
"I do not believe!" as the motto of Stanislavsky and Vakhtangov. Semiotic notes on truth on the Theater Stage*

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Abstract: The founder of the modern theater of the 20th century, Konstantin Stanislavsky, and his student Evgeny Vakhtangov, in rehearsals and in performances, implemented the principle: "as in life". They believed that an actor should be on stage like a child. The latter, dropping the doll, may treat it like a wounded soldier and bandage it quite seriously. So, the actor must relate to untruth (the space of the stage). He must treat this "as if it were truth, that is, turn lies into truth" (VAKHTANGOV, 1918). We propose to consider examples of "truth theater" (school of experiencing, school of representation) through semiotic categories (veridictory modalities, engagement/disengagement), as well as through the prism of Lotman's semiotics of culture, and also ask the question what the truth on the theater stage is today.

Keywords: theater; truth; veridiction; theater stage; fantastic realism.

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Introduction

Thinking about truth on the theater stage, I would like to start with two examples from my personal experience. Both of them concern the famous State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov (Moscow). For many years, my family has been connected with this theater by friendly relations and joint projects, so this text is both a testimony of a semiotician and an admiring spectator.

The first example: June 2016, rehearsals for a new production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. A unique international project: the performance was played at a festival in Greece in the ancient amphitheater of Epidauros for 14,000 seats, with the participation of Russian and Greek actors, and then entered the repertoire of the Vakhtangov Theater. A documentary *Oedipus in Epidauros*¹ was filmed about this premiere: a reflection on how to play a Greek tragedy today, a story about the play's journey to Sophocles' homeland.

Let's get back to rehearsals. The role of Jocasta is played by the famous actress Lyudmila Maksakova, the keeper of the traditions of the Vakhtangov school (Figures 1, 2). I look at her hair, how she is dressed: a toe-length black dress embroidered with glass beads, high-heeled shoes. Outfit for going to the theater or for the premiere itself. But to wear such a dress for a rehearsal, for routine work, for repeating the same scenes? The director of the play addresses her: "Now you are not just leaving the stage, Jocasta is going to die." And before our eyes, her body becomes the body of a rag doll, her arms hang limply, and she heads for the exit. She does not "play" her last steps, there is simply no life inside her anymore. How does this happen? In a formal dress embroidered with glass beads...

Figure 1: Performance *Oedipus Rex* of the State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov, Epidauros/Moscow (2016).



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

¹ OEDIPUS in Epidauros. Direction: Marina Merkulova. Movie script: Alexander Myagchenkov; Marina Merkulova. Moscow: Vakhtangov Theater, 2018. Available in: <https://vakhtangov.ru/video/33462/>. Accessed on: 27 jun. 2022.

Figure 2: Jocasta – Lyudmila Maksakova.



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

We can find one of the possible answers in archival documents: the history of the theater and its founder, Eugeny Vakhtangov. In the notebooks of his student Boris Zakhava we read:

Vakhtangov did not like people to come to the Studio for the sake of any practical results – a role, a performance, the creation of a theater; he wanted everyone to go to the Studio for the sake of the holiday, he liked to see festive faces around him: *he even liked the students to come to the lesson a little more smartly dressed than usual ...* (ZAKHAVA, 2011 [1927], p. 318, loose translation and emphasis added).²

As Algirdas Julien Greimas wrote in *On Imperfection*, clothing “performs the function of an appearance, it projects a reconstructed image of the female figure” and hints at the presence of the body as a precious secret. “Going beyond the aesthetics of taste, the subject rushes towards the intuitive aesthetics of the imagination” (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 91, loose translation).³

Before us is an example of a “loophole” (*échappatoire*), that is, in the words of Greimas, “the striving for perfection.” Not ordinary, but festive rehearsal clothes “anticipate” the performance, it in itself already “gives birth to a space where the forbidden [...] can fully play the role of the creator of meaning, where the imagination can be exercised freely until developing the Western conception of love” (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 92, loose translation).⁴

² Original quote: “Вахтангов не любил, чтобы в Студию приходили ради каких-либо практических результатов – роли, спектакля, создания театра ; он хотел, чтобы каждый шел в Студию ради праздника, праздничные лица любил он видеть вокруг себя : он любил даже, чтобы ученики приходили на урок несколько более парадно одетыми, чем обычно...” (ZAKHAVA, 2011 [1927], p. 318).

³ Original quote: “En transcendant l’esthétique du goût, le sujet se hausse ainsi vers l’intuition d’une esthétique imaginaire” (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 91).

⁴ Original quote: “créateur d’un espace où l’interdit [...] peut pleinement remplir son rôle d’instaurateur du sens, où l’imaginaire peut s’exercer librement jusqu’à développer la conception occidentale de l’amour” (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 92).

The second example: November 2021, the Vakhtangov Theater celebrates the Centenary of its founding. Anniversaries are in themselves a semiotic phenomenon. The anniversaries of prominent writers and scientists, the dates of publication of books and the establishment of cultural institutions serve as a kind of reference cultural points, that is, those on which the scale of measurements as a whole is based. Therefore, in the UNESCO system there is a whole Program of anniversaries⁵ (international days, international decades and anniversaries of one hundred years and above), aimed at promoting intercultural dialogue and paying tribute to the memory of outstanding personalities who contributed to the construction of human civilization. Among the recent examples of UNESCO Anniversaries are the Congress of the French Semiotic Association on the Centenary of the birth of the founder of the Paris Semiotic School Algirdas Julien Greimas at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris in 2017 and the Congress on the Centenary of the birth of the founder of the Moscow-Tartu Semiotic School, Youri Mikhailovich Lotman in Estonia in 2022.

Usually, anniversaries are marked by a series of events. In the case of the theater, this could be an evening-concert with the participation of actors and guests of honor, or a performance. However, the Vakhtangov Theater chose its non-standard unique solution. This day, November 13, 2022, was called the “Silence Day” (Figures 3, 4). On this day, the doors of the theater were open to all visitors. Everyone could come there, walk along the corridors of the theater, see an exhibition of costumes and scenery for famous performances, get an autograph from any actor of the theater troupe or take a selfie with him, visit the management’s offices, sit in the large auditorium, where the voices of departed actors sounded in the semi-darkness from the stage, and where their names were projected on the back of the stage, like stars in the sky. The theater management described the concept of the “Silence Day” as follows: “What will happen on the anniversary, November 13? – It will be Memorial Day. Theater History Day. Day of Silence. The lights will be on in the Vakhtangov Theater, we will open the doors, we will open the box of the historical stage. We will listen to the voices of the departed. They will be heard as if from records on a damaged tape, as if from the other world, with crackling. We don’t recognize many of them” (VAKHTANGOV THEATRE, 2021a).

⁵Available in: <https://en.unesco.org/anniversaries>.

Figure 3: “Silence Day”, State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov, Moscow, 13.11.2021.



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

Figure 4: “Silence Day”, State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov, Moscow, 13.11.2021.



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

This is another example of an unconventional “loophole”. A holiday, but not a formal concert, but a holiday for everyone, an open action, without pomposity, sincerely. On the day of the theatre's centenary, the spectator could enter any of its spaces, usually closed to the public, *live, really* “touch” the actors. To come to a shock of feelings, but not to catharsis, but to aesthesis. In order to shorten time, as Greimas wrote, preserving only the fleeting, to narrow space, giving meaning only to fragments – and *gradually approach the most important thing*, while at the same time remaining in the material world:

Thus, through a reduction of time – maintaining only what is ephemeral –, through a reduction of space – granting importance only to fragments – we would approach little by little what is essential, though also remaining in the material order (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 98, loose translation and emphasis added).⁶

1. About truth in the context of theatrical semiotics

Truth in the space of a work of art is the subject of reflection for many semioticians. One of the most famous examples is Umberto Eco's *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (ECO, 1994).

The real world and the imaginary world are inextricably linked. As Eco writes, when reading a literary text, we flee from the anxiety that overcomes us when we try to “say something true about the world around us” (ECO, 2002, p. 163).⁷

The chapter “Possible Woods” begins with a description of a historical character, the last king of Italy, who, while at an art exhibition, looks at a picture of a valley and a village, and then asks the question: “How many inhabitants does it have?”⁸ The conclusion that Eco draws from this situation is formulated as follows: “tacit agreement”, which Coleridge called “the suspension of disbelief” (ECO, 1994, p. 75). The reader knows that he is being told a fictional story, but he must not conclude that the writer is lying.

The theoretical heritage of Umberto Eco can be generally regarded as *a semiotic quest for truth*, in the words of Anna Maria Lorusso. In a recent lecture, she pointed out that “for Eco, recognizing the legitimacy and the importance of the lie means recognizing the legitimacy and the importance of a semiosis based on the autonomy of culture” (LORUSSO, 2022).

Yuri Lotman also repeatedly addressed the topic of truth. In his last interview in 1993, he connected this issue with the problem of the multiplicity of paths, values and choices that a person constantly makes:

The world we live in is increasingly willing to get the most important value at the cheapest possible price. It's like not very diligent schoolchildren who peep into the answers to the problems, instead of solving them themselves. We want to get the truth as quickly as possible, like ready-made shoes made for “nobody”. And truth is given only at the cost of the sacrifice of the dearest. In fact, the only

⁶ Original quote: “Ainsi, par une réduction du temps – en ne retenant que l'éphémère –, par une réduction de l'espace – en n'accordant de l'importance qu'à ses fragments – on approcherait petit à petit de l'essentiel, tout en restant pourtant dans l'ordre du matériel” (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 98).

⁷ “By reading narrative, we escape the anxiety that attacks us when we try to say something true about the world” (ECO, 1994, p. 87).

⁸ “Once upon a time there was ... “a King!” my gentle audience will immediately exclaim (...) The story goes that one day he had to open a painting exhibition. Finding himself in front of a beautiful landscape showing a valley with a village...” (ECO, 1994, p. 75).

way to get the truth is to destroy yourself for its sake. Truth does not exist for everyone and for no one (LOTMAN, 1993, p. 113).

What can we say about the space not just of a literary text, but of a text transferred to the stage, “coming to life” in front of the spectator? Does the principle of “suspension of disbelief” work in this case? What is the price of truth on the theater stage?

Lotman devoted a number of articles to the theme of theater, in particular, “Theater and theatricality in the structure of culture of the early 19th century” (*Teatr i teatralnost v stroe kultury nachala 19 veka*) (1998a [1973]), “Theatrical language and painting” (*Teatralnyi yazyk i zhivopis*) (1998b [1979]), “Semiotics of the stage” (*Semiotika sceny*) (1998c [1980]), “Language of the theater” (*Yazyk teatra*) (1998d [1989]). The main conclusion that he draws about the theater is that if all art forms are connected with the problems of artistic communication, “that is, with semiotics”, then few of them touch upon such diverse aspects of it. And in the theater “everything is semiotics”: from makeup and facial expressions to the norms of the behavior of the spectator in the auditorium, from the theater stage to the ritualized theatrical atmosphere. Moreover, this semiotics is so complex and diverse that the stage can be called an “encyclopedia of semiotics” (LOTMAN, 1998c [1980], p. 603). The scenic world is symbolic in nature, and the scenic action is based on the actor, that is, the person enclosed in the space of the stage.

Lotman's thoughts are surprisingly close to the postulates of one of the leading theatrical figures of the 20th century, Antonin Artaud. In the program manifesto *The Theater of Cruelty*, he warned readers against the danger of the theater being swallowed up by the text, insisting on *the special language of the theater* and its exclusively semiotic nature:

It is essential to put an end to the subjugation of the theater to the text, and to recover the notion of a kind of unique language half-way between gesture and thought [...]. Once aware of this language in space, language of sounds, cries, lights, onomatopoeia, the theater must organize it into veritable hieroglyphs, with the help of characters and objects, and make use of their symbolism and interconnections in relation to all organs and on all levels (ARTAUD, 1958, p. 90).

Lotman argues that the special language of the theater has its own name - *theatricality*. “Theatricality is the language of theater as an art”, he writes (LOTMAN, 1998d [1989], p. 604). The nature of theatricality is complex, two components are clearly visible in it: firstly, the relationship between the play (written text) and the performance (staging); secondly, the relationship between the spectator and the performance. In both cases, we are talking about a dialogue, and this dialogue is dramatic. In the case of the play/staging

relationship, the “resistance of the play” is born, which can lead to new unpredictable results. Art as a result of an explosion creates an unpredictable text, this is the phenomenon of art. In the case of musical theater, for example, turning Mérimée's short story into Bizet's opera or Pushkin's story into Tchaikovsky's opera is an act of creativity, mutual tension of different kinds of art, creating an explosion of artistic energy, a flow of new meanings. According to Lotman, “Staging is one of the most difficult types of literary translation” (LOTMAN, 1998c [1989], p. 604).

If we look at the theater from the point of view of the evolution of art in general, then the first thing we notice is the changed role of the spectator in comparison with the forms of archaic creativity. The archaic forms of folklore are rituals. This means that they do not have a passive spectator. Spectators are involved in the rite, in its temporal or spatial frame. The ancient theater still retained the features of the ancient worldview and assumed a direct impact on the spectator and inducing him to certain actions: the audience of Athena rushed to their women after the actors recited love on stage. However, modern theater (Lotman is talking about the theater of the 20th century) appeals to a completely different audience. This spectator “calmly perceives” the most terrible episodes and scenes, without interfering in the action, “he sees, but does not interfere, co-presents, but does not act” (LOTMAN, 2004a [1992], p. 134-135).

Thus, Lotman formulates the main postulate of the relationship of the triad “spectator – actor – stage” in the theater: the action is replaced by the *co-presence* of the spectator, which simultaneously coincides with the presence in the usual non-artistic space (the real location in the auditorium) and is completely opposite to it.

How do the principle of co-presence (non-interference in the stage action) and the principle of “suspension of disbelief” fit together for the spectator? A possible answer can be found in the form of Greimas’ “veridiction contract” (*le contrat de véridiction*).

Understanding the truth from the point of view of semiotics is one of the key issues in *Semiotics and Language. An Analytical Dictionary* by Greimas and Courtés. According to the authors of the Dictionary, truth must be understood as a complex term that includes the concepts of “to be” and “to seem” (*être/paraître*) within the semiotic square of veridictory modalities (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 420). It is important to remember, Greimas and Courtés write, that “‘truth’ is within the discourse, because it is the result of enunciative operations” (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 420, loose translation).⁹ And it is the inclusion of the problematic of truth within the discourse that leads to the creation of a “veridiction contract” between the two participants in

⁹ Original quote: “le ‘vrai’ est situé à l’intérieur du discours, car il est le fruit des opérations de l’énonciation” (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 420).

communication - the one who formulates the message and the one to whom it is directed (*énonciateur/énonciataire*). A veridiction contract is nothing more than an agreement in which both sides of the communication channel “believe in the truth” (*croire-vrai*), and this belief is “more or less stable”:

The belief in the truth (*croire-vrai*) by the enunciator is not enough, we know, for the transmission of truth: a belief-in-truth (un croire-vrai) must be installed at both ends of the channel of communication, and this more or less stable balance [...] which we name veridiction contract (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 417, loose translation).¹⁰

Why does the spectator in the theater enter into this contract? Developing reflections on theatricality, Lotman pointed out that this concept has two components, as ancient as the theater itself. The first is that the spectator, being in the auditorium, must forget that he is in the theater. The second is that the spectator must never forget this, always remember that before him is “the game of life” (LOTMAN, 1998d [1989], p. 605). The dialogue that the theater conducts with the spectator in the language of theatricality involves two operations: the spectator “turns on” to the theatricality, looking at the stage, and “turns off” from the theatricality during the intermission, walking along the theatrical foyer, and again returns to the theatricality, to the point on where he stopped, into the world of illusory reality. As we can see, in this case, Lotman's formulations are close to the conceptual apparatus of Greimas' semiotics (with the concepts of *on/off: embrayage/débrayage*), especially when it comes to “returning to theatricality” (that is, to the language of theater) as a *return inside discourse*. “shifting in refers to the effect of returning to enunciation, produced by the suspension of the opposition between certain terms of the categories of person and/or space and/or time...” (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 119, loose translation).¹¹

The spectator's belief in what is happening on the stage has a dual nature: he believes in the reality of the stage – and cries over the fate of Desdemona, and at the same time he knows that this is an illusion – and therefore does not rush to her aid. The degree of faith or trust is also different, depending on the activity of the spectator: the spectator can visit the performance only once, and then his perception is superficial, or he can become a “faithful spectator”, a loyal fan of this particular theater, and then he is an active and grateful interlocutor.

¹⁰ Original quote: “Le croire-vrai de l'énonciateur ne suffit pas, on s'en doute, à la transmission de la vérité [...]: un croire-vrai doit être installé aux deux extrémités du canal de la communication, et c'est cet équilibre, plus ou moins stable [...], que nous dénommons contrat de veridiction” (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 417).

¹¹ Original quote: “l'embrayage désigne l'effet de retour à l'énonciation, produit par la suspension de l'opposition entre certains termes des catégories de la personne et/ou de l'espace et /ou du temps” (GREIMAS ; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 119).

In the dialogue between the theater and the audience, between the stage and the audience, mutual understanding is only one aspect of the matter. After all, if mutual understanding is too easy, it means that it is based on past successes, on yesterday's theatrical language. And a real live theater is constantly evolving, its language is changing, this is the law of any semiotic system. And together with the spectator, he seeks the truth, which is “always a search”, as Lotman says (1998c [1989], p. 608).

In the case of “veridiction contract”, the spectator is not simply transported for some time into another illusory reality (that is, he believes that he is transported into it). The long-term perspective of this contract is the impact on the entire subsequent life of the individual, these are new opportunities for his self-expression. “There are epochs, writes Lotman, when art imperiously invades everyday life, aestheticizing the daily course of life” (LOTMAN, 1998a [1973], p. 635). The theater as a particular kind of art is able to turn the everyday course of life, that is, to offer the very “loophole” of Greimas (1987, p. 70). The problem of a person's everyday behavior is that he “freezes into everyday life, like a sinner of Dante's Hell into the ice of Caina”. Looking at life *as a performance* gives a person a new opportunity for behavior. Everyday life without events is monotonous. Theatrical life, that is, “life as a performance”, is the existence of a historical character, an actor. A person himself chooses the type of his behavior, actively influences the world around him, dies or succeeds (LOTMAN, 1998a [1973], p. 636).

2. Vakhtangov: Truth and Fantasy

Theater director Evgeny Vakhtangov (1883-1922) is a student and successor of Konstantin Stanislavsky. He is the founder of a new theatrical style and the creator of the now legendary Vakhtangov Theater, which celebrated its centenary in 2021. Within the framework of this article, we would like to start a conversation about him with his own quote addressed to his students: “My dears, if you want to be like me, if you want to please me, *stay true to yourself*” (VAKHTANGOVETS, 2022b, p. 4, emphasis added).

At rehearsals and in performances, Konstantin Stanislavsky and Evgeny Vakhtangov implemented the principle: “as in life”. They believed that an actor should be on stage like a child. The latter, dropping the doll, may treat it like a wounded soldier and bandage it quite seriously. Similarly, the actor must take untruth (the space of the stage) quite seriously. He must treat this “as if it were truth, turning lies into truth” (VAKHTANGOV, 2020 [1918], p. 55).

The students of Evgeny Vakhtangov, who preserved his school and developed his theatrical theory after his tragic early death (at only 39 years old), developed this idea in detail:

The more lies on the stage, the greater the field of activity for the actor's creativity. If I love a girl and I need to declare my love to her on stage, there is no art here. If an actor needs to declare his love to another girl, and he sees in her the one he loves, then this is also not art, but a hallucination. There will be art when he treats his partner on stage as the one he loves, that is, he turns a lie into truth (ZAKHAVA, 1918, p. 55).

Evgeny Vakhtangov managed to stage only a few performances, but it was these performances that became the basis of a new theatrical direction, which he called “fantastic realism”. Vakhtangov's relationship with Stanislavsky was not simple and ambiguous, and the main controversial issue was precisely the question of truth on stage, the boundaries of this truth, its naturalism. The essence of their relationship (the student's loyalty to his teacher, disagreement with the master's theory, perceived by the latter as a betrayal, and at the same time admiration for his “rebellious” student) is summarized in one phrase by Stanislavsky, written in a telegram to Vakhtangov after the premiere of the play *Princess Turandot*: “I am proud of such a student *if he is my student*. Tell him to wrap himself in a blanket like a toga and fall asleep like a conqueror” (STANISLAVSKY, 2011 [1922], p. 565, emphasis added).

The play *Princess Turandot*, staged in 1922, is considered the pinnacle of Vakhtangov's work (Figures 5 and 6). The first version of the play ran 1035 times and was played for the last time in 1941. In the new version, the performance was recreated in 1963 and survived until the 1980s. Finally, from 1996 to 2006, the audience saw the canonical production of Vakhtangov with a new generation of actors. In total, *Princess Turandot* was played 2500 times on the stage of the theater, and the performance became the hallmark of the Vakhtangov Theater. Today it exists only as a beautiful theatrical legend, but perhaps one day the curtain will open again with the motive: “here we begin with our simple song, in five minutes our platform will become China” (VAKHTANGOVETS, 2022a, p. 2).

Figure 5: Performance *Princess Turandot*, Vakhtangov Theater, Moscow (1922).



Source: Archives of the State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

Figure 6: Performance *Princess Turandot*, Vakhtangov Theater, Moscow (1922).



Source: Archives of the State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

A simple song reveals the essence of Vakhtangov's approach and his method of “fantastic realism”: the actor *does not hide* from the audience that he is acting, and does not really live, but at the same time invites him *to believe together* in a fairy tale that he creates on stage.

Initially, in 1920, Vakhtangov was interested in Schiller's tragedy *Turandot*, but the production was not successful, and during the rehearsals the play was replaced with the original plot, which Schiller borrowed from Carlo Gozzi. The originality of Vakhtangov's idea was that he proposed to emphasize the theatrical nature of Gozzi's tale, written in 1762, based on the traditions of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Together with the students of his Studio, Vakhtangov was looking for new ways to create a role, achieved *estrangement*, anticipating the Brechtian principles of the existence of actors on the stage and their interaction with the stage image. Vakhtangov subtly felt the mood of the time, understood how much the spectator of the post-revolutionary era, the time of famine and devastation, needed the theater and the holiday. Therefore, the performance-holiday was born on the stage right before the eyes of the spectator. Improvisation on stage, one of the hallmarks of Italian comedy, was carefully prepared, but presented to the viewer as if it had just arisen in his presence. The students wrote down the Master's advice: “It is not the fairy-tale world that should appear on the stage, but the theatrical world. The representation of the fairy tale must appear on the stage. No psychological excuses. The justification is only theatrical” (VAKHTANGOVETS, 2022a, p. 1).

Vakhtangov demanded maximum external expressiveness from the actors, took them to circus performances to show examples of free control of the body, sought from them an instant exit from the image, an ironic game with him. The scenery of Ignatius Nivinsky (ramps, arches, gymnastic trapeze), the music of Sizov and Kozlovsky, performed «not seriously», on whistles and rattles, played a huge role in the performance. The effect was enhanced by the exquisite theatrical costumes of Nadezhda Lamanova (evening dresses for women and tailcoats for men), and on top of these costumes were “hooligan” accessories:

instead of a beard, a muffler, instead of a headdress, a lampshade, instead of a royal scepter, a tennis racket... For the inhabitants of the difficult post-revolutionary era, a joyful, ironic, full of hope and fun performance was staged, where external beauty did not annoy, but made them forget the problems and difficulties of everyday existence. The style of the new performance opened up new horizons and for many years influenced the development of the creative manner of both the Vakhtangov Theater and the European theater. Critics have commented on it like this: “Purity of thought, purity of feelings... This is a disinterested, sincere game of theater, a game of children, in which each child is uniquely brilliant” (VAKHTANGOVETS, 2022a, p. 2).

Princess Turandot is considered a challenge to Stanislavsky's theory. In this performance, the achievements of psychological theater, which Vakhtangov carefully studied and taught his students, seemed to be discarded, and a new path to understanding acting was offered. The principle of the actor's existence in *Princess Turandot* was to become different, remaining himself (VAKHTANGOVETS, 2022a, p. 2). The “challenge” of this performance of Stanislavsky's theory lies precisely in the question of “truth” and “truthfulness” of the performance on stage.

Stanislavsky's system (in the English-language tradition – Method) can be summarized in the famous phrase “I don't believe!”, which, according to legend, he addressed to his actors. His phrase is usually interpreted as follows: Stanislavsky criticized unnaturalness, excessive pathos and encouraged lifelikeness on stage. It is also believed that Stanislavsky thus opposed the “imitation of truth”, demanding from the actors an internal transformation so that they “could see life” through the eyes of their characters.

The provisions of Stanislavsky's system are systematized in the book *An actor prepares* (1938, English version 1936), where he divides acting into three technologies:

1. *Craft*: the use of ready-made stamps, by which the viewer can clearly understand what emotions the actor has in mind;
2. *Art of representation*: in the process of long rehearsals, the actor experiences genuine experiences, which automatically create a form, but at the performance he does not experience these feelings, but reproduces the form, the external drawing of the role;
3. *Art of experiencing*: in the process of acting, the actor experiences genuine experiences, and this gives rise to the life of the image on stage.

It is this system that Vakhtangov has been teaching to the students of his theater Studio since 1913. As Boris Vershilov, one of the young students of the Studio, wrote, Stanislavsky and his system were “our shrine, our gospel”. Evgeny Bogrationovich Vakhtangov mastered this art superbly. “I remember how one evening he showed us Mikhail Chekhov, he lived in his image. He did not imitate, but lived. It was not always outwardly similar, but the important thing is that it

was no longer Vakhtangov, but a completely new person” (VERSHILOV, 2011 [1959], p. 21).

However, Lee Strasberg rightly notes the difference in the results of the work of two outstanding theater directors: if you examine the work of the Stanislavski System as made use of by Stanislavski, you see one result. If you examine it in the work of one of his great pupils, Vakhtangov, you will see a completely different result. “Vakhtangov's work was skillfully done, his use of the Method even more brilliant and more imaginative than Stanislavski's, and yet Vakhtangov achieved totally different results” (quoted in: CARNICKE, 1988, p. 45).

Princess Turandot is both the embodiment of the Stanislavsky System by Vakhtangov and the quintessence of disagreements between the student and the teacher. During the rehearsals of the play in early 1922, he told the actors:

We have the right to play our performance as a «representation». We have the right to this because we can, if we want, give a pure “experience”. We know the methods and techniques of the Stanislavsky school for this. Anyone who knows how to “live” a role has the right to seek a theatrical form of revelation or to “represent” [...]. Many of the actors “representing” are unconvincing, meaningless and stilted because they do not know the “sense of truth” and the “truth of experience” (ZAKHAVA; GORCHAKOV, 2011 [1922], p. 439).

By staging *Turandot*, Vakhtangov fought against the naturalism that had come to the theater along with the Stanislavsky System. Stanislavsky urged that the audience, coming to the Art Theater to see Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, believe that he was not in the theater, but “visiting the Prozorov family” (the family of three sisters). The problem, according to Vakhtangov, was that Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavsky, carried away by the expulsion of vulgarity, removed with it the real, necessary theatricality, and “real theatricality consists in showing theatrical works theatrically [...]. Carried away by real truth, Stanislavsky brought naturalistic truth to the stage”. Contrasting himself with Stanislavsky, the director of the conventional theater Meyerhold, “being carried away by theatrical truth, removed the truth of feelings from the stage. But the truth should be both in the theater of Meyerhold and in the theater of Stanislavsky. The time has come for the theater to return to the theater” (VAKHTANGOV, 2011 [1922], p. 578). The way to return truth to the theater is the language of theatricality, authentic theatrical means, and in this sense Vakhtangov anticipates both the work of the theorists of the theater of the 20th century and the semiotic understanding of theatricality presented by Lotman.

In one of his last conversations with students in April 1922, a few weeks before his death, Vakhtangov argued: “In the theater there should be neither naturalism nor realism, but fantastic realism. Correctly found theatrical means

give the author *a true life* on stage. The means can be learned, the form must be created, it must be fantasized. That's why I call it fantastic realism" (VAKHTANGOV, 2011 [1922], p. 583, emphasis added). Vakhtangov sought to find a compromise between two postulates: the spectator must forget that he is in the theater (Stanislavsky) and he must not forget for a second that he is in the theater (Meyerhold). In *Princess Turandot* he brilliantly managed to implement the principle that in 1989 Lotman would call the key in the language of the theater: the principle of *on/off*: to forget and not to forget at the same time. In order for such a state to happen to the spectator, the actor must also be in the same state, "helping" his spectator. In this sense, one should understand Vakhtangov's advice to the actors of *Princess Turandot*: "You need to cry with *the most real (raznastoyaschimi)* tears and carry your feelings to the ramp" (ZAKHAVA; GORCHAKOV, 2011 [1922], p. 439, emphasis added). In this phrase, Vakhtangov invented the neologism "raznastoyaschij", that is, as truthful as possible.

In parallel with the rehearsals of *Princess Turandot* in January 1922, Vakhtangov rehearsed as a guest director in the studio of the Jewish theater "Habima" An-sky's play *The Dybbuk* (Figures 7, 8). The performance is based on an old Hasidic legend about a spirit that can take possession of the body of a living person. *The Dybbuk* is the only performance by Vakhtangov that has traveled almost the whole world and has been played in its original form for more than 40 years. It is also the play that started the tradition of creating television versions of plays (its television version was created in London in 1937). After the triumphant world tour of the Habima Studio in 1926-1930 (the artists stayed in the West, then the Studio worked in Israel) the performance was recognized as one of the most outstanding theatrical achievements of the 20th century. If *Princess Turandot* became the basis of the theatrical tradition of "fantastic realism" on the Russian stage, then thanks to *The Dybbuk* this direction has gained worldwide fame. On February 14, 2022, the Vakhtangov Theater presented a documentary exhibition dedicated to the centenary of the performance *The Dybbuk* (Figures 9, 10), where the performance was called "a real embodiment of the dream of a mystery theater" (VAKHTANGOVETS, 2022a, p. 4).

Figure 7: Performance *The Dybbuk*, Moscow, Habima Studio (1922).



Source: Archives of the State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

Figure 8: Performance *The Dybbuk*, Moscow, Habima Studio (1922).



Source: Archives of the State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

Figure 9: "The Dybbuk: Centenary exhibition", State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov, Moscow, 14.02. 2022.



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

Figure 10: " *The Dybbuk*: Centenary exhibition", State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov, Moscow, 14.02. 2022.



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

What are the features and the secret of the success of *The Dybbuk*, in addition to the sophisticated play of the actors? First of all, it is language. An-sky's play was translated into Hebrew and staged by Vakhtangov in that language. Vakhtangov did not know Hebrew, and neither did the public of Moscow in 1922. Many future spectators of the performance from different countries did not know this language either. And yet the performance was played in Hebrew, as if Vakhtangov was trying to prove to himself and to the audience that, without understanding the language spoken by the actors, everyone can understand *the language of theatricality*. In this sense, theatrical truth appears, as it were, "purified from language" in general. Vakhtangov sought the utmost theatrical expressiveness from the actors, which would compensate the audience for not knowing the language of the play. Extremely valuable are the testimonies of the outstanding actor Mikhail Chekhov, invited by Vakhtangov to one of the rehearsals of *The Dybbuk*. After watching the performance in Hebrew, Vakhtangov asked Mikhail Chekhov to name those scenes that remained incomprehensible to him. Then he forced the actors to rehearse for several more hours, until he achieved such precision, gesture and emotion that "everything was exactly clear to the audience. Chekhov was shocked" (VAKHTANGOVETS, 2022a, p. 4).

Antonin Artaud, already quoted at the beginning of this article, compared two phenomena: the theater and the plague. During the health crisis of 2020-2021 this comparison has acquired a new relevance and began to be read in a new way:

If the essential theatre is like the plague, it is not because it is contagious, but because like the plague it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty [...]. In the theatre as in the plague there is a kind of strange sun, a light of abnormal intensity by which it seems that the and even the impossible suddenly become our normal element... (ARTAUD, 1958, p. 92).

Just a few years ago, few people could have imagined that “virtual nightly poetry readings by famous artists and writers or their dialogues on social networks will become a new cultural norm” (MERKOULOVA, I.; MERKOULOVA, M., 2021, p. 145). Few could have imagined that theaters would hold «meetings and telephone conversations» with the audience and live premieres (the Sovremennik Theater in Moscow and the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris). That the video of the soloists of the Mikhailovsky Theater ballet in St. Petersburg with rehearsals at home will garner millions of views and enthusiastic reactions all over the world. That many of us will miss our favorite theaters so much that these theaters themselves will “meet” the audience with virtual tours and linguistic projects (*The theater misses the audience*). And that we ourselves will turn into artists, artists, musicians, inventing online performances and imitating a “cultural trip to the theater” ... In the era of the sanitary crisis, the emergence of new cultural forms occurs according to the laws of Lotman's semiosphere: elements that were on the periphery move to the center; at first, they are perceived as “explosive” and unexpected, but gradually they themselves become a new norm and starting point (LOTMAN, 2004, p. 254).

In this sense, the potential of the “principal” or “truthful” theater is that very *strange sun* of Artaud, in the light of which the impossible becomes a “normal element”. A paradox arose: the traditional forms of cultural entertainment – theatre, cinema, museum, concert hall – turned out to be inaccessible (with 50 or 25 percent occupancy and restrictions for older audiences), but it was this vacuum that became the catalyst for many original and innovative online-projects. The latter aims to remind the audience of the very theatrical truth, which, according to Lotman, “raises a person above everyday life” (LOTMAN, 1998a [1973], p. 636). That is why, as it is written on the branded mask of the Vakhtangov Theater, this new theatrical attribute of the 2020-2021 pandemic era, “Theaters are important” (Figures 11, 12).

Figure 11: Mask with the logo for the Centenary of the Vakhtangov Theater and the inscription “Theaters are important”.



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

Figure 12: Spectator in a mask at the inauguration of the monument to Vakhtangov on the Centenary of the Theater.



Source: State Academic Theater Evgeny Vakhtangov.

One of the original projects of the Vakhtangov Theater in this era is the Audio performance-promenade “Vakhtangov. The path to Turandot” (VAKHTANGOV THEATER, 2021c). This original action combines the forms of a real excursion in the urban space (an interactive performance in the space of the city, where the audience is at the same time participants in the performance) and recreates the virtual world of Vakhtangov, who conceives and implements the play *Turandot* at one or another city address.

The Audio performance-promenade of 2021 is also an occasion to recall one of Vakhtangov's unrealized plans: the 1920 project to stage Alexander Pushkin's *A Feast in the Time of Plague*. As Lotman believed, “works of art create images of the real world”, and in this sense, a conceived but unwritten (remaining virtual) work also has meaning and importance (LOTMAN, 2004b [1969], p. 9). According to the memoirs of Vakhtangov's student Boris Zakhava, the production plan was as follows: on the stage there is a table, a streetlamp, skeletons of houses against a background of black velvet. There is a group of people at the table, a sculptural group: holes for the hands and heads are cut in the huge gray cloth, this cloth covers the table and all the actors.

Thus, it turned out to be one continuous gray mass, where everyone is connected to each other: there are no bodies, and only heads and hands play against the background of a gray canvas. Extreme economy of movement. The hand reaches for the goblet, the hand embraces, the hand pushes away - everything here becomes extraordinarily significant [...]. By simple means, Vakhtangov achieved amazing effects. *Not a single word had yet been uttered* on the stage, but already a tragic imprint lay on everything, in the slow movements of the hands and heads one could feel the breath of the “plague” (ZAKHAVA, 2011 [1927], p. 318, emphasis added).

Two other masterpieces of fantastic realism grew out of the unrealized project of 1920: *Princess Turandot* (the fairy tale becomes an alternative to the tragic life of the post-revolutionary era) and *The Dybbuk* (the incomprehensible language of the characters, *as if they did not utter a single word*, is replaced by the expressive language of theatricality).

Conclusion

The theatrical stage is the territory of untruth, but this untruth is creative, full of unpredictable possibilities. Its basis is not just the principle of “suspension of disbelief”, but an explicit agreement, a *veridiction contract* between the actor and the audience, based on the principle: “the actor believes” on the stage and “the audience believes” in the auditorium, while remaining in his place. *The veridiction contract in the theater* is a special combination of “suspension of disbelief” and the principle of non-intervention, and the basis of this combination is theatricality.

Now if we turn to the semiotic terminology of Jacques Fontanille in his 2021 book *Together (Ensemble. Pour une anthropologie sémiotique du Politique)*, then in the case of the theater it will be not so much about the “factory of truth” (*la fabrique des vérités*), but about the “creation of worlds” (*l’instauration des mondes*) (FONTANILLE, 2021, p. 221, loose translation).¹² Theater is a special, common, “possible” world between actors and spectators, where they really coexist *together*.

“I will shed tears over fiction” is the quintessence of this agreement, formulated by Alexander Pushkin in 1830. In the poem *Hero* of the same 1830, he put it even more specifically: “The uplifting deception is dearer to me than the multitude of low truths” (PUSHKIN, 1985 [1830], p 477-487). A few decades later, in *Crime and Punishment*, Fyodor Dostoevsky will connect both themes – theater and semiotics – in the discourse of one of the characters. “Everything came together too well... and intertwined... just like in the theater”, he comments on the crime. And he continues:

Lying is the only human privilege over all organisms. Lie and get to the truth! I am a man because I lie. Not a single truth was reached without lying in advance fourteen times, or maybe a hundred and fourteen, and this is honorable in its own way; and we can't lie on our own! You lie to me, but lie in your own way, and then I will kiss you. To lie in one's own way is almost better than to tell the truth in someone else's way; in the first case you are a man, and in the second you are just a bird! (DOSTOEVSKY, 1990, p. 269).

Pushkin and Dostoevsky, both beloved by Youri Lotman, emphasize the originality of untruth as a condition for its acceptance by the interlocutor / spectator (“I will shed tears” / “I will kiss you”). The original untruth “here and now” is going on in the theater, and any deviation from originality turns into a “stamp”, “cliché” and gives the right to both theater critics-followers of Stanislavsky and ordinary amateur spectators to say: “I don't believe it!”. This is

¹² Original quote: “Instaurer des ‘mondes’ et mettre en œuvre des fabriques de vérités” (FONTANILLE, 2021, p. 221).

not just a negative assessment of the play / staging / acting. This is an unfulfilled expectation: a “loophole” from everyday life did not happen, which means that “a unique aesthetic moment”, “the only aesthetic values that lift us up” (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 99)¹³ are still waiting for their spectator, actor and director.

Looking at the history and path of the Vakhtangov Theater, we will turn again to publications and reviews after the “Silence Day” in November 2021:

The dream is *to play without acting* and *to stage (a play) without staging*. This is how we should probably live and love [...]. The theater is the only institution in which one must live without lies! We wish and dream to be frank and pure as much as possible in front of the third person we play and in front of the public (VAKHTANGOV THEATER, 2021c).

This statement (*to play without acting*) is another proof of the essence of the theater as an “encyclopedia of semiotics”. This is the transfer of Greimas’ postulate of “veridictory modalities” (*modalités véridictoires*) into the theatrical context: the concept of *truthfulness* gives way to the concept of *effectiveness*, and the production of truth corresponds to the creation of a special cognitive skill – the skill of persuasion (GREIMAS; COURTÉS, 1993, p. 418-419).

“Without acting”, without showing unnatural, excessive pathos, nevertheless, “play”, that is, make the spectator believe in the life of the character, not forgetting that he is in the theater. Today’s life of the Vakhtangov Theater in the 21st century proves the words of its creator exactly a century ago: “Fantastic realism exists, it should now be in every art” (VAKHTANGOV, 2011 [1922], p. 583).¹⁴ ●

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¹³ Loose translation: “[...] les valeurs dites esthétiques sont les seules propres, les seules, en refusant toute négativité, à nous tirer vers le haut” (GREIMAS, 1987, p. 99).

Russian edition: “[...] так называемые эстетические ценности являются единственно настоящими, ибо только они одни, ничего не отрицая, поднимают нас ввысь” (GREIMAS, 2022, p. 95).

¹⁴ This work was prepared with financial support within the framework of the State Assignment of GAUGN on the topic “Modern information society and digital science: cognitive, economic, political and legal aspects” (FZNF-2020-0014).

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"Eu não acredito!" como o lema de Stanislavsky e Vakhtangov. Notas semióticas sobre a verdade no palco do teatro

 MERKOULOVA, Inna

Resumo: O fundador do teatro moderno do século XX, Konstantin Stanislavsky e o seu aluno Evgeny Vakhtangov, implementaram, em suas práticas e performances, o princípio “como na vida”. Eles acreditavam que um ator deveria estar no palco como uma criança estaria. Enquanto criança, ele poderia “largar o boneco”, tratando-o como um “soldado ferido” e enfaixando-o com seriedade. Para tanto, o ator deve relacionar-se com a inverdade, isto é, o espaço do palco, tratando-o “como se fosse verdade, ou seja, transformar mentiras em verdade” (VAKHTANGOV, 1918). Neste artigo, propomos abordar exemplos do assim chamado “teatro da verdade” (escola da experiência, escola da representação) através de categorias semióticas específicas (modalidades veridictórias, envolvimento/não-envolvimento), bem como através do prisma da semiótica da cultura de Youri Lotman, procurando responder à seguinte pergunta: “qual é a verdade no palco do teatro de hoje?”.

Palavras-chave: teatro; verdade; veridicção; palco de teatro; realismo fantástico.

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