CHAPTER 7
NERO’S CIRCUS: THE CHRONOTOPE
OF THE CIRCUS-THEATRE

Both Dialogues with Socrates and Lunin ... employ the ‘play within a play’ structure. In the first play Socrates’ trial is structured like a play and is set in the Athenian acropolis. In Lunin ... the life-drama of Lunin is enacted in the prison-cell which is temporarily and partially converted into the setting of a masked-ball. The intersection of the chronotope of the prison and the masked ball creates a time-space which is, on the one hand, both a prison and a masked ball, while, on the other hand, it is neither of the two. As was argued in the preceding chapter, it is similar to the stage of a theatre which is transformed into a masked ball to enact Lunin’s life-drama, and reverts back to prison after the enactment is finished. Thus, although the two plays employ the ‘play within a play’ structure, none of them is set directly on the stage of a theatre.

What happens when a play is set on a theatrical stage? How does it affect the narrative structure of a play? Does the ‘play within a play’ structure become more effective? The play Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca gives an opportunity to explore answers to some of these questions.

This play is set in a circus-arena in which Nero enacts Seneca’s show-trial and performs his ‘comedy of life’. The circus-arena thus begins to resemble the stage of a theatre, and the circus turns into a circus-theatre. It is the main chronotope of the play which functions as a plot-constitutive device and also provides the space in which historical and biographical times are adequately re-presented.

The chapter will explore the influence of the chronotope of the circus-theatre on the narrative structure of this play. It will argue that the techniques of multiple role playing and metamorphoses combine effectively with the chronotope of the circus-theatre to foreground the dichotomy between illusion and reality in life. As a result, the circus-theatre not only operates as a metaphor of the real world, but itself becomes an object of re-presentation.

It will be argued that the nature of the real chronotopes of the theatre and the circus are determined by conventions which are historical and culture specific, and hence their assimilation in literary narratives is also historical and culture-specific. The chapter will briefly explore the different ways in which the novel and drama employ
these chronotopes. A short description of the real chronotopes of the theatre and the
circus in Nero's Rome will be used to demonstrate that the chronotope of the circus
arena employed in the play provides an appropriate space to re-present the world of
Nero and Seneca.

**The Real and Literary Chronotopes of the Theatre and the Circus**

Theatre and the circus are two of the oldest forms of public spectacles, the central
element of which is performance. This element of performance and the resulting
distinctions between the acting and the spectating space and between the performers
and the spectators are governed by conventions. The following section will focus on
some of these conventions because they determine the functioning of the theatre and the
circus as real and literary chronotopes.

An important feature of the chronotope of the theatre is the space in which the
outside world is re-presented. Underlying this process of re-presentation is an
agreement between all its participants on the boundary between the fictive world and
the world of social reality. The agreement is reflected in theatrical conventions which
are historical and culture specific and define the distinction between reality and illusion.
However, the relationship between reality and illusion in the theatre is not absolute,
fixed and intransient. Theatrical performances always operate by defining specific
levels or degrees of reality or illusion. On the one hand, everything that occurs on the
stage is real, because it can be seen and heard, and is as real as anything that takes place
outside it. On the other hand, the participants in the performance agree to suspend their
disbelief during the performance; they agree that the event occurring in the theatre are
nothing more than simulations, that a murder on the stage is not a murder and death is
only an enactment of death, that after the performance the 'dead' will rise and accept
the applause from the audience.¹

The levels of illusion or reality in the theatre of a particular time and place are
defined by a combination of rhetorical and authenticating conventions. As was
mentioned in the second chapter, rhetorical conventions are concerned with modes of
interaction between actors and spectators and deal with techniques of defining space,
setting and time in dramatic performances whereas authenticating conventions are
concerned with interactions between actors as characters on the stage.² The two sets of

¹ This discussion is based on Elizabeth Burns' book *Theatricality: A Study of Convention in the
Theatre and in Social Life*. It should be stressed that the suspension of disbelief is not a trans-historical
feature of the theatre. As will be discussed later, in Roman theatre, very frequently, real convicts replaced
the actors and were actually executed on the stage. Thus, for Roman spectators murder on the stage was a
real murder as was rape. Elizabeth Burns notes that 'modern groups such as La Mama and the Living
Theatre 'act out their own actual problems on the stage' (Burns, p. 15).

² Chapter 2 discussed theatrical conventions about space, time and the narrator in some detail.
conventions are closely related to similar conventions on behaviour in life outside the theatre; within the theatre itself they function as complex, interrelated framing devices for each other. ³

These historically changing theatrical conventions have not only determined the nature of the theatre of a particular time and place, but have also governed the ways in which the theatre has been assimilated as chronotopes in literary narratives. However, the way the two forms of literary narratives, the novel and drama, have used these chronotopes is significantly different. For a novel, drama is a different genre, which operates through a consistent effacement of authorial voice, the voice of a narrator. Hence, when a novel uses drama or the stage within its narrative structure it more or less takes them as they are i.e. according to the prevailing theatrical conventions of the time and place. However, when drama uses the stage or the theatre as chronotopes, it is forced to interact with its own genre, and to explore and question the basics of its own givenness. By using theatrical stage as a setting a play foregrounds its own conventions, transforming its own ‘playfulness’ into an object of representation.

According to Bakhtin most picaresque novels such as Cervantes' Don Quixote, Rabelais’ Gargantua and Pantagruel, Fielding’s Joseph Andrews, Jonathan Wilde - the Great and Tom Jones and Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels contain an intermediate chronotope of the theatrical stage [промежуточный хронотоп театрального подмостка]. ⁴ This intermediate chronotope was employed in novels to solve the problem of authorial presence, and paved the way for the introduction of voyeuristic figures such as clowns, rogues, fools, and strangers. They functioned as masks for the author and helped him or her to narrate the story. Through them the author was able to expose in public the most private aspects of a protagonist’s life.

In several eighteenth and nineteenth-century realistic European and American novels the chronotope of the theatre was also used as a setting for important events. Thackeray’s Vanity Fair and Sterne’s Tristram Shandy are good examples of novels in which it is used as a significant plot-constitutive device. ⁵ In these novels many important events unfold in theatres. Like a Russian ball-room or a French salon, the

---

³ Elizabeth Burns presents an interesting discussion on the interaction between these conventions inside and outside the theatre. In her book she has studied 'theatricality inherent, to varying degrees, in all human action by analysing the conventions to which actions conform inside and outside the theatre, in drama and everyday life' (Burns, p. 3). According to her, 'just as the theatrical metaphor arises out of the ambiguous vision of life as a stage, and of the stage as a representation of life, and of social life as unreal, so too the understanding of theatricality depends on the perception of the two-way process whereby drama in performance is both formed by and helps to re-form and so conserve or change the values and norms of the society which supports it as against the alternative realities which lie outside the currency of any particular social reality' (Burns, pp. 3-4).

⁴ Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 197.

⁵ Fielding’s novel Tom Jones has a special chapter "A Comparison between the World and the Stage".
space of a theatre operates as a public space where people meet, where conspiracies are hatched, and where careers are made and destroyed. However, the nature of the space itself largely remains unexplored and unquestioned. The focus is maintained predominantly on the spectating space: the main hall, the balcony, the aisle or the vestibule. The acting space, and the actions on the stage remain marginal to the whole story. Similarly, theatre-praxis and theatrical conventions seldom become the objects of representation. One of the few exceptions in this regard is Jane Austin’s *Mansfield Park* where a makeshift theatre set up in a billiard room becomes the site where significant events of the story are unfolded. Even after the makeshift theatre has been destroyed its absence still remains vital to the act of story telling. According to Joseph Litvak, ‘despite the destruction of the theatre as place, theatricality pervades the novel.’ This theatricality, which permeates through the whole textual space of *Mansfield Park*, brings into focus the universal dichotomies between illusion/appearance and reality, and between acting and role playing.

In addition to the above two cases, the novel also employs devices of drama in number of subtle ways. This becomes possible because the novel is a very flexible form of story telling. According to Bakhtin, the novel:

... как целое — это многостипное, разноречивое, разноголосое явление.\(^7\)

Being multistylistic the novel has the capacity to employ devices commonly used by other forms of literary narratives including drama. The most common of these is narration through dialogues or through the inclusion of direct speech of the protagonists. One of the interesting novels in this regard is Nabokov’s *Lolita*, in which the seduction of Lolita by Humbert Humbert is presented as a scene in a play. This device re-enforces the significance of this event.\(^8\) In Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts* drama is also used as a plot-constitutive device as the narrative is structured around the enactment of a play performed in a village pageant. The novel presents the text of the play as a play by following the conventions about the printing of dramatic texts.\(^9\)

---


7 Bakhtin, DiN, p. 75.


9 Brian Castro, a contemporary Australian writer, also employs dramatic devices in his novel *Drift*. The novel contains a small scene structured like a play and broken into dialogic and extra-dialogic texts. Brian Castro, *Drift* (Port Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1994).
Thus the novel uses narrative devices of drama and the chronotope of the theatre to strengthen its own narrative capabilities. The dramatic devices are harnessed by the novel for its own purpose and the novel, by and large, remains uninterested in exploring the conventions about drama and the theatre. However, by employing the chronotope of the theatre drama foregrounds its own givenness.

It is interesting that plays attempting to represent the theatre itself appeared in history as soon as an established theatre emerged on the cultural scene. The emergence of the theatre and its convention was accompanied by an exploration of its conventions. Although an investigation of this tradition can be rewarding, it will be more appropriate to discuss only typical examples which would demonstrate the way drama exposes and explores its own conventions. The three plays to be discussed are *The Frogs* by Aristophanes, *The Critic* by Sheridan and *Each in His Own Way* by Pirandello.

Aristophanes in his comedy *The Frogs* placed two Greek tragedy writers, Euripides and Aeschylus, on the stage and made them debate the relative qualities of their works. This play abounds with references to many Greek tragedy and comedy writers such as Sophocles, Agathon, Xenocles. These references appear in the utterances of none other than Dionysus, the patron god of drama and theatre. This comedy not only exposes the theatrical conventions of the Greek tragedies but satirises and ridicules the conventions which govern the comedy as well.\(^\text{10}\) It needs to be stressed that Aristophanes’ did not set his plays on the stage of a theatre, nor did he employ a ‘play within a play’ structure. The Greek tragedies and comedies were satirised but they did not turn into objects of representation.

The theatre became an object of representation in eighteenth-century England when in a period of fifty to sixty years a large number of plays about the theatre were written and staged.\(^\text{11}\) Almost all these plays were comedies and satirised in different ways the role of authors, actors, stagehands, and critics in the theatre. Very often actors in these plays stepped out of their roles and delivered epilogues or made announcements or sang comic songs. Frequently, in the course of a play the characters would start discussing the play itself. In this way these plays, like Aristophanes’

\(^{10}\) In *The Birds*, the chorus interacts with the audience inviting them to participate in the writing of a comedy. Thus Aristophanes, by placing writers, and the audience within the acting space of the theatre places the theatre itself onto the 'stage'.

\(^{11}\) Dane Farnsworth Smith and M. L. Lawhon, *Plays about the Theatre in England, 1737-1800 or The Self-Conscious Stage from Foote to Sheridan* (London: Bucknell University Press, 1979), p. 13. It needs to be mentioned that in *Hamlet* the dramatic space of the interior of a castle is temporarily transformed into a stage where a troupe of travelling actors staged a play *The Murder of Gonzago*. In *As You Like It* the protagonists indulge in role playing by dressing up as foresters and outlaws. In *The Tempest*, the presence of the theatre is so overwhelming that the 'play within a play' structure, becomes the main technique of narration and representation' (Burns, p. 10).
comedies, placed people directly involved in the theatre such as writers, actors, critics onto the stage, bringing them within the spectating gaze of the audience.

Two acts in Sheridan’s play The Critic are set on the stage of a theatre where the tragedy The Spanish Armada is rehearsed. An interesting aspect of this play is the way it explores and satirises the conventions of writing, performing and evaluating plays in seventeenth and eighteenth-century English theatre. The prologue surveys the changes in drama from Dryden’s time to Sheridan’s and the reactions of two spectators on the performance of The Spanish Armada satirises the contemporary tragedy. In The Critic the ‘play within a play’ structure is combined with the chronotope of the theatrical stage but the protagonists of the main play and of the ‘play within’ remain isolated from each other. They do not traverse from one play to another. The characters of the main play become spectators of the ‘play within’ whereas the characters of the latter, play the role of the actors.

The relative autonomy of the main play and the ‘play within’ is subverted by Pirandello in his trilogy of the Theatre in the Theatre. In this trilogy he explores the relation between illusion and reality in the theatre as well as in real life. If Sheridan’s The Critic questioned the conventions about the theatre of his time, in particular the tragedies and the ‘sentimental drama’, Pirandello explores the conventions of realist or naturalist theatre. The plays of the trilogy are set on theatrical stages and employ a complex ‘play within a play structure’.

The play Each in His Own Way is set on the stage and in the lobby. The first act is followed by a long explanation by the author which tells the reader that ‘what was first presented on the stage as life itself to be a fiction of art.’ The scene set in the lobby creates a situation when ‘the substance of the comedy’ performed on the stage is ‘pushed back, as it were, into a secondary plane of actuality or reality.’ The scene in the lobby includes characters such as the ‘first friend’ and the ‘second friend’ of Pirandello and the ‘adversaries’ of Pirandello. The dispute between the friends and the adversaries of Pirandello highlights the play’s main concern about the conventions of the realist

---

12 Several critics note that in The Critic Sheridan followed an existing tradition of plays, the most important of which was Buckingham’s The Rehearsal written in 1671 which showed the rehearsal of John Dryden’s heroic play.

13 Pirandello’s trilogy of The Theatre in the Theatre includes the following plays: Six Characters in Search of an Author, Each in His Own Way, and Tonight We Improvise.

14 Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead is one of the more recent plays which uses the chronotope of the theatre although it is not directly set in the theatre. In this play the two acts are set in ‘place without any visible character’. This characterless place can be taken to be the stage of a theatre where the characters of Hamlet enact an absurdist play. This play has a complex ‘play within a play’ structure and both Rosencrantz and Guildenstern continually move in and out of these plays.

Theater. The explanation after the first act states that the comedy which was performed had a 'key', that is, was based on a real-life episode and that two protagonists of the 'real-life' episode were physically present among the spectators in the theatre. According to the author of the play the appearance of these 'real' protagonists '... establishes a plane of reality, still closer to real life, leaving the spectators who are discussing the fictitious reality of the staged play on a plane midway between the interlude at the end of the second act the three planes of reality will come into conflict with one another, as the participants in the comedy, the SPECTATORS, meantime, trying to interfere.'

Thus, the play is able to create levels or planes of reality and illusion and foregrounds the notion about the suspension of disbelief, questioning the conventions about differentiating life inside and outside theatre. The two lives begin to interpenetrate to such an extent that it becomes necessary to enlarge the semiotic model expressed in the phrase, 'all the world's stage', by its opposite and complementary phrase: 'the stage is also world.'

The three plays discussed above thus illustrate the way drama employs the chronotope of the theatre and in doing so foregrounds its own givenness. The givenness, however, is time and culture specific and a discussion of three plays belonging to different periods in the history of drama was aimed to demonstrate this.

If theatrical performances operate on the suspension of disbelief, in the circus the spectators are asked to watch unbelievable things and feats performed by people and animals. In the theatre actors play roles and turn into characters but in the circus they play themselves. The acrobats perform as acrobats as do jugglers, equestrians and animal-performers.

As will be discussed later, the circus was the most popular form of public spectacle in Nero's Rome. The first circus, defined as an organised sequence of performances within a ring of spectators, was born in Rome, although its origins can be traced to Ancient Egypt where a custom of parading exotic beasts before the people at important religious festivals was quite popular. The Greek menageries and animal parades were the forerunner of the Roman pompa, but if the Greeks were guided by a 'curiosity about the wonders of nature' the Romans, from the time of Julius Caesar and

---

16 For instance, the First Friend remarks: "Because you ... people get your reality from others—it's a convention ... a mere convention ... an empty word ... any word at all: mountain, tree, stream. You think that reality is something fixed, something definite, and you feel as though you were being cheated if someone comes along and shows you that it was an illusion on your part." (Pirandello, p. 321).
17 Pirandello, p. 312.
Pompey at least, wanted to ‘satisfy lust for blood.’ The Roman *pompa* developed into *venationes*, the spectacles of the slaughter of wild animals. These animal shows and killings were moved to the Circus Maximus which was the site of chariot and other types of races. In the circus the exotic and wild animals were exhibited, made to fight and were often killed. This circus also saw the appearance of various types of equestrian games, and animals tamed and trained by *magistri*, who were mostly slaves and foreigners. The Roman circus also absorbed elements generally associated with Greek athletics, and shows by rope-dancers, jugglers, acrobats, gymnasts were added to animal shows. The circus also acquired several attributes of a colourful spectacle which included ‘flutes, trumpets and other wind instruments, dances, coloured ribbons, flaming torches ...’ In the circus ‘the stage was provided with transformation scenery’ and the show included chariot races, athletic contests, animal baiting, theatricals and music.’

After the decline of the Roman circus at the end of the fourth century, the circus as a show in a ring reappeared only in the eighteenth century, when Philip Astley in the 1770s began equestrian shows in an amphitheatre in London. However, it does not mean that the circus died completely; instead, it turned into a roaming circus. For centuries bands of wagoners carried their tents and trapping from fair-ground to fair-ground and from castle to barn. The wagon shows included bear-baiter, horse riders, animal trainers with trained animals, jugglers, tumblers, acrobats, rope walkers, hoop jumpers, trapeze artists, clowns, buffoons and ballad singers. It is interesting to note that the theatre also went through a similar state after the decline of the Roman theatre in the fifth century. The revival of the theatre in the middle ages is associated with wagon pageants which travelled and performed in fairs and market places. It can be argued that this was the time when the circus and the theatre performances incorporated elements and devices typical of each other.

Because the circus draws its origins from Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman menageries and animal shows the role of animals in the circus has remained crucial. In many ways the circus and the circus ring represent the power of human beings to capture, tame and train wild animals. In the Roman circus, however, power was applied to animals as well as human beings who were often slaves and engaged in combats with wild animals. The image of the ring master holding and cracking his or her whip is perhaps the most compelling representation of power in the circus. The spectators are entertained by the capacity of human beings to tame animals, and marvel at the way

---

20 Croft-Coole and Cotes, pp. 16-17.
21 Croft-Coole and Cotes, p. 24.
22 Croft-Coole and Cotes, p. 28.
these animals are able to imitate human beings. When ring masters tame wild animals they, at the same time, tame their own fear. It reflects their power to control their feelings and emotions.

Acrobats, gymnasts, jugglers, rope-walkers and trapeze artists also demonstrate the power of taming the human body. In performing their incredible feats they challenge the physical and mental capacities of the body. Thus, at the centre of the circus is the body, its physicality and its solidness. It can be argued that this emphasis on the body is one of the features which distinguishes the circus from the theatre, but also makes it the lesser of the two performing arts. In the dichotomies between the elitist and the popular, and between the high and the low art, the circus is often equated with the latter. This opposition between the circus and the theatre, however, can not mask the fact that the two have borrowed techniques and devices from each other. For instance, the clown shows in the circus are, in many ways, quite similar to theatrical performances. In them the clowns play roles and tell stories. Although these shows were introduced as fillers in between the main events they were often able to attain the status of independent acts. Some clowns who had skills equaling that of specialist performers such as acrobats, gymnasts, rope-walkers and jugglers, often used their performance to comment on them. They made fun at the skill of the specialist performers, but instead of devaluing it added a human dimension to it. Although the function of clowns is traditionally thought to be that of jokers, it can be argued that, in the figure of the clown, the circus invented a device of self parody.

In addition to the clown shows which often tend to be structured like narratives, other shows in the twentieth-century circus are also quite often presented as costume dramas with distinct narrative themes. The performers no longer play themselves but enact roles of fictional characters. It can be argued that the introduction of narratives in the circus brings it closer to the theatre.

If circus often comes close to the theatre, the theatre also uses elements of the circus.\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps the most significant influence of the circus on the theatre can be seen in the emergence of theatres with the arena configuration. The arena stage dispenses with all scenery except floor treatments, furniture and other hanging or standing props, thereby focusing attention on the actors.\textsuperscript{24}

It was mentioned earlier that the novel solved the problem of authorial presence by employing the figures of fools, buffoons, rogues and clowns. Through them the

\textsuperscript{23} The Chinese and the Japanese theatres seem to have incorporated a large number of devices and conventions of the circus. These theatres are remarkable in their emphasis on the physical aspect of acting.

\textsuperscript{24} Cohen, p. 396.
novel began its assimilation of the chronotope of the circus. It is interesting to note that for the last three centuries the novel has consistently employed these figures as narrative devices.\footnote{In the second chapter it was mentioned that in Apuleius' \textit{The Golden Ass}, the metamorphosis into an ass was used as a similar device. The picaresque novel often used similar figures. The twentieth-century novel, in spite of its emphasis on realism, frequently employs this device. See for instance, Gunter Grass's \textit{The Tin Drum}, Salman Rushdie's \textit{The Satanic Verses}, Peter Carey's \textit{The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith}.}

The use of the chronotope of the circus in drama has been relatively limited, although the cinema has demonstrated a more prolonged romance with the circus.\footnote{Croft-Coole and Cotes give a list of films and plays in which the dominant theme is the circus. They list more than thirty-four films including Fellini's \textit{The Clowns} (Croft-Coole and Cotes, p. 187).} Leonid Andreev's \textit{He Who Gets Slapped} ([Тот, кто получает пощечины]) is perhaps the most popular play which is set in a circus.\footnote{This play was premiered in Moscow in 1915 and was published in 1917. In 1916 a Russian film was made based on the play. The play was also used by an American composer Robert Varda to write an opera which was premiered in New York in 1956.} The play is set in a room, which functions both as an office as well as a dressing room. The circus-arena remains off-stage but its presence is maintained with the help of aural signs such as music, the sounds of galloping horses and the clapping of spectators.

It was noted earlier that the circus and the theatre borrow techniques and devices from each other, while maintaining their basic differences. It is interesting, however, to explore the result of a confluence between the two. In this regard, a number of possibilities are worth discussing. Firstly, a play about the circus, like the play by Leonid Andreev, can be set in a circus, either in the circus-ring or in the adjoining rooms. The theatrical stage in such a case is converted into a circus ring and the recreation of the circus-ring can vary depending upon the style of production. The spectators will, thus, be made aware that they are watching a play about the circus. The re-presentation of the circus is determined by theatrical conventions used in writing and producing the play.

The second situation might arise when a play which is not directly concerned with the circus is set in a circus-arena. Theatres with arena stages give such an opportunity. Such a theatre might be called the circus-theatre or the theatre-circus. The architectural space of the circus arena will foster the intrusion of conventions about the circus shows into the theatre and the two conventions will begin to merge. The first effect of this merging will be on the scenery and other theatrical props, the removal or minimisation of which will result on an increased focus on the actors. The architectural space of the arena will remind the audience that although they are watching a play, there is an element of the circus in it.
The third situation, lying some way between the above two, may result when a play which is not about the circus and meant to be performed in a normal proscenium theatre, uses conventions and devices of the circus shows. These conventions could be both rhetorical and authenticating. For instance, the play might use the performances by acrobats, gymnasts and jugglers, while the actors might use costumes normally used by the circus-artists and paint their faces like clowns. If in the second case the architectural nature of the space created a merging between the circus and the theatre, in this case the merging will be sustained by the conventions about performances. This will also result in a theatre which will be circus-like.28

It seems obvious that in societies where the circus is the dominant form of public spectacle, it will begin to influence the theatre. Nero's Rome represented such a society. Hence, before discussing the chronotope of the circus-theatre in the play Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca, it will be useful to explore briefly the role of public spectacles in the everyday life of a Roman citizen.

The Real Chronotopes of the Theatre and the Circus in Nero's Rome

In his famous tirade against his degenerate contemporaries Juvenal complains about the rise of the circus as the most popular form of public spectacle.29 The Roman who once, according to Juvenal, 'bestowed commands, consulship, legions and all else, now meddles more and longs eagerly for just two things - bread and the circus.'30 The people were only interested in bread and entertainment and the Roman rulers, knowing this, used public spectacles of games and gladiator combats to keep the public satisfied. Although these spectacles did not form an integral part of the governmental system, they helped to sustain its structure. They had turned into one of the most effective means of manipulating and controlling public opinion.

Historians have estimated that the Roman calendar was full of holidays. For instance, in the times of Claudius, who ruled between 41 and 54 A.D., there were 159 days in the year expressly marked as holidays, of which 93 days were devoted to games that were given at public expense. These holidays did not include ceremonies and feasts which were private and for which the state did not take any financial responsibility. With time the number of holidays increased and Marcus Aurelius (121-180 A.D.) had

---

28 Peter Carey's novel The Unusual Life of Tristan Smith is structured around the chronotope of the circus-theatre. The Feu-Follet Theatre in this novel is housed in an old circus school.


to order the restoration of 230 working days in a year, which means that, even then, almost 135 days a year were devoted to public spectacles.

Apart from many religious festivals, the Roman citizens had a choice of three main forms of public spectacle: games (*ludi*), gladiator combats (*munera*), and the theatre. The games were the most popular events and were organised in the circuses, the biggest of which could seat more than 255,000 spectators. Initially the games lasted one day but were gradually enlarged to last for seven and even fifteen days, the main events consisting of horse and chariot races. These games were eye-catching spectacles remarkable for their elaborate rituals of the opening and the closing ceremonies, and attractive dresses with glittering ornaments. The circus where the games were held was a vibrant public space where people of differing social background met, where ‘a woman could look for a husband or a libertine satisfy his appetite for adventure.’ 31 The races attracted intensive betting and gambling and in order to mitigate disappointments, disturbances and rioting, during the banquet at the end of each day ‘raffle tickets for a ship, a house, a farm were rained down on the audience on the orders of Nero, Domitian’ and other Caesars. 32

The gladiator combats or the *munera* were held in amphitheatres and large colosseums. They lasted from dawn to dusk during which gladiators procured by special agents from amongst slaves, the poor, convicts condemned to death, war prisoners, and the ruined sons of good families, fought till death. The gladiators who fought against wild animals were called *bestiari*, whilst for the convict gladiators, the *meridiani*, who were condemned to death, the amphitheatre was the place of their execution. It was a spectacular event designed specially for the entertainment of the public. The *munera*, like the games, held in the circus had their own elaborate rituals of the opening and closing ceremonies. A lavish banquet on the night before the fights was followed by a glittering day parade with suitably attired and decorated gladiators seated in carriages. The fights were accompanied by betting and gambling.

Compared to the two popular forms of public spectacles, the theatre in Rome was in decline, although theatrical performances were held throughout the year. In spite of drawing its source material predominantly from the Greek drama, the Roman theatre had turned into a forum for actors and musicians rather than authors. Most Roman dramatists were happy reworking popular Greek tragedies, and Seneca was one the few tragic dramatists whose plays have survived. In spite of its Greek inheritance, the social function of the Roman theatre was markedly different from the Greek theatre; for an average Roman citizen the theatre was no longer a significant part of the religious

32 Carcapino, p. 221.
festivals, although dramatic performances were still loosely attached to them. The theatre had become more secular and its main function was recreation and entertainment.

The Roman reworking of Greek tragedies led to the introduction of music, dance and lyrics. The written text lost its importance and served as nothing more than a loose framework for songs, mime and dances, and gradually tragedies and comedies were replaced by farce, burlesque and pantomime. Except for the use of masks, the performance of the reworked Greek tragedies did not conform with Greek theatrical conventions. Most of the realistic elements of these plays were lost in stylised and exaggerated performances. Contrary to the well-established Greek theatrical conventions, murders, rapes and other such crimes were not only reported but were vividly enacted. Many heroes of Greek myths, dressed in gold and scarlet, would turn into monsters and enact blood-curdling crimes to an accompaniment of music. ‘Theystes would eat his children, Medea would kill hers, Oedipus would slay his father and sleep with his mother.’\(^{33}\) Roman theatre was full of sensual and erotic elements and its main aim was to titillate and arouse the audience. Female actresses not only appeared as dancers, vocalists or instrumentalists, but performed nude scenes. Like games and gladiator combats, Roman theatre also became the site of killings and executions. For instance, Orpheus was literally torn to pieces and robbers were crucified. In many performances, particularly in mimes, condemned criminals substituted for actors who were executed on the stage. For instance, in the performance of *Prometheus Bound*, the actor or the convict substituting for him was literally nailed onto a cross or seared by the claws of a bear. Carcapino suggests that Nero himself liked to act in plays, and did not hesitate to play female roles of ‘Canace in *Macarici and Canace* and Pasiphae in a play where she was shown to be raped by a bull in the Cretan labyrinth.’\(^{34}\)

Thus, although Roman theatre was secular and democratic, it was like all other forms of public spectacles, full of violent sexual scenes, murders and executions. Its main aim was to entertain and thrill the audience, but it also functioned as an effective means of maintaining the existing power relations.

**The Chronotope of the Circus-Theatre in *Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca***

In spite of its ‘play within a play’ structure, *Theatre of the Times of Nero and Seneca* strictly follows a number of theatrical conventions of Roman theatre. The play opens at night in the arena of a circus with endless ‘terraces of the amphitheatre

---

\(^{33}\) Carcapino, p. 211.

\(^{34}\) Carcapino, p. 228.
stretching away into the darkness’ [128]. The basement of the circus-arena is full of drunk and ravaging gladiators and prostitutes. They have been locked up there for the night and will be freed the next morning to act in the Neronias, the gladiator combats, which Nero will be inaugurating.

Thus, the play is not set on the stage of a Roman theatre but in the arena of a circus. This circus-arena serves as a place where Nero’s Rome will be graphically portrayed. In Rome the circus was attended by tens and hundreds of thousands of spectators, who came there to be entertained and thrilled. It was a place frequented by emperors, where they were both seen and shown, where their power found a visible presence, and from where they manipulated support of the masses for their survival.

The play begins and ends in the circus and all events in the play unfold in the arena of this circus. All murders and executions are reported and enacted here. In this arena Nero, like an expert ring master, lashes with his whip and engineers his funny and brutal metamorphoses. His whip cracks and senator Antonius Flavius, who has been metamorphosed into a horse, neighs and makes pronouncements praising Nero and his rubber-stamp senate. In scenes which enact the assassinations of Britannicus, Octavia and Agrippina, the circus-arena turns into palace interiors. Similarly, it begins to resemble a court when Nero begins the show trial of Seneca. In this show trial or ‘the comedy of life’ as Nero calls it, Diogenes, the old man in the barrel, is appointed by him as the adjudicator, and Seneca is found guilty and sentenced to death. In the finale of the play, the circus-arena turns into a platform for executions, where Diogenes is dragged out of his wooden barrel and crucified. Seneca, who jumps into Diogenes’ empty barrel, is burnt alive. But most interestingly, the circus-arena always seems to resemble a theatrical stage where scenes from the life of Nero are enacted. In the final scene of the play, Nero directs his own production of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* in which he, dressed as Aeschylus, reads verses from the play and the horse-senator, playing the role of Hephaestus, spears Diogenes, who is also forced to play the role of Prometheus.

Thus throughout the play the circus-arena is itself repeatedly metamorphosed into a number of places such as: the interiors of Roman palaces, the court room, the theatrical stage, and the platform for executions. In this way the circus-arena acquires a multiplicity of simultaneous significations as a result of which the same space begins to be perceived as a combination of many spaces. Although its identity and its function keep on changing throughout the play, it always keeps the traces of the preceding spatial signification.

Nero was the emperor and Seneca was his mentor and minister. They were two of the most important public figures in Rome. Their whole life was either naturally open to
the Roman public or was exposed to the public through rumours, stories and anecdotes. Even the most private aspects of their lives were open to the public gaze. Hence a very public space, such as the space of the theatre or the circus, seems appropriate in structuring the narrative about their lives and times.

All Roman historians agree that Nero always aspired to be an actor. Suetonius notes that while Nero was still a young boy he gave a good performance in the Trojan games.\(^{35}\) Nero’s first stage appearance was at Naples where, disregarding an earthquake that shook the theatre, he sang his piece through to the end.\(^{36}\) Suetonius records that Nero sang and acted in tragedies, where wearing masks, he played the role of heroes and gods and sometimes even of heroines and goddesses. These masks were either modelled on his own face or on the face of whatever woman he happened to be in love with at that time. According to Suetonius he performed in plays such as *Canace in Childbirth*, *Orestes the Matricide*, *Oedipus Blinded*, and *Distraught Hercules*.\(^{37}\) He liked games and the circus, and actually raced horse and camel chariots in the races.

Seneca, the Stoic philosopher and Nero’s minister, is known to be a voluminous writer. Apart from writing ethical treatises, moral essays, scientific works, letters and consolations, he wrote nine tragedies adapted from the Greek. It is believed that ‘these tragedies were never staged and were written for private recitation’ rather than acting.\(^{38}\) Thus if Nero in his life was very closely involved with the theatre and other public spectacles, Seneca was not isolated from them, although it is known that he preferred the higher art form of the theatre to games and the circus. Nero not only liked and participated in public spectacles and in the theatre, it seems, he also imitated the theatre and lived as if he was acting and directing a play or a game at the circus.

Thus, in Nero’s Rome the circus was more important and popular than the theatre and Nero himself was a keen supporter of the circus. The Roman circus was an important place in the everyday life of Nero’s Rome. Hence, it can be argued, that by employing the circus-arena as a setting and by using it as a theatrical stage on which to enact the ‘comedy of life’, the play locates an appropriate site to re-present Nero’s Rome. The plays could have been set in a number of other places such as the Roman senate, temples, bath houses, theatres, battle fields but the circus-arena seems to be


\(^{36}\) Suetonius, p. 223.

\(^{37}\) Suetonius, p. 224.

more appropriate because in it Nero can be portrayed as a despotic ring-master of Rome, who was able to reduce Roman citizens, including senators, into animals.\textsuperscript{39}

**The ‘Play within a Play’ Structure**

In the play the chronotope of the circus-theatre is both the plot-constitutive and the time-visualising device. However, it also holds together the ‘play within a play’ structure of this play. It constitutes the place where events are narrated and shown but and also becomes the site, the stage, where the theatre itself begins to unravel its own practice.

The main text of the play contains subtexts of two more plays. One of them is the ‘comedy of life’ or the show trial of Seneca. The second represents the enactment of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* in the finale of the main play. Although the ‘comedy of life’ has been called a ‘play within’, it in fact represents the central event of the narrative. In this ‘comedy of life’ Seneca is forced to read his letters to Lucilius, and after accusing Seneca and obtaining a mute confession, he sentences him to death. The first part of the play, in which Nero sets the scene, in some ways functions like a prologue to the central event, the staging of the ‘comedy of life’. In this prologue Nero informs Seneca about the forthcoming Neronias, and tells him about the suicide of Seneca’s three close friends. The introduction does not stop here because Nero, in a theatrical manner, announces Seneca’s own death. Similarly, the enactment of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* which follows the ‘comedy of life’, is aimed to execute Seneca and Diogenes.

In the first part to the play Nero ‘metamorphoses Seneca into a corpse’ by announcing his suicide [143]. In Nero’s words this version of Seneca’s death was intended only for historical records. However, Seneca is still ‘alive’ and has yet to face his trial. He understands Nero’s intentions and asks Nero if he had been summoned for execution. In reply Nero says “yes” but adds that he also wanted to justify Seneca’s execution by establishing his crime and by extracting a confession from him:

\begin{quote}

Нерон. Короче, как ты умер для истории, мы уже выяснили. И в подробностях.

Теперь нам остается решить - как ты умершь на самом деле ... Стоп!

Прости! Ведь, есть и еще один вопрос - за что ты умершь? За какую вину? [143].
\end{quote}

This question is followed by a number of metamorphoses carried out by Nero. Diogenes, the old man in the barrel, is appointed adjudicator of the ‘comedy of life’.

\textsuperscript{39} Leonid Andreev’s one-act play *A Horse in the Senate* [*Ко́нь в сенате*] is set in a Roman senate and shows how Caligula’s favourite horse was made a Roman senator. The play was published in 1917.
According to Nero, the old man in the barrel should count himself lucky because he would be getting a chance to witness a great spectacle in which rare and famous actors such as Nero and Seneca will act:

Нерон. Ее сожгут сегодня на рассвете ... Ну а теперь, Диоген Последний ...
pока ты еще в бочке - смотри в оба! Сейчас ты увидишь впечатляющую
комедию ... Твой брат Цезарь примет в неё участие и твой брат Сенека
тоже ... Согласись, что не каждый день увидишь подобных актеров ....
[153-154].

After obtaining Seneca’s consent to Diogenes’ appointment as the adjudicator, Nero orders Seneca to read his letters to Lucilius and the ‘comedy of life’ begins. It is interesting that Diogenes, the appointed adjudicator, is given the mandate to judge the performance only. He can not play the role of the judge in this show trial. In Nero’s show trial there is either no judge or there is only one judge, Nero himself. After most of the letters have been read, and the night is about to end, Nero abruptly drops the curtain over the ‘comedy of life’:

Нерон. Вот и окончилась Комедия жизни. Ты прочел все, учитель [171].

After the ‘comedy of life’ has come to an end, Nero begins to plan the performance of his next play. He declares that Diogenes, the old man in the barrel, will be dragged out and will play the role of Prometheus in the play *Prometheus Bound*. The horse-senator will act as Epheustus and will spear Diogenes, playing the role of Prometheus. While this will be going on, Nero himself will put on the costume of Aeschylus and recite the ‘immortal tragedy’:

Нерон. .... (Сенеке.) Я вернусь в одежде Эсхила .... чтоб в лучах восходящего
солнца ... на фоне всей этой декорации ... прочесть бессмертную
трагедию поэта "Прикованный Прометей" ... Ну а ты учитель, как всегда
будешь зрителем ... [181].

**Multiple Role Playing and Metamorphoses**

The play opens in the arena of a circus which contains a cross and a wooden barrel with an old man. Close to the barrel, readers find a ‘sprawling handsome figure of Eros’. Further off they locate the figure of a ‘perfect Apollo’. He is wearing a snow-white toga and has a golden wreath over his head. But this Apollo is an ‘Apollo with a whip’. Soon a latticed gate opens and a beautiful, almost nude, female figure emerges from the underground. She is Venus. The fourth figure, the horse-senator, appears only when Apollo has cracked his whip. In this way, the play opens with three young and handsome deities with which it will also end.
In the opening sequence, Apollo sees an old man, escorted by a slave with a torch, and rushes to embrace him, addressing him as Seneca:

- Сенека! Учитеь! Сенека! [129].

Seneca attempts to free himself from the embrace and addresses Apollo as Nero:

Сенека. (пытаясь вырваться из объяти). Нерон! Великий Цезарь! [129].

It is interesting that, until Apollo had called the old man Seneca, readers did not know who the old man was. Nero’s address makes the old man Seneca. Similarly, readers begin to suspect that Apollo might in fact be Nero, only when they find him addressing the old man, who is Seneca, as his teacher. Thus, one single address initiates the whole process of identification of the protagonists. The identification of Apollo as Nero becomes complete only when readers and spectators hear Seneca addressing him as ‘Nero, the great Caesar’. In this way, Apollo with a golden wreath on his head and a whip in his hand starts playing the role of Nero and will continue doing so until the end of the play, when he will again become Apollo. But before that he will put on the costume of Aeschylus and read from the tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. Thus in this play Apollo plays the roles of Nero and Aeschylus, and in a similar vein, the other two godly figures, Eros and Venus, also play a number of roles, reverting to their original godly status only after the play has come to an end. However, there is an important difference in the status of Apollo or Nero and that of Eros and Venus. If, in the text of the play, after being identified as Nero, Apollo keeps on carrying this name till the end of the play, throughout the play, both Eros and Venus carry their original names, i.e. remain as Eros and Venus.

It can be argued that Apollo, Venus and Eros represent three actors who are playing different roles. Apollo plays the role of Nero, who in turn plays the role of Aeschylus. Eros and Venus on the other hand play the roles of more than one character. By keeping their names unaltered the text foregrounds their status as actors. However, by keeping Apollo as Nero, the text is, first of all, able to draw a parallel between Apollo and Nero, the god on earth. It is well known that Nero imitated Apollo and called himself the god on earth. However, this stability of name also imparts a degree of autonomy to Nero. In the play he alone has a stable identity, and hence the power to metamorphose other people. If all the rest are mere actors, Nero alone is both the director as well as an actor.

Eros plays the roles of Sporus, Nero’s young slave boy, and that of Britannicus, Nero’s younger step brother. Venus, on the other hand, is called to play the roles of all the female protagonists: Rubria - the high priestess of the Goddess Vesta, Agrippina - Nero’s mother, Octavia - Nero’s wife, and Poppaea Sabina - Nero’s lover. Although
both Eros and Venus throughout the play retain their names in the written text, Nero addresses them by the name of the character whose role they are playing. For instance, Eros is addressed as Sporus by Nero whilst Venus is addressed as Octavia or mama, i.e. Agrippina.

In the opening sequence of the play, when Nero introduces Eros to Seneca, Seneca addresses Eros as Sporus. Nero contests this and suggests that the young male figure is, in fact, a girl. In support, Nero draws Seneca’s attention to Eros’ ‘tiny breasts’ and ‘young firm thighs’. Finding Seneca speechless, Nero ‘bursts into good-natured laughter’ and informs Seneca about his latest passion for metamorphoses. In his opinion, he, ‘the great Caesar, is a god on this earth’ and hence like ‘the gods in heaven’ he has acquired the power to indulge in creating his own metamorphoses on earth:

Нерон. ... Все-таки я — великий Цезарь — земной бог ... А почему бы мне не попробовать — и не заняться метаморфозами, следуя обычаям богов небесных? К примеру, у меня, как тебе известно, умерла жена Октавия ... Ах бедная Октавия ... А ведь так хочется жену. Спрашивается — где взять? В женщинах так легко ошибиться. И тогда я задумал метаморфозу. Я решил превратить хорошо тебе знакомого мальчика Спора — в девушку! Грандиозно, да? Как я это сделал? Я собрал наш великий Сенат. И Сенат единогласно поставил: считать мальчика Сpora — девицей.

Хохот Амура.

На днях я женись не нем ... то есть — на нея. Гениально?! Да здравствует Сенат! Речь! Речь! (Удар бичом.) [131-132] (emphasis added).

Nero tells Seneca that after his wife Octavia died he was desperate to acquire a new wife, and because it was hard to get a good wife he decided to metamorphose the young boy Sporus into a girl.40 Explaining the technique used for such a metamorphosis, Nero informs that he called a meeting of the ‘great’ Roman senate and the senate ‘unanimously decreed that the young boy Sporus should be considered to be a girl’. In all the subsequent metamorphoses readers find that Nero employs the same technique. It is Nero, and only Nero, who has the power to metamorphose people, and after each metamorphosis, the great Roman senate rubber stamps it by issuing a corresponding decree. In this way the great Roman senate itself is transformed into a rubber stamp of Nero, a stable of horses, epitomised by the metamorphosis of senator

40 Suetonius notes that Nero ‘tried to turn Sporus into a girl by castrating him. He went through a wedding ceremony with him and treated him as his wife’ (Suetonius, p. 228). Suetonius also records that Nero also married his freedman ‘Doryphorus and on the wedding night he imitated the screams and moans of a girl being deflowered’ (Suetonius, p. 228).
Antonius Flavius into a horse-senator. Throughout the play, this horse-senator, who is a senator as well as a horse, will respond to the cracking whip of Nero by neighing and pronouncing laudatory exclamations, praising Nero and his ‘great’ Roman senate.

The above extracts also demonstrate how the playing of multiple roles by the protagonists is linked with metamorphoses. Nero, like a despotic director of a play, forces the actors of his troupe to enact specific roles. Even the senate is forced to play a particular role. The playing of multiple roles and the metamorphoses are so intricately interwoven within this narrative, that they begin to foreground the basic dichotomy between illusion and reality in life as well as in the theatre. The theatre and the mode of role-playing attain a certain degree of universality. They leave the space of the theatre, and of the circus arena, and even the textual limits of the play, and transcend into life outside theatre, suggesting that even in real life it is not very easy to differentiate between acting and ‘acting’.

The uneasiness arising from an inability to distinguish between reality and its appearance is demonstrated by an interesting linguistic slip which reflects Nero’s confusion in locating a third person pronoun of a proper gender to describe Sporus. “In the coming days”, he says, “I shall marry him ... I mean her”. The confusion with regard to Sporus’ gender is maintained throughout the play and is reflected in nouns, adjectives and verbs of different genders, which are used by Nero for Sporus and by Sporus for himself. For instance, the Russian adjectives which Nero uses to address Sporus are feminine gender versions of ‘my love’ [Моя любимая instead of Моя любимый] and of ‘my sweet’ [Моя сладкая instead of Моя сладкий]:

Нерон. ... (Амур.) Зови их, побystрее, ягодка моя [136].

Нерон. ... (Молчание. Амур.) Почему ты молчишь, любимая? [137].

Нерон. ... (Амур.) Ты, конечно, уже послала, сладкая моя, за консулом Латераном и за великим Пуканом? [138].

Нерон. ... (Амур.) Спор, девочка моя, наш Сенека не видит Тигеллина...

[176].

Нерон. ... (Амур.) Помоги ему взобраться на лошадь, девочка моя [179] (emphasis added).

However, when playing the role of Sporus, Eros uses Russian verbs of masculine gender to describe his actions:

Амур. Я послал центуриона с легионерами к дому Сенеки ... [143].

Амур. Сейчас я рассказал об этом в толпе у цирка. Теперь о смерти Сенека говорит весь Рим [143] (emphasis added).
It is possible that this confusion of identity is created because Eros has been asked to play a number of roles, and although all these roles are those of the male protagonists, Nero keeps on addressing him as a young girl. For readers, Eros thus becomes a kind of split personality, fluctuating between its male and female identities. Even when Eros plays the role of Britannicus, the young step brother of Nero, Nero announces that he was in love with Britannicus and seduced him to establish ‘sinful’ and incestuous relations with him.

Venus, the sole female actress of this play, is asked to play a greater number of roles than Eros. The confusion in the perception of Venus’ identity is foregrounded in the very opening scenes of the play. The beautiful, female figure who rises from the underground is introduced to readers as Venus, but when Nero asks Seneca to look at her and recognise her, Seneca addresses her as a ‘whore’. Nero himself very often addresses Venus as a ‘whore’. So who is this female figure? Is she Venus or a whore? Is Venus a whore or is every whore a Venus? The confusion is not resolved even when Venus starts to play the role of Poppaea Sabina, Nero’s lover. This is because Venus in the lead up to this event had played the roles of Rubria - the priestess, Agrippina and Octavia. It seems that in Nero’s eyes all women including Rubria, Octavia, Poppaea Sabina and Agrippina were whores or acted and behaved like whores.

The enactment of Agrippina’s assassination reveals very clearly Nero’s confusion in his relations with women. This scene is based on the reading by Seneca of his letters to Lucilius and is enacted by Nero and Venus. In this scene, readers find that Venus is simultaneously playing the roles of Agrippina and a whore. For instance, recollecting his Agrippina’s assassination, Nero exclaims: “Poor mother”:

Нерон. Да, ты промочал, опять промочал - все прочитав в глазах волка ...
Ведная Мама ... Ты помнишь, как Это было?
Венера. (Визжит.) Не надо! Я не хочу! Я боюсь!
Нерон. Успокойся, шлюха. Я не видел, как убивали маму ... (Кричит.) Мама! Я ее любил! Презирал, боялся – и любил! ... [161].

In this scene, when Nero asks Seneca to recount how his mother was murdered, Venus, playing the role of Agrippina, cries out: “Don’t do it, I don’t want to die. I am scared”. Thus, readers are told that Venus, in this scene, is playing Agrippina. But soon, in the very next sentence, they find Nero calling her a whore. In this way Venus becomes Agrippina as well as a whore, a whore with Agrippina’s appearance or
Agrippina behaving like a whore.\textsuperscript{41} This dual identity of Venus is maintained throughout the enactment of Agrippina’s assassination.

In addition to the three godly figures of Apollo, Eros and Venus, the rest of the characters also play multiple roles, and hence, turn into actors. The horse-senator, as the name itself indicates, plays the role of a horse as well as that of the senator Antonius Flavius. Suetonius the Roman historian mentions ‘that horses were Nero’s main interest since childhood.’\textsuperscript{42} Suetonius also notes that emperor Gaius (Caligula) loved his horse ‘Incitatus so much that he wanted to award him a consulship.’\textsuperscript{43} Nero loved horses and harboured an unending contempt for the Roman senate. Perhaps because of this he converted senator Antonius Flavius into a horse. In the finale of the play, readers will find out that Nero wanted to convert the whole senate into a stable, and to put marble stalls in it.

In the finale, when the ‘comedy of life’ comes to an end and the old man in the barrel is nailed onto the cross by Nero’s soldiers, Nero forces the horse-senator to play the role of Hephaestus in \textit{Prometheus Bound} and to kill the old man. When the horse-senator refuses to oblige, Nero threatens to nail him onto a cross. The horse-senator capitulates and spears the old man in the barrel to death.

Diogenes, the old man in the barrel, also plays a number of roles. As the ‘comedy of life’ begins, Nero makes him the adjudicator of the play. He is not acting as a judge in the show trial but has been asked to judge merely the performance. After the trial is over, Diogenes is dragged out of his barrel and in accordance with Nero’s directorial instructions he is forced to play the role of Prometheus, the rebel from Aeschylus’ play. But in Nero’s interpretation Diogenes’ Prometheus is not a rebel but a passive dummy, a docile body. In this way a passive and submissive Prometheus is crucified. The enactment of \textit{Prometheus Bound} and the crucifixion of Diogenes in this play are in accordance with Roman conventions about public spectacles including the theatre. According to these conventions convicts were used as replacements for real actors in games, \textit{munera} and the theatre, and were executed in front of a cheering audience.

When Eros drags Diogenes, the old man with broken limbs, out of the wooden barrel, some Roman soldiers and a panic stricken horse-senator ask Nero to look at the old man’s hands and feet. ‘There are nail marks,’ the horse-senator shouts [180]. Nero

\textsuperscript{41} Suetonius recounts that Nero had a ‘lecherous passion for his mother, but Nero’s enemies would not let him consummate it, fearing that, if he did, Agrippina would become even more powerful and ruthless. So Nero found a new mistress who was said to resemble her. Some say that he did, in fact, commit incest with Agrippina whenever they rode in the same litter - the stains on his clothes when he emerged proved it’ (Suetonius, p. 228).

\textsuperscript{42} Suetonius, p. 224.

\textsuperscript{43} Suetonius, p. 181. It was noted earlier that Leonid Andreev’s one-act play \textit{A Horse in the Senate} narrates this story.
goes to the barrel to look at his hands and feet and asks the old man if he had been crucified. 'A long time ago,' the old man in the barrel replies:

Старик. Очень давно. (Все улыбаясь.) Тогда я был Прометеем ... Потом распинали опять ... когда я стал Диогеном ... Меня все время распинают, брат. Оттого меня так веселит твоя вера, что ты — деляешь это первым [180].

The old man suggests that he has been crucified many times. The first time it happened was when he was Prometheus, or was acting as Prometheus. When he became Diogenes he was crucified again. According to him, he has been crucified several times. His statement raises doubts about the real identity of the old man in the barrel. Is he really Diogenes or has he only been acting as Diogenes, or as many different Diogeneses? It is possible that he is playing a character, a character-type, a rebel. Prometheus, various Diogenes, and people who have been continually crucified in human history are merely different incarnations, different roles or different appearances of the same identity that of the rebel.

The ‘horse-senator’ meanwhile is still in shock from the nail marks on the hands and feet of the old man and cries out:

Сенатор-конь. (Кричит). Он бог! Он воскрес! Он истинный бог! [180].

The horse-senator perceives the old man in the barrel as a real god, a god who has risen from the cross. In this way, one more role or character is added to the expanding repertoire of the old man in the barrel. He is Prometheus, as well as many forms of Diogenes, and he is also Jesus of Nazareth. He is a perpetual rebel. But, in the eyes of Nero, the old man in the barrel is not a god but 'a human being':

Нерон. (Хрипло). Он человек. Жалкий, калечный человек ... [180].

Thus the old man in the barrel is not only a perpetual rebel, the rebellion incarnated, but a wretched, crippled human being.

In this play, Seneca is the only protagonist who is asked by Nero to play only one role, that of Seneca. In the ‘comedy of life’ he plays Seneca by reading aloud his letters to Lucilius. Before the ‘comedy of life’ began Nero had pronounced him dead. So, Seneca is playing himself, knowing that he has been already declared dead. He knows that when the ‘comedy of life’ will come to an end he would have to enact the ultimate role of his life.

From Seneca’s letters, readers come to know that Seneca had throughout his life played a number of roles. He was Nero’s mentor and minister, defending him in the Roman senate and in public. He wrote Nero’s speeches addressed to the senate and the
Roman people. Nero merely acted like an obedient pupil and read those speeches as his own.

In the play *Prometheus Bound*, which Nero planned to stage after the ‘comedy of life’, Nero wanted to give a special role to Seneca, that of Prometheus. He wanted to crucify Seneca as Prometheus, but during the play, like a perceptive stage director, he changed his mind. He realised that Seneca could not have played the role of Prometheus because Prometheus, contrary to Seneca, was a rebel and Seneca, according to Nero, had always remained a ‘domestic dog beside a leopard’:

Нерон. ... (Сенеке.) Да, жаль, учитель: ведь Это тебя я мечтал наградить божественной смертью. Ведь, Это тебе я готовил роль Прометея. Согласись, Это было бы царская плата за твои труды. Но Цезарь обязан быть справедливым – так ты учил меня. И разабрав нашу Комедию жизни, мне пришлось признать: ты всегда был в лучшем случае – домашний пес при леопарде, В тебе никогда не было бунта. А какая же Прометея без бунта! ... Вот почему Прометеем станет он .... [179].

In the play when every character is an actor and playing a number of roles, the biggest punishment would be to be turned into a passive observer or to be declared a mute spectator. It is Seneca’s fate that Nero has made him or called him a coward, mute, conforming, but perhaps cunning spectator. However, when everyone is acting and playing roles, not to act is also a form of acting:

Нерон. ... Ну а ты, учитель, как всегда, будешь зрителем ... Но надеюсь, к вечеру ты величаво покинешь наш жестокий спектакль в соответствии с легендой ... [181].

During the performance of the ‘comedy of life’ Nero blames Seneca for ‘keeping quiet’, and ‘not saying anything’. In the above extract he again complains that Seneca always acted like a ‘spectator’. An important feature of the play is the frequent use of the language of the theatre, such as: the ‘comedy of life’, ‘spectator’, ‘actor’, ‘costumes’. In the above extract, Nero again uses the language of the theatre to describe the impending death of Seneca. He hopes that by the next evening Seneca will make ‘his exit’ from ‘our cruel spectacle in accordance with the legend’. Nero refers to the ‘legend’ about Seneca’s death and by doing so hints to Seneca that he expects that Seneca will, ‘according to the legend’, commit suicide in his bath by calling his surgeon and getting his veins slashed.

However, Seneca has something else in his mind. Leaving the role of a mute ‘spectator’ for the first time, he jumps into the empty wooden barrel, and in this way, bursts into the ‘acting space’. For the first time, he becomes a real actor who intends to
play the role of the timeless Diogenes. But this role is short because Nero, dressed in Aeschylus’ costume, sets the barrel alight. This action of Seneca is the only event of the play which has not been planned and directed by Nero, the despotic theatre director. Here, for the first time initiative is taken away from his hands and the character himself starts acting.

Amongst all these actors or characters who are playing multiple roles, there is one who is physically absent but whose absence is more real than of those who are physically present. He is Tigellinus, the chief of Nero’s secret police, and the only protagonist who throughout the play acts his own role. Only in the finale do readers come to know that Tigellinus’ presence is that of absence, that he had been murdered by Nero well before Nero killed his other victims. At every suitable moment Nero foregrounds this strange and compelling absence of Tigellinus by repeatedly announcing that ‘every one is waiting for Tigellinus to appear’. In one of his letters to Lucilius, Seneca describes the mystically absent presence of Tigellinus in these words:

“... Отмечу любопытную подробность: Тигеллин никогда не появляется на людях. Его никто нигде не видел. Он живет затворником в собственном дворце, ибо более общается всех эпидов — постоянным страхом покушения на свою проклятую жизнь” [158].

Tigellinus, according to Seneca, is either deliberately hiding in his palace or, like all other monsters and villains, lives with a constant fear that someone will attempt to kill him. Nero is sure that Seneca as well as Lucilius knew that Tigellinus was already dead and hence wonders why Seneca wrote about Tigellinus’ absence in his letter to Lucilius. Nero suspects that Seneca recorded this for future Roman generations.

This game of hide and seek with regard to Tigellinus continues when suddenly, recapturing his directorial supremacy, Nero asks:

Нерон. ... Кстати, кто же представит нам Тигеллина в нашей комедии? ... Ты с ним так и не встретился, Сенека? [158].

Nero asks Seneca if he had ever met Tigellinus and when he responds by saying ‘no’, Nero begins to rebuke Seneca that even after living side by side in Rome for so many years, they did not see each other. Then, looking at Eros, Nero remarks:

Нерон. ... (Амур.) Роль Тигеллина может сыграть любой — Сенека не знает его лица ... (Делает свирепое лицо.) Я — Тигеллин!

Венера и Амур хохочут.

А впрочем ... Скоро придет Тигеллин ... И с успехом сыграет свою роль ... [158].
After stating that anyone could play the role of Tigellinus, Nero, pulling a fierce face, exclaims that he was Tigellinus. Does this mean that after killing Tigellinus and after turning his ‘absent presence’ so real and fearful, Nero himself played the role of Tigellinus? However, keeping the dichotomy of illusion and reality, which so thoroughly pervades the text of this play, alive and foregrounded, Nero assures Seneca that soon Tigellinus will appear and start playing his role.

In this play only Nero is given the supreme authority to allot roles to the actors, to metamorphose them and to control and direct their actions. For instance, when in the finale of the play, a frightened horse-senator refusing to carry the old man in the barrel on his back, calls for ‘gods’ to help him, a furious Nero shouts at him and whips him for ‘speaking without being told’ [179].

The real initiative of acting and role playing rests with Nero. He also plays more than one role, but these roles are of his own choice and it seems that he is the only character or actor who is conscious of role playing. He is the real actor in this circus-like world or on this world-stage or world-theatre.

Although the ‘comedy of life’ is based on Seneca’s letters to Lucilius, Nero has already edited them. In this way, he intrudes into the textual space of Seneca’s letters and becomes the main script writer of the ‘comedy of life’. Nero is thus not only the supreme director and the main actor of the play but is also its sole author. The whole play represents his theatre, the theatre of Nero.

It was discussed earlier that the text of this play frequently employs the language of the theatre, constantly alluding to plays, games and spectacles. For instance, Nero repeatedly informs Seneca that in the morning, he would be opening his games, the Neronias. Therefore, following the set tradition he has arranged a lavish big banquet for the gladiators, slaves and whores who are locked up in the basement and who have been ‘metamorphosed into Caesars for the night’.

Describing the program of his Neronias, Nero notes that the central attractions of these games would be the enactment of scenes from the lives of Greek and Roman gods: in the beginning ‘Pasiphae, the wife of the King of Crete will be shown committing adultery with the bull sent by Poseidon’ [144]. In this show the role of Pasiphae will be played by Venus, the whore. This will be followed by the enactment of ‘live scenes of heroism’ called ‘The Torments of Prometheus’ [144]. In this spectacle Nero would read from Aeschylus’ famous tragedy and Prometheus will be tortured. In order to add novelty to this spectacle the rocks will be replaced by a cross.

Apart from these references to games, spectacles and plays the text of the play often employs words and phrases such as: ‘we shall enact the comedy of life’, ‘the role
of Nero, Tigellinus, Seneca, Pasiphae, Hephaestus, Prometheus...’, ‘Long live the theatre!’, ‘what a great actor is Nero!’, ‘this can only happen in the theatre’, ‘the great actors Nero and Seneca will enactment the comedy of life’, ‘the comedy of life has ended’, ‘the finale of this tragedy’, ‘in comedy everything is inside-out’, ‘this is an appropriate end of the comedy’.

Concluding Remarks

The play is set in the circus-arena. However, during the play it is transformed partially and temporarily into a number of public and private spaces such as: the interiors of Roman palaces; a public court where a show trial is being enacted; a stage of the theatre whereas Greek tragedy and the ‘comedy of life’ are performed; and a platform with a cross for execution. The arena of the circus thus operates like the stage of theatre and the space in which the play is enacted turns into a circus-theatre, imparting the attributes of the circus to the theatre and vice versa.

Nero’s Rome was the Rome of public spectacles; apart from many religious rituals a large number of secular public spectacles turned the everyday life of a Roman citizen into a spectacular and theatrical affair. The emphasis had shifted from the real drama theatres to the more public and democratic theatricals such as games in the circus and munera in the amphitheatre. The games and the gladiator combats in amphitheatres attracted vast crowds. These were the sites where Rome with its full diversity came to show itself. Caesars and consuls came to see and be seen and the games provided them the most effective site of demonstrating their power and legitimising it. To borrow Bakhtin’s words the Roman circuses and amphitheatres had become such spaces in which time, historical and biographical, was ‘released and made to flow’. It is because of this that the chronotope of the circus-theatre in the play has become an effective device for telling the story and for making the times of Nero and Seneca graphically visible. It is doubtful if the interiors of Nero’s or Seneca’s palaces or the space of the Roman senate or for that matter, the stage of a Roman drama theatre would have provided an equally effective space for representing Nero’s and Seneca’s Rome.

The chronotope of the circus-theatre represents a space which is simultaneously the stage of a theatre and an arena of the circus. Because of this it is also able to bring out the full potential of a ‘play within a play’ structure. The repeated metamorphoses and the associated multiple role playing by actors or characters alluding to the use of masks in the Greek and Roman theatres, create a situation when the theatre itself becomes an object of representation.

The technique of multiple role playing dominates the narrative structure of this play and its effect is so pronounced that readers are always uncertain about the
identities of its characters. They are not sure whether Nero is really Nero or playing the role of Nero. Similarly they are not certain if Seneca was really an astute, uncompromising philosopher and teacher or was only acting, i.e. playing the role of a philosopher, teacher and a politician. If he chose to be a spectator, as alleged by Nero, wasn't he acting by deciding not to act? Who was Tigellinus? Was he a mask, a role played by Nero? It was the body of a dead man that was appropriated by Nero, who kept it alive and made its absence more real than his presence. In this way, the chronotope of the circus-theatre starts questioning the fundamental basis of the theatre and real life. Through them the play starts questioning the conventions about illusion and reality which constitute the basis of the theatre and real life outside theatre.

It needs to be stressed that the word 'theatre' in the title of the play, and the chronotope of the circus-theatre also operate like a metaphors. In a previous chapter, attention was drawn to Bakhtin's discussion of the significance of the chronotope of the path in ancient as well as modern novels. In Bakhtin's opinion, the frequent use of this chronotope in novels is associated with its capacity to operate like a space in which 'time is released and flows through it.'44 This results in a 'rich metaphorisation of the chronotope of the path'. The path becomes a common metaphor to describe life as in the phrases such as, 'the life path', 'to step onto a new path', 'the path of salvation' and 'the historical path'. It can be argued that metaphorisation of the chronotopes of the circus and the theatre is also associated with their capacity to make the time graphically visible.

From the time when the circus and the theatre emerged on the scene, the idea of the world as a theatre or a stage or a circus has consistently appeared in literature and art. Plato is known to have used the play metaphor frequently to describe the world as the great stage of human life on which human beings 'like puppets are manipulated by gods.45

44 Bakhtin, FTCN, p. 276.

45 According to Epictetus world is a theatre, where everyone has a part allotted to him and is judged by how well he plays his part. This idea of the world as a stage and of human beings as mere actors playing their respective roles suggests human beings as passive creatures who lack initiative. The most frequently quoted Shakespearean texts is Jacques' speech in As You Like It in which Jacques asserts that "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players". This speech is Jacques' reply to the Grand Duke's assertion that "This wide and universal theatre/ Presents more woeful pageants than the scene/ Wherein we play in". Equally frequent are quotations from Macbeth and The Merchant of Venice. In scene 5 of the fifth act Macbeth reacting to the death of his queen remarks: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more." In The Merchant of Venice Antonio in the first scene of the first act remarks sadly: "I hold the world but as the world Gratiano -/ A stage where every man must play a part, / And mine a sad one." Cervantes' Don Quixote expresses a similar idea of role playing in the world when he asks his companion Sancho if he had not seen that the same things happen in the world and in "a play acted with Kings, Emperors and Popes, knights, ladies and various other personages bought on to the stage. One plays the ruffian, another the cheat; here is a merchant, there is a soldier; one is the wise fool, another the foolish lover. But when the play is over, and they have taken off their dresses, all the actors are equal". Sancho agrees with Don.
In this play the theatre is a circus-theatre, which, it can be argued, reinforces the image of human beings as puppets by making them similar to the tamed animals. Apollo with a whip is Nero, who is the supreme ring-master. For him all others are either animals or can be metamorphosed into animals. His theatre or world is dominated by the circus in which a whip-lashing Nero rules. The whip creates fear and the fear rules.

In this chapter the play was read fundamentally from within the time-space of its main protagonist. This was aimed to show how the chronotope of the circus-theatre functions both as effective plot-constitutive and visualising device. But the play is not a 'historical' play attempting to re-present only the historically real time and space of its protagonists. The complicated ‘play within the play’ structure which is intimately associated with multiple role playing and metamorphoses needs to be read in connection with the heightened theatricality of Soviet life and cultural practices. Such a reading, i.e. a reading from within the contemporary time-space of Soviet reality and Soviet literary and theatrical paradigms will open a number of interesting layers of meanings. This question will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

---

Quixote and in his reply mentions another, equivalent to the theatre, semiotic model of the chess-board and chess pieces: "A fine comparison, although not so new that I haven't heard it on various occasions before - like the one of the game of chess, where each piece has its particular importance while the game lasts, but when it's over they're all mixed up, thrown together, jumbled, and showed into a leather bag, which is much like shovelling life away into the grave". Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, The Adventures of Don Quixote, trans. J. M. Cohen (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 539.