

Outi Lahtinen

PERFORMATIVITY IN THEATRE OR HOW TO PLAY WITH A BURNED MATCH – A STUDY ON A CONCEPT, A THEORY AND A THEATRE PRODUCTION

The public defence of Outi Lahtinen's doctoral dissertation in Theatre research was held via Zoom at the University of Helsinki on 12 December 2020. Prof. Emeritus Freddie Rokem (Tel Aviv University) acted as Opponent and Prof. Hanna Korsberg (University of Helsinki) as Custos.

In my dissertation *Performativity in Theatre or How to Play with a Burned Match – A Study on a Concept, a Theory and a Theatre Production*, I discuss performativity as it originates from philosopher J. L. Austin and apply the concept in the analysis of a theatre production. My recapitulation of the theory of performativity is selective rather than extensive, and it is directed, on the one hand, by my aim to provide a well-argued interpretation and, on the other, to avoid an oversimplified narrative of the theory. Instead of formulating a method or a model based on a theory and applying it to a case, I have thought about my project in metaphors: at first, I saw it as two roads that intersect, then eventually, as two archeological excavation sites. Things that I find on one of the sites, help me to recognize, interpret and understand things on the other one. I identified this method to be hermeneutical, hence I reach out to understand the items and issues “in their Otherness” trying to avoid “domesticated” adaptations.

LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO MY EXCAVATION SITES:

The bottom layer of the philosophical/theoretical site of performativity is founded on a book called *How to Do Things with Words*. It is a book that Austin never wrote, which, I think, is important to keep in mind. The book was posthumously composed of Austin's lecture notes, hence the text does not bear the characteristics of academic argumentation but, instead, is a manuscript for a series of pedagogical situations. This transformation from a plan for discussions in a classroom to an object in a bookshelf has, no doubt, influenced the interpretations of what Austin was saying and how he did it.

One remarkable signpost in the discontinuous trajectory of the theory of performativity is a debate about Austin's philosophical heritage that took place in the 1970's between two philosophers, Jacques Derrida and John R. Searle. Instead of the most repeated, and at least in the fields of theatre and performance studies reoccurring outcome of this debate, which would be Derrida's critique on Austin's exclusion of artistic utterances from his discussion, my attention was drawn to several other issues, especially in Derrida's follow-up texts. One of them was Derrida's critique of Searle for misreading Derrida's text, for instance, by ignoring such relevant features of the text as its composition, title, subtitles, references to other texts, neologisms that were a kind of “warning lights” in Derrida's words – and paradoxical adjectives that, according to Derrida, were meant

to add “a spectacular blinking effect to the warning light”. Another remark that intrigued me was Derrida’s reflection of himself and Searle as “fronts” or “straw men” and his suggestion that what was behind those “fronts” was the most interesting and important part of the debate, and they were “forces of a non-philosophical nature”. He also reflected on the aggression and violence of the academic polemics.

This viewpoint to academic discourse – not only to focus on what is said but also to look at what is done by the saying oriented me to see these discourses as dramatized narratives, where the scholars were cast according to the needs of the plot and the debates were combats about eminence and power intertwined with the discussion about theoretical content.

Regarding the diverse discourses on performativity in the fields of theatre and performance studies, Janelle Reinelt has mapped the concepts of the performative and performativity in association with the concepts of performance and theatricality, and identified in these discussions three themes: first, identifying an artform – the performance art, second, defining research subjects in three research fields – performance studies, cultural studies and theatre studies, and third, bringing the philosophical concept to the contemporary critique. My study participates in that third discussion.

TO MY OTHER EXCAVATION SITE, THEN:

The production *Tulitikkuja lainaamassa eli elämän ihmeellisyys*, in English *Gone to Borrow Matches or the Strangeness of Life*, was performed at Tampere Workers’ Theatre 2001–2002. It was an adaptation of an adaptation of a novel. The novel was first published in 1910 under the pen name Maiju Lassila but written by a man called Algot Untola. The first part of the production’s name *Tulitikkuja lainaamassa* is the name of the novel and it is familiar, I think, to most Finns whether they have read it or not. The latter part of the production’s name, *Elämän ihmeellisyys*, is not so known, but it is, actually, the name that the author himself intended for the book. *Tulitikkuja lainaamassa* is a very popular piece of Finnish literature and numerous stage adaptations have been made of it.

The novel tells a story of two yeomen, Antti Ihalainen and Jussi Vatanen. Antti is sent to borrow matches from a neighbour by his wife Anna Liisa. On the road, however, he meets his old friend Jussi, who persuades Antti to act as his spokesperson. Jussi is a widower and wants to remarry. Antti’s errand changes from borrowing matches to proposing on behalf of Jussi. After a success in this task, the men leave for an adventurous journey to the nearest town.

The first layer adaptation of the production was made by Veijo Meri in the 1970’s. There Meri puts more weight to the depiction of social hierarchies of the rural community, power relations, and the division to the privileged, like the masters of their houses, and the underprivileged, like women and the landless people. Due to this emphasis, he gives space also to those who were left at home when Antti and Jussi have their adventures. Both narratives exist in the novel, but most adaptations emphasize the adventure plot and Jussi’s endeavour to marry and set the other elements and characters further aside.

The second layer of the adaptation in the production was constructed by director Kalle Holmberg. It added to Meri’s adaptation elements from Algot Untola’s other work *Harhama* that was published under another pen name Irmari Rantamala. Along with *Harhama*, Holmberg brought, or rather, strengthened the existential element that already was embedded in the novel *Tulitikkuja*

lainaamassa, but which has rarely gained space in the stage adaptations. *Harhama* has until the last decades been read as an autobiographical work and it has been used as a source of information about Untola's own life. Therefore, it also introduced the multifaceted character of Algot Untola himself. Untola died a convicted man in the aftermath of the Finnish Civil War in 1918, because he had been writing to the workers' newspaper during the war. The details of Untola's life were introduced in the programme of the production. His destiny was relevant in the production especially, because the production was part of the Workers' Theatre's 100th anniversary repertoire.

In addition to the existential element, Holmberg also added another level, a broader one, which depicted the rapid societal change that had taken place in Finland from the agrarian country of the first half of the 20th century to the techno-society of the end of the century. Considering the festive context this wide perspective also became relevant.

THERE WERE SOME COMMON THEMES IN MY EXCAVATION PITS:

One of them is **marriage**. It is the central theme in the novel *Tulitikkuja lainaamassa* as well as in the production adapted from it. Marriage is represented not only in Jussi's pursuit of remarrying but also as many other marriages in the community and as the favourite topic in the dialogues between the characters.

Marriage is also the best remembered of Austin's examples about performative speech acts, about "How [we] do Things with Words". It is the perfect example of how a few words said by a few persons – a bride, a groom and a clerical or civil authority – in the right context establish a marital bond which is both legal and institutional as well as intimate and communal.

Another common theme in my two pits was the **shifting positions of the initiators**, Austin and Untola, and the variation in the interpretations and appreciation accordingly. Untola's position has varied in the Finnish literary history according to whether he has politically been seen as an enemy or a comrade; when seen as an enemy, Maiju Lassila and his works have been remembered as humorous folk comedy, but the rest has been happily forgotten.

Austin's image, again, has varied from a strict guardian of morals and hierarchies who despises the arts to a playful iconoclast who subverts even his own authority and whose speech flourishes with quotes of, and references to, poems and plays.

WHAT THEN IS THIS PERFORMATIVITY I AM TALKING ABOUT?

According to my understanding, it is the point where our individual performance interacts with the discourse and its conventions. The discourse provides the understandability of our performance be it verbal, gestural or any other kind of communicative act, and it also defines the possibilities for our performance to influence the cultural environment in which we participate. Austin first introduced the explicit performative which is regulated by formal convention, like the marriage ceremony. Later he extended performativity to concern all speech acts as implicit performativity. After Austin, the theory has been elaborated to concern acts beyond the realm of language, for instance by Judith Butler.

In my study, I explored **first of all**, the performative acts of a theatre production and identified the discourses and conventions that were relevant for the production and were activated by it. I found that in terms of style the overall composition as well as the spatial and audiovisual elements of the production had features of both modernist and postmodernist theatre. The basic structure of the production which juxtaposed individual experiential time with societal progressive time relates the production to the epic theatre tradition of Bertolt Brecht and Erwin Piscator. Beside these characteristics, the production seemed to work as a memory machine that addressed its spectators as citizens who had an interest in the history of Finland and to the past of the workers' movement.

Second, meanwhile studying the different discussions of the theory of performativity, my attention was drawn also to the performativity of those discourses, because, as Derrida pointed out also the [t]heoretical utterances are speech acts". When dwelling in the theoretical discussions in the fields of philosophy and literature as well as in the drama, theatre and performance studies, I was intrigued by the "how to dos" of those discourses and the combats and stakes that motivated them.

This led me to the **third** level of exploring performativity and recognizing the "how to dos" of it – that is the level of academic scholarship in general – with which my study attempts to participate.