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Studio for Electronic Theatre – Jumping into the Abyss of Technology

Abstract

This article discusses the compatibility of live theatre and projected media from a practitioner-based perspective. It tackles Arnold Aronson's conception that projected imagery such as video or film cannot have a successful or legitimate place within the setting of live performance. Drawing upon two examples of original theatrical works, I aim to demonstrate that theatre art, in an age of proliferating multi media and digital technologies, can, using this very technology, reinvent itself, exploring, on the one hand, the aesthetic potential of this technology for both dramaturgy and scenography, and, on the other, offering unique commentary on the political, social and psychological aspects of the uses and the effects of media technology in our contemporary culture.

Introduction

In his book *Looking Into the Abyss* (2005), which discusses the troublesome relationship between theatre and media technology, Arnold Aronson is strongly sceptical of the belief that projected image (film or video) would ever find its proper place in theatre. The reason is that the two media, in his view, speak two fundamentally different languages. Aronson offers a long list of facets characterising this disjunction, including the semiotic (the audience differently perceives performance and film as two different sign systems) and the political (media technologies is the result of the capitalist production system and 'is thus the subject to a range of political social and economical influences') (Aronson, 2005: 86-87).

Aronson's thesis may sound anachronistic, considering the proliferating media theories of the past five to six decades, stressing the hybridity of multi-media artworks in contemporary culture. Rather than focusing upon medium-specificity of different media forms, media theorists have increasingly stressed the aesthetic value of multi-mediality, celebrating it either as a fruitful synthesis of different arts (in the tradition of *Gesamtkunstwerk* ['total artwork'] thesis), or as a hybrid aesthetic exploring and exposing the differences, contrasts and clashes of different media languages co-existing in a single work of art.

Nonetheless, I think we should take Aronson's point seriously and engage with his ideas, for they may offer some significant clues as to why the use of media technology in theatre often – to put it bluntly – does not work. Thus, it is not so much the theoretical aspect of Aronson's work that interests me here; rather, it is the implication of his ideas for the questions raised from a practitioners' perspective that is the starting point for my discussion.

Aesthetics of Disjunction

It is important to note that Aronson is not a-priori dismissive of the aesthetic worth of the hybrid media artworks. It is just that he is sceptical of the value of using 'non-theatrical' media in theatre, unless – and here he leaves space for exceptions – the theatre explicitly explores (through either

method or thematisation) the very disjunction arising from difference between various media 'languages'. Aronson writes:

Unless the intent is specifically to create a sense of dislocation and disjunction, or to draw upon the cultural signification of film and video in our media-saturated age, the placement of such technology and imagery on the stage is tantamount to carrying on a conversation in two languages (Aronson, 2005: 87).

I recognise this point as a theatre maker. Since I started using media technology in my work, which was over a decade ago, I have shared this intent: to explore, through both subject matter and technique, the disjunctive aesthetics of multimedia theatre. In my work with the Studio for Electronic Theatre (SET), I have been addressing, in both thematic and formal terms, the semiotic 'disjunction' between the material and the projected imagery on stage. Looking over our projects from the past decade, two main characteristics emerge:

(1) dramaturgical exploration of the themes of dislocation and disjunction (physical, emotional, political...); and

(2) visual aesthetics transgressing the border between the material, three-dimensional reality of stage imagery and the immaterial, two-dimensional reality of projected image.

Studio for Electronic Theatre roots its dramaturgies in narratives of psychological, spiritual and political disjunction, as exemplified by the following productions: *Deus ex Hamletmachina* (2003), which re-imagines a Shakespearean love story within the context of an urban war (figure 1); *Waar is Daar?* (2004), a monodrama that narrativises and visualises the stream-of-consciousness of an Iraqi refugee in Amsterdam (figure 2); *Sokoćalo Project* (2006), which retells a nineteenth-century Serbian myth prophesying an omnipotent media machine that is able to communicate with the world of the dead (figure 3); *Slaughterhouse 5* (2008-2010), based on Kurt Vonnegut's novel describing the disjunctive journey through space and time of an American prisoner of war who lived through the allied fire-bombing of Dresden in 1945 (figure 4); and *Oedipus the Code-breaker* (2011-13) and *Prisoner* (2014), which both re-imagine the Greek mythical narratives (Oedipus and Media, respectively) within the context of contemporary political conflicts.

The second aspect – the visual aesthetics transgressing the border between the material, three-dimensional reality of stage imagery and the immaterial, two-dimensional reality of projected image – comes to expression in our digital scenographies. This is mirrored in the breach of spatial and temporal boundaries expressed in the plays' dramaturgies: the boundaries between past, present and future (as in *Slaughterhouse 5* and *Prisoner*), between East and West (*Waar is Daar?*); between the physical and the virtual (*Deus ex Hamletmachina*); between the material and the digital (*Oedipus the Code-breaker*); and between the living and the dead (*Sokoćalo*).

The aesthetic effect we aimed for with our digital scenographies was to contain both synthesis and tension. At times, the physical bodies of the performers and other material elements of the stage visually merged with the projected imagery, collapsing the difference between the three- and two-dimensional natures of the theatrical and projected media. The tension inherent within the hybrid was brought out in the scenes where the two 'realities' departed in both dramaturgical and visual terms. Examples of both effects can be seen in this excerpt from our *Oedipus* play:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m1Xn09sZq2Y&spfreload=10>), where the created visual synthesis of two- and three-dimensionality is followed by the exposure of the media boundaries.

In this essay, I will focus on SET's projects *Sokoćalo* (2006) and *Oedipus the Code-breaker* (2013), which both thematise a utopian desire for and belief in the ability of technology to transcend body, space, time, or other limits inherent in human condition. In addition, they explore the dystopian outcome of pursuits driven by utopian desire, where technology, rather than transcending the faults and limitations of the physical world or human political systems, turns out to be a mirror image of the 'real world', shaped by the same destructive interests and powers.



Figure 1. *Deus ex Hamletmachina* (2003) reimagines a Shakespearean love story within the context of an urban war



Figure 2. *Waar is Daar?* (2004) is a play about an Iraqi refugee lost in the space between 'here' and 'there'



Figure 3. *Sokoćalo Project* (2006) retells a nineteenth-century Serbian myth prophesying an omnipotent media machine that should be able to communicate with the world of the dead

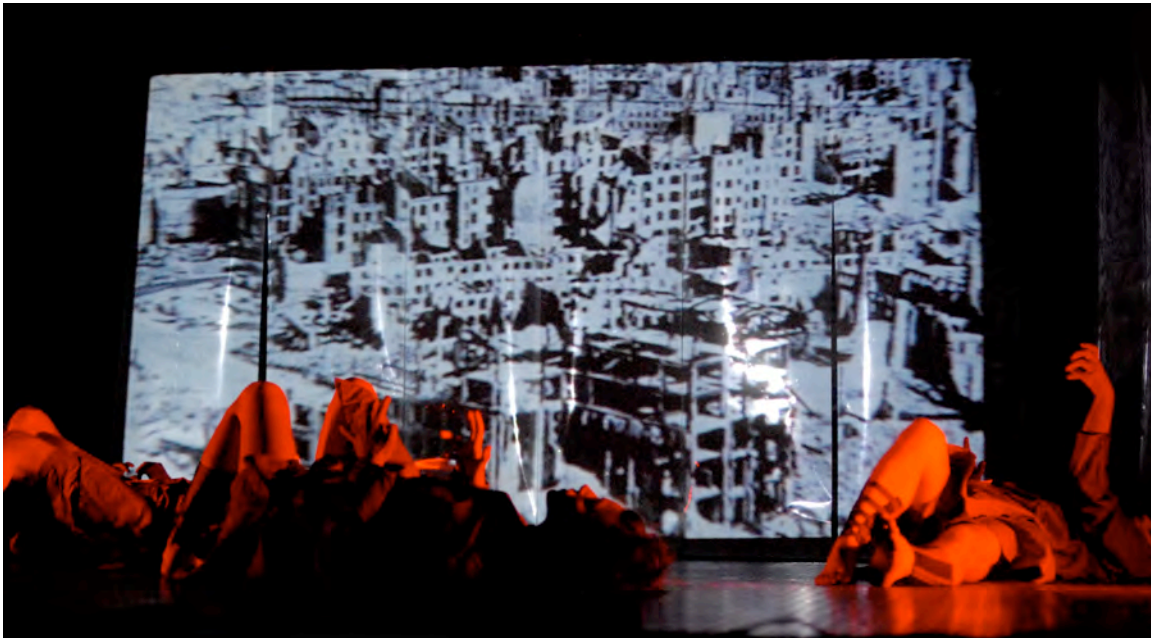


Figure 4. *Slaughterhouse 5* (2008) is based on Kurt Vonnegut's novel describing the disjunctive journey through space and time of an American prisoner of war who lived through the allied fire-bombing of Dresden in 1945



Figure 5. *Oedipus the Code-breaker* (2013)

Sokoćalo

Sokoćalo is based on the myth of two peasant prophets from nineteenth-century Serbia, who are believed to have predicted the major local and global political events that would shape the world a century later. The collection of their visions, recorded by a local village priest and titled *Kremna Prophecy*, contains vivid images of the future revolutions, dictatorships, wars, deaths of old

empires and births of new states, technological revolutions, interplanetary voyages and so on. In one of their visions, they saw a 'sokočalo' (a localism for 'gadget' or 'machine'), which they described as a kind of prophetic media machine showing accurate images of past, present and future events, as well as the potential to reveal the world of hereafter. They prophesised:

Man will build a box and within the box will be some kind of gadget [sokočalo], with images. With sokočalo man will be able to see what is going on in any corner of the world, but he will not be able to communicate with the dead me, even though this gadget with images will be as close to this other world as hairs on the human scalp are close to each other (Golubovic and Milenkovic, 1988: 189).

Though Kremna prophecies are imbued with an ethics of radical altruism, critical self-reflection and spiritual enlightenment, the myth has frequently been re-written and misused in the political history of the region by those wishing to appear as the 'saviours' of the nation by identifying themselves (either explicitly or implicitly) with the figures from the prophets' visions.

By re-constructing the mythical all-seeing and all-knowing machine ('sokočalo'), SET's digital performance of the same title explores both historical and media myths which helped shape, represent and misrepresent the recent bloody history of the Balkans. At a historical location, in the catacombs of a bomb shelter used in the Balkans' many wars, our performance engaged with this myth against the narrative backdrop of the recent bloody ethnic conflicts, political turbulences, and the media war that greatly fuelled the conflict on the ground. *Kremna Prophecy*, with its subject matter of politics, death, and technology, provided the framework for both the theme of the project and its 'mediatised' form.

The content that we developed during the production referred mostly to the disturbing experiences from the recent wars in Yugoslavia, where media technology played a vital role in dispersing the hatred and ethnic animosities, inspiring extremists on all sides in the conflict to commit horrendous war crimes. The same technology was later used to cover up the crimes and place blame on the other side. Placing the political story in the quasi-mythological context of a prophecy, we wanted to show these recent tragic events and the associated media manipulations in a new and estranged light. Without taking sides, we wanted to give a new, artistic voice in the discussion about the crimes and responsibilities in a country that has great difficulties in undertaking a genuine reconciliation. We worked with young local people who wanted to live in a different society from the one that pushed the country into political, economic, and moral misery.

The performance consists of a number of theatrical episodes loosely connected to the main theme. In the first episode, Pythia tries to wake up the prophet to ask him to tell not the future but the past. *What has really happened?* In a country manipulated by media to such a degree, both the past and the future appear equally mysterious.

In the second story, the audience is presented with the film, a fake documentary about Sveti Retrograd ('Saint Retrocity'), an imaginary city where all wars start and end. In one of the city's secret locations, the prominent scientists have gathered to create the ultimate media weapon, Sokočalo, which will change the future, but also the past, of humankind.

In the third scene, we created the techno remake of a famous nineteenth-century revolutionary song, popular among the Yugoslavian unionists, a song that romanticises their centuries-long

struggle to free the South-Slavic nations from the Ottomans and Austro-Habsburgs and create a common state where all its different ethnic and religious groups will live in peace. Seen in the perspective of a broken Yugoslavia and its recent wars, the song sounds absurd, unreal, cynical and depressing.

The song is followed by the episode in which revolutionary partisan heroes turn into nationalists and cold-blooded war criminals, killing each other on the monuments commemorating the Second World War (<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLC11FE91CE0AF5B5F>).

The performance ends with the prophets' apocalyptic vision: 'Man will build a sokočalo capable of seeing everything on this Earth, but there will be nothing left for him to see.' In this final scene, we placed a performer inside the dystopian scenery of our digital scenography, with the sound and physicality of his heavy breathing merging with the prophets' words in the voice-over. Our theatrical image of the 'last human', walking through the moonlike landscape with a sokočalo in his hands and recording the void, can be seen here (link to the video <https://vimeo.com/19525890>). What the audience sees in front of them is a virtual, two-dimensional world of live video that merges with the three-dimensional stage reality and the materiality of the performer's body. The post-apocalyptic void is expressed not through visual figuration (i.e. there are no images of death or destruction), but through the scenographic magic of the visually pleasing synthesis of disparate realities – which, paradoxically, both intensifies and relativises the bleakness of the play's dramaturgical vision.

Oedipus the Code-breaker

SET's *Oedipus* is based on another Balkan myth, which has had much wider resonances in the intellectual and cultural history of Europe and the wider world. The *Oedipus* play starts where *Sokočalo* ends – at the end of the world, the time of the performance then running backwards towards present time.

As Susan Sontag observed in her *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), and earlier in *On Photography* (1977), contemporary culture's oversaturation with images – images of war, amongst a myriad of other visual depictions of human suffering – produces a kind of emotional numbness in the viewers, decreasing their (our) capacity to sympathise. Our *Oedipus* play, made in co-operation with the UNHCR, was an attempt to re-instate the urgency of awareness of the suffering of the war victims today. We wanted to try and undo (or, rather, provide an artistic model for the undoing of) the cumulative 'numbness effect' of the images of war that is depriving us from the most fundamental component of our humanity: our capacity for compassion. Using the techniques of the 'theatre of cruelty', with the physical bodies intertwined with digital imagery, our *Oedipus* play sought to re-establish the missing emotive link between the images of war and our hyper-mediated perception of them (<https://vimeo.com/71428479>).

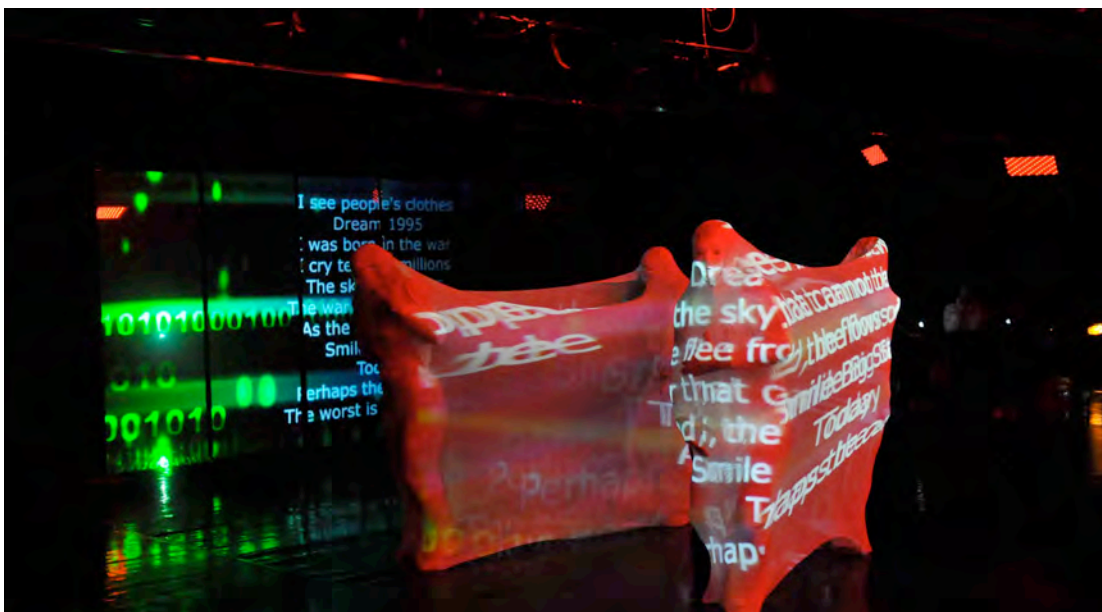
Oedipus the Code-breaker consists of several episodes, in the course of which the title character gradually undergoes a transformation from a 'computerised' humanoid into an awakened human being made of flesh, blood and shame. Our Oedipus is a disillusioned survivor from the future Final World War that he – through his well-intentioned attempts to prevent – unwittingly helped start. He believes that he has saved the community of the Thebes city-state by cracking the password of the Sphinx computer programme, which enabled them to escape the horror of the physical world by entering a virtual paradise. However, as Oedipus is to shortly realise, they have

unwittingly entered a virus programme created in the media image of the world as it was at the start of the twenty-first century, with the multiple visible and invisible wars they now have to hyper-experience.

On his virtual voyage, Oedipus assumes the role of a king of the media super-state TB. By attempting to protect his citizens, he unwittingly commits horrendous crimes. When this is eventually revealed to him, Oedipus is stricken by the overwhelming feeling of guilt and shame. He asks to be banished from the virtual world and in order to be redeemed he is willing to travel the gruelling path of a nameless refugee without a home country. He is being thrown into the real world in the year 2013. At the end of the play, humiliated, despised and unwanted, Oedipus starts breaking the code of his future.

The performance's aesthetic mode is an interactive blend of the intense physicality of the performers' acting and movement style and the visually and sonically 'oversaturated' digital scenography. The images of war are used as both signifiers and signified, collapsing the difference between the two by projecting them onto the live human bodies on stage that are engaged in a physical performance. This style of physical performance, while doing away with all forms of figurative expression (i.e. codified gestures and movements), conveys intense physical and emotional pain.

Our use of verbal signifiers (mostly from Seneca's *Oedipus*) was also in a non-figurative mode. However, we did not want to push non-figuration to the point of incomprehensibility: rather, by having the spoken language arise out of body and out of the intensely physical performance, the words acquired a materiality, which, without depriving them of their intrinsic power of signification, pushed them towards an expressivity that is not commonly a domain of verbal communication. The use of written text in the performance, as verbal imagery projected onto the performer's bodies or as fragments of words and sentences dispersed around the three-dimensional space of the stage, had a similar aim: to en/liven the classical text, both literally and figuratively, and to transform and enhance its expressivity by locating it in the body and space.





Figures 6. and 7. Through the use of malleable costumes and projected visuals, the performers are transformed from the mummy-like, humanoid shapes into the figures of mourning women (*Oedipus*, 2013)

Considering the goal of the project was to re-connect the viewers with the subject of representation, the question of audience participation was of great importance to us. However, making the viewers leave the safety of their place and literally 'take part in' or 'interact with' the play is not the form of participation we were after. Even though I am a practicing theatre maker, as a member of an audience I never managed to get over the awkwardness in situations where I was made to 'take part' in a performance. I never felt 'more engaged'; if anything, the effect was one of disengagement. So, how were we to move the viewer from a position of a distant observer and stimulate greater 'immersion', without engaging her/him in literal interaction?

On entry, the audience was invited to wear the same white protective suits used as costumes in the play. These suits are commonly used in scientific laboratories or in virus contaminated areas. The fact that the audience, performers, technicians, and so on were all dressed the in same outfit immediately created a sense of shared space, diminishing the boundary between the stage and the auditorium and suggesting the presence of the plague in the world outside (see figure 8). In addition to this, we created a sonically immersive environment by surrounding the auditorium with an eight channel sound system.



Figure 8. Costumed audience in *Oedipus the Code-breaker*

Using the transparent screens made of the latest projecting materials and effects of instant spatial transformations these materials enabled us to produce, we created an extraordinarily malleable and immersive scenographic space. Using an extremely stretchable material for the costumes, we could make them function alternately as clothing, projection screens, or both. In one of the play's most poignant scenes, the performers are transformed from the mummy-like, humanoid shapes into the figures of mourning women, through the combined use of malleable costumes and the projected visuals (figures 6 and 7).

Throughout the play, the performers are shifted in and out of the fictional computer screen (the virtual world of Oedipus's TB), with the two-dimensional projected image morphing into the three-dimensional stage space, and vice versa. The visual effect of the live performers' immersion into the digitally generated imagery serves a dramaturgical purpose: it provides scenographic context for the narrative journey of a hero caught in the web of the intertwining 'real' and mediated realities. The disjunction between the theatrical and projected media, as described in Aronson's *Jumping Into the Abyss*, rather than presenting an obstacle for our mediated theatre play, serves its fundamental dramaturgical and scenographic principles.

Conclusion

So, what can we conclude with regard to the question of compatibility (or incompatibility) of theatrical and projected media languages? Leaving the theoretical considerations aside, what I

hope to have demonstrated from a practitioner's perspective, is that theatre art, in an age of proliferating multi media and digital technologies, can, using this very technology, reinvent itself, exploring, on the one hand, the aesthetic potential of this technology for both dramaturgy and scenography, and, on the other, offering unique commentary on the political, social and psychological aspects of the uses and the effects of media technology in our contemporary culture.

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Biography

Fahrudin Nuno Salihbegovic is a theatre director, visual/sonic artist, interaction designer, and lecturer specialising in multimedia theatre and interactive digital arts. His practice-led research focuses on physical computing in theatre practice and performing arts. His investigation is both artistic and technological. He explores, through practice, the aesthetic potential of the uses of interactive digital media in theatre making and performance. In his scholarly work, he researches the history and theory of the idea of 'total theatre', with a particular focus on the twentieth century avant-garde and contemporary theatre practice involving media computing.