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“The World Closed from the Outside, but Opened from the Inside”

The Theatre Director’s Semiotic Tasks Illustrated through the Example of a Performance

Abstract

The role of the theatre director has undergone a significant transformation in recent decades. Whereas theatre directors were once viewed primarily as decision-makers in matters of dramaturgy and aesthetics, their work is now increasingly understood as a form of interdisciplinary meaning-making, in which knowledge of semiotics and psychology also plays a role. The director is not merely the creator of the stage world, but also the director of the audience’s interpretation and the psychodynamics of the creative process.

Keywords: theatre semiotics, aisthesis, *Angyalok a lombok között* ('Angels Among the Boughs') (Szabadka), *The Lesson* (Ionesco), "theatre within theatre"

Networks to be kept in hand

According to the semiotic interpretation of theatre, everything that happens on stage becomes a sign (Balázs 2023a; 2023b; 2024; Balázs, Pölcz and Terdik-né Takács [eds.] 2023). The actor’s movements, the colour of the costume,

the arrangement of the set, all carry meaning, and it is the director who constructs a coherent system of meaning from these signs. Theatre is therefore not merely storytelling, but the creation of meaning, which encompasses cultural, social and psychological layers.

It must be borne in mind that the use of layers of meaning must not be limited to their conscious application, just as these layers are not equivalent to the simplistic use of symbols. It should also be avoided that the director creates a system of codes to be deciphered, in which the viewer's reception is largely reduced to the two possibilities of whether they are able to decode it or not. This is a process far more complex than one might imagine, one that also engages the subconscious, in which the director must not forget that the spectator's theatrical perception is not merely passive reception, but an active process of meaning-making in which the spectator's physical and sensory presence plays a fundamental role. *Aisthesis* in the theatre, the experience of sensation and perception, cannot be separated from the creation of meaning, since sight, sound and movement not only convey information but also evoke sensory effects that guide the spectator's interpretation. A theatrical performance thus functions not merely as an interpretable text, but also as a sensory event in which meaning is created through the mediation of the body and perception (Kiss 2001).

The theatre is not merely a system of signs, but also a psychological space. Throughout their work, the director is in constant contact with the actors, their creative partners, and the audience. The psychodynamic relationships that develop during the rehearsal process, such as trust, tension, and motivation, have a fundamental influence on the quality of the performance. The director must therefore possess not only semiotic but also psychological sensitivity, remaining open even to the unconscious realms of their own creative partners and audience members (Bodolay 2019; Balázs 2025). It is the director's task to recognise and integrate these elements, and to give them a theatrical form in which the audience can also participate in the process of self-discovery.

A synopsis of reality

To support these theoretical theses with examples drawn from reality, I shall highlight details from my most recent production, specifically from the production *Angyalok a lombok között* ('Angels Among the Boughs'), which premiered in Szabadka on 26 October 2024, and which features a unique interweaving of

instinctive, conscious, and reality-edited meanings. I will also discuss what it was like to manage all this as a director. Although the performance is based on a real event that took place barely ten years ago, during the *mise en scène* I worked with a powerful visual and textual system of signs rather than realistic or purely documentary devices.

The dramatic premise revolves around the disappearance of a recently graduated performer who still maintained strong ties to the arts university. The story begins at the start of the season, when the young actors and their lead teacher found a new, progressive independent theatre company and rent the university stage for their first performances. One of the girls gradually starts behaving strangely: she is constantly on the phone, misses rehearsals, fails to fulfil her obligations, and then quits via text message. She can no longer be reached by phone or online, and she disappears from the city. However, they cannot report her to the police because she calls her mother at regular intervals, reassures her about her well-being, and comes up with plausible yet implausible explanations. Her troupe, however, is unwilling to let this unsettling situation rest and begins an investigation, suspecting that their colleague is in trouble and that the responsibility for her rescue falls on them.

What makes this true story unique is that the troupe happened to have a production in their repertoire titled *The Lesson*, adapted from Ionesco's *The Lesson* (Ionesco, N. d.), in which a naive schoolgirl takes extra lessons from her teacher, whom she increasingly idealises. As she submits herself more and more to the man, he becomes increasingly domineering, wielding ever greater power over her, until finally, at the emotional climax, he stabs his pupil. In the final stage of the performance, blood covers everything until the housekeeper cleans it up and announces the arrival of another pupil.

The role of the schoolgirl was played by the girl who had disappeared. Another performer took her place. The company was deeply shaken by the fact that she could be replaced and by the suspicious disappearance of the original performer. They recall it as a traumatic memory: when they first performed the play with the newcomer, they were all bathed in fake blood together, and suddenly the fictional dramatic premise takes on a completely realistic interpretation of what might have happened to their colleague.

Since their former colleague had been begging for help even in their dreams, and they found themselves thinking of her countless times during their training sessions, they decided together to launch an investigation and find her at all costs. During the investigation, they rely on their intuition, declaring as fact that the girl

has most certainly fallen into a bad crowd. Indeed, after a while, they even begin to spread the firm belief that she has joined a cult. (On the dreams, see Balázs 2017.) Although they have no evidence for the above apart from earlier rumours, time and the mounting information prove them right. They find their companion in a dilapidated little shack on the edge of the village, living in wretched conditions, from which, however, she does not wish to return home. They almost must use force to get her out of there, undeterred by her threats, and then restrict her personal freedom until her state of mind clears up. At this point, the girl breaks down and is tormented by suicidal thoughts, as she realises there is no point in going back, given that serious forms of abuse of power are taking place inside, and she cannot find her place out here either.

This is where the story's most intriguing question arises. If the girl was happy in the shack, truly so for the first time in her life, as she says, was it the right decision to bring her out? Although her circumstances may seem frightening, how could an outside observer judge better what the individual's true needs are?

What the artistic mind constructs into sign systems

As with the story's real-life heroes, we too sought intuitive solutions for the performance's system of signs, interpreting the explanations and connections only in hindsight. The angel costumes became the strongest motif. This was intended to explore the theme of "goodness", as there was no self-serving explanation for the rescue operation. The participants did it simply to do good for another person. The question arises: what is the fundamental driving force in such situations? Does true selflessness exist, or do people perform good deeds for their own sake, to fill themselves with a sense of fulfilment? Or does life within a community, particularly a small one, induce a kind of "obligatory", instinctive reaction?

I conducted interviews with the victim, during which she stated that, for her at the time, that little village hovel was paradise itself, where, although it was shut off from the outside world, the world opened from within. For this reason, instead of a rural setting, I used the more mysterious, romantic, fairy-tale-like motif of a "forest house", isolated from civilisation. In doing so, I also managed to convey the otherwise factual reality that the cult members almost never went out.

As these were performing artists, the investigation took place during rehearsal breaks, the summer break, and before and after performances. Indeed,

the absence of their colleague often struck them even in the very middle of performing *The Lesson*. Added to all this was the “theatre within theatre” nature of the Lonesco production, which was also a menacing prophecy. Who knows whether the artists were “self-servingly” and professionally inspired by the mystery surrounding the girl’s disappearance, thereby “exploiting” the tragic events? We sought to emphasise the entertainment-industry aspect of their professional lives behind the scenes with excessively sequinned costumes, which, when played with the spotlights, cast a kind of otherworldly, angelic glow around them.

I didn’t want to incorporate the Lonesco play verbatim, nor did I want to include real locations or people, so I devised a fictional play with the same title as ours, namely, *Angyalok a lombok között* (‘Angels Among the Boughs’), which according to the story, is first created without any prior knowledge, and then, during the investigation, is continually adapted to the present as new information comes to light. This is how the structure became “theatre within theatre”, which eventually merged, so that the performance seen about the girl’s rescue is what the company ultimately created, and what the audience is currently watching.

We placed great emphasis on coincidences and the subconscious as well, since both the “rescuers” and the victims reported strange dreams. The sole man leading the cult, the Master, drew their attention to such “miracles” that remain inexplicable even in retrospect, such as banknotes and cigarettes falling from the sky when the victim was in dire straits or longed for them. In the performance, we conveyed this with a large quantity of cigarettes raining down from the ceiling.

When the troupe rescued the girl, they also stole the cult’s rubbish from the bin, which is tipped out in the middle of the stage during the performance. We did not arrange the rubbish in the bag in a realistic manner, but instead filled it with aesthetic items, such as tiny skulls covered in rhinestones, sequins, and black angel wings.

The original, real-life story and its seemingly insignificant details continued to provide us with a wealth of material for our system of signs and meanings. For example, the real-life cult watched the series *Twin Peaks*, whilst the entire investigation resembled this series and its world. Originally unconsciously, a large red curtain also became a dominant feature, which played an important role in the series.

The cult members wore gemstone necklaces. We evoked these with more striking, larger, fluorescent stone necklaces and earrings that glowed in the dark.

The recruiter—as it turned out—was the university hairdresser: a woman of almost unremarkable, unassuming appearance, who often boasted of her sexual power, even though it sounded utterly ridiculous coming from her, so I asked a male actor to play her role.

One of the senior cult members was referred to as the "woman with the pigeons" because she lived alone, in isolation, with the pigeons. Reflecting on the forest and the pigeons, the set for the fictional performance, and thus for our own performance, consisted of a "forest" of natural, gnarled trees, with pigeons perched on the branches or circling above them. The overall visual was complemented by a dreamlike swing, which simultaneously evoked the flow of creation, investigation, and the rituals of the sect.

Summary

Through the example above, it has perhaps been clearly demonstrated that the work of a director involves not merely the coordination of stage elements, but also the steering of a meaning-making process in which the layers of reality, fiction, memory, and the unconscious all play a part. In this sense, theatre does not merely represent, but recreates, questions, and interprets. The director's task is to create a system from theatrical signs that can address the audience—not only intellectually, but also sensually and emotionally. The *mise en scène*, the use of space, the motifs and the symbols are all the result of decisions that guide the audience's interpretation whilst leaving open the possibilities for meaning-making.

A semiotic reading of theatre provides an opportunity to interpret the director's work not merely as a technical activity, but also as a theoretical and sensory one. In this process, the director is not only a creator but also a mediator: they establish a connection between reality and fiction, the conscious and the unconscious, the personal and the collective. The network of meanings that emerges during the performance is created not only on stage but also within the audience, and this is the point at which theatre truly becomes a living art form (Balázs 2021; 2024; Antal 2025).

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