

Academic Student Theatre in English in a Pedagogical University: Specifics and Opportunities to Meet With the “Different” Culture

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Abstract

The article presents an analysis of the experience in the creation of academic student theatre in English at Lesosibirsk School of Education – SibFU Branch. The materials of the research are theoretical categories of the research problem and experimental data obtained in the course of the work. It has been proved that the academic student theatre has its own specifics, which is due to both the originality of non-professional theatre as a whole, and the essential characteristics of higher professional pedagogical education. The article presents the facts confirming the effectiveness and expediency of the academic theatre in English in the system of higher pedagogical education. The implemented Methods of the research consist of questionnaires, content analysis and interpretation allowed ensuring the validity of the work. The purpose of the work is to identify the specifics of this kind of theatre and identify opportunities for theatre participants and spectators in the context of a meeting with the “different” culture. Moreover, the essential difference between professional and non-professional theatre in terms of goal-setting, functions and results is revealed.

Keywords: Professional and amateur theatre; Academic student theatre in English; “Different” culture.



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1. Introduction

For many centuries, the theatre has been and remains a place of attraction of human hearts and souls, where reality is lost, and every creator, participant of theatrical action and the spectator are prisoners of the theatrical “time machine”. Here there is no past, present and future, and there is only what is happening with everyone, who is mired in this magical field. For centuries, professional theatre has solved and continues to solve this problem brilliantly. But human nature is such that the need to express themselves by scenic means exists a priori in people who are not engaged in theatre professionally. The deep roots of this phenomenon can be found in the children’s game, which once has become leading activity in a person’s life, and does not let him go throughout his life. So there was an amateur theatre, one of the variants of which is the academic theatre in the system of professional education. Such a theatre is initially designed to solve other problems than those of a professional theatre, respectively; it has a different specificity and opportunities.

This article is intended to describe the experimental work done to identify the specifics and opportunities of the academic student theatre in English to meet with the “different” culture and identify trends in the development of this kind of theatre in the present and future.

The prospective hypothesis of this study was that the academic student theatre in English at the pedagogical university is a phenomenon that has its own specifics and contains opportunities to create conditions for the entry of theatre participants and spectators into the “different” culture.

2. Materials and Methods

As a source base in our work is the activity of the academic student theatre in English “Globe” of Lesosibirsk School of Education – SibFU Branch. The conceptual ideas for the creation and development of such a theatre were

multifunctional and synergetic approaches. To obtain reliable results, we first of all had to analyze the following theoretical categories of research: professional and amateur theater, academic student theater in English, “different” culture.

Let us turn to the first two concepts. Theatre as an art form is a reflection of a person’s need to express themselves and their attitude to the world through specific forms that are inherent in human nature and are reflected in the complex interaction of people in society. The action stage is built on the clash of ideas, personalities, attitudes, likes, dislikes, emotions, cultures, etc. (<https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teatr>) All of this occurs in the presence of at least one spectator. Entertainment, thus, is an indispensable attribute of theatrical action. This is the fundamental difference between theatre and such arts as literature, music or painting, where the author can create any work individually, in isolation from the spectator (listener) “in the table” with the hope that it will find its audience (listeners) years later. Theatrical action is always collective (even if it is a theatre of one actor), open to improvisation and, unlike other forms of art, fleeting and every minute “different”. The main essential feature of the theatre is freedom of expression for the director, actors of dramatic material and for the spectator who perceives and interprets the theatrical action. The synthetic nature of theatre is well known. It has combined literature, music, choreography, fine arts for long time. In the modern era, visualization with the help of computer technology has been added, which allows the spectator to “read” information at a new level.

All of the above is an essential characteristic of professional theatre, for many centuries of its existence to determine its opportunities and limitations. In professional theatre, the main goal is a performance for which a variety of resources are used: the actual text of the play, the director’s plan and its embodiment in the play of actors, scenography, various means to help solving the super task of stage action (music, scenery, etc.). The higher and more professional the level of these resources, the brighter the stage action is, the more holistic the performance looks and the more opportunities for innovation and interpretation of dramatic material are. But it is the dictate of the play that brings a dissonant note to everything that happens in a professional theatre. Even in the best theatres of the world, as a rule, the problem of educating the actors has not raised and has not solved, tough competition and “premiership” appear, and the dependence of actors from the desires and attitudes of the director finds itself bright. As for the spectator, this attractor in a professional theatre, in principle, takes a secondary place. The director and actors do not care about the impression that the performance made on the spectator, but even less about the changes that occurred to the spectator during and after his viewing. The “cash” of the play and the opportunity to entertain the spectator are decisive. It is this parameter that often leads in choosing the repertoire and its embodiment on the stage of professional theatres. The talent and skill of the director and actors can solve this problem and return the theatre to its original spirituality.

All of the above negates the possibilities of theatre and characterizes it as quite hard, sometimes even cruel art. Nevertheless, professional theatre has existed for many centuries, it has embodied the unique experience of human relations and creative pursuits of all who have been and remain in the service of this great art. The emergence and existence of such theatrical areas as the school of Stanislavsky, Vakhtangov theatre, Brecht theatre, etc. show that theatrical art has always sought to overcome the hidden or obvious negative manifestations of the essence of professional theatre. As in any kind of human activity the principle of complementarity works here ([The principle of complementarity](#)). What is its specificity in this case? We are talking about non-professional amateur theatre, where everyone can test himself in the role of director, actor or any other participant of the stage action. At the same time, the main goal is not a performance as such, although it is the result of the complex work of the team that creates it. No less important are other results, among which it makes sense to note, first of all, the changes that have occurred with the participants of the play during the preparation of the play. So the theatre moves from the actual form of art to the field of pedagogy. This transition is primarily associated with a change in goal-setting. It is important for the director to know for what purposes the participants of the future performance come to the theatre: it can be psychological problems associated with the need to get rid of embarrassment before the audience, the desire to establish themselves in a new team, to learn something new, etc. The palette of functions of non-professional theatre changes naturally: educational, upbringing, developmental functions become dominant and make up the unity.

Despite such striking differences between professional and amateur theatre, in fairness we note that it was professional theatre that gave impetus to the emergence of theatrical pedagogy, which was embodied both in the preparation of professional actors ([Knebel, 1979](#); [Stanislavsky, 2017](#)), and in pedagogy in general (preschool, school, pedagogy of higher education). The value and wisdom of theatrical pedagogy lies in its humanistic principle, where the emphasis is on the individual. Currently, theatre pedagogy finds vivid expression, as in diverse practical experience and also in its analysis and theoretical understanding in the literature ([Educational theater of Tambov State University named after G.R. Derzhavin \[E. resource\]](#); [Kokhanaya, 2008](#); [Kovalev](#); [Krotovskaya](#); [Nikitin and Kuznetsov, 2011](#)). However, many resources of theatre pedagogy remain unclaimed, indicating its potential opportunities (<https://dic.academic.ru/>); ([Tanja Bidlo Theatre Pedagogy, 2006](#)). For example, it is known that the magic of the theatre includes the ability to play under the guise and mask of another person whose life position may be in principle different than that of the performer of the role. It is no coincidence that in the cultural traditions of many countries, theatrical pedagogy is still associated with psychodrama and acts as a means of helping an adequate entry of the individual into society. Still the difference exists. This idea is reflected in the interpretation of the concept of “theatre pedagogy”: “Theatre pedagogy ([German: Theaterpädagogik](#)) is an independent discipline combining both [theatre](#) and [pedagogy](#). As a field that arose during the 20th century, theatre pedagogy has developed separately from drama education, the distinction being that the drama teacher typically teaches method, theory and/or practice of performance alone, while theatre pedagogy integrates both art and education to develop language and strengthen social awareness. Theatre pedagogy is rooted in [drama](#) and [stagecraft](#), yet it works in order to educate

people outside the realm of theatre itself” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theatre_pedagogy). The psychotherapeutic ability of the theatre to give an opportunity to “acting out” various states is especially attractive for children and teenagers (Zhitkova and Zybina, 2018). It is no accident that a director in an amateur theatre is required to set first a pedagogical goal, and then a goal concerning the final product – a performance.

Let us turn to the description of the characteristics of the academic student theatre in English. Such a theatre is by definition amateur and exists within the educational activities of the higher educational institution (in our case – the School Education). The main purpose of such a theatre cannot be limited to one aspect, but involves the synthesis of goal-setting, where the dominant component is the personality of the theatre participant, and in fact the academic theatre itself acts as a means for its professional and personal development. We can mention other purposes of academic theatre, such as forming the critical thinking (Education for Innovative and Independent Learning, 2014), the innovative skills, the development of voice (The Art of Voice Activity, 2011) and others. But moreover students-participants of the academic theatre come to the theatre, focusing on their own intentions and desires, but over time they begin to understand that the academic theatre gives them a unique chance to gain experience of a new social practice. It is therefore extremely important is the formulation of goals by the participants, which will subsequently allow implementing the reflection. The idea of qualitative changes in the educational, developmental and personal aspects of its participants becomes the dominant idea in the student theatre (Semenova and Semenov).

In addition to the above, the academic student theatre in English has one feature that distinguishes it from other non-professional theatres. We are talking about a meeting with “different” culture.

For future foreign language teachers entering the “different” (in this case English) culture is organic and there is no doubt. During his studies at the University, the student learns “different” culture for him in the course of numerous foreign language classes. But this process mainly takes place at the mental level and rarely affects the emotional and sensual sphere. Academic theatre helps to solve this problem. The participant has to “live” the role in the context of “different” culture. Sometimes it happens at the intersection of two cultures: native and “different” ones. So, for example, in the play “Cherry Orchard” (Cherry Orchard) the participants played dual roles: the actors of the English theatre, performing the roles of the characters of the comedy by A.P. Chekhov “The Cherry Orchard”: Lopakhin, Ranevskaya, Petya Trofimov and others. It is important to mention here that we all in a global world of culture (Crane, 2002) and multicultural educational environment (Enygin *et al.*, 2017). That’s why it’s very important to educate students in the most tolerant approach (Morozov *et al.*, 2018) using innovative technologies (Education for Innovative and Independent Learning, 2014; Teaching Information Literacy in Higher Education, 2017). Only in this case we should reach the purpose of estimating of future teachers’ competences formation (Sergeev *et al.*, 2017) and can organize of teacher training to professional activity in modern conditions (Vasilchuk, 2017).

The academic student theatre in English “Globe” exists within the educational process in Lesosibirsk School Education – SibFU Branch since 2007. During this time more than 15 performances were staged, many of which were recognized at International and Regional theatre festivals of amateur theatres (Art forum, Novosibirsk, Krasnoyarsk, etc.).

At the first stage, the creation of the academic student theatre in English “Globe” was due to the desire of its creators to conduct experimental work that would help to identify the opportunities and limitations of such theatre for its participants and spectators, as well as to establish the resources of the theatre for their professional and personal development. The experiment was of a longitudinal nature, but, as it turned out, excluded the aggregate, final stage. Such a stage can only be the termination of the theatre activities. Moreover, goal-setting was corrected during the experiment. If at the first stage it was limited only by the possibility of forming the participants of the theatre language and speech skills in English, then gradually the range of goals expanded and modified. This was due to many factors, among which we note, as the main, the opportunity to use the resources of the academic student theatre to build a dialogue of cultures (Bibler, 1991) and a meeting with “different” culture. This is due to the fact that the content of the theatre is the English and American drama, and with the momentum that gives such a rich content for building their own dialogue with the “different” culture. Each of the participants of the theatre is a representative of his native linguistic culture. In the play, he does not just play the character of a dramatic work, but “lives” the image as a representative of “different” culture on an emotional level. Using the figurative metaphor of V.S. Bibler, he becomes “... a little German, a little French” [Ibid.]. This experience is invaluable because it lies in the field of emotional and sensual sphere and remains with a person forever. At the same time, each participant of the theatre is not just “enters” into another culture; he does it on behalf of the character he plays. It turns out a complex unity “participant of the theatre as a representative of the native linguistic culture – “different” culture character”. The result is a qualitative change in the personality of the theatre participant, which they often wrote about in their reflexive compositions.

Thus, the modification of the goals of the theatre provided us with a constant search for research methods that would ensure their adequate achievement.

The leading methods of our study were:

1. Survey.
2. Conversation.
3. Content analysis of reflective essays of the theatre participants and the audience after the premiere.
4. Method of interpretation of the received data.

Survey and conversation are quite common methods in humanitarian research. We used questionnaires and interviews to clarify students’ preferences in choosing the repertoire and content issues of dramatic material for staging performances. Thus, in the preparation of the play “I Love you or the vicissitudes of love”, the survey

showed that modern students are concerned about the themes of unrequited, sacrificial love equally as the cynical attitude towards it. As a result, the works of O. Wilde, E. Hemingway, and O. Henry were chosen for the performance, where these topics are fully covered. In preparation for the play “Jonathan Livingston Seagull. The choices we make” (*Gonathan Livingston Gull*) according to the results of the survey, the emphasis was placed on the problem of the relationship between the individual and the crowd, the search for their own life scenario, which turned out to be relevant for today’s youth.

It is proved that the method of content analysis allows determining the validity of the study and provides a measurement of facts and trends that are reflected in the documents (*Content analysis*). Content analysis was carried out in stages and included the following:

- formulation of the purpose of the study;
- selection of keywords and categories;
- mathematical calculation of concepts and categories, which reflected the leading trends of the phenomenon under study.

As we analyzed the feedback of the theatre participants and the audience, it was important to find a basis for the harmonization of logical and emotionally-colored beginnings.

The method of interpretation is the most attractive because of its openness and freedom, and at the same time, the most vulnerable, because it contains the subjective assessment, which from the point of view of science is not correct enough. At the same time, it is the interpretation that makes it possible to conduct effectively a reflexive analysis of both activity and personal equally for the participants of the performance and the audience.

3. Results

As we noted above, a long-term study of the specifics and possibilities of the academic student theatre in English included a dynamic change in the goal-setting and as a consequence of all the theatre activities. The result is one of the principles of the theatre operation was the principle of constant modification, change, improvement of the overall functioning of the theatre, quick and clear reaction to the needs and capabilities of the members of the theatre and the audience. To realize this position, the director and the participants had to understand the synergetic function of the theatre and implement it in their daily work. This approach was methodological in nature, which provided the impetus for the development of the theatre. Thus, in the history of the theatre there was not a single repetition of dramatic material, the interaction of the director, theater participants and spectators at all stages of the production became fundamentally important. This interaction required from the director a democratic style of communication, the ability to build a dialogue, to accept ideas that, at first glance, did not fit the concept of the play. So, in the play “Verdict” (*Verdict*) the main idea was identified as a confrontation between supporters of humanistic pedagogy and psychology and apologists of authoritarian attitude to children and childhood in general. The stage action took place in the form of a trial of the English and American writers (W. Shakespeare, W. Golding, M. Twain), which showed children, their relationship with the adult world as they are, while reflecting the truth of life. In preparation for the performance the students offered to present the characters of the court in the form of the heroes of L. Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland”. The result was a charm, a kind of double-stage action, where the Dark Queen, the Hatter, the Cheshire cat, etc. played the roles of members of the court, acting as defenders or opponents of the humanistic pedagogy and psychology.

Reflexive essays, which became part of the experimental work, helped to comprehend the activities of the theatre and to outline further ways of its development. After each performance the participants were asked to answer the questions “What did participation in this performance give to me? What changes have happened to me?” For all the years of existence of the academic student theatre, 78 people were involved in it. This figure is associated with the short-term stay of students in high school (4-5 years); the same is explained by the very short life of the performances of the academic theatre. All students-participants of the theatre positively assessed the experience they gained in it.

But we were most interested in the general trends that could become leading, both in assessing the activities of the theatre, and for planning its further activities. Therefore, we chose the linguistic categories, which were common in nature. The content analysis made on this basis was carried out according to the scheme of connection of two tables: the system of coordinated and subordinated categories of analysis and the coding matrix. Let’s say at once that it was difficult to do such content analysis, because the discourse of the works was emotionally colored. Nevertheless, we were able to identify the quantitative predominance of categories that have the character of generalizations. The results of a study of the reflective essays of the theatre participants are given in table 1.

Table-1.

№	System of coordinated and subordinated categories of analysis, consisting of the content analysis units	Number of units
1	The theatre helped me overcome my fear of the audience	28
2	My hero became close to me	36
3	I tried to hear my partner and react to his acting	20
4	The problem of the play is clear to me and excites me	45
5	The skills I acquired at the theatre will help me in my future professional career	65
6	I began to understand different culture better	59

It was equally important to investigate the generalized assessment given by the audience. Over the entire period of experimental work, performances of the academic student theatre were attended by a total of more than 700 people: students of the Lesosibirsk School Education, students of schools in Lesosibirsk, foreign guests, school teachers. After watching the performances, they were also asked to answer the questions “Express your impression about the performance”, “What did you think about after watching the performance?” In total, 340 people took part in the survey. The results of the content analysis of the responses are given in table 2.

Table-2.

№	System of coordinated and subordinated categories of analysis, consisting of the content analysis units	Number of units
1	I liked the main idea of the play	280
2	I liked the acting	284
3	The problem of the play is clear to me and excites me	220
4	After watching the play, I thought about many things	243
5	The actors managed to show representatives of different culture	167

Comments.

During the experiment, we developed special instructions for the content analysis procedure for encoders. The main idea was to define generalized concepts and categories. Therefore, even with a verbal mismatch of opinions and judgments, coders found the leading idea in the writings, which correlated with the general idea of the respondents. As a result, in the writings of students, many positions intersected, so the counting figures were also cross. Encoders don't need to carry out the calculation according to the formula $K = \frac{\text{number of units of analysis}}{\text{total number of units of analysis}}$, fixing a given category/total number of units of analysis, as all the works reflect a positive attitude to the academic student theatre. We were more interested in the qualitative assessment of the theatre's activities and the identification of trends that helped us to carry out analytical work and determine the formats for its further development.

4. Discussion

The carried out work has aimed us to further search for the identification of the specifics of the academic theatre and its opportunities to meet with the “different” culture. The most important direction of our work is the actualization of the idea of the intercultural function of theatre as art, which is able to transfer a person to other epochs and cultures, making him a subject of “out of necessity” of cultural time and space. “Living” such states, the participant of the academic theatre will simultaneously find himself in an extremely relevant position: on the one hand, the participant of the theatre will defend (often at a subconscious level) the idea of his national culture (Gachev, 2015), on the other hand, come into contact with a wide layer of “different” culture, confirming the idea of the dominance of the standards of “universal way of life” (Liferov, 1996).

5. Conclusion

This study investigates the characteristics of academic student theatre in English. The characteristics such as dynamic change and goal-setting draw much more attention comparing other distinct characteristics. In this order, the synergetic functions of the theatre and its implementation in daily work of these students have been observed. It has proved that not only such academic studies provide students with more incentives but also help them to comprehend the different facets of this issue. Moreover this investigate clarifies the general trends of both in assessing the activities of the theatre, and for planning its further activities.

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