence of a master-narrative, but in the need for one, Kotte proposed that at the start there should be a broad study of theatrical forms in their interaction: various collaborators, various phenomena, various methodologies. The starting point will be "the theatrical act", an act with (various degrees of) reduced consequences.¹² This will make it possible to cover a wide area, between political rituals and the standardized production of a Lloyd Webber musical.

This broad study will create a growing and increasingly dense network of data, based on all the available sources. At the same time methodology will continue to be debated, tested, and refined with the help of the material available. He suggested three sets of questions that should first be dealt with: (1) Thematic ones: what is theatrical about an event? What form of theatricality are we dealing with? (2) Local ones: which place, which village, town or region has produced this theatrical event? (3) Historical ones: in which period, which year etc. was this theatrical event produced? One of these three sets of questions should be chosen as a focus, the two others viewed as constraints. This would produce studies of the following kind: (1) One form, several places, a short period: e.g., "Kabarett" in German-speaking Switzerland around 1970. (2) One form, one place, one longer period: the role of masks in folk custom in the city of Lucerne: (3) Several forms, one place, a short period: the Zurich theatrical scene in 1991.

On this basis various studies have already been produced. They appear in a special series, entitled *Theatrum Helveticum* (in Latin, because it does not privilege any of the national

¹² The German term used is "theatrales Handeln".

languages), which has started publication in 1995.¹³ Along with doing research for these studies a database is gradually being built, containing information on people, theatres and places; this will eventually lead to the publication of an encyclopedia of the theatre in Switzerland with about 4000 entries.

Only after this will the project of writing a single history of the theatre in Switzerland (rather than one of the Swiss theatre) be taken up again. Or so it is hoped; only the evaluation of the material collected, and the state of methodological discussion will tell in which shape (if at all) such a history may be produced.

But in the end, another factor will be decisive, one that has also been introduced earlier: Will the idea of national identity, from which the project draws its strength, and which it strengthens by (re)constructing a crucial aspect of its history, still be considered important enough to be reaffirmed, debated and celebrated in this form? Already now the editors think in terms of theatre in Switzerland rather than the Swiss theatre; they are aware of having a problem.

¹³ Cf. Kotte, Andreas, ed. *Theatrum Helveticum: Beiträge zur Theatergeschichte der Schweiz/Contributions à l'histoire du théâtre en Suisse*. Basel: Edition Theaterkultur Verlag, 1995; Zürich: Chronos Verlag, 1998ff. A particularly impressive volume in the series is Gojan, Simone, *Spielstätten der Schweiz/Scènes de Suisse/Luoghi teatrali in Svizzera* (1998). By 2002 ten volumes had been published.