Jerzy Limon

Waltzing in *Arcadia*: a Theatrical Dance in Five Dimensions

Time structures are essential to any analysis of drama or theatre performance, and in this article Jerzy Limon takes the final scene from Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* as an example to show that non-semantic systems such as music gain significance in the process of stage semiosis and may denote both space and time. The scene discussed is particularly complex owing to the fact that Stoppard introduces two different time-streams simultaneously in one space. The two couples presented dance to two distinct melodies which are played at two different times, and the author explains how the playwright avoided the confusion and chaos which would have inevitably resulted if the two melodies were played on the stage simultaneously. Jerzy Limon is Professor of English at the English Institute at the University of Gdańsk. His main area of research includes the history of English drama and theatre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and various theoretical aspects of theatre. His most recent works, published in 2008, include a book on the theory of television theatre, *Obroty przestrzeni* (*Moving Spaces*), two chapters in books, and articles in such journals as *Theatre Research International*, *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, *Journal of Drama Theory and Criticism*, and *Cahiers élisabéthains*.

SINCE TIME AND SPACE are the most important constructive elements of theatre, we may divide the related phenomenal components into two categories: those that have the ability on their own to generate temporal structures, such as human bodies, stage speech,[1] music, dance, and the like, and those that do not reveal that ability, such as objects, silence, and light, but which may gain the function of a time and space marker through the course of the action. We may distinguish sub-categories in the first category: the components that either generate time or space and those that are employed in both time and space construction. The first of these may be labelled as a TGC (Time Generating Component) or SGC (Space Generating Component), whereas the second sub-category may be labelled as a TSGC (Time and Space Generating Component).

Of course, the same or similar material substance of theatre signs may perform different functions, depending on the circumstances. For instance, the sound of a radio may function as a TGC when there is no shift in space between the scenes, and it may also function as a SGC, when the shift occurs. Light may indicate the time of a scene and, therefore, it may signal, say, a change of colour, jumps in time forward or backward between the scenes, but it may also indicate jumps in space and will therefore function as a SGC. In both of these instances, of course, we might have situations when the sound of the radio and light indicate a jump in both time and space, and then they will function as TSGCs.

The functions listed, especially those belonging to the second category, being signs that are not capable of signalling time and space on their own, need an additional factor that will enable the spectator to read them correctly; and that factor is provided by the fictional stage figures, who continually signal to the spectators – through the actors – the way they perceive the world around them, being the fictional realm, and that mode of perception contradicts what we see and hear on the stage.[2] This, of course, is a feature intrinsic to and characteristic of the theatre, where meaning is generated precisely through that contradiction: it is not only the creation of the fictional realm that is essential in theatre, but the juxtaposition of

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and the relationship between the elements of the fictional world as perceived by the fictional figures and as signalled to the spectators by the actors, and the phenomenal world of the stage as perceived by the spectators.

Thus, within the same space – say, a room in somebody's house – jumps in time may occur, and these may be signalled by an acoustic TGC; for instance, a distant sound of cannons being fired. From the ensuing expository dialogue, supported or not by the stage set, we understand that the action is taking place during the Second World War in some German town, and the Russian front is approaching. In turn, the same space without the sounds of cannons may indicate the time before or after the war, depending on how the stage figures define it.

Once we learn the temporal relationship between the sounds offstage – or the lack of sounds – and the action, the spectators do not need the stage figures to define the time for them any longer: the information is conveyed by the sound itself or by silence. Thus, the offstage sounds alone will have the ability to signal a jump in time (or space or both). This explains the theatre's ability to endow non-semantic components such as light or music with significance.

Among TSGCs, a special case is represented by those that reveal the ability to signal on their own the temporal structures employed. This ability derives from the fact that TGCs are temporal signs (as defined by Roman Jakobson), and they require a certain amount of time to reveal their entire selves. Music may stand as a good example here. Of course, we have to distinguish between the music that is heard by the stage figures and the music that is not heard by them. In the first instance, a temporal and spatial contiguity is created by which an indexical relationship is established between the music and the fictional figures. In the second instance, the music is not part of the fictional realm and has to be treated as an external, hence metatheatrical, addition made by someone who is responsible for the production. In the latter case, the music does not have to indicate any specific time and space, and the same tune may be sounded for a changed scene taking place in a different space and at a different time (as is often the case in films).

However, when the music is perceived by the figures as music, it becomes a very conspicuous time and space marker, without the need to define it further verbally. Thus, it is a TSGC. Moreover, it may be noted that, whenever music is perceived by the stage figures, the time of the music and the fictional time of the figures merge and, in most cases, they flow with the same tempo as the time of the spectators. I write 'in most cases' because in non-mimetic productions music may slow down or accelerate, or may be attributed a different temporal value which inevitably creates a contrast with the time of the spectators, and which does not and cannot coalesce with the awkward acoustic phenomena onstage.

Furthermore, TGCs have the ability not only to become markers of specific time, but also to transfer temporal values to other objects and phenomena within a given space to those components that independently do not have this ability. This is achieved through the establishment of an indexical relationship, which rests upon the spatial contiguity and/or upon the merger into one cause and effect sequence. This explains why in theatre an apple touched by the biblical Eve becomes a fruit in Paradise whereas the same apple touched by a modern woman jumps in time to become a present-day object. Moreover, even if the modern woman is not named Eve, a certain equivalence is created by which some of Eve's attributes are transferred through the timefaring apple to the contemporary person. This in fact shows us how meaning is created in theatre and how it is conveyed from one sign to another.

It may therefore be claimed that the basic rules of theatre are temporal in nature. They are based on the agreement between the performers and the spectators by which the latter are ready to accept the contradiction created when someone, being the actor, is pretending that what belongs to the past (from the spectators' temporal perspective) is the fictional figure's real present identified with the present time of the spectators. It is a re-creation of the past as a continuous evolving present of the recipient.[3]

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This may only be accepted as a convention, and creates a separation of the three worlds: three, because apart from the space of the auditorium and the spectators, the stage in itself is dual in nature, with its two spheres divided by what I label the 'fifth wall'. For readers obviously familiar with the concept of the 'fourth wall', the appearance of a fifth may be somewhat misleading. However, the 'fourth wall' should be treated as a metaphor rather than a literal reference to the 'missing wall' in the proscenium stage. In this understanding, the 'fourth wall' may refer to any type of stage, meaning the temporal and spatial distance created by the actors from the audience. The 'fifth wall', on the other hand, refers to the invisible divide between the material and non-material, the signifier and the signified, the physical and fictional time.[4]

The appearance of the three distinct worlds with a concomitant division of time and space (and dual, so to say, ontology) results in the complex network of relationships of all components of a given production. Moreover, what follows is the conspicuous emergence and juxtaposition of two models of perceiving reality – that of fictional figures, as signalled by the performers, and that of spectators (the actors' perspective is not part of the performance message). Consequently, time in the performance becomes split: it is the real present of the performer who is a live human being (and shares his/her time with the spectator), and the created fictional present time of the figure. This is why I speak of the theatre's fifth dimension, which results from the dual present time.

All of these factors have to be taken into account when discussing plays that employ non-verbal TGCs. In the very last scene of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, a play that lends itself perfectly to discussion on practically all theoretical issues connected with theatre and drama, the situation becomes highly complex: there are two plots from two distinct time-streams that spatially merge and are presented simultaneously. Up to this scene, the plots are presented alternately. This, indeed, is a scene that is among the best ever created in drama. The whole play takes place in one space (the hall of an English aristocrat's house) and rests on two related plots set on two different time-levels: the beginning of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth. We have two groups of figures belonging to two different historical times. The thread of the plot, which meshes and applies, to a considerable degree, to both time-levels, is played out in an alternating sequence of scenes: one from the beginning of the nineteenth century, one from the end of the twentieth, and so on. All the items of furniture, and even most of the properties, various bibelots, remain the same, although sometimes their function changes.

In the last scene, however, Stoppard combines all the figures spatially, which means that historical figures are mixed with the contemporary ones and there is a simultaneous development of the two plot threads. Obviously, this has to be carefully directed so that the figures in their invisible time 'veils' do not bump into and so mutually disturb one another. This demands a careful distribution of activities and utterances between the two groups of figures: for most of the time they cannot be active simultaneously, and the spectator has to know which of the signals emanating from the stage are to be treated as related spatially and/or temporally. This is why, as in an orchestra, some of the stage instruments have to be 'silenced', while the others sound to create the desired acoustic effect.

We are dealing here with a layering of two temporal levels and it is time which constitutes the factor separating the figures. The space remains as if the same, but the space from the beginning of the nineteenth century is imposed on that from the twentieth (or rather the other way round). But for the spectator in the theatre, the layering of properties and the physical space is not noticeable. Stoppard's game with conventions does not end here, however, for in the same scene some figures from both time-levels sit next to each other around a table and even read from the same sources (Thomasina's exercise book) or drink wine from the same glasses!

What in this case happens with the wine glass? Or with the wine filling it? The mo-

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ment when it is touched by a person from the beginning of the nineteenth century (being a TGC), the wine glass becomes activated, torn from its time (or rather a-temporality), and, having formed with the hand holding it (and thus with the figure, who becomes the link with the space) the composite material of a compound sign, joined in a new configuration which signals a change of indexical function, it becomes the sign of a wine glass from the beginning of the nineteenth century.

It is this touch which causes the object to acquire, together with the hand, the indexical function and hence the quality of a sign to be grounded in a specific time. Set aside on the table, it is deprived of spatial contiguity with the actor and its signifying (and temporal) value significantly decreases.

It is worth noting that objects by themselves cannot create a stream of fictional time. It is only live actors who can do this, because they are the most important TGCs in theatre. Also, other phenomena that are produced by humans such as singing, dancing, radio or television programmes, or music-making, have the ability to denote the fictional present time. Consequently, in Stoppard's play, when the wine glass is picked up by the hand of an actor impersonating a figure from the end of the twentieth century (another TGC), the same wine glass (and the wine inside) undergoes another metamorphosis and – joined in a new configuration and signalling a new indexical function – becomes transformed into the sign of a contemporary wine glass and wine. The spectators guess also that the wine even changes in taste, although they cannot verify this empirically. In this way, the whole interior is divided temporally: it is simultaneously an interior from the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the one superimposed on the other.

It would be hard to find a better example of the magic of the theatre. Let us add that the layering on one another of configurations of compound signs means that the role of those elements enabling them to be differentiated increases. In this case, for a brief while it is the wine glass that becomes the dominant sign, transporting, like a time machine, back and forth, all the other objects from one epoch to another (although, strictly speaking, this is done through the changing indexical relationships). Since this is noticeable for the spectators, the playing with conventions in particular stagings of *Arcadia* is a source of humour. Two fictional semiotic orders are shown and juxtaposed, and the humour stems from the temporal paradox; for the same material substance of the production is shown as belonging to two different time-streams, which overlap and appear in one sequence. The theatre presents its five dimensions in action.

However, within that extremely complex and subtle network of spatial and temporal relationships, changing hierarchies of functions, there seems to be one element in the play that stands aside and does not fit the overall consistent handling of the stage picture and action, and the complex relationships of the time structures employed. This is the music played in the very last scene of the play, when the two couples, each belonging to a different time-stream, listen to and dance to music played by – well, there's the rub: played by whom, one is tempted to ask?

The problem is that the two time-spheres operate perfectly well within one space, provided certain rules are observed; and these are provided by the text itself. The basic rule here is repetition in that, through repetition, the reader or spectator is instructed how to 'read' a given scene with the help of convention and how to explain something that undermines logic or the rules of physics known from the world we live in. One of these rules is that the acoustic signs from one time-sphere are not heard and simply do not exist in the other, especially when they are performed by humans inhabiting one of these spheres (which means that we are dealing here with two distinct non-verbal TGCs).

So, as is the case in *Arcadia*, one group of actors signals to the spectators that it is, in fact, hearing something that the spectators do not hear; their behaviour alone suffices as a signal of an acoustic component of the fictional realm, inaudible to the spectators. At the same time, the other group signals to the spectators through its behaviour and utterances that it does not hear anything. This is

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why words spoken by the nineteenth-century figures are not heard by the twentieth-century ones, and vice versa, even though the blocking and proxemic relations of the actors reveal the potential of hearing. This violates the laws of acoustics, but the convention employed helps the spectators to suppress any scepticism that may have arisen. So, in theatre, it is actually possible to show two couples dancing, each to a different tune, provided the signalled behaviour and utterances of the actors are carefully managed. Again, *Arcadia* may stand as a conspicuous example of something that seems an impossibility.

This needs further explanation. Of course, there is a cinematic tradition whereby music is heard as a continuum irrespective of the changing takes, which may jump in space and time. But that music is not played in any of the fictional realms live, and is not perceived by any of the fictional figures who are appearing in them. We may have that convention introduced in theatre on the condition just mentioned, namely, that the music is not heard by any of the fictional figures. This is because when the figures signal to the spectators that they can, in fact, hear the music, a spatial relationship is established by which an indexical function is forwarded. This means that the music in itself becomes a TGC and belongs to the same time-sphere and the same tempo as the time in which the figures are set. We may therefore speak of an indexical congruity here, although in *Arcadia* the latter becomes somewhat blurred.

In the case of Thomasina and Septimus, who belong to the early nineteenth century, it is Count Zelinsky who is playing in an adjacent room. Thomasina exclaims: 'The Count plays for us, it is God-given! I cannot be seventeen and not waltz' (p. 91).[5] However, owing to the time-border mentioned above, neither Valentine, Bernard, Hannah, nor Gus, who are all present in changing configurations in the ensuing scene, and who all belong to the late twentieth century, can hear Zelinsky playing. The spectators must take this for granted. And Thomasina and Septimus, who represent the early nineteenth century, cannot hear the modern music coming from the marquee in the park, invisible to the spectators.

So, when Stoppard includes a stage direction, '*The music changes to party music from the marquee*' (p. 92), the spectators understand that the change of music is, of course, a jump in time. This means that one TGC is replaced by another, but we must not forget that, as I have indicated above, each of the TGCs has the ability to transfer its temporal characteristics to whatever establishes an indexical relationship with it. Thus, the change of the TGC means a jump in time from the early nineteenth century to the late twentieth century. This is why, in order to maintain indexical congruity, the music coming from the marquee cannot be heard by Septimus and Thomasina, because otherwise a contradictory spatial and hence temporal relationship would be established.

However, the situation described becomes slightly confusing because, as is apparent from the ensuing action and stage directions, even though neither of the two signal the fact of hearing the music from their future, an indexical function seems to be established between the new TGC and Thomasina and Septimus since, when they start to dance, they do it, as the spectators are told, to the modern music from the marquee, which creates an obvious contradiction (they dance to music from a different time sequence). When Thomasina asks her tutor, 'Is it a waltz now?', to which Septimus says abruptly, 'No,' the stage direction immediately following the exchange informs us: '*The music is still modern*' (p. 93). This means that the spectators are not hearing Count Zelinsky playing, and what they are hearing is the music from the marquee. This indeed is not the waltz that Thomasina wants to practise.

And yet, after some verbal exchanges, one would expect the music to change back to Count Zelinsky's piano, as Thomasina succeeds in convincing Septimus to teach her to dance:

THOMASINA: Then we will dance. Is this a waltz?
SEPTIMUS: It will serve.

He stands up.

THOMASINA (*jumping up*): Goody!

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But, surprisingly, this is not the case. A stage direction immediately after this exchange informs us that:

> SEPTIMUS *takes her in his arms carefully and the waltz lesson, to the music from the marquee, begins.* (p. 94)

Now, the problem here is with the quoted phrase in the stage direction: '*to the music from the marquee*', because that particular music, its tempo and timing are beyond the world Septimus and Thomasina live in, and beyond their perception, and yet as a TGC it establishes an indexical function with the dancing couple that is incongruous.

However, by now Stoppard has already introduced the convention which enables the spectators or readers to accept the apparent incongruity; he has established an indexical relationship between couple and music, so that, owing to the convention employed, the spectators do not need to hear it to know that the figures can actually do so. The spectators know that they can only practise waltzing to the music played by Count Zelinsky, and the music from the marquee can only be a sign of the piano playing. But the spectators do not hear that, as is apparent from the stage direction. Obviously, Thomasina's question, 'Is this a waltz?', refers to the piano and not the modern music from the marquee. Human bodies and their movement become the signs of the music the audience cannot hear.

The spectators can only hear the music that is also perceived by Hannah and Gus alone (as they are the only figures from the twentieth century left on the stage). However, in the course of their dancing lesson, the music switches back to the tunes played by Count Zelinsky. This is confirmed by the final stage direction – also the last words of the entire play: 'SEPTIMUS *and* THOMASINA *continue to dance, fluently, to the piano*' (p. 97).

However, Hannah and Gus have also begun their dance, and the question remains: what music are they dancing to? Of course, we may assume that the music from the marquee has by now changed to the waltz, and both couples are waltzing, but that would suggest that the tempo of the music in both temporal spheres is exactly the same, which is an impossibility. Also, for pragmatic reasons, the spectators cannot hear both of the tunes simultaneously. Besides, Stoppard never says that the music coming from the marquee is a waltz: he calls it simply 'modern'. But in the final scene Stoppard says, it ought to be the piano that we hear, and in this case the piano music becomes a TGC, for it means itself – that is, the waltz played by Count Zelinsky.

At best, it may also be treated as the sign of the music coming from the marquee – not of a specific tune, but just of the fact that music is being played also in the other time-sphere. But that contradicts the convention applied: until this moment, whenever one of the groups of figures from one time-sphere was active, it had as its background the music from its own sphere; now, Hannah and Gus are dancing to music they cannot hear, played by Count Zelinsky; and Thomasina and Septimus are waltzing without paying attention to the modern tune coming from the marquee.

Of course, in theatre, we do not need to hear music to understand that it is being played in the fictional realm, as is also the case of verbal silence, which may be a sign of actual speech.[6] But in this particular case, the convention established by the text is quite singular and uncommon, which may lead to some unexpected confusion (although it is probably unnoticed by most spectators and readers). One TGC replaces the other. This is the cause of the confusion, as also of the indexical incongruity, for the fact is that the music played in each of the temporal spheres establishes an indexical relationship with the figures belonging to the particular sphere, but on the other hand the dance, with its rhythm and tempo, also establishes an indexical relationship between the dancing bodies and the music played.

It is exactly for this reason that Stoppard introduces hints in the stage directions which prevent the confusion. For when Septimus and Thomasina begin to waltz to the music coming from the marquee, we learn that they do it '*with the slight awkwardness of a lesson*' (p. 94). Similarly, when Hannah and Gus dance to the sound of music played by Count

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Zelinsky, we are told that they do it '*rather awkwardly*', when, by this time, Thomasina and Septimus have already progressed in the dance lesson and they dance '*fluently*' (p. 97).

This means that the awkwardness of the dance of the former couple becomes the sign of the music played from the marquee, and the fluency of dance of the latter couple is congruous with the music we are hearing. In this way, Stoppard avoids incongruity with the functional relationships already established in the play. Otherwise, the problem would have been insoluble, for there are four components of the scene (TGCs) which have the ability to signal two time-sequences. These are the two groups of stage figures and the two sources of music. The juxtaposition of fluency with awkwardness suspends the contradiction and incongruity. The latter will inevitably appear if, in the actual production, the director decides to have both couples waltz fluently to the same tune, as was the case with the Gdańsk production of the play (1994), directed by Krzysztof Babicki, and attended by the playwright himself.

As we have seen, in the case of objects, which are not TGCs, the improbable was in fact annulled: the one wine glass could make a journey in time to become either a nineteenth-century glass of wine or its twentieth-century counterpart, depending on which of the figures, being a TGC in its own right, touched it. Through the touch, the wine glass became filled with time. With the touch gone, the wine glass was emptied, and ready for another temporal refill.

This does not, however, work with music, because it is produced by humans, perceived by the fictional figures, and set in time that is clearly defined; and, being a TGC in its own right, it creates a tempo of its own and an indexical function without effort or action on the part of the figures. This is why it becomes obligatory to signal the difference in behaviour or reaction between the two dancing couples. The difference signals parallel but separate indexical functions operating, by which we understand that Hannah and Gus are dancing ('awkwardly') to the modern music we cannot hear, whereas Thomasina and Septimus waltz to the music we can hear, incompatible as though it might seem (unless we turn to the possible symbolic or metaphoric readings of the finale). Two time-streams are shown operating in one space.

In this ingenious way, the theatre's conventionality is unveiled, and this, in turn, heightens the appearance of the aesthetic function. We may therefore conclude that playing games with TGCs, unless carefully handled, inevitably brings about confusion and internal contradictions which may be noticed by at least some readers or spectators. In his theatrical handling of music, Tom Stoppard shows a rare awareness of the forces and rules operating on the stage.

Notes and References

1. It seems more proper to use the term 'stage speech' rather than 'language' since the verbal component of any theatre production does not fulfil the features of a natural language as understood and described by linguists. At best, stage speech, being a blend of verbal and non-verbal substances, may be seen as a sign of the language used by the fictional figures, being the language the spectators cannot hear. This of course is too complex a subject to discuss in detail here. For an intriguing discussion of language in the theatre, see Eli Rozik, 'The Vocabulary of Theatrical Language', *Assaph*, No. 2 (1985), Section C, p. 15–26; 'The Functions of Language in the Theatre', *Theatre Research International*, XVIII, No. 3, p. 104–14; and also his 'The Syntax of Theatrical Communication', *Assaph*, No. 3 (1986), Section C, p. 43–57.

2. Following the formalist tradition, it is appropriate to use the term 'stage figures' rather than 'characters' because in theatre we have to distinguish between the live actors and the fictional figures that the former impersonate. The fictional figures, by definition, do not exist in any material sense and cannot be perceived by the senses; they can only be mental constructs created in the minds of spectators.

3. Even though the fictional time evolves in the spectators' present time, we understand that it is, in fact, a re-enactment of events (historical or not) from the past (rarely from the future).

4. I have described the concept of the *fifth wall* and of the theatre's *fifth dimension* in my book *Piąty wymiar teatru* (Gdańsk: Słowo obraz/terytoria, 2006).

5. Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1993).

6. See my article, 'The Fifth Wall: Words of Silence in Shakespeare's Soliloquies and Asides', in *Shakespeare Jahrbuch*, CXLIV (2008), p. 47–65.

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