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*THE VIETNAMESE THEATRICAL
TRADITION IN THE PLOT OF MONSUN,
BY ANJA HILLIN*

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RESUMO

A partir do texto dramático **Monsun**, da autora alemã Anja Hilling, este artigo analisa a construção de uma trama que se utiliza de elementos do teatro asiático, neste caso específico a tradição vietnamita, identificando a sua presença na estrutura, além das menções constantes ao contexto daquele país, começando pelo próprio título da peça e pela viagem de uma das personagens ao Vietnam.

Palavras-chave: Dramaturgia Contemporânea, Teatro Vietnamita, Drama Alemão, Anja Hilling.

ABSTRACT

From the dramatic text **Monsun** by the German author Anja Hilling, this article analyzes the construction of a plot using elements of the Asian theater, in this specific case the Vietnamese tradition, identifying its presence in the structure beyond the constant references to the context of that country, starting with the title of the play itself and the trip of one of the characters to Vietnam.

Keywords: Contemporary Drama, Vietnamese Theatre, German Drama, Anja Hilling.

I German-speaking dramatists have always been at the forefront of their métier among other nationalities since the emergence of what we call the German Drama by the second half of the XVIII century. G. E. Lessing was the central figure in its establishment, not only through his plays in prose, for the first time in the German scenery, but also with his **Hamburgische Dramaturgie**, a compilation of reviews and theoretical writings about the nature and purpose of the Drama. Abandoning the French neo-classical influence, Lessing defended a more natural drama, in blank verse, and followed the liberties taken by William Shakespeare – after all the Brits are closer culturally and ethnically to the Germans – in relation to the strict rule of the three unities developed by the French School. The succeeding generation, which obfuscated its predecessor, was represented by J. W. von Goethe and F. Schiller, who although moving from the pre-romantic explosion of the **Sturm und Drang** back to a more classical writing style, they both consolidated definitely the German-speaking theatrical tradition as one of the strongest and more influential in the Western world. Names as G. Buechner, F. Wedekind, Ö. von Horváth, B. Brecht, P. Weiss, T. Bernhard and B. Strauss are only few examples of a vast list of influential German-speaking authors. Since then, playwrights have been coming up as the result of a society and government who regard the theatrical art as one of the greatest achievements of the human kind. Public financial support and the constant interest of the audience have transformed Germany, Switzerland and Austria in a Mecca for theatre artists, and more specifically, dramatists. Anja Hilling, a young author in her thirties, is one of the names of a well-succeeded production structure.

Hilling is a good example of this successful generation of German-speaking playwrights. She holds a degree in Theatre Studies and German Literature. Then she studied creative writing at the well-conceited University of the Arts in Berlin. Her plays are disputed by important theatres in Germany and she got different awards and prizes. After **Stars** and **My young and foolish heart**, Hilling wrote **Monsoon**. Its plot can be summarized as:

(...) an almost grotesque panorama of all too contemporary figures helplessly trying to keep pace with their own experiences. As if observing them through the eye of a camera, she analyses a lifestyle that proves, in the real time of the theatre, to be characterized by the fatal feeling something is missing. It takes a road accident and the death of a child to draw her characters' lifelines together. Bruno writes scripts for a soap opera called Tränenheim (Home of Tears). He loses his job as a result of the mess he makes of an interview. His assistant, with whom he is having an affair, is to be his successor. Coco and Melanie, a lesbian couple, are trying desperately for a child. Their desire to become parents finally drives them apart. While Melanie is preparing her words of farewell in the car, she runs over Bruno and Paula's son Zippo. The intrusion of death into their modern, ordered circumstances forces the characters to relate to one another in new ways. And to leave behind lives lived within the dimensions of an early-evening serial. Death is real. They flee in different directions, Coco and Paula to the German countryside, Melanie to Vietnam. All of them seem utterly helpless in the face of what they have experienced. Bruno begins a new script, a really good one this time, no more trash. As the dead child is remembered, as their own histories are reconstructed, as their relationships are reordered, it becomes evident what is missing: Who is actually playing whom? Who remembers what and how? (Goethe-Institut, 2008)

Interestingly, she is not the only German-speaking playwright who depicts Asian elements in her plots. Moritz Rinke wrote **die Optimisten** whose characters get stuck in Nepal in the midst of a civil conflict. Fritz Kater's **Abalon, one nite in bangkok** examines the connections between the Thai/Asian and the western/German cultures. Marius von Mayenburg's character of the father in **das kalte Kind** has a heart attack while visiting Singapore. Nevertheless, this paper intends not to relate Asian and Western cultures on a thematic level, but on a deeper¹ one. Through the analysis of the structural forms of the

theatrical traditions of the Asiatic country portrayed in **Monsoon** this paper will make a comparison between those forms and the one chosen by the playwright. In other words, to what extent the formal material found in the Vietnamese theater has been used by Anja Hilling to build her own plot.

1 Deep here considering two levels of a text: the superficial or apparent and the deep or hidden one.

2

The Vietnamese theatrical forms development follows a very similar chronological pattern to other Asian traditions:

- a) Folk performance
- b) Classical performance
- c) Popular theatre
- d) Spoken drama

In the folk performance tradition we encounter three main proto-theatrical forms as well as two main theatrical forms. The proto-theatrical forms are constituted by songs and dialogues performed either by Buddhist monks in trance, boys and girls belonging to a specific court, courtesan or storytellers. All these traditions were very influential to the development of the prospective drama. Besides those, two theatrical forms developed outside the court. The first one is the **Hat Cheo**, which included poetry, mime, singing and dancing. It started being staged in front of temples or places of worship (*dinh*) but later it moved to the community houses. Its main theme of the common man triumphing over greedy mandarins was later taken over by the socialist government. The second genre that is perhaps the most characteristic of the Vietnamese theatre is the **Mua Roi Nuoc**, a kind of water puppetry depicting comic and animal scenes on a pond.

The court theatre — **Hat Boi** — on the contrary did not get an enthusiastic support by the Marxist regime. Strongly sinicized, the courtly dances exalted the Emperor and the Confucian values. The Chinese influence is seen in the traditional division into military (*vo vu*) and civil (*van vu*) dances, in its common belief that it was a Chinese actor who introduced the genre and also in the import of Chinese actors during the reign of Minh Mang (1820-1841) which contributed to the similarity with the Cantonese Opera style. At the same time, many typical Vietnamese features define its uniqueness in comparison with the Chinese opera. Here we can include the presence of female actresses, the anti-Chinese themes and the distinctive southern musical flavor, heavily influenced by the Indian tones that entered the Vietnamese territory during the *Champa* Empire that dominated the meridional part of the country from the VII century until 1832.

The **Cai Luong** is a melodramatic musical theatre that reached its popularity in the 1920's and 1930's. It is a fusion of ballad songs with the **Hat Boi** elements. The music is naturally the basis of the genre and the figure of the clown plays an important role too. Today it is considered the national form par excellence. According to a native site:

Cai Luong (Renovated Opera) appeared in the southern part of Vietnam in the 1920s. This relatively modern form combines drama, modeled after French comedy, and singing. Scenes are elaborate and are changed frequently throughout the play. *Cai luong* is similar to the Western operettas and more easily depicts the inner feelings of the characters. Songs of the *Cai luong* are based on variations of a limited number, perhaps 20, of tunes with different tempos for particular emotions - this convention permits a composer to choose among 20 variations to express anger, and as many to portray joy. The principal supporting songs in *Cai Luong* is the *Vong Co* (literally, nostalgia for the past). *Cai luong* owes much of its success to the sweet voices of the cast, much appreciated by the audience. Upon hearing the first bars of the well-loved *Vong Co*, the audience reacts with gasps of recognition and applause. The *Cai luong* performance includes dances, songs, and music; the music originally drew its influences from southern folk music. Since then, the music of *Cai luong* has been enriched with hundreds of new tunes. A *Cai luong* orchestra consists mainly of guitars with concave frets, and danakim. Over the years, *Cai luong* has experienced a number of changes to become a type of stage performance highly appreciated by the Vietnamese people as well as foreign visitors. (Vietnam-Culture.com, 2008)

And finally the modern spoken drama — *Kich Noi* — which became a powerful instrument against the oppressors which in Vietnam were not few, starting with the Chinese Dynasties, the French colonial interests and the USA interference during the Vietnam War. Before 1921, date of the first drama in the Vietnamese language, all the plays were translations of French works. Later on, the realistic style substituted the first dramatic attempts, which mingled the idea of a western theatre with the local popular theatrical traditions. According to Catherine Diamond²:

Unlike most Southeast Asian theatres, Vietnam has created a sizeable corpus of scripted spoken dramas that continue to be

² Who interestingly defies the idea of J. Brandon that the Asian spoken drama is a mere reproduction of western models into the local culture.

popular in performance with urban audiences. Initially influenced by French classicism and Ibsenist realism, the Vietnamese spoken drama, *kich noi*, very quickly adapted to local social realities and survives by readily incorporating topical subjects. While keeping abreast of current social issues, the theatre nonetheless makes use of its multi-cultural heritage, and in any given modern performance one can see the layers of influence – traditional Sino-Vietnamese *hat boi/ tuong*; Vietnamese cheo theatre, *Cham* dance, French realism, Soviet constructivism and socialist realism, and most recently, western performance art. The Vietnamese playwrights, set designers, directors, and actors have combined aspects of the realistic theatre with the conventions of their suppositional traditional theatre to come up with a hybrid that is uniquely Vietnamese. It is argued that these manifold layers should be regarded as a kind of palimpsest rather than just as pastiche. (Diamond, 2005, p.211)

In **Monsun**, in Act II, Melanie announces: “I won’t be here. I’ll go to Vietnam to the mountains in the north. Kurzdoku. The life habits of the minority populations” (Hilling, 2006, p.51, tradução nossa). From the third act on, this character does not come back to Germany anymore. The last scene of the play takes place in Vietnam inside her hut. She eats with her fingers. She belongs to the monsoon landscape.

The structure of Hilling’s play is very fragmented. The scenes are short and there is no worry about the sudden transition of time but mainly of place. In the beginning there is even a description of the places depicted along the play, and the ellipses that finish the list indicate it could be infinitely added. This kind of structure is found in the **Hat Cheo** that has also few characters and a prologue, elements also existent in **Monsun**. The disrespect to the unity of place is a characteristic of popular genres that trust on the audience’s imaginative power. Hilling follows the same pattern.

Another interesting possible connection between the play and the Vietnamese traditions relates to the many monologues found in the play. Hilling balances in her structure dialogues with sole characters telling their stories. It reminds us of the storytellers of the folk performance traditions.

When the character of Melanie arrives in Vietnam the monsoon season starts. She stays the whole time inside her hut waiting for the end of the rain. The opposition between her silent scenes and the wordy dialogues between the other characters portray the predominance of the word in the western

theatre. Melanie is unable to communicate not only because of the weather but also because of the language. Her only tool of contact is the camera she took with her. It is through the images that she will try to record her social experiences in Vietnam.

Melanie's inadequacy is translated through her own space. The scene II, Act III, her first one in exile:

Eine Huette in Vietnam in den Bergen. Die Huette ist mit Bambus gebaut. Woelbt sich nach innen. Melanie bewegt sich in der Huette. Sie passen nicht zusammen, Melanie und die Huette. Die Moebel sind zu klein fur sie, der Bambus zu rund. Die Kameraausruestung ist an den runden Bambus gelehnt. (Theater Heute, 2006, p. 51)

Melanie doesn't fit to the context she decided to be part of. Her hut is too narrow, the rain incarcerates her inside the hut, the language is non understandable and the costumes of the **Mien, Meo** and **Hhmongs** are too unrelated to her. They eat dogs and their skins are blue from the plants they use to color their clothes. This character has long monologues as the only way to express her ideas and feelings in the solitude of the Vietnamese northern mountains.

Songs are an important contribution for Anja Hilling's play. Not only the song, but the voice as an aural element in general. The songs are listened on the radio as well as Bruno's interview in the prologue. Throughout the play we listen to many different pop songs that are listed the same way as the places of action are in the beginning of the play. In the Vietnamese theatrical forms, music has always played a very important role. Buddhist monks and courtesans used to sing dialogues in this southeast Asian culture's proto-theatrical forms. Later, the **Kai Luong** became the most popular genre based mainly on music.

Interestingly, Hilling chooses a country in which the spoken drama tradition is really strong. In a similar way highly supported by the public initiative, drama is seen as a tool for discussion and enlightenment, beyond its natural and obvious entertaining function.

In her play **Monsun**, she is reflecting the voracious appetite of the Vietnamese drama in appropriating different sources in order to create art. Anja Hilling takes elements from different art manifestations, as music and cinema, to elaborate the structure of her own play.

Perhaps one of the most important formal aspects of **Monsun** reveals the author's debt with the theories of the Epic Theatre. The titles of the acts and the intense change of place of action suggest more an episodic plot instead

of a linear one. Some of the actions happen parallelly. While Melanie is in Vietnam, The other four characters are involved in a net of encounters and misunderstandings.

In conclusion, **Monsun** can be seen as an example of a playwright who is aware of the structure of his/her play. The theme is a reflection of its nature. The story is told not only through what is going on but mainly through how the events are being portrayed. Sometimes not perceived in a conscious level, the form of the play is the support through which the reader/audience will be able to capture the playwright's ideology. This play then becomes another kind of palimpsest, choosing as its different levels not only the close cultural references but also the theatrical formal traditions of the theme it depicts.

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