

Research Article

Messages Coming from Myths and Contemporary Albanian Theatre

Inis Gjoni¹*

¹ Faculty of Performing Arts, University of Arts, Tirana

* gjoni.inis@gmail.com

Abstract

Albanian dramaturgy and theatre have repeatedly turned to myth, approaching it on two levels: as a perceived reality and as an artistic reality. The universality of their ideas and the metaphors that set life against death, the fantastic against the real, and man against his shadow make these dramas and performances provocative and rich in messages, psychological depth and symbolism, and link them to contemporary time and contemporary man. The method followed in this article is a critical analysis of the meaning of myth in the theatre, combined with a demystifying way of looking at things; its main goal is an aesthetic evaluation of the phenomenon that offers a deeper explanation of several concrete performances. Techniques of transformation and distortion—mutations of characters, settings and times, and the coexistence of the living and the dead, of objects, animals and people, and of virtual and real images—heighten the affective states of spectators and the hypnotic, magical power of the theatre. Mythological material turns esoteric elements into important textual-theatrical units. This trend became visible after 1990, with the fall of communism, but it has not infrequently gone to excess, distorting the meanings of mythological narratives. Nevertheless, the use of mythical material, its decoding and the creation of associations with today's man and life remain among the modern practices of Albanian theatre, and they demonstrate the value of re-semanticizing myth in line with the messages that theatre conveys.

Keywords: myth, theatre, narrative, modernity, symbol, demythologization, Albanian drama.

Introduction

Dramatic writing—drama, tragedy, comedy, stage play, farce and so on—is the basic component of theatre, through which it conveys its main ideas and messages. The director, for his part, leads the theatre and shapes its tendencies, spirit and face, its direction, form and manner of expression [1]. In the Albanian-speaking space (Albania, Kosovo and North Macedonia), modern theatre has drawn on mythical subject matter for its power of imagination, symbol and metaphor, placing myths in the service of figurative associations with today's life [2,3]. In this way theatre has performed a transfiguring role, synthesizing and universalizing the spiritual states of its characters through the unchanging, predetermined archetypes that myths carry in their essence [4,5].

Albanian theatre has approached works based on ancient myths, ballads and legends in order to re-semanticize them and give them a new meaning closely related to contemporary man. The tendency has roots in the 1980s, but it became fully visible after 1990 and the fall of communism [2,3,6]. Re-semanticization is understood here in the sense that myth is not a fixed text but material that is constantly reworked [7].

Directors such as Pirro Mani, Mihal Luarasi and Serafin Fanko have brought mythical subject matter together with social concerns, treating national virtues such as faith, the relationship between love and freedom, and stoicism and sacrifice in the face of historical challenges, in plays such as *Who Brought Doruntina*, *The Fox and the Grapes*, *The Blood of Arbër*, *The Unwalling* and *Rozafa*. Each created associations with the time in which the play was staged, transcending the original place or space. Events were remodeled and displaced, and characters were placed in contemporary and, more broadly, universal human situations. The messages these productions convey were reconceptualized and rearticulated in line with society and its demands, so that the directors converged mythical subject matter with what was troubling society.

Several of these productions deserve closer analysis. The first work staged by Pirro Mani, *Who Brought Doruntina*, brought out the national concept and virtue of the “given word” (*besa*) [8]. Although it carried an ideological and political subtext of the 1980s, it surpassed that subtext by sublimating the eternal metaphor of the survival of the Albanian nation through the turbulent and dangerous centuries of its history [2,9]. The second director, Mihal Luarasi, uses in *The Fox and the Grapes* the tale of the Greek fabulist Aesop to affirm the idea of the relationship between love and freedom, in which freedom is the more precious to man even though he sacrifices his love for it. The third, Serafin Fanko, staged *The Blood of Arbër*, Fadil Kraja’s drama, remodeling the subject matter of two Albanian ballads—that of Ago Ymer and that of Kostandini and Doruntina—in the service of a contemporary message about two leading concepts and virtues of the Albanian nation, “the given word” and “faith” [10]. He reinterprets them through stoicism, endurance and sublime sacrifice in the face of historical enemies who sought to seize Albanian lands—in this case the violence committed by Serbian chauvinists against the powerful demonstrations of Albanian youth in Kosovo seeking their political rights, and beyond.

In the second drama, *The Unwalling*, Fanko brings the mythical subject matter of the afterlife, hell and the grave as a substratum of national identity and historical stoicism. The production reaffirms the need to preserve this identity in an Albania that had emerged from communism and now faced an open, democratic society, amid strong confrontations between mythical consciousness and demythologizing consciousness. National myths, although expressions of historical identity, are attacked and stripped so that individuals and society can embrace new mindsets [11]. In the third drama, *Rozafa*, the legend of the walled-up woman is re-semanticized on two main levels: (a) the mother’s immeasurable love for her child, expressed in her request that her breast be left outside the castle wall so that she can go on feeding the child with milk, and (b) her sacrifice, which is a pure sacrifice, while the tragedy is sublimated and turns into moral power [12,13].

Methodology

This study rests on a critical analysis of dramatic texts and their stage productions, read through theories of myth and of its demythologization [14–16]. Its aim is an aesthetic evaluation of selected performances, set within the history of Albanian drama [2,17] and within the anthropology of art [18].

Albanian dramaturgy includes many works that build their structure on mythical tales and legends elaborated from folklore, and that use them as messages of sacrifice, renewal and national identification. Among them are *Halili and Hajria* by Kolë Jakova (compare the epic songs of the frontier warriors [19]), *The Blood of Arbër* and *Rozafa* by Fadil Kraja, *The Sorcerer of the Rooster Inn* (*Shtrigani i Gjel-Hanit*) and *The Rolling* (*Rrakullima*) by Beqir Musliu, *The Shore of Sorrow*, *Public Dinner* and *The Reprise of Freedom* by Teki Dervishi, and *The Illyrian Plot* by Ekrem Kryeziu [2]. Other plays, such as *Beselam*, *Why Are They Sacrificing Me* and *The Living Sphinx* by Rexhep Qosja, *Invitation from Afar* and *Utopos* by Stefan Çapaliku, *Stormy Weather on Mount Olympus* (*Stinë e mërzitshme në Olimp*) by Ismail Kadare, and *The Coin of Gentius* by Milazim Krasniqi, offer another message by taking a new, re-evaluative perspective. Sacred texts, mythology and folklore are reinterpreted: stripped of their “sacred aura,” freed from blind faith and put to the service of vital human problems through a process of demystification [17,20]. The mythical subject and the characters who act within it are assigned other functions, those of the man of the time and his spiritual situations.

In the productions based on these dramas, directors such as Pandeli Stillo, Serafin Fanko, Fadil Hysaj, Agim Selimi, Esat Brajshori, Milto Kutali and Gëzim Kame, among others, followed the path of creating associations and metaphors that hand the audience ideas and thoughts of a universal nature, transcending time and addressing its problems. In most cases, therefore, the events that originate in these mythological narratives were reconceptualized and moderated. Through productions by different directors, the theatre operates with psychosocial underpinnings to discuss moral stances and enduring antinomies, transcending the boundaries of times and ideologies [1,21]. These and similar plays put on the table for discussion such concepts and moral attitudes as the heroic, the tragic, the majestic, the sublime, the fatal, the low and the perishable. They also touch on permanent, eternal antinomies such as the extraordinary and its demystification, and coherence and degradation.

The theatre also emphasizes several ideas and messages that transcend spaces, nations, ideologies and times: selflessness for the vital interests of the people, the nation, the homeland and the social group, and for high ideals and moral values; and the denial of evil and satanic powers through the “exorcism” of individuals or specific groups, which in these plays and productions are symbolized as destructive political and social forces coming from outside (the sorcerer, the invader, esoteric powers with satanic, diabolical connotations). Equally present are the corruption and political-moral decline of people, the excess of power through mistaken, fatal and tragic delegation, betrayal, disintegration and the excess of justice.

Discussion

Through these forms, Albanian theatre and drama experimented with the language and models of literary, dramaturgical and theatrical modernism and postmodernism [22]. Theatre criticism in Kosovo followed these experiments from the late 1970s onward [23,24]. Especially after 1990, with the fall of the dictatorship and the arrival of freedom of

conscience, authors and directors have followed two lines: mythologizing a narrative or phenomenon, or stripping it of the spirit of esotericism, religious overlay and speculation. In both cases the mythical subject has been treated as a pretext for reaching other ideological stations that connect with the present and create parallels with it. The goal, therefore, has not been to challenge or to “amaze” the spectator with the magical and hypnotic sides of myths and legends. Today’s spectator cannot be shaken by customary and anthropological cultural “fossils” that no longer live. On the contrary, theatre has treated material taken from myths and legends not as a given reality but as a “literary reality,” an artistic literary tool that emphasizes and underlines the social, political, moral and human aspects of today’s man and his time. This practice belongs to the wider European tradition of restaging classical and canonical myths [25].

Teki Dervishi’s *The Shore of Sorrow* (*Bregu i pikëllimit*, 1985), a cycle of nine plays, is an example. It uses the ballad of Constantine and Doruntina as a metaphor for the apocalyptic journey and the anguish of the exiled man, integrating esoteric elements and modern directorial concepts [2,21]. The protagonist is a kind of “player of fate.” Here one passes from life to death and back again, through a journey full of suffering by a son towards his mother. The journey is apocalyptic, moving from dream and parenthesis to reality and truth. Even the waiting for the mother, who does not die, is arduous. Constantine in his death chariot carries now his sister, now himself, now other characters, surrounded by devils, elves and satanic powers, creating a carousel of pain, sorrow, worry and tragedy. The metaphor relates to the Kosovar man expelled from his homeland, with his anxiety and hope of returning to the motherland, which stands for the author’s own expulsion from Kosovo. In the nine parts of the cycle, the incursion into the nine circles of hell is recycled in the form of a parenthesis and a bad dream, in which the boundaries between the real and the unreal become ephemeral.

In the modern directorial concept of Vladimir Milčin, the staging presented the hero sometimes in a state of trance, sometimes within environments and beings that are disfigured, grotesque, perverse and demonic. Measurable time is lost as a notion, as are the symbolized spaces. The numerous vicissitudes, the rich imagination, the magical elements, the spiritual confusion that accompanies the Player’s journey and the presence of strange beings give the work an esoteric dimension. It remains one of the most successful models of Albanian drama and theatre in the re-thematization of myth, in which polysemy gives the message a wide scope. The hero is contradictory, seen from diverse and contrapuntal perspectives as contemporary man in a denied and forbidden homeland (Kosovo). Time is transformed into antiquity. More than once the author uses the biblical situation of “Calvary” (the crucifixion of Jesus) as an allegory of existential suffering, death and life. The situation is apocalyptic, a psychic dizziness in which the boundaries of time and space disappear. The drama has had two stage versions in major Albanian-language theatres: that of the Provincial People’s Theatre in Pristina, directed by Vladimir Milčin in 1987 [26], and that of the National Theatre in Tirana, directed by Agim Sopi in 1993.

Through the process of demythologizing and deconstructing myth, theatre carries out an open critique of fetishes, prejudices and the manipulation of social consciousness, while at the same time increasing the hypnotic power of performance [15,27]. Serafin Fanko, Gëzim Kame, Fadil Hysaj, Altin Basha, Bekim Lumi, Memet Xhelili, Arben Kumbaro, Hervin Çuli, Armando Boro, Ilir Bokshi, Milto Kutali, Adonis Filipi, Blerta Neziraj, Kiço Londo, Laert Vasili, Driada Dervishi and others, in productions such as *Invitation to Dinner*, *Demolition of the Wall*, *Why*, *The Great Magic*, *Museum*, *Tyrannosaur*, *Waiting for Godot*, *The Lesson*, *Rhinoceros*, *The Blood Shirt*, *The Bald Soprano*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Electra*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *Happy Days*, *Faust*, *Who Brought Doruntina* and *Animal Farm*, have stirred strong emotional fires by keeping in fragile balance the relationship between the rational and the irrational, harmony and debauchery, clarity and confusion [28]. Works such as Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (adapted to the Albanian stage) fall into the category of myth-based theatre, or of practices of re-semanticizing mythical and archetypal elements, for three main reasons:

The use of universal structures and archetypes. These works rely on permanent situations, symbols and archetypes that transcend a particular time or space and function in a way similar to myths, expressing the ontological condition of man [4].

The process of demystification and reflection of reality. Like the treatment of myths in modern theatre after 1990, these performances strip power structures, people's expectations and social fetishes of their "sacred aura," putting them through a process of demystification in order to create direct parallels with the vital and political problems of the time.

The creation of universal metaphors for the human condition. Through the language of symbols and allegory, they address perennial antinomies (such as endless waiting, moral decline, the corruption of power and absurdity), serving as an artistic instrument that reinterprets their meanings to address the challenges of contemporary man.

In their directorial thinking, entropic actions are intertwined with clear and meaningful ones, and states of delirium and spiritual chaos with calm, coherence and meditation. As Përparim Kabo [18] (p. 259) observes of such performances, "Theatrical speech is esoteric. It seems unambiguous in the literary aspect, but on stage it is not simply like that. It comes with two meanings, three meanings or even more."

In the tetralogy *The Sorcerer of the Rooster Inn* (*Shtrigani i Gjël-Hanit*; book-theatre in four parts: "I, Halil Garria," "The Hour of the Cuckoo," "Faustiana" and "The Fair of Gjilan"), Beqir Musliu enters the interior of the Quranic myth, which mixes with the ballad of Halil Garria [19,29]. By alternating actions, situations and characters, he creates an existentialist model of life and death, in which death restores life and vice versa. The end and the beginning lose meaning because they replace each other in a cyclical manner, which always gives rise to absurdity and meaninglessness, creating a closed circle with no solution. In this way situations of anxiety and chaos remain immanent and ontological. The return to nothingness is inevitable, tragic and unsurpassable.

However, in the 13 plays of the two cycles—*The Sorcerer of the Rooster Inn* with four and *The Shore of Sorrow* with nine—structural deficiencies are encountered that make it difficult to transform them easily from literary works into theatrical performances. The dialogue and long monologues are often literary, the meanings hermetic and the flow of thought incoherent, and the excess of the notion of the sacred and of “purple patches,” used as a way of escaping spiritual chaos, makes communication with the reader and the spectator difficult [1,29]. Even so, thanks to the power of myth, theatre increases the hypnotic power of performance and realizes symbols and beautiful theatrical metaphors.

Conclusions

Performances that use mythological narratives are notable for their powerful use of symbols, allegories and metaphors across semantic, syntactic and pragmatic dimensions. The essential element of modern theatre does not lie in “external brilliance,” lighting effects or speculative tricks that temporarily captivate the spectator. The essence of artistic success remains the theatre’s ability to convey clear messages and to draw meaningful parallels between the content of the mythological narrative and today’s reality [27].

The artistic and theatrical, as the highest quality of the aesthetic communication of a performance with its audience, is the concretizing subject that merges into an integral and organic whole everything that comes from the material and mythical narrative of the dramatic text, be it tragedy or comedy. In this way theatre creates a system. What must be avoided is “external brilliance” and “speculation” with myth, whether its interior is escalated and challenged or myth is used simply and only for “theatricality” and self-expression, to amaze the spectator with dizzying fantasies and inventions. The formal brilliance of narrative, characters and vision drawn from myths is not in itself a claim to “modern” forms of theatre. It is not the tricks, the external lighting effects, the paradoxical scenography and the magical elements that can briefly hypnotize the spectator by distracting his mind. On the contrary, what always remains the main thing is what the performance tells us and what parallels the theatre draws with the interior of a particular mythological narrative.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

Author declares there is not any conflicts of interest.

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