

## On pedagogy: between mark/model and the broken mirror

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**Abstract:** In trying to discover ourselves as artists, we are too often on the verge of making mistakes, or sometimes we may even commit acts that we will never be able to motivate or repair. There are many such acts, but two stand out among them. The first, as a common feature of every generation, is letting go of the past. The second, probably more dangerous than the first, coagulates in the future artist's desire to act similarly to the one who is successful or to the one whose work is said to represent the model and, therefore, success. On the wire stretched between these points each one of us dances at some point, until, if we're lucky, we fall and go our separate ways.

**Keywords:** school, theatre directing, spirit, university, Stanislavski.

Motto: „Sfîindu-se Îngerul Morții să culeagă ultima suflare de pe gura lui Moise, Dumnezeu a convocat în divan, rând pe rând, ca să-și deie cu părerea, pe lângă toate puterile divine și malefice, și toate sfintele litere cu care s-a alcătuit Tora... toate! Și toți și toate au fost întru aceeași părere: că Moise – chiar și Moise – împlinindu-i-se sorocul, se cade să moară. Și pentru că nimeni în Cer și pe Pământ nu voia, nu putea sau nu cuteza să-i ia sufletul, Dumnezeu, El însuși – binecuvântat fie numele Lui – s-a aplecat să-l sărute, și sărutându-l pe gură i-a luat sufletul.”

(Alexandru Sever, *Ordine și dezordine*, 2002, București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române, p. 5.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Ashamed of the Angel of Death to take the last breath from the mouth of Moses, God summoned to the divan, one by one, to give his opinion, in addition to all the divine and evil powers, and all the holy letters with which the Torah was composed... all of it! And all of them were of the same opinion: that Moses - even Moses - when his age was fulfilled, he fell down to die. And because no one in Heaven and Earth would, could or dared to take his soul, God, Himself - blessed be His name - bent down to kiss him, and kissing him on the mouth took his soul." - Alexandru Sever, *Ordine și dezordine (Order and disorder – our tran.)*, 2002, Bucharest: Romanian Cultural Foundation Publishing House, p. 5.)

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1. When we were studying at the Faculty of Law in Klausenburg<sup>2</sup>, one of our professors of civil law told us that Nicolae Titulescu<sup>3</sup> reread, at the beginning of each judicial year, the *General Theory of Obligations*. This act certainly had a purpose, because, for a lawyer pleading in the area of civil cases, remembering the details of such an important legal matter was essential. Over time, starting from this example, I developed an addiction to reading, or better said, to re-reading: every year I reread *The Actor's work with himself*, Stanislavski's book so quoted by the international theatre world, even the Romanian one. At first, I did as any student would do, but as time went on the reading became more careful and more convinced of the importance of the book. Maybe it's a lack in my readings or theatre culture, but nowhere else in the world, besides in Romania, have I seen young theatre people, but also more mature ones alike, refuse the writing of the Russian pedagogue more violently. We are tired of Stanislavski; and that's why we don't even read his works anymore, a fact that would still leave room for a rereading, in the terms in which Matei Călinescu talks about these two actions. We no longer read him because we heard something disturbing about Stanislavski: he was born in the century before our teachers were born. That makes it unimportant, and stale, and we have no time to pay even little attention to the past when we are busy with the future that those who read Stanislavski will be a part of: no one can remind us of this rejection. Is the school to blame for the oblivion into which Stanislavski falls, for example, or more directly: is it enough for a field to be uncultivated in order to be sown<sup>4</sup>? The answers vary, depending on our own opinions: some of those who have read Stanislavski are advocates of knowing the past in order to be able to maybe reject it, and the others, who have not read him, say that they do not need the past to alter their own artistic path. In fact, to use an expression from the field of Titulescu's interests, we believe the contemporary space of theatrical pedagogy, especially regarding that dedicated to the theatre director, is defined by the unnatural act of doubting something, even rejecting it, before you come to believe in anything at all. It's disturbing and dangerous. Disturbing because by removing the lessons of the past the Delphic urge may not have a chance to be achieved. Dangerous because nothing can make us go further than the experience of our ancestors. We do not want to insist on these considerations or try to canonize the

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<sup>2</sup> The German name of the city of Cluj-Napoca.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolae Titulescu (1882, Craiova, Kingdom of Romania -1941, Cannes, France) was a Romanian politician, jurist and diplomat noted internationally as Minister of Foreign Affairs and permanent delegate of Romania to the League of Nations in Geneva, for which he was twice elected president of this international forum, in 1930 and 1931. From 1935 he was elected full member of the Romanian Academy.

<sup>4</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Crisis of the American Spirit*, Bucharest: Humanitas, translation and notes by Mona Antohi, 2017, *passim*.

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experience of the past, but the metaphor offered by Radu Penciulescu<sup>5</sup> regarding flight is edifying: in order to be able to take off, the plane needs land.

For our praxis, both as a theatre director and as a theatre director's pedagogue, meetings mattered a lot; but we have now reached an age where meetings, or rather their outcome, interest us, and we also understand the nature of our duty to confess. We can admit that our teachers, like Stanislavski, of course, left a mark on our spirit. The engram of these meetings does not touch us. It only allows us to distance ourselves, a distance that comes from knowledge. In the absence of encounters, in our opinion, we are unable to reject, unable to assign labels because we are unable to know and understand. It is true that we do not want to talk about a generalization, but in the last five, even ten years, I have met future theatre artists who had neither the spiritual strength nor the cultural force to be able to take upon themselves a future from which the past is absent, even so, with a beneficent shadow cast over the present. We are convinced that the purpose of the university is to prepare citizens who can meet future demands that today we cannot even imagine, but we are equally convinced that, at the university level, our obligation could be translated to an increased effort that we must bring to *promoting a liberal education*<sup>6</sup>, which, it is very true, in the absence of strong models, will only be a copy of the action of some ad hoc masters. We say this being sure that in the sphere of theatrical pedagogy, especially the director's pedagogy, we do not teach what we want, nor what we know: we teach what we are<sup>7</sup>. Perhaps the values of the present are strong enough to transform preferences into merits from which the future theatre director, and indeed any theatre artist, will eventually build. However, we doubt all our actions as a director, but also as a theatre pedagogue, and we completely agree with what Allan Bloom<sup>8</sup> said in his book about how universities have betrayed democracy and impoverished the souls of students:

"We should not think our way is better than others. The intention is not so much to teach the students about other times and places as to make

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<sup>5</sup> Radu Penciulescu (1930, Bucharest-2019, Stockholm) theatre and television director, professor at the Bucharest Institute of theatre and Cinematic Art until 1973. From 1974 he settled in Sweden where he was an acting professor at several universities. He carried out an important pedagogical activity in Europe and the USA. Among his students we mention Andrei Șerban and Aureliu Manea.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>7</sup> The thought belongs to the French thinker and politician Jean Juarez.

<sup>8</sup> Allan Bloom (September 14, 1930, Indianapolis, USA-October 7, 1992, Chicago, USA) essayist and university professor at the University of Chicago. Author of the volume *The Crisis of the American Spirit*, in 1987, a book that still stirs up controversy today.

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them aware of the fact that their preferences are only that—accidents of their time and place.”<sup>9</sup>

The difficulty arises, it's very true when we try to instill in the future theatre director the possibility of assuming his own path, a path that must be protected, but also guided, cultivated, but also sometimes censored. Personal preferences will prove themselves in these conditions lacking the substance necessary for each leap, a substance that also proves itself insufficient, part of the voice of each student, and in the circle that closes between one's own taste and the craft's foundation, the need to know the past, seemingly uninteresting, thus becomes an imperative. Everything starts with trust. Without the student's confidence that coming to university offers him more than propaganda rooted in the student's desires, nothing will be disciplined, nothing will turn into a disciplined, and therefore assumed preference. Conditioned by the existence of a said trust, the university is obliged to give up the temptation to satisfy the preferences/tastes of the student for the sole purpose of transforming the student into statistical data. We propose, to achieve this desideratum, adopting the "Odysseus impulse", as defined by Allan Bloom:

"Thus students, and the rest of us, are deprived of the primary excitement derived from the discovery of diversity, the *impulse of Odysseus* (s.n.), who [...] traveled the world to see the virtues and vices of men. [...] True openness is the accompaniment of the desire to know, hence of the awareness of ignorance."<sup>10</sup>

Openness, undisguised in anything, is therefore the obligation of the academic sphere. Once enacted, openness will not allow us, the teachers, nor the students, to ignore each other; and ud, the teachers, to ignore the preferences of the students; and them, the students, to ignore the past represented by the teachers. For the theatre director's pedagogy, and we are inclined to believe that for the entire theatrical pedagogy, ignoring each other was/is a tradition, just as another canon was/is the presence of the dead master:

"Thus there are two kinds of openness, the openness of indifference — promoted with the twin purposes of humbling our intellectual pride and letting us be whatever we want to be, just as long as we don't want to

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<sup>9</sup> Allan Bloom, *op. cit.*, page 23.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, page 38.

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be knowers—and the openness that invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude, for which history and the various cultures provide a brilliant array of examples for examination."<sup>11</sup>

As stated above, we do not agree with the search for certainty. In theatrical pedagogy, but also in general theatrical practice, certainty leads to stiffness, to falling asleep, leads to the easy solution, or to copying, even under the often-found formula of self-copying. We, the teachers, and in many cases we, the theatre practitioners, actors, and theatre directors, want to be the holders of certainty, a situation in which we could sit quietly in our positions in universities and theatres. By copying, students also desire certainty, the all-encompassing success. Open indifference is more and more common, or maybe it never went away. Drama school students parade around saying that they don't know and don't need to know, that they don't need anything but themselves, even if they lack skills, and in immediate succession claim their absolute right to be anything, even if they lack knowledge. Of course, we repeat, this is not a generalization. We are not infrequently in the presence of young people who are really looking for an answer to the Delphic advice, in the vicinity of minds and souls who do not see knowledge in general and knowledge of the past in particular as a waste of time dedicated to their becoming.

2. Is Stanislavski a model, a brilliant example of the contemporary theatre person? Can Stanislavski still be a model for the extreme contemporary theatre practitioner? Here are two questions that the aspiring theatre artist might try to answer. We will not say that it is necessary, so as not to draw an obligation here, but as there will be no reader of this material who will try to reread Stanislavski in order to be able to give a reply to our concerns, I nevertheless risk a challenge. It doesn't belong to me. I saw it at another great pedagogue-director of the last century, who actually studied acting; let's call it "Grotowski's challenge". The well-known Polish theatre man, much more accepted by the newer generations of students and directors, launched a real competition. Speaking about what influenced him from Stanislavski's practice, he invited us to write him a letter to offer him our own answers to the question: Is Stanislavski important for the new theatre? An act that could free us all from the grip we feel when Stanislavski's system is still taught in school or when, with academic rigor, theatre history teachers mention him in class. The letter should be a work of exorcism, of recognition of the lack of sympathy towards the stanislavskian proposal; it could also contain the expression of attachment to the entirety of Stanislavski's work

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, page 40.

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or to a part of it. We believe that the departure from Stanislavski's proposals has its origins in the ways in which his method was taught. The exaggeration of the segment that spoke about affective memory, but also about finding in the intimate life of the actor all the resources to configure the role, did nothing but emotionally oversaturate the stage work and distance the future actor, or the one who is already working, from a knowledge real of the Stanislavski continent.

We believe that Grotowski's entire written and practical work is a letter addressed by him to Stanislavski. The work of the one who introduced the notion of "poor theatre", urging his contemporaries to stop for a moment on the need to impoverish the theatre performance, was one that can be defined as practice as research. Just like Stanislavski, Grotowski records in writing the result of his work after explorations in the laboratory, saying:

“I was nurtured by Stanislavski; his continuous search, the systematic renewal of his methods of observation, and his dialectical relationship with his own previous work made him my personal ideal. Stanislavski asked the fundamental methodological questions. However, our solutions differ greatly from his - sometimes we come to opposite conclusions.”<sup>12</sup>

As we can see, Grotowski not only confesses to having fed on the output of Stanislavski's work, but he also reinforces the action by adopting the "dialectical relationship with one's own activity", which Stanislavski used throughout his teaching career. Sure, Stanislavski's theatre was a rich one, and the director of the *13 Row theatre* in Opole promoted a performance formula from which wealth had to be eliminated, but this act does not prevent Grotowski from recognizing that the fundamental methodological questions in the theatre were first raised by Stanislavski. The author of the show *The Constant Prince* does not hide from the one who had become his ideal and contradicts him by building a work that answers new questions:

"Can theatre exist without costumes and sets? Yes, maybe.

Can it exist without music to accompany the action? Yes.

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<sup>12</sup> Jerzy, Grotowski. „Towards a poor theatre” in *Towards a poor theatre*. Bucharest: Unitext Publishing House, Magister series, translated by George Banu and Mirella Nedelcu Pătureanu, Preface by Peter Brook. Postface by George Banu, 1998, page 9.

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Can it exist without light effects? Of course.

And with no text? Yes;"<sup>13</sup>

In his reply<sup>14</sup> to Stanislavski, Grotowski insists on several aspects that we will mention here, trying to persuade future theatre directors to at least read this material. Grotowski was convinced that we humans "are condemned to restlessness"<sup>15</sup>. Not infrequently we have wondered what is the reason why a theatre directing student abandons the commitment he shows during the entrance exam or that he simulated at that time. It's clear now: he gets laid back far too quickly; he confuses being accepted at university with the end point of his training. Our mentor used to say, I make it my duty to remind the student of this, when asked how many directors come out of directing school, that as many come out as come in. The lack of restlessness makes students lay down their arms, and turns them into prisoners of certainties that have their source in the impression that the only thing they have to do is what they want. We call Grotowski's anxiety *attachment*; other times we call it *essential living*. This way of living makes us remain awake in face of the possibility of transmitting it is a desideratum for which it is worth remaining a pedagogue in a theatre school. At the intersection of Stanislavski's work with Grotowski's work, the Polish director places: (1) the open attitude, which allows the rediscovery of every stage of life; (2) a continuous self-reform; (3) an attitude towards work: study versus creative process; (4) the need for permanent training; (5) defining a score comprised of physical actions or a stream of organized impulses; (6) the situation in the circumstances proposed by the role; (7) emotional memory vs. body-memory; (8) the high treason of the students; (9) theatre is a road to knowledge, to life, therefore; (10) "Why ask whether Stanislavski is important to the new theatre? Give your own answer to Stanislavski - not based on your ignorance of the field, but on your practical knowledge of it. Open yourself to existence. You're either a creator or you're not. If so, in one way or another, you overcome it, if not, you are true to it, but you are barren."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Jerzy, Grotowski. „The new testament of theatre” in *Towards a poor theatre*. Bucharest: Unitext Publishing House, Magister series, translated by George Banu and Mirella Nedelcu Pătoreanu, Preface by Peter Brook. Postface by George Banu, 1998, page 19.

<sup>14</sup> Jerzy Grotowski. „Answer to Stanislavski” in *Theatre and ritual. Essential writing*. Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, translated by Vasile Moga, Preface by George Banu, 2013, pages 236-262.

<sup>15</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *op. cit.*, page 257.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, page 257.



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In fact, almost all theatre directors who have acquired a working method, and we emphasize the word *acquired*, admit that they have been influenced by Stanislavski. If I were to mention only one of the most important European directors of the moment, I would have to quote what Thomas Ostermeier states:

"My method, if I may say so, is based on the ideas of the greatest theatre people of the 20th century. Its first pillar is Stanislavski's analysis of the situation and the dramatic process. The second, is a method developed by myself, storytelling. The third is the exercises of Sanford Meisner, a great pedagogue in the field of acting in the United States, known mostly for cinematography. The fourth pillar is related to what we might call a methodology of rhythm."<sup>17</sup>

3. In March 2016 we were in a theatre in Romania and we were staging a show based on a text by Georges Feydeau. Rehearsals went on as always: sometimes it was good. One morning I was twisting two words in my mind: essential directing. I understood quite quickly that I had dreamed these words. We stubbornly searched for several days if the two words had been inspired by recent readings. I have not found anything. We wanted to define the new notion. For this, we had to say, to begin with, that theatre directing was a thing that we had not done until that moment. After a few years, in 2021, we set ourselves a task: to give a definition of essential directing. From this work came a definition of theatre directing. Thus, at this moment, I can say that, for me, theatre directing is the revelation of one of the possibilities to balance the force resulting from the sum of the energies released by the fictional presences represented by the dramatic characters, which can be found in a text intended for the stage, and the power gathered in the concrete existences represented by the conscious bodies of the performers. *The essential directing consists of disciplining this balance.*

We would like these lines to open a dialogue. For, at a time when everyone is talking about the death of directing and the disappearance of the director, about how the theatre director confuses the actor, it is at least strange to teach directing at the university sitting comfortably in our professorial chairs. From the broken mirror, the model looks at us with multiplied sadness.

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<sup>17</sup> "The partner as impulse", a conference held by Thomas Ostermeier on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2015 at the National Conservatory of Dramatic Art. The work was published in Thomas, Ostermeier. *Theatre and fear*. Bucharest: Nemira Publishing House, translated by Vlad Russo, Preface by George Banu. 2016. Pages 100-110. The quote can be found on page 103. Our translation.



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