2 CONTEMPORARY DRAMATURGY: THE ELEMENTS

In this chapter, we will map the main elements of the dramaturgical structure of contemporary performance and look at how the focus has moved from some elements to others, from drama theatre to postdramatic theatre and to contemporary performance. We will also follow how this shift in focus proposes very different dramaturgical structures, and very different experiences for the audience, while the main dramaturgical gestures are fairly similar.

This chapter is somewhat brief and dense but necessary, and I hope the reader will bear with me. I must also note that this chapter is closest to theatre theory, and I have tried to approach it from the point of view, and with the knowledge, of a practitioner and not a theorist (apologies to the theorists if you disagree with some points!).

Elements of performance   To map the main elements of theatre we can follow Aristotle's division into plot, character, theme, language, rhythm, and spectacle. The plot is the sum of all action on and off stage depicted by the play. The characters are persons depicted through dialogue and the presence of

the actors. The theme is the subject behind the plot depicted by the dramatic conflict. The language is the understanding that the plot is expressed via dialogue and monologue, and that the language is somehow stylised or heightened. The rhythm is the unfolding of the plot, characters, theme, and stage elements in time – the composition of when things appear and how long they last in relation to other elements. The spectacle is the totality of stage elements: actors, set, lighting, sound, costume, etc.

Dramatic situation   In drama theatre the main dramaturgical elements, the building blocks that the dramaturg focuses on, are characters and the dramatic conflict that is the basis for plot, story, and action. The characters have their characteristics and motivations (desires and needs) that move them towards and against other characters. The characters are not depicted through descriptions (like in epic forms such as the novel) but mainly through their actions and reactions to other characters, in addition to dialogue, the spoken words. The conflict with other characters is the basis for the dramaturgical dynamics that unfold in time. Aristotle describes the main character – the protagonist – and their enemy – the antagonist. We call this conflict also a dramatic situation. A dramatic situation is a constellation of characters, characters in relation to an environment, or to their own selves, where not everybody can achieve what they want at the same time. Sometimes it is individual characters and sometimes groups, of course. In classical Greek

tragedy, the drama was usually built through the conflict of human laws versus divine laws (see, for instance, *Antigone*).

The system of tensions and releases around the main conflict creates the basis of the dramaturgical rhythm of the play. We can say that classical dramaturgy is focused on the dramatic conflict of the characters, its expression on stage, and the rhythm with which it unfolds.

Dramatic structure   The classical dramatic structure, or 'complex plot' according to Aristotle, includes: a) peripeteia or reversal (a sudden change of situation); b) anagnosis (knowing again) or recognition (anagnorisis or 'knowing again'), a moment of understanding usually of the main character; and c) pathos (the suffering of a destructive or painful act). And these elements are there to provide 'catharsis', a specific experience of the audience – a purification of emotions via identification with characters and via an extreme change in emotions.

Ideas about the structure of the play have changed over time. For instance, in the 19th century, the German playwright Gustav Freytag developed a proposal for a variation of this structure: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and catastrophe. But the main understanding is that some kind of story/plot, depicted through action and the dramatic conflict between characters, prevailed. So, up to this point we can say that the dramaturg follows (analyses and helps interpret) the characters and the dramatic situation and

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helps strengthen the basic structure of the unfolding of the plot of the play. And the series of scenes leading towards transformation, usually of the main character(s), forms the spine of the performance.

Genre   Another important aspect of dramaturgy in drama theatre is the understanding of genre. The construction of the performance relied on the format. In ancient Greece it was comedy, tragedy, and satyr plays. Throughout history, theatre genres were variations of comedy, drama, tragedy, melodrama, etc. (And some theatre performances even take forms usual for literature or film, such as detective/crime genre or romantic love stories). Each genre has its own inner logic or rules of the genre, how it unfolds and what it focuses on. It also allows the audience to predict, at least in part, how things will unfold and where they will lead.

Shift   The turn in the understanding of dramaturgy happened slowly, from the end of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, and it is beyond the scope of this book to describe this. But in short, the understanding of plot, characters, and story changed radically over the course of this period. For instance, the plot changed to no action, as in Beckett's avant-garde play *Waiting for Godot* (premiered in 1953). Everyday language entered the stage, for instance in the work of British playwright Harold Pinter (1930–2008), who used colloquial language, unpolished grammar, and chaotic syntax that resembles everyday speech. Or the characters changed to parts of character within

one person, as in the play *4.48 Psychosis* by British playwright Sarah Kane (premiered in 2000). Most of these changes are directly connected to the change of understanding of what a story/plot is and how it is expressed. A story did not have to happen chronologically anymore; it did not have to happen within a 'cause and effect' logic; it could depict mainly feelings, for instance, and not actions, etc. Overall, it gained poetic and fragmentary features.

This is when the dramatic situation was redefined. The conflict between the divine and profane, the personal and the social, the individual and the family, the political and the psychological, etc., was not necessarily depicted by direct conflict between specific characters. The conflict could be enacted/depicted in non-narrative ways – with movement or inaction/passivity, by poetic language or by everyday language, or simply by stage images without language. The conflict could be depicted by different stage elements, and even within individual stage elements.

Postdramatic theatre This development influenced the rise of postdramatic theatre, defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann in his book *Postdramatic Theatre* (1999).[2] Postdramatic theatre is theatre that does not focus on plot and characters. It can tell fragments of stories, or even not tell stories at all. The focus here is on what Aristotle calls theme, language, rhythm, and spectacle.

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2 As defined by Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).