

DOI: 10.46340/ephd.2021.7.1.10

Olga Lachko, PhD in History of ArtsORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8141-1132>*Kharkiv State Academy of Culture, Ukraine*

THE ENVIRONMENTAL THEATRE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEATRICAL CULTURE

The questions of environmental theatre history and theory are considered in the article, the dynamics is analyzed of its research in contemporary theatre. Environment is defined as a special stage practice of the second half of the twentieth century, which is continuously developing, synthesizing the texts and languages of various arts. Examples of performances are given and work of famous environmental theatre directors is analyzed.

Based on the research, it is determined that the heyday of the theater of the Environment, which falls on the second half of the 20th century, is characterized by the struggle against the stereotypes of elite art. The desire to meet the audience, which usually does not go to the performance, brings the performing arts into a real life environment. The artistic search begins outside the traditional theaters and concert halls. The street, the territory of an abandoned factory, the roof of a skyscraper, or a restaurant become an active tool for the implementation of numerous creative ideas. Environmental theatre is based not on the principle of mimesis, but on the principle of presentation of reality, the place where the performance is no longer created with the help of scenery, but is quite real, a priori existing in everyday life. As a cultural phenomenon of the postmodern era, Environment promotes the joint creativity of those present in the hall and on the stage; the audience has completely new artistic and aesthetic experiences, which cannot arise during the process of limited communication between author and recipient in traditional theater. Further study of the Environment as a theatrical practice of Ukrainian contemporary art seems interesting due to the urgency of the problems associated with artistic processes that lead theatrical culture to new forms.

Keywords: environment, action art, art practice, environmental theatre, Ukrainian art, theatrical practices.

At the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, Ukraine takes the path of creating an effective model of cultural development, integrating into the European art space. The search for new relations with the spectator led to the emergence of a new practice for Ukrainian art—the Environment, the main task of which is to study the relationship between an object and its environment. In the world art history literature, there are significant differences associated with the definition and the genesis of the phenomenon studied by the author in the context of theatrical culture, because the process of its formation and actualization is not completed, which makes it difficult to create a theoretical and practical basis. The Environment operates in the theatrical space of Spain – “teatro ambiental”, France – “de Venvironnement”, Poland – “teatr środowiska”, the USA and Great Britain – “environmental theatre”, Ukraine – “довкрусний театр” (*lit.* surrounding theater)¹.

At the present stage of the study of the spectacular genres of artistic culture of Ukraine, an insufficient number of studies that consider the problems of creating a performance outside the classical theater premises have been revealed, which necessitated a holistic art criticism analysis of the aesthetic and artistic features of the Environment.

In order to determine the main stages in the development of the studied theatrical practice, works that generally describe the history of art of the 20th century became significant: *Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*², *Dictionary of Theater* by P. Pavis³ and *THEATRICA: Lexicon*

¹ Клековкін, О. (2012). *THEATRICA: Лексикон*. Київ: Фенікс, 800.

² Chambers, C. (2002). *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*. New York: Continuum, 865.

³ Пави, П. (1991). *Словарь театра*. Москва: Прогресс, 504.

by O. Klekovkin¹ provides a terminological definition of the Environment. The methodology of creating an environmental performance is covered in the work of the director and historian of the American theatrical avant-garde Richard Schechner *Environmental Theater*². The evolution of spatial systems of theater in the context of 20th century culture is considered by T. Bachelis³.

The purpose of the research is to study and to analyze the aesthetic and artistic features of the Environment in the context of world theatrical reality.

The Environment has emerged as an art form of postmodernism along with performance and happening. Expanding the concept of the Environment in the context of theatrical culture, the French researcher P. Pavis in *Dictionary of Theater* notes that this term was introduced in the 60s of the 20th century by Richard Schechner, a performance theorist and director of the experimental theater troupe “The Performance Group”, in order to define the theatrical practice aimed at reducing the difference between the audience and the stage⁴. The wave of creative experiments has led to the development of a new stage space: a characteristic feature of the theatrical avant-garde of the 60s of the 20th century was the staging of performances in non-theatrical spaces.

Although the terminological definition of the Environment has appeared only in the 20th century, the historical sketch of the origin of this phenomenon should be considered through the prism of ritual actions combined with dance and song. The rationale for the claim about the ritual genesis of the surrounding theater is set out in Richard Schechner’s *Environmental Theater*⁵. The director explores the interaction of man and the environment on the example of the rites of the island of Bali. The environment became an active participant in the sacrament: the separate areas intended for ritual action are considered by R. Schechner as the first manifestations of the organization of theatrical space. The lack of differentiation between participants and spectators blurred the line between everyday life and play activities, creating a single energy environment that completely absorbed the recipient. The property of space to emotionally influence a person, according to the principle of the location of objects, can be traced in any era: signs of the Environment are inherent in the medieval mystery theater, Japanese No and Kabuki, Indian Kathakali, Shakespeare’s Globe. According to P. Brook, a real theater is a Shakespearean theater, in which the crowd is not bound by a rigid framework: the people took part in the play and together with the actor determined the course of the play⁶.

It is important to note that the birth of new genre systems and genre generalizations characteristic of theatrical culture of the 20th century, was facilitated by a variety of experiments to reconstruct ritual practices of the past.

The stage practice of the 19th century undergoes numerous modifications, but the dictate of verbality remains characteristic of European theater, which assigned the spectator the passive role of an observer. During the performance, oppositional relations were created between the stage and the auditorium due to the clear division of space by the ramp line. In the art review literature, there are isolated descriptions of performances of the 19th century, which were carried out in realistic landscapes⁷. The properties of natural objects were used as the main means of expression, the position of celestial bodies was taken into account.

The search for new forms of communication began powerfully with the birth of director’s theater in the early 20th century. An unprecedented degree of freedom has sparked a wave of creative experimentation. “A demonstrative rejection of the realistic naturalistic depiction of visible reality, or the mimetic principle in its isomorphic paradigm, approved in the 19th century; unrestrained striving to create fundamentally new in everything and above all—in the forms, techniques, and means of artistic expression”⁸ have led to a rethinking of the concept of “art”, its content and forms. The development of the latest means of stage existence abolishes the dictatorship of the text, accumulating an atmosphere of appropriate aesthetic and creative environment.

In order to understand the background of shaping the Environment in theatrical practice, it is worth noting the experiments of German director Max Reinhardt. Like most reformers of theatrical art in the early

¹ Клековкін, О. (2012). *THEATRICA: Лексикон*. Київ: Фенікс, 800.

² Schechner, R. (1973). *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Hawthorn, 339.

³ Бачелис, Т. (1978). Эволюция сценического пространства (от Антуана до Крэга). *Западное искусство XX век*, 148-212.

⁴ Пави, П. (1991). *Словарь театра*. Москва: Прогресс, 504.

⁵ Schechner, R. (1973). *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Hawthorn, 339.

⁶ Brook, P. (1996). *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone, 176.

⁷ Schechner, R. (1973). *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Hawthorn, 339.

⁸ Бичков, В. (2004). *Эстетика*. Москва: Гардарики, 556.

20th century, he opposed naturalistic aesthetics on stage. In *Western Art of the 20th Century* T. Bachelis notes that the director “sought to intensify the theater and for this purpose wanted to destroy, to break the ramp line, and to involve the audience in action. Others sought to overcome the line that divided the theater in two that was one of the illusions of artists who wanted to make the theater truly massive”¹.

An example of a departure from the established scenographic approach is the directing of the 1920’s, represented by the experience of W. Meyerhold. The director boldly approached the organization of theatrical space, believing that “when an actor enters the stage, he/she always has some kind of aspiration to the absolute center of the stage, that is, to a place from where he/she can still be heard and seen on the left and right. Sometimes, it is necessary to return the actor, to put him/her in a state of some kind of deformation, to break the usual point of view, to move the imaginary center of the play. Then the spectator will not fall apart in an armchair, stretching out /her legs, but will get worried”².

Mykola Okhlopkov continues similar experiments with the polyfocus of the theatrical environment at the “Realistic Theater”. Working on the theatrical action *The Struggle of Labor and Capital*, the director renounces the scenery; elements of real space are used instead of artificial elements of traditional theater. The surrounding becomes an active participant in the action, because the director places the core of the stage action among the audience. In his memoirs, Okhlopkov notes, “I will never forget in my life how these thousands of spectators, as if by magic wand, began to believe in everything that happens on stage, began to see those places of action, which only hinted at the details and game objects”³. The crisis of verbal means of stage expression provokes the study of a new type of theatrical communication. Manifestations of the environmental practice can be traced in the performances of A. Artaud, A. Appia, G. Craig. “The action will cover the entire theater hall; will surround the spectator on all sides, immersing him/her in an atmosphere of light, images, movements, and sounds. This means that there is no longer a clear rupture and disruption of ties between life and theater”⁴, A. Artaud said. For this, the theater should get rid of its usual “ornaments”.

Although the European tradition of the experimental scene began to slowly fade from 1939, the postwar period has opened a new page in the reformist trends in performing art. Reality is changing and in order to portray it, you need to change the nature of the image. New problems naturally and logically have demanded new forms of expression. T. Bachelis believes that “the desire to see a person in a new light inevitably put an imprint on art. It broadened its horizons and sought to take into account the impact on human nature of the environment”⁵. Innovations related to the transformation of the stage environment continue in Jerzy Grotowski’s performances. The spectator is absent at the performances of the “poor theater”, because he/she is transformed into a participant in the action. The original stage model of the world was built by the director due to the unconventional organization of the theatrical space. The theater begins to go beyond the traditional premises into a world of endless possibilities, pushing the boundaries of the usual expressive means. The experiments continue on river banks and glades.

The concept of “going out of artistic practice outside the frame of the picture, outside the bar on which the picture is painted or the sculpture is molded, outside the conventional space of a museum, theater, concert hall...”⁶ was continued in the 1960s by actionist artists who began to perceive art as a total activity, as a permanent creative process, not limited by the framework of a separate work. The introduction of real objects into the plane image contributes to the disclosure of the artistic content of the environment and, therefore, should develop in a real situation. On this basis, there is an interest in a new art practice—the “environmental art”, the main one for which will be the interaction of a real object and space.

The heyday of the theater of the Environment, which falls in the second half of the 20th century, is characterized by the struggle against the stereotypes of elite art. The desire to meet the audience, which usually does not go to the performance, brings the performing arts into a real life environment. The artistic search begins outside the traditional theaters and concert halls: the street, the territory of an abandoned

¹ Бачелис, Т. (1978). *Эволюция сценического пространства (от Антуана до Крэга)*. *Западное искусство XX век*, 148-212.

² Гладков, А. (1990). *К. Мейерхольд*. Москва: СТД РСФСР, 473.

³ Велехова, Н. (1970). *Охлопков и театр улиц*. Москва: Искусство, 359.

⁴ Арто, А. Театр и его Двойник. Манифесты. Драматургия. Лекции. Философия театра. *Театральная библиотека* <<http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/Artod/Doubl/>> (2021, March, 12).

⁵ Бачелис, Т. (1978). *Эволюция сценического пространства (от Антуана до Крэга)*. *Западное искусство XX век*, 148-212.

⁶ Ланкин, В. Основы эстетики. *Учебники* <<http://textb.net/17/index.html>> (2021, March, 12)

factory, the roof of a skyscraper, or a restaurant become an active tool for the implementation of non-by the numbers creative ideas.

In 1961, Allan Kaprow, the founder of the theory and practice of happening, has created the action “Words”, which he called “Environment with Light and Sounds”. In fact, this event became an ascendant to streamline the practical terminology of the *surrounding theater*.

Since the aesthetics of the environmental performance is based on the principle of presentation of reality, and not on the principle of mimesis, the place where the performance goes is no longer created with the help of scenery, but is quite real, a priori existing in everyday life. Peter Brook in his *The Empty Space* noted that he is able to “take any empty space and to call it an empty stage”¹. Subsequently, this phrase became a beacon for many experimental studio theaters (“Living Theater”, “Open Theater”, “Bread and Puppet”, “Welfare State International”) on the way to forming the aesthetics of the *surrounding theater*. Going beyond the classical theater was perceived as a return to the “normal state” of creativity, as a means of breaking the illusion, because the surrounding that was chosen did not change, remaining as it was outside the performance. The process of “coming out of art from art into life” begins².

In 1968, Richard Schechner, a theater critic and director, has founded “The Performance Group”, with which he made his directorial debut. In the *Environmental Theater*, the author notes that the creative composition of the theater is “an ensemble devoid of any internal hierarchy”³. Every member of this ensemble—playwright, director, artist, illuminator—has the right to improvisation, spontaneous action on a par with the actor, thereby denying the need for traditional sequence in the work process. It should be noted that in some art history literature the Environment is positioned as a “spatial relic of happening”⁴, since the concept of this phenomenon born in the environment of actionism turned out to be consonant in philosophical and aesthetic terms with the concept of happening. The elasticity of the boundaries between these phenomena has contributed to the borrowing and assimilation of identical artistic experience, which subsequently led to the diffusion of the main means of expression. The plot is replaced by an event, the role—by tasks on a particular topic, the sequence of actions—by fragmentarity, the only optical focus of perception—by polyfocus, viewing the play-by participation in it.

The connection between the scene of the play, the theme of the work, and the nature of the environment chosen for the presentation becomes of great importance in shaping the environmental situations. Sometimes, the Environment dictates the theme of the spectacle, and the artistic action that takes place there allows emphasizing the uniqueness of a particular public place, turning it into an art space. In both the first and the second cases, the Environment becomes the central aspect of the performance, as a result of which a special visually and energetically active space is created, which absorbs the performer and the spectator equally.

In the late 1960’s, the actors of “The Performance Group” got up a play in a restaurant. Interaction with the real environment, its involvement as the main element in the action allowed Schechner to launch a mechanism of liberation of the theater from fiction. A beer stand instead of spectator seats, an echo of a storm outside the window instead of a phonogram—the revolutionary means of expression have contributed to the birth of a new theatrical language that can turn any fragment of prosaic life into a work of art, raise it to the level of sacred action. The absence of fixed seats during the performance contributes to the restructuring of connections—the gameplay and the process of perception by the audience became spatially equal. In this theater, there is no place for illusory, imitation of real objects. Only real materials are used, as each of them is endowed with its own energy, and not made specifically for the performance by a scene shop.

According to art theorist B. Groys, “truly relevant, contemporary art should be carried out directly in life—it should give shape to the world of life, feelings, perception, social reality of its time”⁵. The interpenetration of the theatrical world and the social world allows speaking about the idea of carnivalization of life, the concept of “holiday revolution”, which was in tune with the sentiments of the apologists of the counterculture of that period—creative youth associations. The director’s intentions are looking for ways to combine the environmental theory and practice in performances: *Orlando Furioso* by Luca Ronconi, 1789—the play *Theater de Soleil* dedicated to the French Revolution, *Orghas*—by Peter Brook staged on the ruins of ancient Persepolis, *Ka Mountain*—by Robert Wilson⁶.

¹ Brook, P. (1996). *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone, 176.

² Бичков, В. (2004). *Эстетика*. Москва: Гардарики, 556.

³ Schechner, R. (1973). *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Hawthorn, 339.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Гройс, Б. (1999). О музее современного искусства. *Художественный журнал*, 23, 27-32.

⁶ Chambers, C. (2002). *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*. New York: Continuum, 865.

In the early 1980s, similar creative experiments with signs of theatrical Environment have emerged in the countries of the former USSR. The experience of director N. Bilyak, who staged A.S. Pushkin's *Scene from Faust* in the ceremonial halls of the former estate, is interesting. Similar performances are implemented by S. Mrevlishvili in the Tbilisi temple of Metekhi. In the casemates of the Peter and Paul Fortress, the head of the Leningrad Experiment Theater, director V. Kharitonov, staged V. Manevsky's play *Prisoners of the Russian Bastille*. In modern Ukrainian theatrical culture, signs of the Environment can be traced in the performances of V. Troitsky's Dakh Theater, an independent performance group of TanzLaboratorium, which works with time in a proposed, accidentally found or deliberately chosen place.

Among the Kharkiv groups, whose work is aimed at creating environmental spectacles, we should single out "EASTFIRE SHOW". As a result of the analysis of performances of the specified collective, we can trace the basic tendencies of creation of a round theater in Ukraine. For example, during the international opera open air festival "Operafest Tulchyn", the team has created a visual component to the musical *Vampire Dance* only on the basis of fire and acrobatic show. The spectacle took place in live scenery—in the architectural ensemble of the palace of the 19th century, which became the main for the disclosure of the plot of the musical.

Further study of the Environment as a theatrical practice of Ukrainian contemporary art seems interesting due to the urgency of the problems associated with artistic processes that lead theatrical culture to new forms. As today's entertainment industry is adapted to the undemanding intellectual and aesthetic demands of the mass consumer, the issue arises of creating an action that can fill the urban space with philosophical content. The destruction of spatial bifurcation during theatrical Environment promotes the joint creativity of those present in the hall and on stage; the audience has completely new artistic and aesthetic experiences, new aesthetic experience, which cannot arise during the process of limited communication between author and recipient in traditional theater. The peculiarity of such relations is that the *surrounding theater* opens many opportunities for finding new means of theatrical expression.

References:

1. Artaud, A. (2020). *Teatr i yego Dvoynik. Manifesty. Dramaturgiya. Lektsii. Filosofiya teatra* [Theater and its Double. Manifestos. Dramaturgy. Lectures. Theater philosophy]. *Teatralnaya biblioteka* [Theater library] <<http://teatr-lib.ru/Library/Artod/Doubl/>> (2021, March, 12). [in Russian].
2. Bachelis, T. I. (1978). *Evolutsiya stsenicheskogo prostranstva (ot Antuana do Krega)* [The evolution of the stage space (from Antoine to Craig)]. *Zapadnoye iskusstvo XX vek* [Western art of the twentieth century], 148-212. [in Russian].
3. Brook, P. (1996). *The Empty Space*. New York: Touchstone. [in English].
4. Bychkov, V. (2004). *Estetyka* [Aesthetics]. Moscow: Gardariki. [in Russian].
5. Chambers, C. (2002). *The Continuum Companion to Twentieth Century Theatre*. New York: Continuum. [in English].
6. Gladkov, A. K. (1990). *Meyyerhold. Pyat let s Meyyerholdom* [Meyerhold. Five years with Meyerhold]. Moscow: STD RSFSR, 2. [in Russian].
7. Groys, B. (1999). *O muzeye sovremennogo iskusstva* [About the Museum of Contemporary Art]. [in Russian].
8. *Khudozhestvennyy zhurnal* [Art magazine], 23, 27-32. [in Russian].
9. Klekovkin, O. Y. (2012). *THEATRICA: Leksykon* [THEATRICA: Lexicon]. Kyiv: Phoenix. [in Ukrainian].
10. Lankin, V. G. (2021). *Osnovy estetiki* [Fundamentals of aesthetics]. *Uchebniki* [Textbooks] <<http://textb.net/17/index.html>> (2021, March, 12). [in Russian].
11. Pavi, P. (1991). *Slovar teatra* [Theater dictionary]. Moscow: Progress. [in Russian].
12. Schechner, R. (1973). *Environmental Theatre*. New York: Hawthorn. [in English].
13. Velekhova, N. A. (1970). *Okhlopkov i teatr ulits* [Okhlopkov and the theater of the streets]. Moscow: Art. [in Russian].