The Kitsch in Theatre. Short Inventory

Călin CIOBOTARI*

Abstract: Our study tries to answer questions such as: How is kitsch disguised in a contemporary theatre show? How does it manifest in the art of acting and staging? What does the kitsch look like in the audio and visual universe of the show? What do the kitsch-actor, the kitsch-stage director and the kitsch-spectator look like in the world of XXIst Century theatre? Can kitsch still be avoided or is this fight permanently lost?

Cuvinte cheie: kitsch, aesthetics.

Starting from the main signs used to identify kitsch, as they have been pointed out by the most important observers of the phenomenon, we are going to try, in the following study, to define the forms the kitsch gets in the theatre.

We are guided in our research by the general meanings of the kitsch: mass product, mass culture, triviality, banality, perishable art, counterfeited art, reproduction/large scale imitation of masterpieces, trying to be what you aren’t, predictability, aesthetic agglomeration, consumerism, (creative) industry, aesthetic mismatch, shallow catharsis, beauty marketability, desire to show off, poor taste.¹

The kitschy show

The closest kitsch form of the theatre show is what Lev Dodin called the “fast food show”. The Russian director took into consideration not only

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* Lecturer PhD. George Enescu National University of Arts, Iasi

¹ This is a synthesis of the kitsch - features I have extracted from works such as: Matei Călinescu, Cinci fețe ale modernității, 2nd reviewed and updated edition, translation from English by Tatiana Pătrulescu and Radu Țurcanu, afterword by Mircea Martin, Polirom Publishing House, Iași, 2005; Hermann Istvan, Kitschul, fenomen al pseudoartei, Politică Publishing House, București, 1973; Gavril Máté, Universul kitschului. O problemă de estetică, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 1985 etc.
how fast such a show could be made, but also its doubtful quality, its low ‘nourishing’ abilities.

The *fast food* metaphor related to the theatre is relevant because it refers to:

- the fast working time. It is difficult, if not impossible, to build a show, valid from an aesthetic point of view, in two-three weeks.
- using ‘recipes’ and prefabricated items. The show doesn’t require any original formulae, but applying pre-established dosages to standard formulae.
- closely related to the ‘fast food show’ there is also the ‘shawarma all inclusive’ show, a true form of theatrical kitsch in which the creators feel the need to demonstrate they have in their aesthetic warehouses something for everyone. The show takes the shape of a receptacle where you throw, any old how, words, lights, costumes, movement, colours, without any particular consideration for matching various ‘flavours’ or ‘nuances’.

Staying in the range of the gastronomic metaphors, we can talk about the ‘E’ numbers of a theatre show, the show of substances that seriously harm the consumer audience’s aesthetic health:

- entertainment at any cost. There are the shows designed from the beginning with one purpose only: to entertain the audience. This way we get within the perimeter of the pseudo-catharsis indicated by theoreticians as a form of the kitsch identification. Keeping entertainment as the only thing at stake, the theatre discards any profound speech, becoming mere commodified art.
- soap opera show. Predictable, buttery, generating superficial emotions, it has the exact type of audience as the hundreds of soap operas cranked out all over the world. They access superficial feelings, they don’t put a strain on intelligence and, by the inevitable happy-end, they provide a state of well-being to the audience.
- cliché-solutions. If you want to show the universal evil of a classical character, you resort to a Nazi sign. Were you to solve the matter of the Bombed citizen, you ask him to falter and have very noisy hiccups. If you want to do a Chekhov by the book, you produce grey shades and try to make the show so as everyone should get bored.
• torturing the classic text. One of the basic principles of the Romanian contemporary director is that the classic text should not be left in its initial form. The text is amputated, rewritten, added, unburdened by what the director, sure of himself/herself, calls ‘ballast’.

• update at any cost. Sometimes the updates are slick and then the text world, repositioned, gets a very good return from it. However, most of the times, the path to ridicule is certain. The ‘aesthetic mismatch’, another feature of the kitsch, is flagrant.

• gaudy naturalism. The excessive imitation of life turns the theatre into its tautological double. Spitting, urinating, vomiting, belching on stage cancels one of the finest theatrical dimensions: the dimension of the convention.

• smoke on stage. It represents one of the kitschiest version of creating ‘atmosphere’. Used by the endless replays, the smoke solution can still be found all over the place in contemporary shows.

• smoking on stage. Stage action happening with astonishing frequency, smoking has as unique motivation the preconceived idea that a character with a cigarette in its mouth is more interesting than one without it.

• excessive stroboscopic light, nature sounds, video projections.

**The kitschy director**

• the creator who has reached the conclusion that art comes second and the priority is to make money. The kitschy director is less concerned with aesthetic circuits and more interested in financial circuits.

• the director who, for different reasons, gets to produce six, seven, eight shows a year, turning them, inevitably, into mass products.

• the copy-paste the director. It is the director who, due to laziness, haste or self-love, gets to self-plagiarise. The remakes are, to great extent, kitschy productions, because they don’t go beyond, except in exceptional situations, the status of pale replicas of the first works.

• the director who lacks aesthetic sensitivity. We include here the hyper-intellectualist directors, but also the impostors. The shows made by this type of directors will be deprived of stylistic unity or, in the happiest case, they will be simply ugly from a visual point of view. The aesthetic mismatches
which vitiate many shows, derive from the same lack or atrophy of the aesthetic organ.

- the director who resorts to easy solutions which he/she has seen in others or he/she has frequently experimented himself/herself.
- the director who requires from his collaborators unjustified agglomerations of scenery, avalanches of lights, and a very busy sound space. He/she wants theatre props made of plastic, he wants light garlands, decorative objects, and flashy colours.
- the director who doesn’t work with the actor but tells him/her ‘do like me!’, limiting him/her to being an imitator who lacks all creative initiative.
- the director with no culture will end, without any doubt, in kitsch. His/her interpretations will always be limited to his/her own limitations.

The kitschy actor

- the predictable actor about whom you know how he/she will solve a character even before seeing the show.
- the actor acting only for the audience; he/she is the one who, instead of trying to give answers to the question ‘how is my character?’, is looking for answers to the question ‘how does the audience want my character to be?’
- the actor who plays too much – there are actors who, for various reasons, have periods of time when they are cast in anything; this produces an inflation of their performing art and of their own image; and as in any artistic inflation, this leads to kitsch. The ability to probe deeper into the character disappears, the searches are more and more superficial.
- the external performance (without any aesthetic motivation) places the actor in the kitsch field. The most vulnerable element in exposing the actor, the external performance represents the high accents, stage shouting, stage laughter, stage crying.
- the actor whose acting is ‘thick’, with declamatory excess or too obvious body gestures/attitude.

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2 We have here Grotowski’s distinction between the ‘courtesan actor’ and the ‘holy actor’.
3 All the advice Hamlet gives to the actors arrived at Elsinor may be considered as axioms of the anti-kitsch theatre.
• the actor who refuses or cannot constantly reinvent himself/herself, in the same character, during the multiple representations of one and the same show. His/her character, no matter how well it would have been performed at the opening, it would gradually turn into a mass product.

• the actor with no solid knowledge is vulnerable, prone to become a kitschy actor. The actor lacking culture doesn’t meditate on the art he/she practises, doesn’t ask himself/herself any profound and useful questions, doesn’t have the ‘self-consciousness’ of his/her own character and doesn’t find the resources to reinvent himself/herself as we have mentioned in the previous paragraph.

• the actor who has been incorrectly distributed may generate kitschy characters; the ‘aesthetic mismatch’ mentioned before intervenes in this case.

• the actor who imitates, without passing the mimesis through the filter of his/her own creative subjectivity, whether he/she imitates other actors, himself/herself in other shows, or simply people of the reality he/she lives in.