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Social Histrionism and Artivism

[First published in: Maska, Ljubljana, fall 2006, vol. 21, no. 6-7, pp. 5-19]

Modern engaged theatre practices and theories have long since surpassed the traditional concept of “engagement”. In order for a work of art to be “engaged”, it has to overcome the political stereotypes, theater conventions and falsehood. Therefore, if art wants to be political and engaged, it has to fulfill two conditions: first, it must present polemical political-social contents, and second, it must show interest in itself as art and demonstrate its awareness that it is socially determined art form.

For this reason, theater practitioners and theorists have introduced the term “theatricality” into the modern theater vocabulary, signaling their willingness to explore theater as a social form of communication. Moreover, this should become a compulsory task for everyone involved in the practical and theoretical work related to theater. However, modern theater not only humbly delved into itself asking various questions that challenge its basic premises: what is it that makes theater a social institution and what is acting, representation, illusion, theatricality and related concepts. Over time, modern theater became arrogant, since it perceived itself as more truthful and more distinguished than classical theater precisely because it presumably introduced epistemological issues into theater practice and theory. Deliberations about these issues presumably enabled modern theater to develop artistic tools that are supposed to be “more truthful” and “more genuine” than any tool used by erstwhile theater practice.¹ Precisely the study of “theatricality” supposedly enabled modern theater theory and practice to take the bull – classical theater – by the horns, and bring it down once and for all, with fragrant and fiery thoughts in mind. Theatricality was embraced by theoreticians and practitioners alike. One reason was that it presumably helped them detach theater from the convention and falsehood of classical theater, and another that it lent greater epistemological value to the modern understanding about theater, such as has never been achieved by classical theater.

In the belief of theorists and practitioners alike, theatricality is the very ontological substance of modern theater. Thanks to theatricality, in contemplating theater it is no longer necessary to start from the basic dividing line that defines the fundamental theater situation which requires the spectator, on the one side, and the actor on the other. The term “theatricality” supposedly links both realities, the fictitious and the real, since theatricality is a feature of both theater and real life. According to this explanation, we play roles that have been determined and written down beforehand, not only in theater but in real life as well. In defending this thesis, theater theorists are helped by social scientists, the proponents of the theory of the social construction of reality, who argue that social institutions exist within man who internalized general values and accepted them as his “roles” which he then acts out and plays over and over again. The basic difference between life and theater has thus become obsolete; representing “something else”, that is to say, acting, meaning that which is supposedly “theatrical”, is presumably inherent to theater as well as everyday life itself.

These considerations removed the border line between theater and life, with theater appropriating the right to shift arbitrarily, moving away from the classical theater institution (for example Italian theater box) into life and back into institution. These strategic shifts “away” and “back into” produced various forms of performance, for example, street theater, guerrilla theater, body art and the like, each pursuing its own sharp aesthetic polemics and communicating its own critical political message. While in real life roles cannot be chosen freely, in theater there is freedom of choice. Unlike real life, theater freely chooses roles, and unlike classical theater, it also enjoys freedom of determining the conditions of production. Freedom of modern theater consists of its freedom to pick the street, the media, the factory, the shopping center or the classical stage of the Italian theatre box as a place of its artistic intervention, and it enjoys similar freedom when it comes to the choice of the manner of artistic presentation.

I already wrote about the concept of theatricality on another occasion, so in this essay I will only summarize the basic idea.² The main flaw with the concept of theatricality, regardless of whether a performance takes place in the street, in a factory or on a theatre stage, is a fact that it always remains attached to the institution

of theater and its principles of representation (i.e. the procedures employed in an attempt to convince us that whatever is represented is truthful and authentic) and presentation (i.e. the procedure employed to show that everything presented is equally untruthful). However, the theatricality of everyday life must observe only the first principle, meaning that even the theatrical must be as truthful and convincing as possible. But if the theatricality of everyday life nevertheless observes both principles, that of representation and presentation, then we have to do with “spontaneous theater” and as such it actually belongs in the field of psychoanalysis. The issue of spontaneous theater was addressed by Octave Mannoni among others. He pointed out that the theatricality of everyday life occurs only when one “forgets himself” and continues to play although he is no longer in theater.³ But such a person does not mimic the person or thing he/she represents, but his/her performing rests on acting alone through which that person says: It is true that I'm not the king, I only play the king. But by playing the king I try to show you that which I am: a good actor”. Theatricality, which Mannoni named histrionism, is normal and acceptable in theater, because it may be controlled; however, outside theater, in everyday life, theatricality appears as abnormal and “pathological,” so it calls for caution as required in everyday life. There is an essential dividing line that separates theatricality in theater from theatricality in everyday life, and this dividing line spells the difference between “normal” and “abnormal.”

I will now supplement the psychoanalytical theory with the thesis that histrionism may be either an individual or collective phenomenon. To start with, I will explain the thesis about collective histrionism using the example of medieval knights' tournaments. Duccio Balestracci, the author of *La festa in armi*,⁴ had quite a few difficulties trying to explain the medieval tournament. He first concludes that the tournament was not the continuation of war, although there existed examples (indeed rare) of warring sides organizing a tournament to continue the terminated war. But, says the author, participants in the tournament neither simulated nor “acted out” the fight, as in a *moresca* (a war dance stylistically representing fencing and warfare), so tournaments often ended with dead or wounded parties. Therefore, the tournament was a real affair, rather than just a pleasure extracted from watching a spectacular performance. Indeed, one reason that it was pretty much real was the fact that it offered an opportunity to gain material benefit. In fact, the defeated knight was

considered a captive, so he had to buy his freedom from the winner (naturally, if he has not already paid with his life). So, if the tournament is neither war nor a simulation of war, then, proposes Belastracci, it could be a “ritual warfare”, given that in the eye of the then society the tournament was an “ordal”, i.e. God's verdict. The tournament could have been a way of resolving a conflict, since it was believed that God would bestow victory on the one who was in the “right”. Accordingly, the tournament was also a kind of legal verdict, in which the judge was God himself. Many things could be gained in a tournament: justice, reputation and even material advantages. While society relied on rules to regulate interpersonal relations, the tournament, as a “space of play”, was left to randomness, although the outcome of that play was not inconsequential for society. After all, at stake were justice, social power, reputation and material benefits. The outcome could strike a new balance of power among specific members of society and thus affect society itself. This means that the tournament was only apparently a game, while in reality it was a social battle in its purest form. Since ostensibly, being only a game, the tournament had nothing to do with society, it was an opportunity to engage in battles that were otherwise not allowed. *However, as long as these social battles were underway, they were just a game, but once they ended spitting out victors and losers, they have become a social fact.* Those that emerged as victors became masters. We will name this almost pathological attitude of society towards play that is treated more seriously than is apposite to “play”, social histrionism.⁵

The issue of theatricality is therefore valuable for theater, but not in relation to everyday life, as seen by modern theater theorists Elizabeth Burns, Michael Kirby or Josette Feral, but in relation to individual and social histrionism. The problematic aspect of theatricality is not a direct link between theater and life, but it should probably be sought in the relation of theater to social histrionism.

If we explore theater history in the light of this conclusion, we first notice that theater had always been closely connected with a holiday or a festival. It was so in ancient Greece and Rome, in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and even during later periods, although less obviously. Yet it is nevertheless not possible to link the festival as such with social histrionism, such as one identified in connection with medieval tournaments. That would be possible only if we could prove that the festival is not

innocent play, “sensible but without purpose”, to borrow Huizinga's definition from *Homo ludens*, for whom play has “sense only in itself”.⁶ Similar to what has been demonstrated in connection with the medieval tournament, we would have to show that society controlled the “festival” employing a number of rules that lent it the appearance of play, and ascribing to it an almost sacred meaning. That would, in turn, mean that the festival produces decisions which society does not know how to accept or defend otherwise. My hypothesis, which I will try to justify, is that in relation to society play is supplementary: it is outside society, the non-serious excluded from the serious, but at the same time it affects the most vital area of society, one related to social conflicts. In order to be able to prove this, things have to be put into historical perspective and explored within a concrete historical context.

For modern theater, a very interesting and relevant phenomenon is the Renaissance festival, which accompanied Humanist and Renaissance theater. This topic was intuitively brushed up by Craig in his journal *The Mask* published in Milan in the 1930s. Craig was fascinated by the scenography and theater architecture in the Renaissance, the discovery of perspective, philological reading of ancient texts and archaeological excavations. Social explanation of the Renaissance theater was provided by Jacob Burckhardt who put forward the thesis that during the Renaissance theater detached itself from the religious framework and content and leaned on ancient practices and authors (at least those that were available at the time and insofar as they could be understood), which presumably set off the process of theater emancipation and socialization.⁷ With this, he created a myth with which we still live today, that art is presumably disinterested and living outside pragmatic economic and political goals, since it is in the service of humankind, creativity, the progress and development of civilization. I will now put this noble idea on the scale and weigh it against the Renaissance theater viewed in the historical context of the Renaissance festival.

Humanist Renaissance theater indeed forced out medieval passion plays, mysteries and miracles, but it nevertheless remained subordinated to the Church calendar. Documents dating from the 15th and 16th centuries show that at that time theater performances could be staged only during the carnival time, which was structurally determined by its opposite pole, “*quaresima*”, that is, the 40 days of fasting during

which the merry crowds had to atone for carnival frivolity and gluttony. Theater performances could thus be staged only during the period of general merrymaking endorsed by the Church. The carnival time usually lasted one week preceding Ash Wednesday, but it could also be longer. For example, in Florence and Ferrara it started on Epiphany and lasted until Ash Wednesday, while in Venice it started even earlier, on December 26, immediately following Christmas Day. Outside the carnival time, theater performances were given only rarely, or at least it was so during the Renaissance, and there had to be a strong reason for giving a performance, for example, to honor the visit of a sovereign, or to celebrate a truce, royal wedding and the like. During the 14th and 15th centuries, when humanist theater was emerging in Italian towns, the festive carnival program was already well established, so to say, and widely recognized. This means that theater entered the context that already had its “formal unity” and “general ideological background”,⁸ so that a theater performance was added as just one among many events.

The study of carnival is seriously obstructed by the ahistorical notions of carnival developed by George Bataille and Mihail Bakhtin in their widely acclaimed studies. According to Bataille, the carnival is a transgression of social rules, and a period during which social relations are turned upside down until the end of the festive season when society recovers its “normality.”⁹ Bakhtin, on the other hand, in his study of Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, explains carninality as pre-class folklore dating from the time when the community still cultivated a uniform perspective on the world and its phenomena, and society was not yet differentiated by classes and class consciousness.¹⁰ Once society split into classes, the pre-class folklore was largely lost lingering on only as part of various artistic forms (Aristophanes, medieval farce, Petronius, Lucan and others) and carnivals. Bakhtin sees carninality as a series of signs that belong to the same “matrix”,¹¹ for example eating, obscenity, corporality, play, revelry and the like. All these elements, banned by the ruling ideology, are presented in a manner that dangerously approaches that same ideology, with the purpose of ridiculing it. Bakhtin's carninality, Bataille's transgression and the historical carnival indeed bear some resemblances, yet the historical carnival should not be confused with Bakhtin's or Bataille's understanding of the carnival. The Florentine carnival of 1452, when citizens dragged around the streets a carriage of fools led by the elected prince, was close to their idea of carninality, but this type of carnival is

rare among the descriptions of Renaissance carnivals. In fact, other types of celebration prevail among the descriptions in historical documents, and these, in contrast to the one mentioned above, reveal conspicuously patrician traits. That descriptions of popular celebrations are rare can probably be laid at the door of rich citizens, who were the most frequent chroniclers and were probably more interested in nobler things than popular vulgarities. Accordingly, the kind of carnival mentioned above was probably more common than suggested by written records, but this is still not a sufficient reason to justify neglect of the reports on carnivals about which Bakhtin and Bataille say nothing.

Another important element in the study of the Renaissance festival is its medieval prehistory. Giorgio Brugnoli showed that the medieval carnival did not stem directly from similar ancient holidays (e.g. Saturnalia, Liberalia or Anna Perenna), although some external resemblances between them did exist. On the contrary, the historical studies undertaken by Brugnoli and Bronzini concluded that from its very onset, which can be traced to the period between the 8th and the 12th century, the carnival was the domain of the Catholic Church. In Europe of that time, it was usually connected with the atonement accompanying Lent.¹² Early on in Rome, the protagonists of these celebrations were priests who, wearing costumes and accompanied by the faithful, paid a visit to the Pope from whom they received presents. There were also bull fights in which horse riders and foot soldiers fought bulls and other animals which symbolized temptations, so by killing the animal the soldiers symbolically eliminated bodily temptations, while animals were offered to God. In this way the community prepared itself for Lent. Fights against animals persisted in Rome until the Renaissance, but over time they lost their religious connotations of sacrifice and atonement. The 14th century statute of the city of Rome referred to the games as *Agone* and *Testaccio* organized by the city. In the last quarter of the 15th century, the holiday came under the auspices of the Pope who added to it various features of humanist culture, such as *carri trionfi*, Latin drama, reciting, receptions and the like. Similar to Romans, Venetians, too, organized games during the carnival time; these were held in San Marco Square on the carnival Thursday. In these games, a bull and twelve pigs were killed symbolizing the 12th century victory over the Patriarch of Aquileia and his canons. The meat of sacrificed animals was initially distributed among the most prominent Venetian noblemen, but in

the 16th century it began to be given away to the poor. Just in passing, this shows that charity and philanthropy are modern expressions of class status.

Other Italian cities also organized bull fights, but not on a regular basis as did Rome and Venice. However, they cultivated another, no less violent practice called *battaglie di giovani*, that is to say, clashes between the gangs of young men organized by town neighborhoods. From the 13th century onwards, these gangs engaged in fights either during the carnival time or after Easter, in Florence and in other cities; there was fist fighting, stone throwing and clubbing.¹³ The war began on the carnival Tuesday if the brigade from one neighborhood tried to start bonfire (*capannucci*) before midnight, or to penetrate the territory of another neighborhood. The clashes were fierce and frequently ended in deaths and injuries. The city authorities (*signoria*) strictly condemned the violence and tried to prevent this type of entertainment through decrees and armed interventions, but they could not eradicate it. One reason was that unusual violent games were very popular with the citizens of Renaissance towns. There were games staged in Italian cities and at courts in which the competitors had to wring the neck of a duck or a goose while jumping into the water or riding a horse. Another notorious game was one in which a man had to kill a cat nailed to the board by hitting it with his shaven head. Those who managed to kill it got a generous reward.¹⁴

In addition to popular brigades, there were also brigades composed of young men from rich families. They organized *armeggerie*, majestic processions on horses in luxurious outfit, then various competitions, serenade singing, dances, recitations and *carri trionfi*. On the surface, *armeggeria* indeed appeared as gallant socializing of the equal, but neither this event lagged behind the others in terms of violence. It is known from historical documents that for the night, or several days, of *armeggeria*, the city authorities declared that they were unable to maintain order and recommended self-protection advising citizens to shut themselves inside their homes. By this they conferred upon the brigades of noble young men the right to perpetrate violence against their fellow citizens and threaten their political opponents without being punished for their wantonness.

Although the Renaissance festival originated in the urban environment, it took over many elements from the medieval knights' tournament. The purpose of many festive events was a demonstration of martial skills, only that during the Renaissance these were no longer restricted to the aristocracy, but participants were both common and rich people, and even people from low social classes, *popolo minuto*. However, in reality the Renaissance carnival hardly allowed any mixing of classes, and it is even less true that the carnival was a popular festival or an expression of the people's will. In these festivities the class roles were carefully observed and equally carefully selected were the modes of presenting these classes.

The 15th century *armeggerie* in Florence were organized by brigades consisting of no more than 12 young men, in accordance with the city statute, but all of them were from rich and influential families. One such *armeggeria* was held on November 14th, 1464 and led by Bartolomeo Benci. Although it took place outside the frame of the carnival, it is significant for our purpose as a source of information about this type of carnival event. The brigades usually brought together young men from rich families that belonged to the same political faction, so *armeggeria* was not just a demonstration of loyalty and the fighting spirit of the young men, but also a threat to political opponents and in part the community as a whole. On February 14th, the gallant company in luxurious clothes sang a serenade below the window of their leader's beloved and competed in a tournament.¹⁵ For these young men, this short trip around the streets of Florence represented an initiation ritual. Through it they were announcing their entry into the public life and asserting their determination to strive for the political goals supported by their families. This short transgression and violence was also a threat to their opponents signaling their entry onto the public stage. Accordingly, the event was indeed a transgression of the general rules, which is believed to be a characteristic of the carnival, but this transgression was reserved for a few chosen ones rather than common people, who were the intimidated ones.

A similar initiation ritual, known as *Testaccio* games, was also held in Rome during the carnival time. City districts and conquered towns had to contribute their best young men to take part in these games. All participants were aristocrats and descendants of venerable families. Many young men did not take part in these games of their own will – their participation was a levy paid by subordinated cities. On

top of that, for very young men, described by contemporaries as “*putti*” and “*giovanetti*”,¹⁶ these games could mean death or mutilation. Yet they rode into the city of Rome dressed in luxurious clothes and accompanied by servants, enthusiastically cheered by the crowds along the route of their procession to the foot of *Testaccio*. There, they first had to kill pigs that were released down the slope, and then to fight bulls – a rather frightening task for “children”. In 1567, in an attempt to end the violence, the Pope issued a threat saying that victims will be denied a Christian funeral. This, however, did not divert Romans from bull fighting, so the descendants of reputable aristocratic families continued to take part in these games preparing for their future roles of the masters of life and death.

In Venice, young men from patrician families of the 15th and the 16th centuries gathered in brigades called *compagnie delle calze*, distinguished by the color of their socks.¹⁷ Only aristocrats could be the members of these fraternities, which had to have their official statutes that were submitted to *Consiglio dei dieci* for approval. The fraternities organized public events, clashes (*caccia*) with bulls (first bitten by dogs and then killed by man), and rides along the channels in lavishly decorated boats called *bucintori*; they also organized theater performances for which they usually hired professional actors (because it did not befit an aristocrat to appear in a theater performance), and the like. The Republic commissioned fraternities to organize receptions for high foreign visitors. Through these activities, similar to the initiation rituals practiced in Florence and Rome, young patricians from Venice were paving their way to public life. It is interesting to note that these fraternities always reserved honorable membership for *condottiero*, the Venetian military chief who was usually a mercenary from high aristocracy, from Mantova, Calabria or Urbino. Understandably, alliance with the military structures was a sensible strategy for rich young men who struggled for the power in the Republic and therefore needed the support of the army.

Until now we have lived with the image of the carnival as common frivolity, but historical documents obviously hold little evidence of popular traits in it. It might be that popular festivities did not hold as much attraction for chronicle writers as did events organized by aristocrats or patricians, so perhaps historical documents create false impression that in reality the carnival was not a folk revelry. Since chroniclers

were probably not interested in popular rowdiness, records of common people's celebrations (the wagon of fools, masquerades, *andare in maschere* and the like) were indeed rare, but every description is accompanied by a note "as is a custom". Therefore, these practices were very likely more steady and more frequent than can be concluded from the records. But although in the 15th century common and aristocratic, or aristocratized, celebrations existed alongside each other, the attitude of the city authorities towards each of the two was different. While they condemned the violence practiced by common people, and sought to harness it by deploying the army or issuing legal decrees, they backed off when it came to rich citizens. As mentioned earlier, in advance of *armeggeria* the Florence authorities advised people to retreat behind the walls of their homes and leave the streets to the reveling rich young men. When on a certain occasion in the 1380s these young men went too far, all the authorities did was organize a reconciliation mass for the affected families. Moreover, in order to diffuse rivalry between families and between political parties, the Florentine Commune itself sometimes organized *armeggeria* including tournaments and dances, in which family ties and political affiliations were not relevant. In this way, the *signoria* tried to subvert the influence of family links and instill into young men loyalty and commitment to the community.

In 15th century Florence, therefore, various forms of common people reveling existed alongside the aristocratic forms of celebrations, *armeggeria*, tournaments and *carri trionfi*, all of which bore distinct traits of humanist culture.¹⁸ But as early as the 16th century, popular culture during the time of the carnival ceased to be tolerated, so popular brigades had to withdraw gradually from the carnival and were moved to May 1st. Sometime around the turn of the century, Florence "purged" the carnival celebrations from folk rowdiness and brutalities, which from that time on could be lived out only on the First of May, while the carnival became cultivated through humanist theater, recitations, painted *carri trionfi* inspired by Petrarca and the like. The more civilized the carnival was becoming, the more brutal the First of May celebrations were. For that occasion, *potenze* or *signorie fasteggianti* were established across cities gathering workers and small craftsmen. For a day or more, these groups acted as a court led by its elected king, a duke or a count accompanied by ministers, counselors, trumpeters and armed soldiers. During the holiday time, district-based *potenze* had the right to collect taxes, so they frequently clashed

among themselves fighting for the territory, since the greater the territory the more taxes were collected. As a result, *potenze* came to be hated even more, first because of the violence they caused and then because of taxes. But as a rule, city authorities treated them with respect and even sent their officials to attend these events expressing their “obedience” and “respect”, with soldiers having been deployed only if serious clashes erupted.¹⁹ But more than anything else, the First of May celebrations were an entertainment for higher social classes, who were amused by the clumsy attempts of the lower classes to imitate the ruling class.

In the 16th century (*cinquecento*), the holidays became strictly divided by classes, and higher classes avoided the risk of mixing with lower classes. The more the carnival was acquiring the image of a cultivated humanist spectacle during the 15th century, with *carri trionfi*, singing, recitations, dance and theater performances, the less room was left for common people. As early as the 15th century, common people had only limited access to public events, while in the 16th century their celebrations were completely driven out and moved to May 1st, when *ciompi*, workers without political rights, could enjoy a short spell of economic domination and engage in street violence. However, they could indulge in this pleasure only by being violent, displaying the lack of civilization and greediness, which made them the object of general ridicule and hatred. Those who were without means of existence, political rights and educational opportunities were presented as greedy, violent and uncivilized.

This brief look at the history of Renaissance holidays showed how very important it is to contextualize the common representation of the carnival. As Shklovsky says, the notion of carnivalization from Bakhtin's analysis of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* can only be an external manifestation of a phenomenon, while essential traits of that phenomenon can be explained only through contextualization.²⁰ Accordingly, our study of the Renaissance holiday was both an internal analysis of the structure of the holiday and an external analysis of the relationship of the carnival to other holidays. The analysis showed that the carnival celebrations were largely controlled and guided by important families that had the political and economic power. They were the organizers of carnival games; they pushed their children to go through the initiation ritual that was intended to fill two semantic horizons and bind them together:

first, to reinforce the social authority of the family, and second, to ensure social reproduction. The carnival was not a transgression of the relationships that existed in everyday life, nor a world turned upside down for a brief spell of time as Bataille argues, when common people acquired the permission to trespass prohibitions and enjoy themselves as a compensation for usual exploitation. On the contrary, the examples given above show that the carnival transgression was an enjoyment for those who practiced it more or less throughout the year.

On the occasion of the carnival, young men from Rome, Florence and Venice spilled blood, their own and the animal blood (with the latter also symbolizing human blood), and this blood spilling was not only allowed, but ordered. And participants in the carnival were not any young men, but the descendants of the most prominent families who, through the carnival rituals, appropriated the right to control life and death. Young men showed courage in defying death by appropriating the right to decide about the matter of life death – the life and death of others. And precisely that was the moment when young men turned into masters, like butterflies metamorphosing from larva.

In the second half of the 15th century, this “formative whole” of the Renaissance festival was joined in by humanist theater. At that time, mainly classical ancient comedies and tragedies by Plautus, Terence and Seneca were performed in Latin, and only later original Italian plays were added with typical stage sets with perspective. Initially, the performers in humanist theaters were pupils and students for whom this was an opportunity to practice Latin, and particularly convenient were performances staged for schools which could thus show off in front of the public and parents. In 15th century Florence, schools were competing among themselves over which one will attract more eminent visitors to their performances.²¹

Much like in Florence, theater performances in Rome were also organized by school masters, initially Pomponius Laetus and later his pupil Tomasso Inghirami Phedrus, both teachers of rhetoric. They performed at banquets and receptions for the Pope and cardinals. The performers were mainly the sons of distinguished persons and aristocrats, and Pope's nephews and relatives, whose excellent Latin stirred admiration.²²

Ferrara was the first Italian city to develop a prototype of court culture from 15th century theater performances. From 1496, Ercole d'Este organized regular theater performances for the carnival, initially ancient comedies by Plautus and Terence, and later the plays by domestic authors, among whom the most prominent was Ludovico Ariosto.²³ In contrast to Florence and Rome, where humanist theater was mainly cultivated by schools, theater in Ferrara was part of court life, with tasks related to performances fulfilled by court artists and courtiers themselves.²⁴

While theater in Florence and Rome served the purpose of the initiation ritual for young pupils and students who prepared themselves for future careers, in Ferrara it was young courtiers who went through the initiation ritual. By performing in theater they paved their way towards court life. Given that the task of the court was nothing else but to take care of culture, gallantry and entertainment, as the Duke's court counselor Pellegrino Prisciani reports in the manuscript *Spectacula*,²⁵ this kind of initiation through theater performances was more than convenient. By practicing for theater, young people could acquire most of the skills demanded from a perfect courtier, as described by Baldassare Castiglione.²⁶

The effort invested in this historical study helped us to put the Renaissance carnival into historical perspective and contextualize it. The carnival drew on the knights' tournament, but transposed it to the urban environment and endowed it with middle-class traits, and even plebeian ones. However, there was no mixing of the bourgeoisie and commoners in Italian towns. Those plebeian forms of celebrations (e.g. *battaglie dei giovani*) that did exist, were looked upon with contempt by city notables and aristocrats. Similarly ridiculed were less spectacular carnival events for lower classes, for example races for Jews, women, young men, old people or animals. In Venice, women from poor families attempting to win some gain participated in boat competitions, and in Ferrara prostitutes were competing for the discarded dress of the duchess.²⁷ The Renaissance bourgeoisie's dislike of popular revelry went so far that folk celebrations were moved to May 1st, in Florence at least. The Renaissance carnival celebration was therefore an instrument and an expression of early capitalist society which helped undermine the republicanism of medieval city communes.

The historical development of the Renaissance carnival inevitably moved in the direction of a civilized festival, and humanist culture contributed a great deal to this trend.²⁸ The young men who initially had to undergo initiation rituals in the form of dangerous knights' tournaments, *tauromachie* or *armeggerie*, now appeared in theater performances, and their initiation ritual involved rhetoric skills, gallant behavior and rich outfit. With the inclusion of theater in the public festival, young men could discard swords and replace them with fluent Latin and rhetoric. The public festival thus acquired a more polite look, although its content remained no less cruel; the social effect that was produced by means of culture and theater performances was much like the one formerly produced by means of *tauromachie*, tournaments and *armeggerie*. Only the appearance was new, with “rough” class violence now presented as “culture” although in terms of content it was equally brutal and violent.

The historical material presented above enables us to make an important conclusion, i.e. that the emergence of European theater was connected in an essential way with the struggle of the bourgeoisie for political and economic domination. Class oppression that could be perpetrated using civilized and cultural instruments was advantageous primarily for the Renaissance bourgeoisie fighting for the economic and political power. In this context, the festival, as social histrionism, was an *ordal*, or God's verdict, that decided which side enjoyed God's mercy. The ostensible “innocence of play” (and later the “social autonomy of art”) was very convenient as it could create the impression that the clashes of social groups and their cultures were free of bias and not imposed by some external force. Much like the medieval tournament, the Renaissance festival was the site of the clash of social interests that were the products of political and economic processes. During the festival time, social abnormalities of political and economic processes, which at other times had to be treated with caution and consideration when confronting the public, could come to light. Moreover, these abnormalities could even enter openly into a clash with opposing social interests, since, after all, it was just a play. But the ultimate reward for the winners in these games was the fact that they could boast “normality” and get rid of the signs of abnormality. So play was no longer play but a social fact. The final outcome was that those who incited social conflicts appeared in public spectacles as

peaceful and cultivated, and as victims of social conflicts, while common people appeared in the eye of society as brutal and aggressive.

In addition to many inventions contributed by Italian Renaissance states to modern capitalist Europe, from double-entry bookkeeping and insurance to modern financial management, they also invented the society of spectacle. And, it is precisely one of the kind described by Guy Debord in his fascinating book *The Society of the Spectacle*.²⁹ What gripped Debord's attention in connection with the spectacle, and what is here referred to as social histrionism, is its essential ambivalence. The spectacle first creates the impression that it is above the necessity of everyday life, that it consists of play and activities in which one engages for joy and not out of necessity. However, as we have seen, the Renaissance festival perfectly matched the needs of general social processes. Festive easiness and celebrations concealed confrontations of social classes in which culture was a means of class oppression. Behind the screen of disinterested play and the festival, the battle for political hegemony and economic domination was raging. An important function of the spectacle was its supplementary role in relation to society: the festival or play was outside immediate sociality, but at the same time it was a mechanism that propelled sociality and lent meaning to it, affecting its most important segment, i.e. one which relates to social struggles.³⁰

Understandably, the Renaissance *potenze* provoke spontaneous comparisons with modern political actions, or with that which those who conceptualized this thematic issue named activism. Similar to the antagonistic popular culture that was present within the Renaissance holiday but required some effort on our part to reconstruct it, modern cultural and political actions are also continually threatened by oblivion. For this reason, they present a challenge for historians and theorists who should relegate them to the collective memory and analyze social conflicts that give rise to these cultural-political actions. In this sense, Aldo Milohnić's article entitled *Artivism* is a valuable contribution that documents recent projects of this kind in Slovenia, fighting against the enforced oblivion.³¹ Actions described by Milohnić, ranging from the padding of church bells and scattering of dead leaves across the office of an allegedly left-wing political party, to smearing with paint the President of the World Bank, are not recorded in modern mass media almanacs. Only occasionally, when

they catch the eye of repressive state apparatuses, they receive a mention in the crime sections of daily newspapers. And, viewed from the perspective of a disciplined citizen, that is where these “excesses” belong. Yet when these actions expose the real nature of society and social histrionism as a social struggle, they use all their power to “produce the illusion of autonomous symbolism on an individual level”³²; in other words, their acts, that appear as abnormal, can reveal the state of affairs that is believed to be normal – that society consists of winners and losers, and that the social struggle is the firmest basis of sociality. Therefore, the history of these practices is in reality the true history of mankind. And if along the way they also manage to demythologize “culture” and “refinement”, all of us who are not indifferent to culture and refinement can only profit from it.

¹ Elisabeth Burns, *Theatricality, a Study of Convention in the Theatre and in Social Life*, London, Longman, 1972; Michael Kirby, *A Formalist Theatre*, Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987; *Prisotnost, predstavljanje, teatralnost. Razprave iz sodobnih teorij gledališča*, Emil Hrvatin (ed.), Ljubljana, Maska, 1996, including the article by Josette Féral entitled “Theatricality”.

² Cf. Maja Breznik, “Teatralnost”, *Maska*, year 6., No. 3-4, 1998.

³ Cf. Octave Mannoni, *Clefs pour l’imaginaire*, Paris, Seuil, 1969; cf. also his essay “Gledališče in norost”, *Maska*, No. 1, Ljubljana, 1993.

⁴ D. Balestracci, *La festa in armi. Giostre, tornei e giochi del Medioevo*, Rome, Laterza, 2001.

⁵ Therefore, in a society in which life is quite ordered and relationships among people regulated, and in which the conditions of the tournament are regulated by rules that allow participation only to some, and even to them only under certain conditions, the outcome is left to “God’s will.” There are two possible explanations for this. Perhaps it is a sign that the society is not able to keep the social struggle within the agreed confines, so it leaves it to randomness. Or it may be that the society determines the conditions of the social struggle by regulating its framework to such a degree that the outcome is not important. But regardless of which answer we prefer, the practice of social histrionism unambiguously suggest that what is involved here is a symptom of collective pathology.

⁶ Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, Zagreb, Naprijed, 1992.

⁷ Jacob Burckhardt, *Renesančna kultura v Italiji*, Ljubljana, Državna založba Slovenije, 1963.

⁸ Fabrizio Cruciani, “Per lo studio del teatro rinascimentale: la festa”, *Biblioteca teatrale*, vol. 5, 1972, pp. 1-16.

⁹ Cf. Georges Bataille, *Erotizem* (Ljubljana, *cf., 2001) in *Erotizam/ Suze Erosove* (Beograd, Vuk Karadžić, 1972).

¹⁰ Mihail Bahtin, *Teorija romana*, Ljubljana, Cankarjeva založba, 1982, p. 334.

¹¹ In the Slovenian translation, Drago Bajt uses the term “soseščina” (contiguity) for the Russian term “sosedstvo”, which is a more suitable term than “matrix” used in the English translation. Cf. *The Dialogical Imagination. Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, Michael Holquist (ed.), Austin, University of Texas Press, 1981.

¹² Giorgio Brugnoli, “Archetipi e no del carnevale”, in: *Il carnevale: dalla tradizione arcaica alla traduzione colta del Rinascimento*, Rome, Centro studi sul teatro medioevale e rinascimentale, 1989, p. 41-67; and Giovanni Battista Bronzini, “L’arcaicità del carnevale un falso antropologico”, in: *ibid*, pp. 69-85.

¹³ Cf. Giovanni Ciappelli, *Carnevale e quaresima*, Rome, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 1997; Richard C. Trexler, “Florentine Theatre, 1280-1500”, in: *Forum Italicum*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1980, pp. 454-475.

¹⁴ Giancarlo Malacarne, *Le feste del principe*, Modena, Il Bulino, 2002.

¹⁵ Cf. Pietro Gori, *Le feste fiorentine attraverso i secoli*, Florence, Giunti, 1989 [1926, R. Bemporad & figlio,], pp. 40-44.

¹⁶ Fabrizio Cruciani, *Teatro nel rinascimento. Roma 1450-1550*, Rome, Bulzoni editore, 1983, pp. 537-560; cf.. p. 549 and p. 554.

¹⁷ Lionello Venturi, "Le compagnie della calza (sec. XV – XVI)", the first part published in: *Nuovo archivio veneto*, Vol. XVI, part II, 1908; and the second in: *Nuovo archivio veneto*, Vol. XVII, part I, 1909; Giuseppe Tassini, *Feste spettacoli divertimenti e piaceri degli antichi veneziani*, Venice, 1961 [1863]; Federica Ambrosini, "Ceremonie, feste, lusso", in: *Storia di Venezia V*, Alberto Tenenti and Ugo Tucci (ed.), Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, Rome, 1996.

¹⁸ Jean Jacquot, "Della festa cittadina alla celebrazione medicea: storia di una trasformazione", *Quaderni di teatro*, Florence, Nuova Vallecchi editore, No. 7, 1980. pp. 9-22.

¹⁹ The Florentine tradition has it that *potenza* was invented by the duke of Athens who attempted to bribe and exploit gullible masses and incite them against the local bourgeoisie. This illustrates well the Florentine citizens' attitude towards this festival.

²⁰ Viktor Shklovsky, *Tetiva*, Moskva, 1970, chapter "François Rabelais and the Book by M. Bakhtin".

²¹ The theater war was raging between the school of San Lorenzo, founded by the Medici family, and between *scuola Eugeniana* at Santa Maria del Fiore founded by Pope Eugenius while he lived in Florence. In the same year in which Giorgio Antonio Vespucci, a teacher at the school of San Lorenzo, staged Terence's play *Andria*, which was shown in the school itself, in the house of their patron Lorenzo de' Medici and in the town hall, the teacher Piero Domizi from the rival school of Santa Maria del Fiore wrote to Lorenzo de' Medici asking if they could perform the play *Lacinia* for his pleasure or at least dedicate it to him. The school obviously found it important to obtain the support from Lorenzo de' Medici, the true master of Florence. As the teacher stated, the reason for his request was "so that we will not be deprived more than others" (cf. Isidoro del Lungo, "Di altre recitazioni di commedie latine", *Archivio storico italiano*, Vol. XXIII, 1876, p. 170-175). He even proposed that they could perform in the Church of Ognissanti if Lorenzo was afraid of rebellion in Santa Maria del Fiore, whose clerics were traditional opponents of the Medici family. In 1478, the church was the site of the conspiracy organized by the Pazzi family, which ended in the death of Guiliamo, while Lorenzo escaped by the skin of his teeth. In 1479, meaning less than a year after the conspiracy, the same school master Piero Domizi of Santa Maria del Fiore again wrote to Lorenzo expressing gratitude for his attendance at the previous performance and asking for his patronage of their staging of another Terence's play. Moreover, school performances could also be expedient for achieving more demanding goals. In 1488, Angelo Poliziano, Lorenzo's poet, had to write in a haste an introduction to Plautus's *Menaechmi*, staged by Paolo Comparini and his students in the school of San Lorenzo. Poliziano's introduction was an attack on Franciscan monks who incited rebellion against the financial oligarchy of the Medici family (cf. Mario Martelli, "Angelo Poliziano e la politica culturale laurenziana", in: *Il Poliziano latino*, Galatina, Gongedo, 1996.).

²² For the chroniclers of that time this was proof that the young men were direct descendants of Roman patrician families, as is evident from Palliolo writings in 1513 referring to the performance of *Poenulus*. Cf. Fabrizio Cruciani, *Il teatro del Campidoglio e le feste romane del 1513*, Milan, Edizioni Il Polifilo, Archivio del teatro italiano, No. 2.

²³ The Duke was envied by his contemporaries, because of theater manuscripts and translations which he jealously guarded even from his daughter Isabella d'Este Gonzaga, and because of the luxury he could afford in his theater performances. For example, in advance of the performance in February of 1502, he organized a review of costumes so that the spectators would not wrongly assume that the costumes were used on more than one occasion.

²⁴ In 1492, Anna Sforza and Giulio d'Este, the wife of the future Duke and his beautiful brother, appeared as actors in *Commedia di Hipolito e Lionora*. Later on, English and French royal families eagerly copied the model. In court performances, queens and kings, and princes and princesses appeared in the roles of gods and goddesses.

²⁵ Pellegrino Prisciani, *Spectacula*, Modena, F. C. Panini, 1992.

²⁶ Castiglione even encouraged this practice through his own conduct at the court in Urbino where he was writing his book about the courtier and guiding the preparations for a performance of *Calandria*. Some theater historians hold that this performance served as a model for the Renaissance theater.

²⁷ The competition must have caused quite a revulsion among the audience, given that the Duke of Ferrara Ercole d'Este allowed participation only to "honest prostitutes", meaning those older than 12. (Cf. Guido Angelo Facchini, *Il torneo delle contrade per il palio di San Giorgio*, Ferrara, Maggior consiglio del torneo delle contrade, 1939, p. 14.)

²⁸ This process may be corroborated by many examples. For example, Martine Grinberg and Sam Kinser relate similar observations in relation to the "Combat between Carnival and Lent". The Carnival and Lent are the personalization of the calendar opposites, and the staging of this combat was quite frequent in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. During the 14th century, the opposition between the Carnival and Lent was usually presented as an armed conflict resembling a knights' tournament.

During the 15th century, the opposition was no longer resolved through an armed clash but by legal verdict. Cf. Martine Grinberg in Sam Kinser, "Les Combats de carnaval et de carême", *Annales*, January – February 1983, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 65-98.

²⁹ Guy Debord, *Družba spektakla*, Ljubljana, Študentska založba, zbirka Koda, 1999.

³⁰ The position of play in society is similar to that of the class struggle in Marxism or psychoanalytic therapy in psychoanalysis. For these theories, the class struggle and psychoanalytic therapy are realities outside the theory, or that to which theory applies in reality, and at the same time they are their main intellectual instruments and theoretical hypothesis. Although the subject of study (the class struggle or psychoanalytic therapy) should be of a different nature than the external reality which the theory studies (much like the festival itself cannot be connected with reality), the subjects of study, and the festival, may influence society through their supplementary conceptualization.

³¹ Aldo Milohnič, "Artivizem", in: *Maska*, Ljubljana, No. 1-2, 2005.

³² Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Uvod v delo Marcela Maussa", in: Marcel Mauss, *Esej o daru in drugi spisi*, Ljubljana, Studia humanitatis, p. 234.