Slices of Life Mirrored on Stage

Diana COZMA •

Abstract: The present paper aims at a brief analysis of some of the ways of mirroring, both in a dramatic text and in a performance, slices of life from a certain historical period. Thus, we put into discussion some of Molière's reflections on theatre inserted in his plays conceived as *work in progress*, respectively canvases completed during rehearsals with his actors and performances. They are texts that present vices, faults, prejudices of men of the playwright's age. At the same time, we notice that theatre as a mirror has the capacity of reproducing on stage and commenting social micro-realities, revealing mentalities and behaviours that prevail in certain historical periods. From this perspective, we can consider the plays/performances as texts with a historical character. Furthermore we notice that in the immense mirror of the realistic theatre, the world is reflected in all its complexity, the human beings are embodied, with precision and finesse, in credible and recognizable characters. In this respect, we note the significant attention paid by the playwright/director to a quasi-photographic and truthful reproduction of reality.
Keywords: mirroring, realism, slice of life, vice, veracity

Molière's dramaturgical interest is centred on treating in a satirical way some behavioural types reflected in a character's speech, posture, way of walking. The playwright, we are told, created a *comedy of manners*, due to which a liberation from vices could be achieved through laughter and distancing. In this regard, unquestionably, Molière's plays are part of the great human comedy in which laughter and crying intertwine and which address the consciousness of the spectator in order to make him recognize his vices, faults, preconceptions, and eliminate them. Therefore, a faithful reproduction of reality marked by truthfulness is found in Molière's dramaturgy who conceives his characters so that they can be recognized: "When you draw heroes, you do as you like. They are fancy portraits wherein no real likeness is looked for. You have but to follow the riotous flight of your imagination, which often drops truth to snatch at the marvellous. But when you depict men it must be done faithfully. Such portraits must resemble men and women; they are useless unless the people of your age are recognisable therein"[1]. This way of relating to reality, of scenically incarnating the virtues and vices of *the people of one's age*, of exposing the *evil* manifest on all levels of social organization, reaches a climax in

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• Ph.D. associate professor habil., Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeș-Bolyai University
[1] Molière, *School for Wives Criticised* in *The Plays of Molière*, vol. III, translated by A.R. Waller, John Grant, Edinburgh, 1926, p. 175

Tartuffe. In the preface of the play, Molière remarks: "If the purpose of comedy is to correct the vices of men, I do not see why some comedies should be privileged to do so, others not. To allow this would produce results far more dangerous to the State than any other. We have evidence that the stage has great virtue as a public corrective. But the finest shafts of serious morality are often less effective than those of satire; nothing corrects the majority of men so well as a picture of their faults. The strongest means of attacking vice is by exposing it to the laughter of the world. We can endure reproof, but we cannot endure ridicule. We are willing to be wicked, but we will not be absurd"[2]. In order for his play to be convincing, Molière's actor has the duty to faithfully present the role of the character, paying increased attention to a true reproduction of its utterance, posture, gestures, scenic actions according to its *character, social rank, vices, inclinations, attitudes, behaviours, physiognomy*.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we find the same major interest in identifying and unmasking vices, social injustices, mainly, of the companies that practice a *rough theatre* characterized by Peter Brook as follows: "Lightheartedness and gaiety feed it, but so does the same energy that produces rebellion and opposition. This is a militant energy: it is the energy of anger, sometimes the energy of hate. The creative energy behind the richness of invention in the Berliner Ensemble's production of *The Days of the Commune* is the same energy that could man the barricades: the energy of *Arturo Ui* could go straight to war. The wish to change society, to get it to confront its eternal hypocrisies, is a great powerhouse. Figaro or Falstaff or Tartuffe lampoon and debunk through laughter, and the author's purpose is to bring about a social change"[3]. In this regard, we refer, as an example, to the San Francisco Mime Troupe company, founded in 1959, which is a proponent of a political, protest theatre, considered to be capable of generating changes in spectators and, therefore, in society. If Molière believed that theatre had the ability to make the individual recognize the vices mirrored on stage and thus try to eliminate them, the San Francisco Mime Troupe, in turn, believes in the force of theatre to bring about changes in the life of the individual. One can identify common ground between Molière's way of conceiving a dramatic text/performance based on certain topics of interest and that of the San Francisco company such as: the diversity of situations, the popularity of characters subject to criticism and mockery, the colouring, the verve and freshness of the language, the vivid dialogues, the sharpness of the lines, the liberating laughter. Regarding the actors' play, we note the practice of a natural style, marked by directness, which is based on character studies, in which the observation of individuals in society sometimes is instrumental in sketching characters. The actors of the San Francisco Mime Troupe company are strongly influenced by Bertolt Brecht's way of thinking about theatre so that, for example, the assertion "The fate of

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[2] Molière, *Preface to Tartuffe* in *The Plays of Molière*, vol. II, translated by Katharine Prescott Wormeley, , Brown, and Company, Boston Little 1909, pp. 32-33

[3] Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space*, Penguin Books, London, 1990, p. 79

man is man" becomes leitmotivic and contributes decisively to the process of coagulating a *revolutionary consciousness*. Clearly, the members of the company believe that the nature of theatre lies in conflict and change, and in their attempts at investigating the American society, following the model of the characters from the *commedia dell'arte*, they end up creating American characters, such as *the capitalist, the young naive man, the strong woman*. So, we could say that their performances belong to the *rough theatre* or the popular theatre that "Through the ages it has taken many forms, and there is only one factor that they all have in common – roughness. Salt, sweat, noise, smell: the theatre that's not in a theatre, the theatre on carts, on wagons, on trestles, audiences standing, drinking, sitting round tables, audiences joining in, answering back; theatre in back rooms, upstairs rooms, barns; the one-night stands, the torn sheet pinned up across the hall, the battered screen to conceal the quick changes – that one generic term, *theatre*, covers all this and the sparkling chandeliers too"[4]. They are performances marked by vitality, humour and which *deliberately avoid ballet, opera, symphony, theatre based on pre-existing texts, using, instead, techniques from commedia dell'arte, circus, puppet performances, music hall, vaudeville, parades, carnival, musicians who sing on the streets, fanfare, comic strips, movies melodrama and other forms of celebration*[5]. Like the actors of the Living Theatre, they aim for a theatre which is "anti-authoritarian, anti-traditional, anti-pomp, anti-pretence"[6]. Shank notes that for a while *they adapted texts written by Molière, Goldoni, Machiavelli, played in the manner of commedia dell'arte, with stock characters, using masks, exaggerated movement and voice, incorporating news events of the day, allowing improvised reactions during the performance*[7].

In the twenty-first century, as regards *verbatim theatre*, a current form of political theatre, we note that the interest of theatre practitioners is to reproduce as accurately as possible a slice of social reality or an event that directly marks the life of a community. Thus, the theatre is getting closer and closer to a more faithful reflection of reality reproducing with maximum precision the words, modes of utterance, behavioural tics, attitudes of the people who participated in the event reproduced on stage. Through this form of documentary theatre, certain facts, events, life situations are explored, related by people who participated directly in them, precisely with the purpose of making them scenically in a veridical way. We notice that in this case we are no longer dealing with a mirror of time, but with a shard of mirror in which a certain social event is presented. We are told that sometimes *verbatim theatre* as a form of documentary theatre also appeals to newspaper articles, diary fragments, and is not based solely on the transcription of interviews taken to

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[4] Ibidem, p. 73
[5] Shank, Theodore, "Political Theatre as Popular Entertainment, The San Francisco Mime Troupe" in *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 18, no. 1, Popular Entertainments, Mar., 1974, p. 112
[6] Brook, Peter, 1990, op. cit., p. 76
[7] Shank, Theodore, 1974, art. cit., p. 112

people associated with the event represented on stage. The actors therefore incarnate real, recognizable people; imitating these people can go as far as an exact reproducing of words, intonations, voice modulations, pauses, postures, gestures, actions and in this respect we observe the tendency to copy the reality to the smallest detail. It seems that these stories of the performances, created from the words of the interviewees, apparently give a greater dose of veracity to the scenic actions. We can't help but notice that the verbatim theatre performances are, most of the time, niche performances that are addressed exclusively to contemporary spectators with the event narrated on stage; they are like fashion products designed for one season and nothing more.

Another way of transposing a slice of life into dramaturgical or scenic forms that we aim to briefly analyse belongs to the realistic theatre. As regards the realistic plays, Kenneth Tynan states: "A realistic play is defined, basically, by the fact that characters and incidents are visibly rooted in life. Gorky, Chekhov, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, Brecht, O'Casey, Osborne and Sartre wrote realistic plays (…) a human vision of the world is expressed in them with words of all, which we can all recognize"[8]. In this realistic dramaturgical universe, we are often presented with lonely characters, subject to failures, who sometimes experience episodes of anger and depression, in a continuous conflict with themselves and others, whose behaviour is marked by negativism, cynicism, alternations of violence with weakness. The characters remind us of superfluous beings or beings caught in the net of illusions, as in Chekhov's play, *The Three Sisters*, which "gives the impression of life unfolding as though a tape-recorder had been left running. If examined carefully it will be seen to be built of coincidences as great as in Feydeau – the vase of flowers that overturns, the fire-engine that passes at just the right moment; the word, the interruption, the distant music, the sound in the wings, the entrance, the farewell – touch by touch, they create through the language of illusions an overall illusion of a slice of life"[9]. Among the themes subject to reflection are war, the meaninglessness of life, family conflicts, alienation, personality disorders, sexuality, addiction to alcohol and drugs, revolt doomed to failure, social injustices, poetic justice. They are texts/performances whose scenes are arranged in a narrative thread that respects the cause-and-effect equation. Thus, in front of the spectators, the curtain rises above a scene populated by ordinary people, victims of war, as in John Arden's play, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance*, in which the reality of war treated in realistic key contains the seeds of a *rough theatre*, for the play "can be taken amongst many other meanings as an illustration of how true theatre comes into being. Musgrave faces a crowd in a market place on an improvised stage and he attempts to communicate as forcibly as possible his sense of the horror and futility of war. The demonstration that he improvises is like a genuine piece of popular

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[8] Ionesco, Eugène, *Note și contranote*, traducere și cuvânt introductiv de Ion Pop, Humanitas, București, 1992, p. 109

[9] Brook, Peter, 1990, op. cit., p. 89

theatre, his props are machine-guns, flags, and a uniformed skeleton that he hauls aloft. When this does not succeed in transmitting his complete message to the crowd, his desperate energy drives him to find still further means of expression and in a flash of inspiration he begins a rhythmic stamp, out of which develops a savage dance and chant. Sergeant Musgrave's dance is a demonstration of how a violent need to project a meaning can suddenly call into existence a wild unpredictable form"[10].

Also, the scene mirrors the lives of beings who are weakened, missed, caught in Bovarism, or sometimes in illusory realities induced by alcohol and drugs, such as Blanche Dubois in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams or beings who, according to Eugene O'Neill, *could have been, but for them it is too late now*, like Mary Tyrone from *Long Day's Journey into Night*, or beings who even though breathe an air of a rebellion are doomed to feel suffocated, such as Jimmy Porter in *Look Back in Anger* by John Osborne. We also note that we are also dealing with facts reconstructed from historical periods marked by savage cruelty, such as the one in Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, a tragedy that speaks more than just of acts of witchcraft and revenge, evoking a terrifying episode in human history. As the author states, it is a play that "seems to present the same primeval structure of human sacrifice to the furies of fanaticism and paranoia that goes on repeating itself forever as though imbedded in the brain of social man"[11].

What is significant is how the playwright, *a ruthless revealer of hidden truth and a mighty destroyer of idols[12]*, relates to his own creation, which is his condition as an artist who observes and transfigures slices of life, existential situations, in times of rebellion, of emancipation, of recovery from traumas suffered due to wars, social injustices, discriminations, experiences that mark human beings. And in this regard, for example, Henrik Ibsen notes: "Yes, gentlemen, nobody can picture poetically anything for which he himself has not to a certain degree and at least at times served as a model. And who is the man among us who has not now and then felt and recognized within himself a contradiction between word and deed, between will and duty, between life and theory in general"[13]? We emphasize, after all, the necessity of the creator to live as many experiences as possible to transfigure into his texts. At the same time, for a credible recreating of a slice of life, the playwright must consider building characters that have a counterpart in reality as such. As a result, just as, in life, the human being is subject to movement, change, one of the fundamental dimensions of the human being's existence is movement, so, in fictional life, the

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[10] Ibidem, p. 79

[11] Miller, Arthur, "Why I Wrote *The Crucible*", in *The New Yorker*, October 21-28, 1996 at Why I Wrote "The Crucible" | The New Yorker, published: October 13, 1996, accessed March 19, 2023

[12] Shaw, George Bernard, *How to Write a Popular Play* in *Playwrights on Playwriting: From Ibsen to Ionesco*, edited by Toby Cole, Introduction by John Gassner, Cooper Square Press, New York, 2001, p. 57

[13] Ibsen, Henrik, *The Task of the Poet* in *Playwrights on Playwriting: From Ibsen to Ionesco*, edited by Toby Cole, Introduction by John Gassner, New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001, pp. 3-4

character must undergo a series of changes, in Beckettian terms, a series of changes generated by the inexorable passage of time, and which occur from one moment to another. Precisely, in this regard, Lajos Egri remarks: "There is nothing which does not move. Constant change is the very essence of all existence. Everything in time passes into its opposite. Everything within itself contains its own opposite. Change is a force which impels it to move, and this very movement becomes something different from what it was. The past becomes the present and both determine the future. New life arises from the old, and this new life is the combination of the old with the contradiction which has destroyed it"[14]. Thus, the playwright keeps in mind that "A human being is a maze of seeming contradictions"[15]. Lajos Egri also presents us with a character sheet that reflects the character's three-dimensional structure or existence on three levels of organization, respectively physiological, sociological and psychological. A character sheet, for both the playwright and actor, should contain *physiological data such as gender, age, height, weight, hair and eye color, defects, diseases, hereditary signs; sociological data such as occupation, education, family status, the place he holds in the community, political affiliates, hobbies; psychological data such as temperament, complexes, frustrations, skills, qualities, attitude towards life[16]*.

These dimensions are to be found in *the work of the actor with himself* (Stanislavsky). For the performances based on Chekhov's plays, precisely in order to reproduce the scenes with as much veracity as possible, Stanislavsky gives a major importance to the naturalistic aspect of the scenery: "It was the surface, quasi-photographic 'setting' aspect of naturalism that so appealed to Stanislavsky that he drew the rooms, passages, furniture and gardens of his Chekhov productions in minute detail, adding soundscapes to complete the picture – the sound of frogs, crickets, corncrakes, dogs and distant bells, and anything else that built up a credible environment for the people in it and the events taking place there"[17]. Realistic dramatic texts are treated in stanislavskian realist-psychological key in which the actor, in the process of character elaboration, makes use of a series of biological, psychic, mental, behavioural factors, precisely in order to reflect as truthfully as possible on stage the life of a human being seen in a certain hypostasis, a certain situation. The atmosphere of the performances created by Stanislavski "helped actors to penetrate their characters and identify not only their sensations, thoughts and mood (the inner journey necessary for embodying 'inner realism'), but also their possible actions in response to the given situation – what they might do and how they might

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[14] Egri, Lajos, *The Art of Dramatic Writing. Its Basis in the Creative Interpretation of Human Motives*, with an Introduction by Gilbert Miller, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1923, pp. 49-50
[15] Ibidem, p. 50
[16] Ibidem, pp. 36-37
[17] Innes, Christopher and Shevtsova, Maria, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 67

do it in relation to other characters"[18]. Through the technique of identification with the character, the actor, in fact, creates, through a physical and concrete language, a convincing and recognizable living stage presence.

In conclusion, we note that the objective of some playwrights/practitioners of theatre consists in presenting on stage, with veracity, slices of life from certain historical periods. The dramatic texts/performances rooted in life, populated by believable and recognizable characters, have similarities, but also specific differences depending on the style of the playwright or the theatre practitioner and the historical period in which they were created.

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[18] Ibidem, p. 68