2012 ACTA UNIVERSITATIS CAROLINAE PAG. 203–206
PHILOLOGICA 3 / GRAECOLATINA PRAGENSIA XXIV

IMAGINARY SPACE IN GREEK AND ROMAN THEATRE[1]

EVA STEHLÍKOVÁ

When a text by Karel Brušák[2] entitled *The Imaginary Action Space* was published in 1991, it was observed that he cited two nearly-forgotten articles by the classic philologists. The first of these, *Pomyslné jeviště – The Imaginary Stage* (1921) by Klára Pražáková[3], contains a short but precisely-defined theme. Ferdinand Stiebitz[4] developed and systemized the topic further in his 1937 article *Pomyslné jeviště v antickém a moderním dramatě – The Imaginary Stage in Ancient and Modern Drama*. Surprisingly, Klára Pražáková mentions Greek theatre only once (the depiction of death behind the scenes). Karel Brušák cited from Sophocles' plays *Ichneutae* and *Oedipus Rex* and Aristophanes' *The Acharnians*. Ferdinand Stiebitz, who argued that contemporary theatre has its roots in both the Greek and Roman theatre and in medieval religious plays, devoted major attention to the rules of space in ancient theatre. Many years have gone by, but David Wiles' term "an imagined off-stage world" (Wiles 1997: 114) shows that the issues connected with this "imaginary stage" of the classic Czech philologists or the "imaginary action space" of the structuralist Karel Brušák are still alive. The concept bears revisiting.[5]

For this occasion we will consider the ancient theatre of Greek, Hellenic, and Roman times with the stable structure, the background basically unchanging and given by convention. It is a bit of a risk to say exactly where and how Wiles "off-stage world" as well as Brušák's "imaginary action space" actually function. We can say, however, that a theatre

[1] This article was written as part of the research project *Czech Structuralist Thought on Theatre: Context and Potency (Český divadelní strukturalismus: souvislosti a potenciál*; 2011–2015), which is financed with funds from GAČR (the Czech Grant Agency), no. P409/11/1082.

[2] Karel Brušák (1913–2004), Czech theater scholar, literary historian and critic who lived beginning in 1936 in Paris, London, and Cambridge, where he taught Czech studies. His work *Signs in the Chinese Theater* (1939), in: L. Matejka, I. R. Titunik (eds.), *Semiotics of Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976, 59–73, remains today one of the most important works to come out of the Prague linguistic circle.

[3] Klára Pražáková (1891–1933) was a translator of Greek tragedies and Roman comedies, and also examined modern drama (her journal studies were published posthumously in 1940 under the title *From Yesterday to Tomorrow*).

[4] Ferdinand Stiebitz (1894–1961), professor at Masaryk University in Brno, author of *A Brief History of Greek literature* (1936) and *History of Roman Literature for Secondary Schools* (1938), translator of Greek tragedies, author of successful adaptations of Aristophanes, translator of poetry (Ovid) and prose (Apuleius).

[5] Of course David Wiles was not the last to take up this problem. Rehm (2002) works with 6 categories of space: (i) theatrical space, (ii) scenic space, (iii) extra-scenic space, (iv) distanced space, (v) self-referential space, and (vi) reflexive space. Wiles's work, however, takes a structuralist perspective on drama and theatre.

event takes place along horizontal and vertical axes – horizontally to the orchestra, vertically in the proskenion or the logeion. We can expand the vertical dimension to include the area below the orchestra, from which Charonian steps could raise the characters up (Darius' ghost in *The Persians*) and the area above the scene, in which other characters may appear with the help of machines (especially but not only the gods), or where characters may be transported to (Trygaeus' flight to Olympus in Aristophanes' *Peace*).

Basically, the single-scene ancient drama,[6] which is limited in space and in time, has worked with imaginary space since the beginning. The imagined action is set into the background (that is, behind the skene) or on the two sides outside the theater. In modern theater the two worlds are joined by conventional scenographic elements such as windows and doors, and ancient theater is similar. The connection between the visible and invisible is the real door in the skene and the eisodoi. These have differing functions, however. The door in the skene leads to an interior space that can be described as non-public, private, hidden. This internal space represents the oikos, ruled by women, while the external space is connected to the polis, which is ruled by men (Zeitlin 1996: 353–356). The two eisodois establish the importance of two offstage imaginary spaces, which are topographically and symbolically in opposition (Wiles 1997: 134).[7] Most conceive that the right eisodos extends into the town, while the left eisodos reaches towards the countryside. There is also the idea that each play has its own topography (Hormouziades 1965: 136). It seems that the left side connotes primitive, wild, female, individual, and is associated with chthonic, underground gods, while the right side is linked to the civilized, moderate, male, and social, and is associated with the Olympian gods (Wiles 1997: 133–160).

Brušák conceives of the action in the imaginary space taking place mainly in the present or past. Ancient theatre, however, easily communicates to the audience not only the action that is taking place behind the doors of the skene, but also action that takes place in any other place outside the space of the drama in the present, past, and future. Taking place behind the skene is most of the violence, murder, and suicide in tragedy, and childbirth in comedy. To relate present-time events, i.e. parallel events which for whatever reason are outside the view of the audience and cannot be presented directly, the ancient theatre chooses a method that is drawn from the principle known as teichoscopy. Thus the old teacher in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* on the roof of the palace describes Antigone's preparations for fratricidal struggle. In comedy we have a similar example: in Plautus' *Rudens* the slave Sceparnio recounts in a documentary manner the story of a shipwreck. To tell about events in the past (in both tragedy and comedy) is an obvious device of the figure of the messenger. Likewise possible is the colorful description of events that are yet to come. This was of course the domain of the seers. Aeschylus' Cassandra prophesies Agamemnon's death and her own, then lays aside her seer's wreathes, and enters the palace. Only afterward does the cry of murdered Agamemnon rise from within the palace. Euripides' Cassandra also looks into the future, colorfully describing Odysseus' long return from the wars and her own death.

---

[6] Here we lean towards the term "Einortsdrama", which following Arnulf Perger is used by F. Stiebitz and K. Brušák.

[7] Wiles was not the only one to take a structuralist perspective on the issue. Before him much work was done by Oliver Taplin, whose studies produced much interest in research on entrances and exits in Greek drama (see Taplin) .

And there is one more possibility that must be considered: the chorus is able to create the illusion of any kind of space-time, and also to "translate" the action into mythical timelessness. The role of the chorus is of course variable depending on the needs of the author, and on the social situation, which gradually forces limitations on the role of the chorus until it finally disappears altogether.

In creating the idea of an imaginary space, ancient theatre (like modern theatre) is able to make use of various auditory signs – various sounds ranging from cries (the scream of Aegisthus entering the house in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*, the cries of the murdered children in Euripides' *Medea*, or the cry of Polydorus in *Hecuba*), musical sounds (the sound of the lyre in Sophocles' *Ichneutae*), and various real sounds (it was not for nothing that theatres had machines like the keraunoskopeion). Roman comedy as well doubtless was able to make good use of real sounds, for example in Plautus' *Mostellaria*, in which a clever slave, pretending that the house is haunted, communicates with an imaginary dog inside the house. Banging doors and creaking hinges are the favorite ways in comedy to signal the existence of the imaginary space from which the characters enter.

The space for visible action and imaginary space are not completely separate, and may even overlap. The result of events in imaginary space, which produces emotion in the audience, may also be presented by opening the house and making the event visible, or by means of an arranged scene from the interior space which is brought out by means of an ekkyklema. The fastigium can also serve this purpose,[8] which opens after the detailed account of Phaedra's condition in the 3rd act of Seneca's tragedy, and shows Phaedra as she removes her garments. The use of this instrument is puzzling. According to Ferdinand Stiebitz it is an inharmonious mixing of two spaces. For Karel Brušák, who also takes from Stiebitz the example of the comic version of this instrument (the transportation of Euripides in Aristophanes' *Acharnians*), it is an example of confrontation that is meant to further enhance the dramatic tension. He sees the use of the ekkyklema as functional. The great majority of researchers see this instrument as conventional, and thus it is seen by Dale, Taplin, and Wiles. The latter considers such scenes (he points to Euripides' *Hippolytus*) as "formal convention rather than a primitive attempt to depict an inner room" (Wiles 2000: 118). Also noteworthy is Taplin's observation that "as the scene progresses the indoor/outdoor distinction tends to be neglected" (Taplin 2003: 12). In any case the use of this device presents us with the difficult question of the relationship between idealization and naturalism in Greek and Roman theatre.

In modern theatre the imaginary space is a certain more or less important accessory to the action which is taking place on the stage before the eyes of the audience, in Wiles's on-stage world. In Greek theatre the situation is quite a bit more complicated, and demands further study. If we accept the thesis that the songs of the chorus form another meta-space (Wiles 1997: 114–132), then we must evidently conclude that imaginary space is equally important to ancient drama (and especially Greek tragedy) as the performance of the actors onstage. Unlike modern theatre, which does not use convention to evoke

[8] See Sen. *Phae*. 384: *patescunt regiae fastigia*. Boyle (1987: 161) reckons that "The presence of a door or doors in the upper storey of the stage-buildings seems to have been a common feature of Hellenistic, Hellenistic-Italic and Roman republican theatres. Although a purely ornamental second storey became fashionable during the empire, there is no reason to suppose that all Roman imperial theatres jettisoned this facility."

events in imaginary space, in Greek theater there was a semiotic system that the audience of that time (unlike us) had no problem decoding. The dramatic space of ancient theatre is a total continuum composed of both spaces. Thus the interpretation of the play depended on an understanding between the spectator and the actors, who were the main mediators between the seen and the unseen.

REFERENCES

Boyle, A. J., 1987. *Seneca's Phaedra*. Leeds, Francis Cairns (Publications).

Brušák, K., 1991. Imaginary Action Space in Drama. In: Herta und Hedwig Král Schmid (ed.), *Drama und Theater: Theorie – Methode – Geschichte*. München, Otto Sagner, 144–62.

Dale, A. M., 1969. Seen and Unseen in Greek tragedy. In: A. M. Dale, *Collected Papers*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 119–129.

Hourmouziades, N., 1965. *Production and Imagination in Euripides: form and function of scenic space*. Athens, Greek Society for Humanistic Studies.

Perger, A., 1929. *Einortsdrama und Bewegungsdrama*. Brün/Prag/Leipzig/Wien, Verlag Rudolf M. Rohrer.

Pražáková, K., 1921. Pomyslné jeviště. *Jeviště* II, 390–392.

Rehm, R., 2002. *The Play of Space, Spatial Transformation in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton/Oxford, Princeton University Press.

Stiebitz, F., 1937. Pomyslné jeviště v antickém a moderním dramatě. *Věda a život* 3, 229–242.

Taplin, O., 1977. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: dramatic use of entrances and exits in Greek tragedy*. Oxford, Clarendon Press (reprinted 1990).

Taplin, O., 1978. *Greek Tragedy in Action*. London, Methuen and Co. Ltd.

Wiles, D., 1997. *Tragedy in Athens*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Wiles, D., 2000. *Greek Theatre Performance*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Zeitlin, I. F., 1996. Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama. In: I. F. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*. Chicago/London, The University of Chicago, 341–374.

IMAGINARY SPACE IN GREEK AND ROMAN THEATRE

Summary

Studies of the imaginary space by classical philologists Klára Pražáková (1921) and Ferdinand Stiebitz (1937) were followed by Czech structuralist Karel Brušák (1991). The author investigates how this concept has been developed by modern scholars (Oliver Taplin, Froma Zeitlin, David Wiles, Rush Rehm). The author sees the dramatic space of the ancient theatre as a continuum which is made up of the on-stage world together with the imagined off-stage world. The interpretation of the play thus depends on an understanding between audience and the actors, who were the main mediators between the seen and the unseen.

IMAGINÁRNÍ PROSTOR V ŘECKÉM A ŘÍMSKÉM DIVADLE

Shrnutí

Na studie o imaginárním prostoru klasických filologů Kláry Pražákové (1921) a Ferdinanda Stiebitze (1937) navázal český strukturalista Karel Brušák (1991). Autorka zkoumá, jak tento koncept rozvíjejí moderní badatelé (Oliver Taplin, Froma Zeitlin, David Wiles, Rush Rehm). Chápe dramatický prostor antického divadla jako kontinuum, které tvoří jak „the on-stage world" a „the imagined off-stage world". Interpretace hry pak závisí na porozumění mezi divákem a hercem, který je hlavním zprostředkovatelem viděného i neviděného.