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Theatre Muzzled

Report on the conference, 'Art Made Tongue-Tied by Authority: Theatre Censorship Around the World', held in Dublin from 30 September to 2 October 2010.

This conference was the second big international event devoted to the problem of censorship in theatre in the last two years – the first being the IFTR/FIRT conference 'Silent Voices, Forbidden Lives: Censorship and Performance', held in Lisbon in July 2009. Such interest in the subject shows that censorship is still an important matter for theatre researchers. The Dublin event was an opportunity to gather together people interested in the subject, to exchange the outcomes of their research, and their different experiences and views on censorship in theatre. The territorial and historical *foci* of the conference were Spain under Franco, Portugal under Salazar, Brazil under the military regime, and the former Yugoslavia, the German Democratic Republic, Poland, and Hungary during the communist period.

Seen from so many different geographical, cultural, social and political perspectives, censorship in a general sense was confirmed as a useful tool in the hands of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, sometimes quite effective in shaping peoples' minds and world view according to the will of the rulers. The conference assembled around thirty researchers, artists, and cultural operators from Europe, Brazil, USA and Nepal, with key speakers: Fernando Arrabal, Abhi Subedi (scholar and playwright from Nepal), and Lisa Goldman (UK), who spoke about her Iranian experience with open censorship and her British experience with its hidden version. The event was organized in connection with the Dublin Theatre Festival and was part of the AHRC-funded project on Theatre Censorship in Spain (1931–85) <www.dur.ac.uk/mlac/tcs/>.

The conference co-ordinator, Dr Catherine O'Leary from NUI, suggested thematic areas for papers that could include but were not limited to: religious censorship, political censorship, sexual morality and the stage, cultural policy and the state, censorship in democratic states, censorship and authoritarian regimes, performance and freedom of expression, the effects of censorship on writers, directors, and performers, censorship legislation, and finally the legacy of censorship.

In the case of the totalitarian communist regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe the success of censorship, supported by secret police and the whole state apparatus, was, in certain periods, almost total. Stefan Kisielewski, the brilliant Polish columnist and writer, called this censorship 'the secret illegal factory of falsified texts which suggests to the public the false intentions of the authors and make the latter get acquainted with the way of thinking and writing imposed on them by the state power. . . . It was, so to say, a kind of "educational activity" directed towards both the people who were writing the texts and the people who were reading them.' (See Stefan Kisielewski, 'Przeciw cenzurze – legalnie (garść wspomnień', *Zapis*, No. 4, 1977.)

However, in the case of theatre the work of censors was made more difficult due to the interactive character of the art. The censors, therefore, had to be intensively supported by denunciators who attentively watched theatre shows, trying to catch 'dissident moments' in the interaction between the actors and the audience. In communist countries the denunciators were usually secret police agents, performing their duties in the guise of members of the audience.

The rightist regimes did not care enough about the theatre to waste the time of their actual agents in the auditoria. In Spain, Portugal, and Brazil during their periods of military regimes – and even in Ireland – the 'spy-volunteers' were usually fervent Catholics, who were also members of the ordinary, everyday theatre public. It was very interesting to hear in the paper delivered by the Brazilian scholar Ferdinando Martins, from the University of São Paulo (whose research programme on theatre censorship involves over thirty people), that the most active and zealous denunciators in Brazil were the members of associations of Catholic parents and teachers from Catholic schools.

From our personal Polish perspective the most interesting aspects of the conference were the list of topics which were identified and eliminated by prior theatre censorship (or, more accurately, drama censorship) in the twentieth century, and also the strategies adopted by the censors to limit the impact of a given show on the public. Omar García Obregón (Queen Mary, University of London) and Patricia W. O'Connor (University of Cincinnati, USA) gave similar lists taken from instructions for Spanish censors. The subjects were: abortion, prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism, the undermining of Catholic dogmas, homosexuality, adultery, sexual perversions and abnormality, sexual relations before marriage, and some examples of 'bad language'.

The comments used by the Francoist censors to justify the elimination of such 'literary sins' were usually: 'immoral', 'too strong', 'literary pornography', or 'the spectators are unprepared for this'. In the case of the censor's ban on *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* by Peter Shaffer (about the

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Spanish conquest of Peru) the reason was 'the defence of the good name of Spain' – though sometimes the attitude of the censors was more indulgent if a play written by a foreign playwright had already been successful abroad. One thing which was absolutely impossible to forgive was any element of pacifism – the work of Erich Maria Remarque, for example, which was 'weakening the defensive power of the country'.

According to Mayra Rodrigues Gomes and Ferdinando Martins, the Brazilian censors were given relative freedom of action, but their final decisions were therefore more ambivalent and problematic. Generally speaking, the Brazilian 'guardians of word and action' were more liberal in sexual matters than their Spanish and Portuguese colleagues. Some paedophiliac elements might even be approved (but only with girls as the objects of desire, never boys), but a strict ban was always imposed in cases of women's adultery.

The word 'lover' would be accepted only in the mouths of men and divorced women, and could never be spoken by a married woman. Homosexual allusions – yes, but never in the context of the army! Nakedness on the stage – yes, but only with an actress or an actor standing still, not moving! And so on. On the other hand, even the smallest and most modest allusions to Marxist political beliefs were zealously pursued and eliminated.

It was revealing how the Brazilian censors were recruited. Male and female censors were usually graduates of philological studies. Their work was neither respected, nor well paid – but it was easy. Once a week they would take away plays and scripts to read and evaluate at home. Catholic priests consequently refused to take the post of censors.

This recruitment process recalled the Polish situation, where the central and regional offices of the Main Office of Control of the Press, Publications, and Performances (the Polish official name for the communist censorship) were full both of cigarette smoke and of graduates of Polish Philology Departments from universities all over the country. Indeed, philologists were welcome in censorship offices all over the world. In Brazil they were even officially given the special mission of 'defending the purity of the Portuguese language'.

From a paper by Michael Thompson (University of Durham, UK) we learned that in Spain sometimes censors made their final decisions and justifications collectively. They would write their individual comments and evaluations, then discuss their opinions, and finally vote.

Laura Bradley (University of Edinburgh) in her very interesting paper focused on theatre censorship in the German Democratic Republic. In the GDR, as in some other communist countries, the final judgment of the censors could be supported by the opinions of selected representatives of the working class, who would attend rehearsals.

Censors in some countries had the right to recommend (or even to insist on) the size of auditoria and the (sometimes rather vague) definitions of what constituted 'the public' for a given theatre performance. In Spain, according to García Obregón, 'suspicious' shows were relegated to small, 'chamber' theatres or provincial venues, or – by contrast – to the auditoria (always small, never big) in big cultural centres, where the public was considered to be 'better prepared'.

Deniz Poniz (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) recounted the instructive case of the ban on Fernando Arrabal's *The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria* which in 1969 was not allowed to be rehearsed even on the smaller stage of the Slovenian National Theatre. (In the former Yugoslavia there was no official censorship, but informal censors could be found among Communist Party officials and activists of the Yugoslav Front of Unity.) In Arrabal's play they found many allusions to Tito's regime and too many 'sexual irregularities'. Their opinion was clear: the play could be put on in some little experimental venue but not on the national theatre stage. The director, Bojan Štih, desperately tried to defend his work, looking for help and support among high-ranking party members. The final verdict was: it can be staged and presented to the public, but without any allusion to 'sexual perversions' and without any religious blasphemy (the Catholic church was aiding Tito's regime in getting financial support from Western countries).

Different facets of censorship in Polish theatre were presented by John M. Bates (University of Glasgow) and by the authors of this report. Bates stressed that the instructions for the censors were so detailed that they ran to several hundred pages. It was, therefore, impossible for the censors to know them all, so in their everyday work they depended on their private intuition for what to judge as subversive.

It might be assumed that censorship is a problem only of the past, but the accounts provided by Lisa Goldman from the UK and Chris Gatt from Malta (the only country in the European Union that still has official censorship) showed that impulses to control theatre are still strong even in democratic societies. Both the accounts given by these theatre practitioners were remarkably similar to those from the authoritarian past.

Finally, an interesting visual discovery: the seals of the Spanish, Brazilian, and Polish censorship offices were practically the same: large and rectangular, with spaces for the date, the decision, and the signature of the censor. Censors of all countries, unite!

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