

Emerging Theatre Practices – The Golden Myth of European Theatrical Thought

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to reveal the major gap that exists between the national or global literature about theatre and the current theatrical practice. The gap is due, first of all, to the publishing trend of editors that tend to print books written by absolutely exceptional creators. We start from the premise that emerging theatre must not only distance itself from a theatrical phenomenon perceived as traditional, but must also become an artistic current that expands and becomes in turn, in time, a "norm" in itself. Thus, at a time when performances by Peter Brook, Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba and Tadeusz Kantor were seen by theatre critics as emerging performances, theatrical practice in the next decades in European theatres shows us that these directors were creating a rather unique, experimental kind of productions. Laboratory theatre, based on long research, remains a marginal component in Western theatrical practice, where repertoire theatre, with its increasingly shorter production times, remains an absolute norm. However, the paradox remains that these show creators are homaged by the specialty literature, and rightly so, although the same does not happen with "normal" theatre directors. Theatrical theory loves exceptions too much, and the story that we are told about theatre in the late twentieth century, full of great theatrical experiments, is a false one, detached from 90% of the artistic practice. In contrast, Robert Wilson and the shows he directs constitute a completely different story. Many contemporary theatre practitioners claim to be influenced by his aesthetics, including Pippo Delbono, Romeo Castellucci or Thomas Ostermeyer. He practiced a once marginal theatrical style, but which gave birth to a strong aesthetic heritage. Therefore, this article aims to make the historical differentiation between emerging theatre and exceptional theatre, but also to identify in the contemporary Romanian performative arts the real features of the emerging theatre.

Keywords: theatre, performance, Romania, contemporary, current

I. Introduction

In the world of theatre, we like to believe in exceptions. We know that someone who studies medicine must learn a series of well-developed, scientifically proven methods in order to be able to practice his profession according to the standards. The theatre student, whether he is studying performance theory, directing,

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acting or scenography, learns almost by ear, either his own or his teacher's. The teacher's freedom to teach is almost absolute, because the professions in the performing arts are seen as "special", not being subject to science and methodology. Of course, those who say this have their share of justice, given that we are talking about artistic disciplines, but we strongly believe that the "special" status of the performing arts is elevated to the rank of universal motto, with serious effects on both pedagogy and on show-business. In order to be able to support the idea that theatre production is a special world, they have to use very special examples, although most of the time it is not necessary.

In an interview conducted by Tamara Susoi¹, director Dinu Cernescu tells how he befriended Jerzy Grotowski and Roman Polanski in Craiova. A while later, Dinu Cernescu wakes up one evening only to find Grotowski at his door, who asks him to let him sleep at his home, even if only on a mattress on the terrace. Then, the two go to Obor Market, because Jerzy wants to see Romania's pulse. It seems an almost trivial anecdote, but it shows us something fundamental: the fact that the great theatre director, the great director of theatrical experiments in Poland and Italy, Jerzy Grotowski, saw Dinu Cernescu as his equal. They were, for one another, Jerzy and Dinu, two people with the same profession, with common artistic interests, with common cultural inclinations, even if with so seemingly different creative paths.

And yet, things didn't reach us in this manner. Currently, in the catalogue of the "Lucian Blaga" University Library in Cluj-Napoca² there are 17 different books about Jerzy Grotowski, and in the National University of Theatre and Cinematography Library catalogue³ there are 26 different books written by or about the Polish director. Instead, in the same catalogue in Cluj, there are only two books written by or about Dinu Cernescu, while in the UNATC library catalogue there is only one. Why? Because even though they were both outstanding directors, even though they saw each other as equals, even though they both served their audiences with the same hard work, only one of them is seen as an exceptional director. And then only one deserves to be the subject of countless theses and research papers, thousands of articles. The other deserves only to be crushed by the golden myth of Western teatrology. We are going to analyse in detail in the next section who are these exceptional creators and why they are not representative for most creators in the world of theatre, especially in Romania.

¹ <https://www.b-critic.ro/spectacol/teatru/in-meseria-mea-orice-intalnire-este-importanta-intalnirile-iti-modeleaza-viata-fara-sa-stii/?fbclid=IwAR0JsfBTSpUVTHhglTaaqBTOdOuBmlP1I5kdDyMmKDFfrVr9saYLOdCyfbM> – accessed on 28.02.2022.

² <https://bcucluj.ro/> - accessed on 28.02.2022.

³ <http://biblioteca-virtuala.unatc.ro:8080/opac> - accessed on 28.02.2022.

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II. The great exceptions

In many books dedicated to the poetics of directors from a historical perspective⁴, we find a common narrative of the evolutive paths that directing took in the second half of the twentieth century, and the following directors seem never to be absent: Jerzy Grotowski, Tadeusz Kantor, then Eugenio Barba and, finally, Peter Brook. We choose not to go further in time than the 1950s, to Meyerhold, Artaud, Stanislavski or Appia, because many of the theses of these creators and pedagogues are the basis for most Western theatrical creation, but also because the temporal distance between us and them will make us see them *ex officio* as exceptions. There are many other examples that are almost fetishized in the literature, such as Arianne Mnouchkine, Judith Malina or Augusto Boal, but which we do not consider as influential as the four directors we will analyse further on. It may be a personal choice, but those said below certainly apply to „the smaller exceptions”.

Jerzy Grotowski is an exception because his troupe not only played at venues with only 30-40 spectators present, but he even stood in front of the entrance to the hall and selected the audience members who were to participate in the performances. This way of working and playing theatre comes from his belief in a poor theatre, starting from the premise that total theatre leads to falsehood on stage.⁵ Of course, many elements of his theatrical thought, such as the *via negativa* or the idea of working only the exercises he needs with the actor, so as not to spoil what the actor's nature does on his own, remain relevant ways of creation to this day, but only as an aesthetic means, not as a total vision of creation in theatre. Grotowski, along with his actors, devoted hours each day to individual training and months to creating a show.

In addition, in the director's late creative period, that of theatrical experiments, his troupe was not even conditioned by the creation of artistic products in the classical sense, opting for theatrical research based exclusively on the training of the actor and of non-actor participants. In the state theatre system, where actors work eight hours every day, including performing shows, when the troupe is forced to produce a show in 4-6 weeks, Grotowski's vision of theatre remains a utopia. In the independent theatre system, in which the production of shows is supported by audience members who buy 30-60 RON tickets in halls of no more than 80-100 people and, possibly, by

⁴ See MĂNIUȚIU, Anca, *Poetici Regizorale*, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, 2015, *passim.*; or MITTER, Shomit and SHEVSTOVA, Maria (ed.), *50 de regizori cheie ai secolului XX*, trad. Anca Ioniță and Cristina Modreanu, Bucharest: UNITEXT, 2020, *passim.*

⁵ GROTOWSKI, Jerzy, *Teatru și Ritual*, trad. Vasile Moga, pref. George Banu, Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, 2014, p. 66.

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a few projects on non-reimbursable funds, the working time of which the polish director took advantage is merely a distant dream.

The empty space, by Peter Brook, remains, along with *The actor's work with himself*, by K. S. Stanislavski, and *Theatre and its Double*, by Antonin Artaud, one of the most influential books on theatre ever written in Europe. This is due to Brook's principles, which to this day remain a worthy guide for any director: using only the means necessary for a show, focusing the show on the actor-spectator interaction and considering the word as a final product in theatre.⁶ Beyond these guiding principles, Peter Brook's theatre is an absolute exception, owing to, above all, the absolutely unique conditions of creation at the *Bouffes du Nord* theatre.

Brook's theatre, along with his philosophy about the performing arts, comes from the intense research work that the Anglo-French director has done with his troupe, especially in the area of the vocal construction of a theatrical product. He creates his great theatrical tours, such as the one in Africa, starting from the minimalism required by such a journey, but also from the story-telling techniques that he adapts in his spectacular creation. His most famous performances, such as the *Mahabharata*, have their origins in this research work, inaccessible to the vast majority of show creators. Which theatre director or manager in Romania or Europe can afford to suspend all theatre activity in order to do research in a distant country? Almost none. In the Romanian independent theatre, the only real research takes place in the area of documentary theatre, and there only because of the way in which the non-reimbursable financing projects are granted. Real theatrical research can only take place through projects or programs created people who understand the relevance of the theatrical act for the community, and these people are very rare. People who have the disposition and, more importantly, the status needed to be granted such funding are even rarer.

Eugenio Barba asserts himself as a man of isolated creation, of exception, in the prologue to *Burning the house*.⁷ There are, of course, principles of his work that are used by almost all Western directors, including: considering the interpretation of each spectator as a fundamental factor in understanding the theatrical act, the borrowing of oriental theatre techniques and the theatricality of traditional theatrical forms, but also the collaboration with the actor, seen as the author of the show, along with the playwright and director. Barba's theatre is, however, devoid of any connection with the reality of current theatrical practices. The long time dedicated to

⁶ BROOK, Peter, *Spațiul Gol*, trad. Monica Andronescu, pref. Andrei Șerban, Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, 2014, p. 22.

⁷ BARBA, Eugenio, *Casa în flăcări: despre regie și dramaturgie*, trad. Diana Cozma, Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, 2012, p. 13.

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a production, together with regarding research as a foundation for the creation of shows, remain extremely relevant in this respect. However, even more striking is his use of cultural exchange as a creative engine, but also the fact that his theatre troupe forms a community, as in the case of Grotowski. In the Romanian independent theatre, an important part of the actors also have an additional source of income, which makes them often participate only sporadically in the troupe's activities. In the state theatre system, the actors' pride and the dynamics of the cultural market make it impossible to create a community. On the contrary, actors in the state theatre often become only theatrical functionaries. In both variants of the institutional structure, the idea of investing in continuous professional training, in long-term workshops with the masters of traditional theatre, is something that cannot be funded and that cannot be accommodated by the tight creation schedules.

The last exception that we want to discuss in this work is a thousandfold more difficult to define than the other three: the exception of the unique theatre creator. The presence of Tadeusz Kantor on stage, as the author of the show, along with the actors, was a unique event in Western theatre. So unique that it could not even be reproduced in his own company, which tells the story of how the group's shows, once Kantor had died, were simply not the same, although they were performed in the same way. Kantor was the artist captive in his own work of art,⁸ but, also the exponent of the work of art defined by the artist, captive in the artist. His aesthetics, called "the theatre of death" are defined by the co-presence along with the actor, on stage, of a still effigy, but also by a mechanized style of movement performed by the actors, which evokes the non-life in our daily lives. However, his theatre is unique, as is evidenced by the witnesses of his performances. He is an exception not because of institutional structures, not because of funding or rigid theatrical thinking. It is a theatre that cannot be reproduced in today's show-business simply because Tadeusz Kantor was a unique man, as were many artists over time, such as Hieronymus Bosch or John Bonham.

III. The causes and consequences of exceptions

The exposition of the causes and consequences of focusing on exceptions in the aesthetic discourses which we undertake in this paper is by no means exhaustive. Our aim is to highlight how varied these causes are and how persistent the effects of the identified trend can be. It is important to ask ourselves why is it necessary to discuss the inclination of theatrical theory towards unique cases in artistic creation. We believe that it is relevant mainly in terms of theatrical pedagogy. The young

⁸ PAAVOLAINEN, Teemu – *Theatre/Ecology/Cognition, theorizing Performer-Object Interaction in Grotowski, Kantor and Meyerhold*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, p. 205.

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theatre artist develops by talking almost exclusively about something fascinating, exceptional. All of the above directors have an almost mystical aura of writing, completely magnetic. They not only become fascinating as models who supply the student with specific theatrical techniques or aesthetic means, but become themselves the goals of the young artist. He will evolve following professional models that can never be reached and will suffer an inferiority complex for a relevant period of his career, knowing inside himself that he will never be able to rise to the rank of Grotowski, Brook, Barba or Kantor. They, like the young student now, could never rise to the rank of Stanislavsky, Artaud or Appia in their careers. Because the myth can never be overcome. This is the real risk of creating cultural myths.

In contrast, in theatrical pedagogy, too little is said about those exceptional creators who can be taken as role models. We are referring here, mainly, to the Romanian pedagogical space, knowing that the situation is radically different in other countries, such as Germany. One such theatrical creator is Robert Wilson, whose approach to the stage image palpably influences contemporary theatre creators such as Pippo Delbono, Romeo Castellucci or Thomas Ostermeier. Interestingly, Robert Wilson gives birth to few mimetic trends, unlike the legendary directors who lead to the emergence of loyal descendants who just want to repeat what their master did, as happened with Grotowski or Stanislavski. Robert Wilson is recognized as a deserving director, practicing theatre in ways that can be implemented in any sufficiently funded theatre system, so he cannot be elevated to the rank of super-human. Another example of this is Lev Dodin, whose theatrical thinking is extremely relevant to contemporary realist-psychological theatre. Approaching the Romanian cultural space, we hear very little in our training of directors Radu Penciulescu and David Esrig, who were the founders of the pedagogical system of theatre directing, which influenced entire generations of Romanian directors.

The main cause of focusing theatrical theory on exceptions, but also those who suffer the most from this inclination are us, those in academic research. We do this because the exception cannot be disputed. To say that Western theatre must be acted out without stage lighting and massive sets would be an easy-to-dispute statement, especially in Germany. To say that Brook, Barba or Grotowski professed this type of theatre and that their theatre should be a model for us is a much harder statement to dismantle. The moment we bring the subjective thought into our discourse, the personal truth prevails, even under the guise of the archival objectivism of research. We are afraid of being fought against as researchers, for fear that, in a field where all the creators of good theatre have a place of their own, we will have no arguments to support our theses. The only one who can say definitively that theatre should be a certain way and not another is the creator, and the theatre researcher is too rarely a creator in his turn. We take refuge in talking about specific cases, almost unreplicable,

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ultimately abandoning our responsibility: to make conceptual delimitations of current theatrical practices in order to develop existing techniques and methods.

The main effect of the golden myth of Western theatre is that theatrical theory almost never speaks of what is happening in the theatres around us. Brook, Grotowski, Kantor and Barba, together with Mnouchkine, Wilson or even Silviu Purcărete created wonderful shows, which opened the way for other theatre practitioners. However, 99.9% of the world's theatre-goers have never seen performances created by any of the above. For them, after all, the vast majority of academic writing about theatre is useless or, at most, indirect. In Pitești, Matei Varodi was the director of the theatre for decades. In Petroșani, the hired director of the theatre was Horațiu Apan, as well, for a long time. Alexandru Vasilachi is employed as a director in the Botoșani theatre. For the spectators in these communities, the reality of show making is not defined by Edward Gordon Craig, Brecht or Piscator, but by these three Romanian directors. And yet, almost nothing in Romanian academic writing reflects this reality.

Why don't we revolt then? Why haven't we revolted so far against saying too little about the vast majority of shows in the world? Partly because we suffer from the inferiority complex I mentioned above. And partly because we are pleased with this situation. Theatre managers hide their poverty and often the inability to obtain the necessary funding for productions behind big words like, „I want a show like Brook's or Grotowski's, in which to focus on working with the actor, not on the set and costumes.” As if the shows in which there is a large-scale set design and costumes are not created with the same techniques together with the actors and as if a show like Brook's or Grotowski's would be possible in the Romanian theatre.

And for us, the creators, it is very easy to hide behind the big exceptions. The director may be upset with the actors in his cast because they do not understand the directions or concepts, because it would be natural for them to have read them in the books of great directors, hiding, in fact, his own inability to connect with the actor in front of him. The actor, however, can hide his own inability and lack of training behind a method. „I can't just do what the director tells me, because I have to show feelings, I believe what Stanislavski writes.” The theatre theorist can hide his own lack of content in a review of a show by trying to identify quotes and techniques in the performance, completely forgetting the experience of the spectator next to him, for whom he writes that piece. This is how all of us contemporary theatre creators hide in the shadow of the great titans of Western theatre. And here too we dry out, like flowers crushed by the shadow.

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IV. Conclusions

Emerging theatre does not have to be just a unique theatre. Once upon a time, in the Western theatre, the idea that experimental theatrical practices were the true emerging theatre became popular. Marina Abramovici has never created an emerging form in the performing arts, and we say that without trying to devalue her creation in any way. She created by the rule of exception. However, the type of performance she created has not (yet?) been adopted throughout the European cultural space and is a viable trend only in large urban centers, for a niche audience. Emerging theatre is the theatre that can become a viable option for a significant portion of show producers in a region. The one who creates a theatre performance that can be called emergent is the one who does not overthrow the institutional structures in which performances are created, the one who does not want to revolutionize just for revolution's sake, but the one who really manages to create forms or techniques that adapt the show for today's audience. The reason we need emerging theatre is not to innovate for the sake of innovation, but to not lose our audience. The audience is changing, and theatre has to do so along with it. Yes, theatre educates its audience, but the needs of the audience generate theatre.

The tendency of the academic space to focus its attention on exceptional creators is, in our opinion, undeniable. It is a natural inclination, because it is normal for these theatre creators with a magnetic artistic force to attract our attention and make us want to study them. However, we consider that the proportion in which we deal with these exceptions is completely out of place, compared to those who dedicate their work for the benefit of the average spectator. Those who keep the magic of theatre alive are the sometimes unknown directors who work in theatres around the world. They are the real creators of the emerging theatre, because they are the ones who are in real and constant contact with the needs of their audiences.

When discussing emerging theatre, it is crucial that we aim to identify in opposition to what it is emerging. What are the theatrical practices from which the new aesthetic premises are delimited? Our sincere answer is extremely short: we do not know. Because the true emerging theatre, the one that happens in the theatres around us, is suffocated by the emerging theatre as proclaimed by theatre theorists. The real currents of the theatre remain hidden under the shadows of the theatre's titans. 20th century European theatre was not just defined by Kantor or Grotowski or Brook. It was defined, at the same level of artistic quality, by David Esrig, Radu Penciulescu, Lucian Giurchescu and others. It is a biased list, in line with our concerns, and we must acknowledge it. We believe that the new emerging theatre, today's emerging theatre, produced every day in every theatre in the world, should be defined in contrast to the old, emerging theatre of exceptions. Today's emerging theatre is the anti-emerging theatre.

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