

## *Energeia*, the History Play, and Reviving Catherine the Great

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Many dozens of dramatic works featuring Catherine the Great have appeared since the beginning of the twentieth century. In fact it is hard to think of another historical figure who has enjoyed such a continuous life after death, particularly in dramatic form. But it is a peculiar life. Catherine's biographer Vincent Cronin noted that "...it is one of the paradoxes of Catherine that a life which is very well documented should be the subject of so many legends. Catherine's love affairs in particular have been vulgarized *ad nauseum*..."<sup>1</sup> Many of the myths go back to the last decades of the eighteenth century and were spawned by the hostile propaganda that took personal forms and, in the case of Catherine, it consistently targeted her femininity and had sexual connotations. The most salacious stories about Catherine's sexual exploits have, in fact, been dismissed by serious scholars as gossip and, in Cronin's words, "...can be traced to a handful of French writers in the years immediately after Catherine's death when republican France was fighting for its life against a coalition that included Russia."<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless the resilience of myths about Catherine in dramatic renditions throughout the past two hundred years or so is nothing short of remarkable.

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Examples are in abundance, starting with Mae West's play *Catherine was Great* that premiered in 1944, which, according to John T. Alexander "impressed more deeply than ever in the popular psyche Catherine's association with extravagant, theatrical sexuality",<sup>3</sup> concluding with the 2008 Australian play by Tony McNamara *The Great*, which does away with historical facts altogether and creates a sexually charged rendition, seen by a Sydney based reviewer Brett Casben as a parallel to *Sex and the City* dealing "...with women learning to enjoy their sexuality and its congruent empowerment ", by which means Catherine is "opening Russia to the enlightenment of the West".<sup>4</sup> In a way, *The Great* could be viewed as a kind of a pinnacle of this sexualised tradition, in which history has been completely replaced by mythology.

In the face of this destruction of the character in the public domain, I wished to introduce, ironically as it may sound, a kind of an alternative history of Catherine the Great in the form of a play. To be an alternative to myth such play would have to be historiographic. Some scholars, however, view theatre as unfit for the historical endeavour, and its problems with historical accuracy, to which most of the dramatic presentations of Catherine the Great are arguably a testimony, as inherent to the medium. In this paper I will present an overview of such arguments and, based on an alternative view on the 'historical' in theatre, I will argue that not only evidence-based history playwriting can be historiographic, theatre, in fact, thanks to its emphasis on shared experience, supplements historiography with an additional dimension of *historical energy*.

The notion of energy has been a part of the theatrical discourse since ancient times. Nevertheless its historical quality began to crystallise in the scholarly vocabulary relatively recently.<sup>5</sup> By expanding the notion of energy towards the concept of *personal historical energies* for the purposes of my own script about Catherine the Great, I seek to "restore" and "revive" individual historical characters. This paper thus explores in what ways such historiographic endeavour can be possible on stage. Before discussing such possibility and the notion of energy, however, it is important to first address some criticism that the historical theatre faces from scholars.

A recent dissertation on biographical theatre by a playwright and scholar Kathryn Lyall-Watson<sup>6</sup> explores arguments against such possibility. While writing an historical play of her

own, Lyall-Watson researched the issues of a playwright's responsibility towards her historical subject and found that theatre practitioners themselves shed the responsibility for accuracy as well as claims for historical authenticity, first of all, because of the nature of theatre as an artistic pursuit.<sup>7</sup> As a playwright writing about a historical subject, Lyall-Watson sees herself in a "conflicted space"<sup>8</sup> because as an artist, she performs much better when she has an absolute freedom to invent, while adhering to the historical evidence exerts limits on her artistic expression. She finds support with other researchers and theatre makers who relieve theatre from responsibility towards its historical subject matter.<sup>9</sup> Theatre must be first of all entertaining and its historical authenticity is secondary to a 'good story'.<sup>10</sup> Theatre is "a strange place for truth seekers"<sup>11</sup> because it has all the permission to invent as opposed to other media, wherein distortion of historical or biographical truth might call for litigation.<sup>12</sup> This view is supported by Stuart Young, the author of *Playing with Documentary Theatre: Aalst and Taking Care of Baby*,<sup>13</sup> who doubts that historical accuracy is achievable on stage. One of the chief concerns is the mediated nature of facts and evidence presented in the performance. The very substitution of the historical human with an actor in theatre alone raises the issue of authenticity.<sup>14</sup> Theatre is viewed as purely a place of artistic invention, which is subordinate to its entertainment value. These concerns make the concept of a 'history play' dubious at best. In fact, Kathryn Lyall-Watson's definitions reflect the blur of the meaning of "historical" in theatre.

On the one hand, Lyall-Watson defines the term 'biographical theatre' as describing plays about real people living or dead, which use facts as their basis.<sup>15</sup> The biography play is then a sub-genre of a wider category of "historical theatre".<sup>16</sup> Historical theatre and history play are interchangeable terms here and biographical theatre is by definition historical. Lyall-Watson, however, makes a clear distinction between 'historical' and 'biographical' theatres. According to her, Paul Collway's *Realism* is a play that could be classified as "historical" because it is set in Moscow in 1939 with a backdrop of "real historical events." However since all its characters are fictitious, presenting an "invented" event of a rehearsal, "it would not be considered biographical".<sup>17</sup> Thus "historical" is not required to be "factual". This way mythologising plays about Catherine the Great, for instance, could be viewed as historical simply because they use historical events as their background. Tom Stern would disagree. In his article "History Plays as History"<sup>18</sup> he argues that *War and Peace*, for instance, features

Napoleon and Alexander as minor characters but it is a fictitious story of Pierre, Andrei, Natasha, and Nikolai. “A play of *War and Peace* wouldn’t be a history play.”<sup>19</sup> For him history plays “use proper names that refer to real people and real places”, “depict events that really happened”, these events “must be public”, that is there must be an “independent access to them” and they require “responsible engagement with the sources”.<sup>20</sup> Lyall-Watson’s removal of factuality as a prerequisite for history plays makes it difficult to speak of “historical” theatre altogether.

Tom Stern, however, does not believe theatre is fit for historical engagement at all. Stern is poised with a question from a young theatre goer, Anya, who has just watched a performance of *Julius Caesar*. She asks: “I wonder if it happened like that?” Anya is not necessarily treating the performance as a kind of documentary testimony to a historical event but rather, in wishing to know something about the play’s relation to the past, Anya “might be asking because she would find the play more impressive [...] if it were historically very accurate”, in addition to all its other literary and theatrical merits.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed a playwright recreating a historical scene tries first to envision the way it happened. They need to base it on historical evidence. However, according to Stern,<sup>22</sup> we should not look for history in plays. He distils Anya’s query into two possibilities of its interpretation based on two readings of the term “history”: history as events that took place and history as a scientific discipline, or

1. The eyewitness question: Would it have looked and sounded like that?
2. The history book question: How does my understanding of the event, having seen the play, compare to my understanding of the event if I were to read a history book?<sup>23</sup>

In the case of both interpretations the answer to Anya’s question is a “no”. The events portrayed on stage did not happen in a theatre filled with an audience, nor were eyewitnesses present to see those happenings the way we are in the audience, and even if they did they would not make so much sense out of what they saw as we do of the organised, structured performance. The theatre audiences know in advance far more than any eyewitness would to make sense of the reality. History plays often retell a familiar story so, since nothing can be

further from a retelling of the familiar than the experience of an eyewitness, they “...do not turn audience members into eyewitnesses.” But what if the experience for Anya is like she was transported in time back to Rome to follow the events as they unfold? Then she would need a guide, a translator, an interpreter who would lead her through the streets and rooms, and introduce all the people involved, and translate from ancient Greek and Latin, and sift through the events, in order to choose only the important ones. In the case of *Julius Caesar* the travel guide is the playwright, whom Stern calls a *Super Virgil*. This might allow Anya to become a witness of sorts. This points at the second interpretation of the question:

For what is the Super Virgil—the guide, the explainer, the translator (if necessary), the one who selects and emphasizes the historical events for our benefit and understanding, the one who explains the differences between our time and the time in which the events took place—what is he, if not the historian?<sup>24</sup>

Stern makes a comparison between the playwright’s and historian’s work and argues that, in case of a play, the understanding of history is “...significantly worse...” than it would have been upon reading a history book.<sup>25</sup> In other words, a playwright is a historian but not a very good one, simply because the theatrical medium does not allow for ‘good history’ for numerous reasons: starting from the fact that histories are ‘played out’ within a formal context of a theatre, and finishing with doubts about the colour of the pieces of clothing that the actors wear on stage as opposed to their supposed historical prototypes. Additionally actors must speak with their particular timbre of voice, particular manner and emphasis, that is the many aspects of characters that could be unknown and thus ‘filled in’ by the efforts of playwrights, directors and actors, making the historical accuracy questionable. But it could be argued that, in case of reading a book, all of the above aspects must be ‘filled in’ by the reader’s imagination anyway. Moreover, this literary approach does not take into account the value of the theatre’s experiential aspect. There is however a different viewpoint on theatre’s ability to perform history.

In his book *Shakespearean Negotiations* Stephen Greenblatt coined the term ‘social energies’ which are encoded within dramatic texts from the distant past wherein “the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in

the voices of the living.”<sup>26</sup> For him such texts are ‘vehicles’ that contain those energies. When these texts are performed social energies from that past are lifted from the text, transformed and transmitted through the art of acting on the present-day stage.

The “life” that literary works seem to possess long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote is the historical consequence, however transformed and refashioned, of the social energy initially encoded in those works.<sup>27</sup>

Thus there is a claim for something historical in dramatic works, like *Julius Caesar*, albeit it does not relate to the history depicted in the play but the history of the times when the play was written. The historical here is energy which can be made available for experience by the audience through the art of acting. It is literally released and transmitted by way of performing the play.

This concept of *energy* has been a part of theatrical discourse since the classical era. Aristotle viewed *energeia* (force) and *enargeia* (shining forth) as rhetorical expressions which allowed a speaker to make objects described appear before the eyes of the listener.<sup>28</sup> Quintilian’s term *evidentia in narration* (literally “set before the eyes”) was an interpretation of the Aristotelian idea.<sup>29</sup> The rhetorical concept of supreme animation in language that created vivid visions was later developed into oratorical notion of transmigration of spirits.

Socrates compares the transmigration of this spirit through physical bodies to the effect of magnetic force on bits of metal, which penetrates them, transforms them, and irresistibly draws them to itself and together through the medium of themselves: the god inspires the muse, who in turn inspires the poet, who inspires the rhapsode, who, in the authenticity of his transport, inspires the spectator. It is, in the language of physical chemistry, a process of *ionization*.<sup>30</sup>

Eventually Diderot used the language of physics to give such sensibility “physicality, a kinetic form of vitality and thus the ability to be transmitted.”<sup>31</sup> This creates a qualitatively different historiographic or perhaps historico-physical aspect of historical theatre.

Freddie Rokem develops this notion of energy in his book *Performing History*. In his mapping

of the theatrical energy field, Rokem expands Greenblatt's issue of actors being "able to communicate the energies embedded in [...] texts [from the distant past] to today's audiences" in order to "include the sense in which the actors are able to bring the energies of a specific historical event to the audience today."<sup>32</sup> Thus we have two distinct instances of historical energy possible in a dramatic text: one is a *play* or a *text* written in a distant past that carries the historical social energy, and the other is a *historic event* that "continues to be present" and "reverberate in contemporary plays and performances".<sup>33</sup> The key aggregate for these energies is the actor who, by "restoring" historical energies functions as an historian:

The theatre performing history summons a certain kind of energy, which validates the authenticity of the events that are depicted on the stage as historical events. These energies are particularly expressed through the acting.<sup>34</sup>

These energies can be seen as what Rokem calls "added truth which the theatrical images contain *vis-à-vis* the historical documents."<sup>35</sup> This is crucial for the notion of performing history. And it is a response to Tom Stern's or Stuart Young's disbelief in theatre's capabilities for delivering history. Besides the historical information derived from sources, a theatrical performance offers an additional dimension – experiential.

An actor literally incorporates the dramatic text. By physically mastering the text they create the text a second time. They create what Erika Fischer-Lichte<sup>36</sup> calls a body-text. Rokem argues that the energies demanded for creation of "...the "body-text" when performing history [...] can even be seen as refractions of the social energies contained within the historical event itself."<sup>37</sup> The dramatic text becomes incorporated, embodied through acting in an instance of performance and so, argues Rokem, performances about historical events incorporate these events as open texts. "Such performances become historiographic."<sup>38</sup> This of course relies on the playwright's "responsible engagement with the sources" and the factual nature of the history play.

If social energies from the distant past can be experienced through the dramatic works, if energies of collective historical events can be evoked on stage, it can be indeed argued that these energies provide an additional historical dimension to a theatrical performance. Rokem calls this "added truth", which makes the performance historiographic.<sup>39</sup> With full

acknowledgment of the problems of historical theatre, when compared to written historiography, theatre operates on a different level of the historical. But what if the play, like my play about Catherine the Great, is not about a collective history but about one or a few historical individuals and their personal histories? Greenblatt's and Rokem's substantiations of the ideas of different historical energies allowed me to think of a third possibility – *individual historical energies* that could be identified, encoded in a dramatic text, and through the art of acting and theatrical depiction be made available for experience by the audience.

In the case of Catherine the Great, there is an ample amount of historiographic material that can supply a playwright with sufficient information and evidence for identifying and selecting the most important events. However, a play is a dialogue which is a sequence of individual thoughts and actions. The most logical place to search for the keys to the historical thoughts and their individual qualities lies in their firsthand accounts: memoirs, correspondence, and historical documents. The main documents used for this play included memoirs by Catherine herself, Princess Dashkova, Count Poniatowski, Count Segur, Claude Carloman de Rulhière, Catherine's correspondence with Voltaire, Diderot, or Potiomkin and others. These were cross examined with works by Catherine's scholars, which gave the basis in my play to restoration of personal relationships between the historical personages, their actions towards each other, their language, but most importantly their individual thoughts and behavioural patterns for the purpose of crafting a dialogue-based narrative.

Catherine's *Memoirs* were of a particular interest in this regard not only because it concerns the times marked by serious crises in her life. Understanding of that period was of high importance for Catherine herself as evident from the multiple drafts of her *Memoirs*. Olga Yeliseyeva<sup>40</sup> writes in *Young Catherine*: "Many times the sovereign returned to working on this manuscript; it could be said she worked on it all her life, making additions, honing a point or crossing something out or swapping fragments..."<sup>41</sup> Yeliseyeva points out that the many revisions of the *Memoirs* were made at the crisis moments of Catherine's life, when, having lost a certain ground, she was alone in the face of danger. It is as if she looked for clues in her own personality, for the strength that allowed her to survive; and she would put away this work in the times of a "sharp turn in her life", when she would receive the necessary support.<sup>42</sup> The writings were not intended for an audience; only some of the editions where



specifically written for a close person.

Catherine's memoirs were the single most gripping first-person record of female life and power in the eighteenth century. In her erudite and thorough preface to the new English translation of the *Memoirs*, Hilde Hoogenbloom emphasizes Catherine's reluctance to publish them. Not only was Catherine understandably unwilling to expose her son Paul's questionable parentage, she also shared, according to Hoogenbloom, the Enlightenment prejudice (clearly not shared by the likes of Rousseau) against exposing one's *historie particulière* to contemporary judgement.<sup>43</sup>

Thus scholars see Catherine's *Memoirs* as a very intimate personal exercise in self assessment and self searching rather than in self presentation which would have been the case if it were intended for publication, thus allowing for more confidence in them as the source of true historical energy of their author.

I utilised my own acting training in 'organic' approach to character-building, inspired, among others, by Robert L. Benedetti's<sup>44</sup> work, and treated the historical testimony as a kind of dramatic text in development, reconstructing the related dialogues and the chains of thoughts, having in mind Benedetti's advice to students of acting in his *The Actor at Work*:

The script is both your starting point and your final judge; it is a finished verbal product which you take apart in rehearsal in order to rediscover the process of its creation; then, by embodying this process in your performance, you arrive once again at a living expression of the text.<sup>45</sup>

The text gives actors the required clues and 'charge' in order to evoke, 'resurrect' and 'transmit' the historical relationships and their energy. Actors may use different exercises at their disposal in order to achieve that. In 'organic' approach the actor identifies the character thoughts behind their words and the thoughts' directions based on the felt impulses they can produce (forward-advance, backwards-retreat or sideways-dodge), and their emotional qualities through visualization. All of that is filtered through physical movement and breathing exercises that are numerous and aimed at identifying, reading, taking ownership and emitting the energies imbedded in the text. The text is a record of thoughts which, in Rokem's words, have "a physical aspect: it's way of moving, changing direction, leaping, its behaviour in

fact."<sup>46</sup> This way the craft of acting can allow a playwright to 'unearth' historical energies from a primary source like an archaeologist uncovers an ancient vase buried in the ground.

Apart from the tangible matter of paper on which they were written, the thoughts of a memoirist or a person writing a letter or an official document have another physical aspect, which comes to light when embodied and presented by an actor. Approaching them through the art of acting, in conjunction with historiographic study on the subject, can allow a playwright to identify not only the collective but indeed *personal historical energies* and make them available through a dramatic text. The notion of personal historical energies in evidence-based theatre has a potential to allow a playwright to render their historical character in such a way that the resulting performance would become historiographic on a deeper psychological and historico-physical level.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Vincent Cronin, *Catherine: Empress of All the Russias* (London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd, 1978) 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> John T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great: Life and Legend* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 338.

<sup>4</sup> Brett Casben, 'The Great. Sydney Theatre Company.' (Australian Stage 6 Jun. 2008). Online: <http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/sydney/the-great--sydney-theatre-company-1534.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1988); Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Presentations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Lyall-Watson, *Biographical Theatre: Flying Separate from Everything* (Diss. U of Queensland, 2013. Print). Although Lyall-Watson is far from the only scholar to deal with the issue of the biographical and historical theatre, she is, as far as I am aware, the only scholar whose approach was both to write an original play and to ruminate on the nature of engaging with historical material. This approach was parallel to my own and thus it presented a particular interest to my research.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid* 13-14.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* 3.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* 25, 27.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* 26, 27.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid* 11.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid* 6.

<sup>13</sup> Stuart Young, "Playing with Documentary Theatre: *Aalst* and *Taking Care of Baby*." *New Theatre Quarterly* 25:1 (2009): 72-87.

<sup>14</sup> Lyall-Watson, *Biographical Theatre*, 13-14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* 9.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* 10.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> Tom Stern, 'History Plays as History.' *Philosophy and Literature*, 36:2 (Oct., 2012) 290.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* 290.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid* 289.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid* 286.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid* 285.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid* 291.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid* 292.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid* 293.

<sup>26</sup> Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid* 6.

<sup>28</sup> Freddie Rokem, *Performing History: Theatrical Presentations of the Past in Contemporary Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000) 189.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph R. Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (London: Associated University Press, 1985) 46.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* 121.

<sup>32</sup> Rokem, *Performing History*, 194.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* 101-02.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* 102.

<sup>36</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theater*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1992) 189.

<sup>37</sup> Rokem, *Performing History*, 96.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid* 195-96.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid* 103, 196.

<sup>40</sup> Olga Yeliseyeva, *Molodaya Yekaterina. (Young Catherine)* (Moscow: Veche, 2010). The Russian language quotations are presented in my own translation.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid* 3.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid* 4-5.

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<sup>43</sup> Luba Corbut, 'Catherine's Retinue: Old Age, Fashion and Historicism in Nineteenth Century', *Slavic Review*, 68: 4 (Winter, 2009): 788.

<sup>44</sup> Robert L. Benedetti, *The Actor at Work. Third Ed.* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: L. Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1981).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid* 89.

<sup>46</sup> Rokem, *Performing History*, 198.