

The Acting Teachers – The Usual Students

Laura BILIC*

Abstract: During the last 10 years the field of Acting has witnessed an unprecedented development in Romania – now it encompasses teaching, personal development, sometimes even therapy; it has blended well with the visual field in Installations and, due to pandemic situation, it has engulfed the virtual medium. Therefore, Acting has changed – nowadays, the purpose of an Acting School is not that of forging *masters of Acting*, but of guiding and supporting the discovery and designing of the unicity, creativity and personality of each and every artist. Romanian theatre has fought many battles along the way – that with censorship, that with mass media and now a completely new and insidious challenge – the fight with the present sanitary situation. Nowadays, the theatres, either conventional or unconventional, are closed due to various reasons: the political wage of war, the conflict between the vaccine followers and the vaccine opponents, the gulf between the majority parties and the minorities, various restrictions and our own personal fears. Thus, nowadays artists should prove, once more, their amazing capacity of adapting themselves to these conditions. And, if our times are confusing for artists, they are even more bewildering for the Acting teachers. An Acting teacher that is a former graduate of a 4 year course of study in a form of 5-6 fellow mates, that, most likely, has a job as an actor in a National Theatre, is supposed now to teach in Bologna system to a double number of students than the one he was used to (and that even online) and to prepare them for a very crowded and diversified market place. So, what is to be done on part of the Acting teacher?

Keywords: drama pedagogy, Bologna system, acting classes, artistic education

Starting from the theme of the conference – *Emerging Theatre* – we wanted, from the very beginning, to update our exact and scientific meaning of the word. According to the ‘Micul Dicționar Academic’ (“The Little Academic Dictionary”), second edition, 2010, the *emergent* term is used in physics, referring to a body or radiation “that emerges from an environment after having crossed it”¹. The contemporary world, with all its aspects and directions – from social, political, artistic, philosophical, and economic, to the daily life of each of us – has not yet emerged from the *environment*

* Lecturer PhD, Faculty of Theatre, UNAGE, Iași

¹Source: www.dexonline.ro.

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(context) it has experienced in the last three years. Therefore, any current analysis of the present can only be subjective and devoid of conclusions. Moreover, Peter Brook believed that any attempt to theorize the art of theatre is obsolete as soon as it is stated – at the end of his first book, "*The Empty Space*", the director states: "As you read this book, it is already obsolete. For me, it is an exercise, now frozen on the page," concluding: "The truth in theatre is always on the move."² Theatre cannot exist outside of it *now*; it is defined precisely by the fact that it is happening in the *present*. I would not say that, over time, the theatre has *changed* (because the verb "to change" implies, perhaps, a scale of values – it has changed for the better or the worse), as it has *adapted*, it has changed together with society.

For example, since 1999, since the implementation of the Bologna system, the number of university graduates has increased, **therefore** the area of theatre has expanded from the large stage of the National Theatre to smaller scenes of independent theatres, athenaeums, and cultural centers, to unconventional spaces, that are more or less surprising, subsequently included education, personal development, therapy, it merged with the visual in installations and, since the pandemic, it has also been integrated into the virtual environment. **As a result**, the number of specialized schools has also increased. And since theatre can only exist today, all those who compose it (artists, theoreticians, teachers, stage designers, light designers, etc.) have adapted to the times they are experiencing. From the ancient Greeks to the present day, in the age of podcasts and *YouTube*, the theatre artist has exceeded his limits, added and blended (put together) different forms of artistic expression, and found new ways of expressing himself, because, under the auspices of *Now*, he is, inevitably, the product of the times and the society in which he is living. For now, we can only speculate what the effect of the current distancing of the theatre will be – maybe it will become just an App³ (Virtual Application), or it will use holograms, or it will be an artificial theatre invented by artificial intelligence – it will certainly find out the way to adapt.

Adaptation is a continuous process, which involves permanent research, and not only do artists navigate it, but together with them, also theatre pedagogues experience the same process. How could an acting teacher, who graduated university together with five or six classmates (fellow students), in a four-year cycle and who

²Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, translated from the English language by Monica Andronescu, with a preface by Andrei Șerban, NEMIRA Publishing House, Bucharest, 2014, p. 208.

³<http://teatrelli.com/event/the-walks/>.

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probably worked in a National Theatre, teach a double number of students (even do it online, nowadays), to prepare them for an overcrowded and super-diversified market? We have found that in the times we are going through, the purpose of a theatre school is no longer to form *masters* (experts), but to guide and support the discovery or definition of the uniqueness, creativity, and personality of each artist. Virtuosity is no longer in the first place, theatrical art now requires very personal artists who expose themselves on stage, who reveal in their characters pieces of their most intimate history, of their most hidden desires and fears. Only this *artistic DNA* can make the artists shine in the theatrical direction that was meant for them. Isolation also had an important contribution to the definition of this *DNA*, because it gave the artist the chance to descend into himself, rediscover himself, and, if necessary, reconsider his passion for theatre; we can say, in Brechtian words, that we live a period in which the new and the old are fighting inside us ("The old and the new do not divide people into two piles (categories), but the new fight the old right inside of each person"⁴).

Gradually, the most important attribute of an actor was not empathy, but adaptability. The young generation of artists must adapt quickly to groups of new people, in the most diverse spaces, to classical or straight away improvised texts, to the constantly changing society, to the history that we do not know what surprises have in store for us, etc. and to do all these faster and faster.

Under these circumstances, we teachers have no choice but to try to become our students and see the world through their eyes. We don't stand in front of them to criticize the present and to explain to them that *it was better before*, but we are there to support and guide them in discovering their place in the growing world of theatre. In an uncertain present, always on the move, first of all, the young artist does not need lessons or *teachings*, but a *colleague*, with the authority given by experience, to be with him at the beginning of the journey towards discovering his artistic identity.

This approach, which theoretically seems simple, in practice turns out to be a little more complicated because the current generations have everything at hand – starting from food and school (for which in recent years, they didn't even have to get out of bed sometimes), to information, culture, entertainment, communication and everything else we can think of – so they don't have the patience to go through the road of personal researches, to work, to question and to discover answers themselves. As Professor Ion Cojar said, in theory, the Actor's Art is the same for everyone,

⁴Berlot Brecht, *Scieri despre teatru* (Writings about Theater), Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 267.

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practically, it is different for everyone. Stanislavski, in his reference works, *The Actor's Work with Himself* and *My Life in Art*, conveys to the artists that it is imperative not to take his method *mot à mot* (ad literam), but to pass it through their personal filter, to let it become only the starting point in the development of a personal method of theatre/acting. But the personal method, whether more Stanislavskian or more Brechtian, cannot be discovered without *involvement*.

To communicate the feelings of the part (character), it is necessary to know them and, to know them, you must try analogous (similar) feelings yourself.⁵ (K.S. Stanislavski)

Slip into your character's skin and try to be as comfortable as possible. Put him through the strain and pay attention to his heart's reactions. Eat with him, applaud his little ideas, and look through his eyes.⁶ (B. Brecht)

Nowadays, however, the student, used to immediate answers, does not have the patience and tenacity necessary to reach his own answers – sometimes, during rehearsals, the young aspiring actors, probably due to fatigue or insufficient individual training, got stuck, stopped and the atmosphere floating in the air was "I can't do it. Give me the solution. Teach me how to make it work", not realizing that the teacher does not have the solution, that this answer will not come from the outside, but must find it inside themselves. On the other hand, sometimes the teacher, stressed by the short time, by the desire to put the students in a good perspective and to give them the chance to be part of a quality production/exam, offers them a way to get out of the impasse (difficulty) because, likewise, they do not have patience and they do not have courage. Students need to have the courage to be themselves and the courage of introspection, while pedagogues need to consider the school a laboratory and accept the fact that results can appear after years. I fully agree with Peter Brook's statement that "talent is not static, it increases and decreases according to many circumstances."⁷, a statement that applies not only to artists but also to teachers.

I believe that in education, whether domestic (home) or professional, the most thorough lesson that can be given is a personal example – we should at least try to become the people we want our children/students to be. We want our students to be *involved* and *hard-working*, then we'd better make sure that we put into practice the

⁵K.S. Stanislavski, *The actor's Work with Himself*, NEMIRA Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013, p. 31.

⁶Berlot Brecht, op.cit., p. 62.

⁷Peter Brook, op.cit., p. 156.

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lessons we teach. And if we do not know how *passion* is taught (scientifically speaking passion is "the vivid inclination, accompanied by pleasure for the object studied or the practiced profession"), then we can at least live it and practice it, in the hope that we will touch (seduce/persuade) those around us. But passion cannot unfold, in all its splendor, in the presence of *vanity*. For example, I explain to my students that they cannot influence how 30-40 spectators will perceive their artistic performance, not to mention the halls of hundreds of seats. As the part is the fruit of the artist's intertwining the intimate self with the work (play/ show/ performance), his representation is the intertwining of the artist's vision with the spectator's intimate self. Therefore, the actor can control very well the message he wants to send/the worldview he has developed through his character and not at all the way he is perceived by the diversity of the DNAs in front of him. The energy wasted in trying to change what is in the nature of things – namely the subjective (personal) perception of art – makes you no longer master even the thing over which you had control. Thus, we teachers should also avoid wasting our energy in the game of vanities - the part of us that will take care of everything else is related to the Here and Now (... do I have a good exam / mise-en-scène (staging)? ... am I enough authoritarian (bossy) or not? Do students like me or not? etc.) this will always be the missing part of the *passion*. The student is *the double (stunt)* of the teacher. If I aim for my student's school experience to be unique and to guide him/her, precisely by its uniqueness, on the path best suited to him, then this experience must be unique for me as well. Perhaps that is what the teacher's talent is – his ability (practical and not theoretical!) to learn something from each student.

If I think about the times we are going through, I think that the students and the pedagogues of the theatrical schools must also submit to an act of *cruelty* – in an Artaudian sense. That is, a process of self-analysis through which the artist realizes his clichés and constantly seeks to suppress them – "a difficult and cruel theatre for me in the first place." Trying to understand what is our artistic/pedagogical dominance (text, situation, character composition, choreography, etc.) and the fight against it will keep us alive, awake (observant), present, and contemporary with our times. Ion Cojar said that "The Art of Acting develops by the simple attention it is paid", as well as the Art of Pedagogy, or any other profession performed from the soul. Only by deserting our comfort zone, we will be able to go forward, becoming more and more complex individuals and professionals.

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The theatre has overcome war, and famine, it has also overcome pandemics, and the stage artists who had something to say, have found the form to express themselves. If, until today, the theatre was an instrument to act on the spirit of a people, today, in my opinion, the imposed social distance can only be overcome by changes in the spirit of the artist. The current times make the artist plunge into himself, probably to rediscover his *purpose*. Antonin Artaud predicted: "It is right that sometimes some cataclysms occur to challenge us to return to nature, to rediscover life."⁸, and nowadays, *life* has become an inner one, spent in solitude. As well as the artists they train, also the teachers must rediscover the *life* within them, they must create a *living (vivid) pedagogy*, as Peter Brook understands by *living (vivid) theatre*:

In a living theatre, every day of rehearsal we should question the discoveries made yesterday, be willing to start over, and believe that we missed the truth of the play again. Instead, the lifeless theatre comes closer to the classics with the belief that somewhere, sometime, someone discovered and nailed up the way the play should be staged.⁹

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