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THEATRE ARCHITECTURE. A SYNTHESIS OF ARTS IN THEATRE

ARCHITEKTURA TEATRALNA. SYNTEZA SZTUK W TEATRZE

Abstract

The 16th century brought changes in the European theatre. The Teatro Olimpico which was erected in Vicenza continued in the formation of the seventeenth-century theatre built in Parma. It initiated the Italian Baroque Theatre, adopted throughout Europe and later throughout the world. The All'Antica arrangement of stage-auditorium that preceded Teatro Farnese was developed in Sabbioneta, and it was the first attempt to create a theatre of the viewer and the actor. A Baroque theatre hall in Mantua, with its functional capabilities, was ahead of its time.

The artists of the Great Theatre Reform were looking for a space that would allow the viewer and the actor to be treated as the subject of performance. The beginning of this approach to theatre was demonstrated by Richard Wagner. Theatre became a place that saw a synthesis of all arts, and Peter Brook most clearly showed it in his performances, notably *Mahabharata*.

Keywords: theatre space, stage and audience relation, Renaissance theatre, Baroque theatre, multiple use form

Streszczenie

Wiek XVI zapoczątkował zmiany w teatrze europejskim. Kontynuacją Teatro Olimpico wzniesionego w Vicenzie był XVII-wieczny teatr w Parmie. Zapoczątkował on przyjętą w całej Europie, później na świecie, formę Włoskiego Teatru Barokowego. Poprzedzająca Teatro Farnese forma sceno-widowni All'Antica zrealizowana w Sabbionecie była pierwszą próbą wykreowania teatru widza i aktora. Zachowująca barokowe pryncypia sala teatru w Mantui swoimi możliwościami funkcjonalnymi wyprzedziła epokę.

Artyści doby Wielkiej Reformy Teatralnej poszukiwali przestrzeni, które pozwoliłaby traktować widza i aktora podmiotowo. Przecząc sztywnemu podziałowi na świat realny i iluzji, początek takiego myślenia o teatrze dał Ryszard Wagner. Teatr stawał się miejscem, gdzie następowała synteza sztuk wszelkich, co Peter Brook najdobitniej wyraził swoimi spektaklami, w tym inscenizacją *Mahabharaty*.

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeń teatralna, relacja sceny i widowni, teatr renesansowy, teatr barokowy, przestrzeń zmienna

1. Introduction

A breakthrough in the European theatre, initiated by the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, shortly afterwards led to the construction of venues that did not prove the value of the idea for creating stage productions. However, the Teatro Olimpico caused a completely unexpected evolution of space in theatre in the direction of a clear division into viewer's and actor's zones. Andrea Palladio could not expect the extent to which Vincenzo Scamozzi would change his assumptions in relation to the stage and the audience. For today's historiography, both parameters of the orchestral zone and *pulpitum*, as well as the entire "backstage" with streets in a weird perspective, will remain an unresolved mystery. The illusionist space behind *Porta Regalis* and the other four door openings does not improve stage possibilities due to limited visibility [1; 2; 3, pp. 43–46, 198–199] (Fig. 1).

Joseph Furttenbach was reluctant to describe the stage in Vicenza as an illusionist one. Yet, one can doubt the stability of his beliefs. Furttenbach, author of a multifaceted study published several times in Poland, titled *On the construction of theatres*, quotes false data on the number of seats for viewers, similarly interprets the space. His work was widespread in the 18th century, practically from the moment of its creation or the first print. In various editions of articles, their selection is diverse. However, in every collection one can find transformations of *Scene Frons*, relating to the Olimpico, the Teatro Farnese in Parma and the Teatro San Carlo in Naples. Furttenbach notes that the richness of the interior proves that both architects, Palladio and Scamozzi, have seen the classics and perhaps a bit of subsequent drama, including the imperial period on the Olimpico's stage. Probably not entirely consciously, with no meaningful stage effect, the streets are entirely inspired by the architecture of the Roman Empire. But this rich decoration of the stage bears a resemblance to the illusionist theatre [4, 5].

2. Palladio and his followers

It is possible that Palladio did not see the stage in this way. The evidence for it would be his numerous studies on Roman performance venues, which he did for his patron, Daniele Barbaro. He prepared drawings for the renaissance edition of *Ten Books on Architecture* by Vitruvius. The way he perceived the architect's role in the contemporary world is visible in his works. A learned stonemason with solid foundations of a mastered craft building, he may not have reached beyond the *a priori* adopted classical repertoire and the physical and dramatic formula of spectacles imposed by the Olympic Academy. He had expressed his conviction to Roman form and detail in his work earlier. His search for a pure form of projection, based on a rectangular composition, contradicted the Mannerist trend, parallel at that time in Italy, based on the art of Michelangelo Buonarroti. Therefore, the attitude of the author of the first indoor Renaissance theatre in Europe towards architectural material was contained in fairly rigid canons and did not create the foundations for the already emerging Baroque. Hence, Palladio also cannot be considered a versatile creator. However, aesthetic qualities make the Teatro Olimpico one of the most renowned works of the late Italian Renaissance. The venue



Fig. 1. Vicenza, Teatro Olimpico. The streets of Vincenzo Scamozzi are visible fragmentarily from certain places in the auditorium. Is it just an enrichment of the richly decorated Scenae Frons? (photo by P. Obracaj)

impresses visitors and it has become the showcase of Vicenza, undoubtedly providing an impetus for the evolution of world scenes at later times. The interior is an example of the emerging theatre that would bind many fields of art.

A few years after the premiere of *Oedipus the King*, Vincenzo Scamozzi constructed the Teatro All'Antica in Sabbioneta. One can assume that the venue was created on the basis of negative experiences from Vicenza. Undoubtedly, the designer saw theatre differently at that time. A small building commissioned by the Gonzaga family contains a deepened and elevated, single rectangular space of auditorium and the stage. It is preceded by a proscenium placed at the level of the first row of seats, and is far from replicating the arrangement of the orchestra and *pulpitum* of Vicenza. This setup offers a wider range of possibilities and is limited only by the size of the room. There are no streets on the background of the stage, and the extended proscenium suggests that several dozens of seats were placed there. The interior of the room is modest, the walls are decorated with a series of polychrome frescoes. At first glance, it makes

a completely different impression than the interior of the Olimpico. By chance, Scamozzi was close to the arrangements that the artists of the Great Theatre Reform had expected. One can only suppose what repertoire he saw in the space he designed. Plautus and Terentius are usually named in this respect today. Kazimierz Braun mentioned Seneca, which seems unlikely. The bloody and realistic dramas of Nero's teacher were not played at all at that time, at least such performances are unheard of. But what follows from that unverified information is that the creator of the theatre in Sabbioneta had a broader vision of using the stage than Palladio. Several decades had passed since the performance of *Oedipus the King* in Vicenza, and the experienced architect now focused on the theatre of viewer and actor. These are the beginnings of a theatrical formula in which viewer and actor were to be the subjects. Thus, Scamozzi saw performances in the All'Antica in a broader context than those which were performed in the other venue, after Palladio's death. A different approach to decorations designed for specific performances, and often inherently their background, meant that theatre was becoming the Temple of All the Arts. The role of the All'Antica is not fully appreciated, it is often ignored, yet from the point of view of a barrier-free stage, it gave the storyteller great freedom of activity [3, p. 189] (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Sabbioneta, Teatro All'Antica. Scamozzi suggests an open form of the spectacle area. Orchestra could be predicted a priori also for viewers (photo by P. Obracaj)

World historiography indicates the Teatro Farnese in Parma as the next place in the evolution of theatre, with ideological roots originating in Vicenza. Giovanni Battista Aleotti undertook an extremely difficult project. The Farnese family commissioned him to adapt the 2nd level (or the first floor) of the Palazzo della Pilotta for a theatre space with an audience exceeding 1,400 people. It was only an initial number, because the vast proscenium could accommodate the same number of standing audience, or as many as 1,000 seated audience. In 1628, *Mercurio y Marte* of the Achillini and Monteverdi duo was staged there in grand style. Ten years after the completion of construction work, the stage was prepared for a performance of a show described as a form of opera. After creating a portal frame and a clear division between the stage box and the curved audience, the proscenium was arranged to facilitate viewers. But the essence of this development was the portal frame, behind which the show operating machinery was

placed. These were the beginnings of technologically advanced stage operating technology. The machinery, which has been modified many times since, has become necessary equipment for every opera theatre, arrived in the dramatic theatre, and wasn't opposed until the era of the Great Theatre Reform. It enhanced the development of opera as a form of spectacle and facilitated significant changes in the perception of the role of graphics in theatre. In addition, music joined the combined arts that constituted theatre [3, pp. 43–46, 198–199; 6; 7] (Fig. 3).

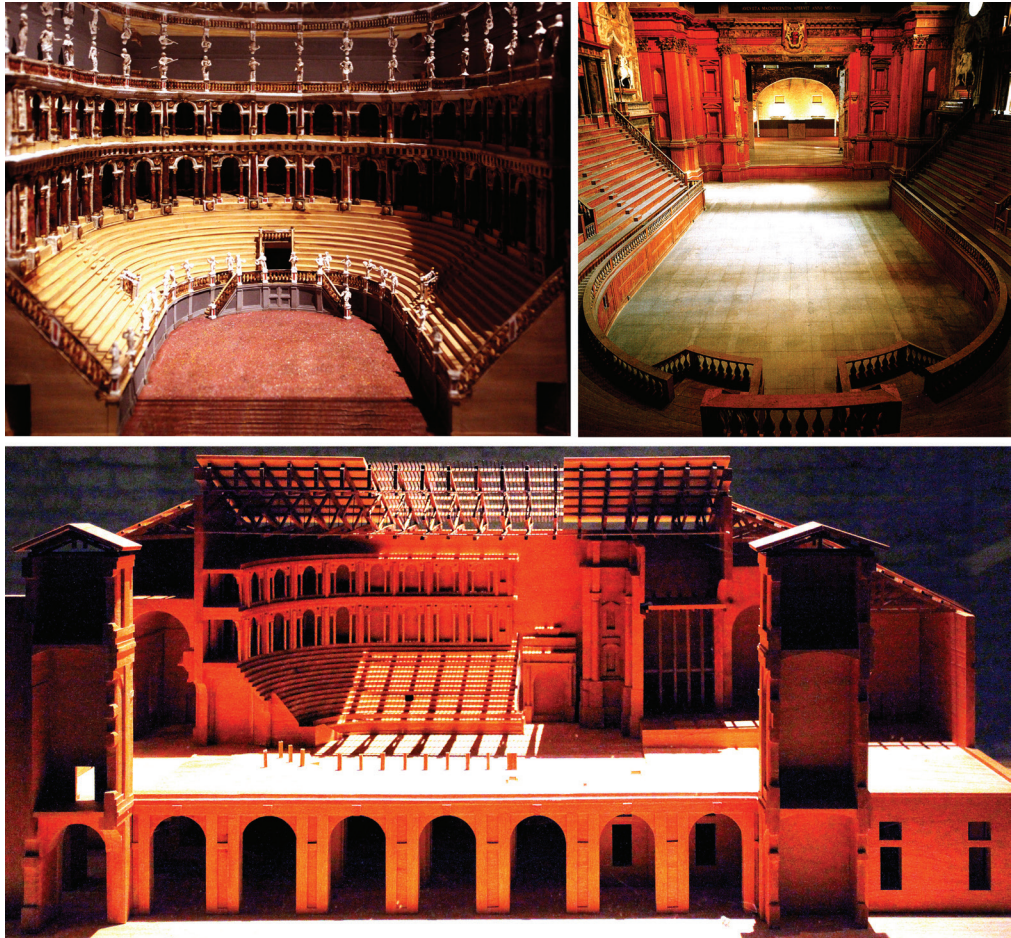


Fig. 3. Parma, Teatro Farnese. Portal frame divides the world of illusion and real (photo by P. Obracaj)

3. Richard Wagner's idea of the theatre

In the 18th century, opera gained a very high social status. It was already associated with a form of a building that had to meet certain functional conditions. By analysing the form of the spatial layout and equipment of the Teatro Farnese, you can easily turn to venues that

were created in the last decades of the 17th and later in the 18th and 19th centuries. In each development from this period there is a part originating from the spatial and technological arrangement of the theatre in Parma. In short, Aleotti originated the triumph of the stage later described as a boxed stage. Broader, these are the beginnings of the Italian Baroque Theatre. This distinction is important because the division into the world of illusion and the real world has been transferred from opera to dramatic theatre. As already mentioned, in the middle of the nineteenth century, this formula was renounced by artists of theatre, which resulted in different arrangements of the stage, often scarcely relating to the baroque model from Parma. Richard Wagner's arrangement can also be described as the box stage. The Festspielhaus Bayreuth built in the second half of the 19th century is a "milestone" of departure from the early-Baroque standard from Parma. The history of the Bayreuth opera house is a complex one, and Richard Wagner stands as a dominant figure among its creators. Inspired by Gottfried Semper's abandoned project in Munich, the master hired two architects, Otto Brückwald and Karl Brandt, commissioning them to "merge" their stage-auditorium vision with the Munich building. That concept was certainly Wagner's original idea. It shows not only the fact that the performances fitted so perfectly in the stage space, but also in his opinions as expressed in theoretical writings. He was inspired by German literature where he found his heroes (often group heroes). He wanted to give them special emphasis and he used the stage to achieve this. But not only the stage. In *Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft* (*The Artwork of the Future*), Valkyrie often runs out in front of the stage and, as in this case, in front of the "disappearing" portal. The bridge separating the first rows of seats probably never really existed. It remained only in the imagination of this outstanding theatre artist, but it was realised later in various performances. Importantly, it was neither the goal nor principle to move away from the Italian stage. The directors were guided (and this is still the case) by dramaturgical considerations.

Richard Wagner perceived human existence as a tragic condition. He was influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Friedrich Nietzsche, and such was also the reception of his art. However, considering it as a whole, one can see its multi-faceted perception and the effect on the recipient as a result of the symbiosis of many arts. This is an important theme that comes out in Wagner's theatre concept. The stage in Bayreuth from the very beginning, even before it existed, had its receiver, namely the audience. The relationship between the stage and the audience was formed along Wagner's idea and answered the needs of his performances. In contrast to the Parisian scene, his venue has never been the subject of admiration for connoisseurs of art or viewers. Theatregoers do not notice the aesthetics of the room or the exteriors. Still, the art that is performed on that stage is vivid and wonderful. But those who clearly cannot see its concealed beauty nevertheless appreciate what is most important: it is a temple, a temple of art [8, 9].

4. Wagner and Bibiena; two ideas of the baroque stage

Bayreuth is also associated with an Italian architect Giuseppe Galli Bibiena, who built the Margravian Opera House there between 1745 and 1750. A curved auditorium, surrounded by boxes, was separated from the stage box by a deep, richly ornamented portal frame.



Fig. 4. Bayreuth, Margravial Opera House. The auditorium formed as horseshoe was a baroque standard, the visibility from the lodges was limited (photo by P. Obracaj)
 Bayreuth, Festspielhaus. The fan-shaped auditorium provides a full view of the scene (fisheye, photo by P. Obracaj)

Baroque details were dominant. It is a court theatre that can be contrasted with Wagner's concept of the opera house. The division into illusion and reality zones is not only distinct but highlighted. The period between the construction of these two buildings is a little more than a century. They were intended for opera, a form of performance that had evolved since the 1820s. Bibiena's venue could not meet the needs of Richard Wagner. The orchestra pit, fenced off with a decorative rail supported by balusters at the level of the first row of seats, can hardly accommodate a Mozart orchestra of only 35 to 40 musicians. What is certain today is that this opera of the margraves could not meet the requirements of Richard Wagner simply because there are up to 105 musicians in his orchestra. Other, less evident limitations are the depth of the portal frame and a narrow stage, confined by the backstage.

One can look at the Bayreuth venues yet from another perspective. The Festspielhaus was created as a theatre that met the creator's needs, the artist knew exactly what these needs were and what space he needed to fulfill his ideas. The relationship between the stage, the orchestra pit and the auditorium was meticulously thought out. Also, the auditorium in the shape of a fan, as well as being a novelty, was designed to allow for an expanded area of creation on the protruding platform. In short, the stage together with the auditorium was a single space, while in Bibiena's venue these two functions are clearly separated. There are some similarities between this arrangement and the theatre in Sabbioneta, however these two are quite different as far as scale is concerned. Still, despite Bibiena's conservative views on opera space, a spirit of theatre reigns in the venue he designed. The architecture, with its sensitivity and craftsmanship, in its form and detail matches the canons of the Baroque.

Giuseppe Galli Bibiena came from an artistic family in Parma. He was considered the most talented and most versatile creator, like his brother Antonio and father Ferdinando. He carried out conservation and design projects. He created set designs for performances in his own venues, as well as for other stages. Giuseppe Bibiena practiced easel and wall painting (*al fresco*, *al secco*). In the history of theatre, he was the first creator who embraced the whole integrated theatre art which culminated on stage [3, pp. 73–81, 221–2; 7] (Fig. 4).

Giuseppe's older brother, Antonio, had a similar professional career, though he lived in Giuseppe's shadow. Between 1767 and 1769, Antonio constructed a unique venue in Mantua. The Teatro Dell'Academia, also called the Teatro Scientifico, was intended to serve several functions. In the latest descriptions of the place there is no agreement on whether drama or opera were to dominate there. The moderate style of the hall suggests an academic function, although it might also be seen as a concert hall. The auditorium pointed in one direction adjoins the stage and is surrounded by a three-level gallery of boxes, which is quite unusual for that period. The creator deliberately did not separate the auditorium from the stage using a portal bridge because of the layout of the hall, which is a single space only expanded by shallow pockets. It is a single and stylistically homogeneous space. As he created the object, the creator reached far to imagine all kinds of cultural events there, not only those for which the venue was designed. History does not mention any significant theatrical performances there, but it was nevertheless a place where several opera performances by Baroque composer Luigi Gatti were staged. It is a unique theatre in which a thirteen-year old musician named

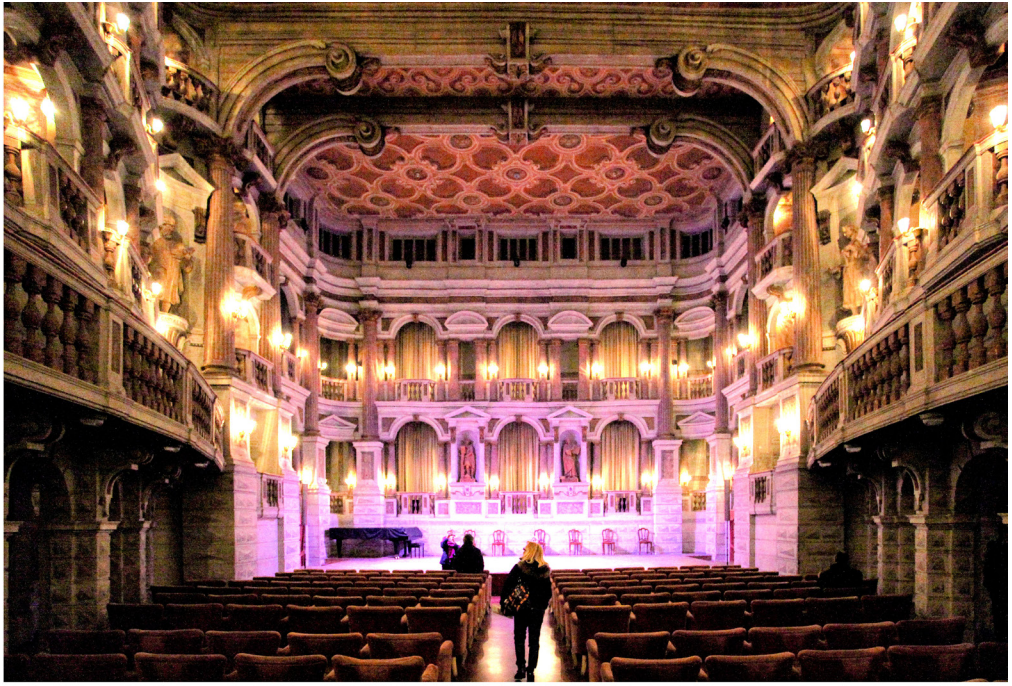


Fig. 5. Mantova, Teatro Scientifico. Baroque space as a multiple use form (photo by P. Obracaj)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart debuted. The versatility of the venue was also confirmed by the academic meetings that took place there [3, pp. 47–50].

Antonio, like his brother Giuseppe, was a skilled painter; details of the theatre's interior are covered with frescoes. This facility is considered to be one of the most significant achievements of the Bibiena family. As a part of the Virgilian Academy of Science and Art, the place has been associated mainly with its academic function for centuries. Despite the fact that chamber performances with covered stage background could have been performed there, no one really appreciated the theatrical function of the place. Adolphe Appia, before he met Dalcroze, had been looking for a stage that would combine “history and modernity”. His concept was not yet completely defined, but at the time when he was still developing his creative ideas, Bibiena's place could inspire him. He made the best known performances in an austere rectangular hall in Hellerau, spatial analogies are visible though (Fig. 5).

Bibiena's work in Mantua seems not to be very much appreciated. The spatial layout suggests great flexibility, and the boxes surrounding the stage can be associated with the Elizabethan theatre. You can hang a curtain between two illusory portal frames. By covering galleries at the backstage, you can achieve the open stage. So for chamber performances, the creation area can be arranged as an arena, an open stage or a standard proscenium stage. And these are all fundamental relations between the stage and the audience. Bibiena accidentally designed a theatre with flexible space, and the best version of it, because he was able to realize the different options without the use of technology, only by simple variable relations between the stage and the auditorium. Such places were in demand among the leading artists of the Great Theatre Reform. Despite technological progress and inventions which supposedly allow for any form and any show to be performed on stage, theatres where alternative forms could be achieved thanks to architectural features, will continue to be in demand among those in search for a flexible theatre space [10].



Fig. 6. Paris, Les Bouffes du Nord theatre. Multiple use space results from the idea of staging
(photo by P. Obracaj)

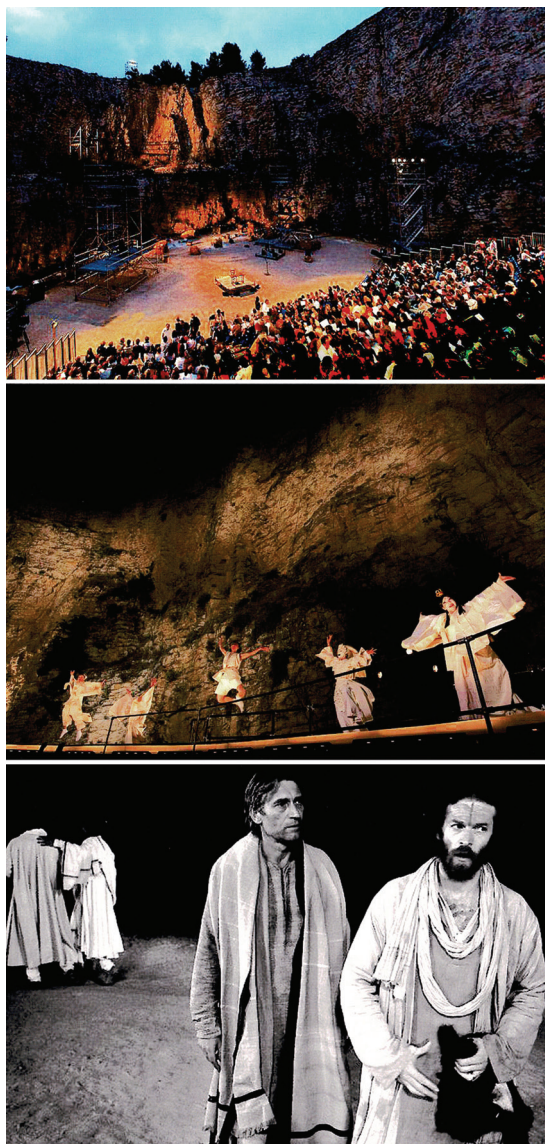


Fig. 7. Avignon, Carrière de Boulbon. The world of illusion is interwoven with the real, open form of the game area, meaningfully integrating the whole theatrical space (photo by P. Obracaj)

5. Conclusions: looking to the 21st century theatre

Such diversity is distinctive for a Parisian venue Les Bouffes du Nord theatre, which appeared as an alternative “theatrical place” for Peter Brook’s staging of *Mahabharata*, considered a great synthesis of theatre art. A dynamic action, at times seemingly slowed down, merges with what is physically permanent and fits into the existing spatial conditions

whatever they would be. *Mahabharata* takes place in a space that should be described as open, without barriers and as such coherent with a drama. Thus, the staging does not impose any spatial dogma. With this principle of arrangement, it can take place anywhere. Seeing a performance, whether in a quarry at Avignon, in Athen's Petra, or in Les Bouffes du Nord theatre, one is open to multi vocal interpretations of a show, while intentions of the director are always clear. He explains what is "unexplainable" using artistic means. The role of theatre in the modern world could be summarized similarly [11, 12, 13, 14] (Fig. 6, 7).

It appears that theatre is distinguished by three basic aspirations. First of all – defining a new psychology, a new type of interpersonal relations true for people and societies of the 21st century. Secondly – defining a new type of interpersonal conflicts. Thirdly – finding new creative and artistic means. Considering the above, the integration of all arts in theatre will become even more expressive.

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