

Theater between art and experiment

Otilia HUZUM •

Abstract: These few pages want to shed some light on the differences that exist between theatrical performance and experimental creative act. The fundamental notions that define the human being, in general, and the artistic entity in particular, are debated and evidence is provided about the importance of man in time and space. At the same time, the focus falls on knowledge as an essential factor in the evolution of the individual, on his ability and desire to explore expression through his own body, on the complexity of theatrical art perceived as forming culture and on the path of trials that contemporary society is going through. The argumentation is based on reference studies and includes personalities such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Michael Chehov, Brook, Étienne Decroux, precisely to emphasize that not every experiment or form of artistic expression can become art and constitute a theatrical performance.

Keywords: theater, art, experiment, creation, imagination, search.

The theater is a space of search, an infinite place where the being escapes to give meaning to those inner things that disturb his existence. The phenomenon itself cannot be delimited, but acquires the value of universality, because it cannot fit between something and something else; there is no visible border to establish the area of development and experimentation. Even if man has tried, through certain terms, to have some control over his own means of expression, in essence relativity dominates the research space, precisely because of the creative imagination, which particularizes and individualizes the resulting product.

The present study aims to promote some ideas aimed at the theatrical phenomenon perceived as art and the show - which stands under the sign of experimentation. We want to specify the fact that not all forms of expression can be embodied in a work of art, and the theatrical performance requires summing up certain features to define it. Although theatrical or performance art is subjective, we have sufficient criteria on the basis of which we can analyze and differentiate artistic creation from other searches and forms of expression explored by man. More precisely, the demesne will focus on defining some key grounds found in theatrical art (the need for expression, knowledge, search, imagination, improvisation, creation, originality), defining elements without which the actor's art will not be able to integrate into a whole called show. At the opposite pole, we will focus on a research

• Associate Professor, PhD at the West University of Timisoara, The Music and Theatre Faculty

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

that cannot meet the qualities of a creative act pretending to be a theatrical performance, but remains an experimental form. Not every manifestation of rendering a thought can constitute a work of art. Creation cannot be reduced to an awareness of the interior transposed into debatable proposals, just from the desire to use stimuli responsible for empathy with the environment. Thus, we will approach two directions: theatrical art and the performance - experiment, which will remain only under this name, because an image-generating performance from which an interpretable message shines through does not cross the ramp.

The art of the theater brings together a multitude of factors that converge towards the same goal - the performance, where, in complete harmony, it is revealed: the direction, the actor's art, the scenography, the dance, the music, the entire lighting system, with all the complexity that each part contains. The binder is none other than MAN – an entity in constant search. And from here we make the leap to knowledge - a primordial phenomenon of the human self. The process or procedure is not simple, because how, when, how much, why and what become answers that require certain conditions. Developing the concept itself we discover that in the pursuit of knowledge we rely on information stored both in the memory of the event and in that of the feeling. Moreover, the whole data bag is relative and dependent on context and perspective. So, it does not have a static form, but constantly evolves, and the diversity of the factors involved favors new forms of a hypothetical future, facilitating, through imagination and reinterpretation, the emergence of the creative act. In other words, we cannot agree either with the rationalists, who considered that we obtain knowledge only through the intellect and logic, or with the empiricists who gave priority to the senses and their own experience. In theatrical art, there is no antithesis between the two components, we do not argue with terms and do not remain in the world of ideas; theater art not being a space of theorizing, but one governed by the verb to do. Let us not imagine that the invoked verb has only a visible form, and corporeality holds supremacy. The unseen factors that participate in the creative act, the inner action that prepares the actor's game, that completes and continues the vision prepared in the intimate creative laboratory, become essential in becoming an artist. The ability of the performer to consciously manipulate his subconscious in order to restore the artistic act reminds us of the art of living - a system proposed by Konstantin Stanislavski, but it also indicates that art is not only the result, the performance itself, but the entire path from the detachment of the text from the literary condition to its display in front of the public, in an original manner and in accordance with a directorial vision. Peter Brook also subscribes, saying that art is "the place where the visible and the invisible can meet"¹ So, we don't call art only the finished product, but also the ability to create, "more important than the truth, it seems to me the way to the truth."² This Sisyphean

¹ Peter Brook, *Spațiu gol*, Editura Nemira, București, 2014, p. 10

² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, apud Ion Cojar, *O poetică a artei actorului*, Editura Paidea, București, 1998, p. 32

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

work of trials, failures and searches, the entire path traversed by the artist just to get to the embodiment of the character, demonstrates his ability to lose, for a short time, his social body and come into sensitive contact with another character in constant change.

The current time moves under the sign of the search for another identity. Traditional values are denied, an essential part of the thinking structure is cancelled, the need to adopt behaviors structured on principles of reorganization and rethinking of the way of life is subtly suggested. Contemporaneity wants to draw the lines that become defining axes of each individual. We can see that society as a whole is moving towards a form of globalism, homogenization, and the role of the individual becomes uncertain. The lack of concrete triggers revolt for some, while another category develops a kind of tacit compliance. From the experiences of the past, we know that in the end the masses dominate and establish identification criteria, because the individual mind circumscribes the collective one, and from here there is only one more step towards the homogenization of a way of life, with new rules and different angles of approach, both in thought and expression. If we move towards a deep analysis of contemporary man's life, we distinguish a certain social pressure exerted on the masses, with the aim of influencing behavior and thinking. Judgments are imposed or visions are changed, expectations are suggested and requirements are launched in order to create behavioral norms and standards, an attempt is made to direct thinking and feeling towards experimenting. Social pressure, whether it is subtle or aggressive, aims at the loss of autonomy and independence of the individual, sometimes even discrimination, and their exclusion if they do not conform to the dominant norms that define the majority. Among the types of social pressure that can influence the artistic current and that we feel, we mention: social pressure through conformity when the individual accepts the ideas of others just so as not to be excluded from a certain group, social pressure through identification when adopting the values and behavior of others from the desire to identify with the ideas of the group to which they adhere and social pressure through suggestion when influence is transferred through suggestions and persuasion, the recommendations of others being important here. The examples presented reveal the complexity of the social strategies exerted on humanity as a whole. The goal - directing the evolution in a certain direction, for now the final destination is uncertain. Cultural events, the theater show for example, a phenomenon with a strong impact and an indisputable image vector, is a means by which the masses move, so by involving the act of culture, messages are disseminated much more easily and at a much deeper level. Thus, the mind is invaded, at the level of ideas, through messages, but also the affective area, through the triggered emotional impact. The conclusion - it depends on us what we promote today as a value, because the future takes shape depending on the decisions of each individual generation.

We remain in agreement with the aforementioned and continue the debate with an aspect aimed at the performances designed and promoted by the artists Krööt

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Juurak and Alex Bailey, performances entitled performances for cats and dogs (performances for pets).

In order to develop a pertinent analysis, we return to the origin, to the etymology of the word spectacle (in this case theater performance) which, according to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language, can have several interpretations. Presentation on stage of a dramatic work, an artistic program or presentation of artistic works to the public³. Analyzing the two meanings, we notice that the invoked act takes part: the playwright, through the literary support, and performers whose purpose is to present the artistic work to an audience. Once the word work is pronounced, the mind directs us to art, which inevitably involves creation. At the same time, we also know that we have enough norms, criteria and values by which we can judge an artistic act to establish its belonging. But the principles of critical analysis cannot constitute a taboo subject, but are moderated by time and space, so that the changes contribute to the updating of some concepts. So, we are not talking about preserving the old and recognizing it as a supreme value, but we are emphasizing the need for an alliance between the past and the present; preserving sacred values and adapting or integrating them in the present. Somehow, we want the assumed detachment of the means and principles from the rule condition with the aim of experimenting and discovering other ways or forms of artistic expression.

Staying in the same sphere of definitions, also found in the linguistic guide, we discover that theater performance can mean any performance given to the public⁴. Here we have a problem in interpretation, because it is not specified who can be the audience, who is the audience. Another approach mentions that the show can be a set of elements, things, facts that attract the eyes or attention, that impress, that cause reactions⁵ - still an incomplete statement, because it is not specified whose eyes. It goes without saying that we are discussing the human factor, but there are voices that have divergent opinions, considering that the viewer can be any living being.

The fundamental question: Is there a difference between the theatrical experiment and the theatrical performance? In this sense, I will detail a modern vision of the theater performance in the understanding of two artists Krōōt Juurak and Alex Bailey. The show presents a pair, a woman and a man, who embody animals. The couple adopts animal behavior in every way. Visually, man borrows the animal's gait, the movement of the limbs, the arching of the back, imitates the positions of quadrupeds, frolics, sticks out the tongue, hunts, imitates sounds, crawls, all in the presence of the only spectator - the dog or the cat.

Nothing abnormal if we think about the student period when, in the first year, the behavior of animals is studied and improvised exercises are built in order to

³ Dex online, spectacol - definiție și paradigmă

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ Ibidem

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

assume, as faithfully as possible, the researched characters and their ways of expression. The analysis of the actor's body in different environments and situations, but not in a private regime where there is a comfort zone, but in spaces that require him both physically and emotionally, attracts a certain awareness of the movement and coordination of his own body in order to develop bodily expressiveness. The idea of the two artists subjects attention to two approaches: one of vision, as a whole, and another of public perception.

Through the initiated experiment, an abolition of human exceptionalism is proposed, somehow the differences between species are cancelled. "As a species, we may have evolved technically and philosophically, but we have not lost our animal specificity - that of being physically active"⁶ Desmond Morris does not deny the evolution of the human being, but at the same time draws our attention to the way in which she acts. From an anthropological point of view, we know that the priority for the human being was the relationship, but not with oneself or fellow humans, but with nature, of which it was an integral part. Over time, man distances himself from the environment that originated him and creates, alongside his peers, another universe. Moreover, it develops a form of belonging to a community with its own identity. Thus, it becomes authoritarian and wants to dominate nature, it even positions itself, many times, in opposition to it. Behavior evolves in this way, and the present reveals the ultimate aspiration - exacerbated individualism at the expense of the idea of coexistence. Art, especially that of the theater, imposes the idea of a group, because as Vakhtangov specified, "a brilliant actor is not the theater; it is a monster, a miracle. ...the concept of theater includes the notion of collective"⁷.

Continuing the evolution-oriented discourse, we note the fading of several aspects: transcendental landmarks are diluted with the separation from divinity, the body is no longer given priority in the sense of a defining element of identity, and separation from the group in order to acquire freedom positions the individual in a sickly loneliness. Pointing only to these three directions of the manifestation of contemporaneity, it is easy to understand the artist's attitude towards the search for initial simplicity, his desire to return to the primary impulses, to that natural form that was the basis of the relationship between man and nature. The idea of returning to the primordial forms of manifestation is a necessity supported by all great theater people, because the origin becomes an indisputable landmark in terms of the purity of the experiences and the act of manifestation with unique value. The authenticity of the primitive man comes to emphasize that the development of the intellect, which facilitates the emergence of the elitist generation, represents precisely the dispossession of the truthfulness of living, a defining and vital element in the art of the actor and implicitly in that of the theater performance. Promoting analytical

⁶ Desmond Morris, *People watching. The Desmond Morris guide to body language*, Editura Vintage, 2002, p. 3

⁷ Andrei Malaev-Babel, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, Routledge, London, 2011, p. 87

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

thinking at the expense of empathy is nothing more than ignoring some human qualities, those native senses. Prioritizing and valuing the cult in favor of the superior man, capable of evolution through thought, foreshadows the formation of an amorphous collective entity, incapable of creating values. Survival is brought by the artist, by that histrionic entity that finds its own space of manifestation proving that it is possible in another way. In fact, the artist, a component of society, opposes two types of manifestations, creative thinking and creative action. Thus, he becomes a typology that acts in accordance with the nature of his own self, one situated in complete harmony with the society in which he takes place. His freedom of expression originates in the strength of his own personality, unsubjected and in a singularity necessary for the emergence of authentic creation. We can claim that, by its nature, by adhering to the creative element, defining for one's own identity, it traces the directions of society, demonstrating that there is a clear distinction between the crowd, where concepts are no longer passed through the filter of one's own thinking but are taken with the value of truth, and individual, possessor of the consciousness of his own thoughts, choices and actions. The individual man differentiates himself through original, singular visions most of the time, and embarks on experimentation with the aim of exploring a world beyond his being, beyond the word, beyond the knowledge offered by logic and intellect. In this way, the way to creation and implicitly to art is opened, because the social body is abandoned, it is lost, due to the aspiration to seek organicity in one's own expression, a vital aspect, according to Konstantin Stanislavski. Whatever the human achievements, regardless of the field of activity, we must recognize the universality of emotion and its independence at the same time. Paul Ekman, working with people without artistic training, proves that emotion is inseparable from the human being, and those feelings transmitted through body language have value in any place and moment of the action. The metamorphosis of the artist upon contact with otherness produces an accumulation of energies triggering experiences. At the opposite pole, the cessation of transfiguration favors the emergence of decline.

Remaining in the sphere of corporeality, the show for dogs and cats can be interpreted as a vision directed towards the study of expressiveness through non-verbal language. According to Desmond John Morris, any movement is a repetitive sequence, a pattern characteristic of the movement of the body in space that forms, in fact, a typical of physical action⁸. The statement acquires the value of truth if we relate it to the study undertaken by the artist in order to understand human typologies. Michael Chekhov's study on the psychological gesture proves that through movement, with the meaning of gesture, we discover characters and psychologies. So, the dramatic physical action has nothing to do with analytical thinking, with the strength of the intellect or with technological discoveries, but everything is condensed in the

⁸ Paul Ekman, <http://atlasofemotions.org>

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

other animal properties of the body, in those inner impulses that the performer appeals to in working with himself.

The Russian succession, through the emblematic personality of Vsevolod Meyerhol, completes the research area of artistic corporeality. Starting from the analysis of the Vitruvian body developed by Leonardo da Vinci, Meyerhold demonstrates the close connection between mathematics, the proportions of the human body and movement. Biomechanics highlights the importance of the movement of the human body in space, when the new actor removes the customs of traditionalism, separates himself from the psychological side elaborated by Stanislavski and sets out in search of the form of expression removing the word and prioritizing the action. Therefore, the movement gains power of expression and dominance, so that authentic living and the word lose their value. Referring to the ideas presented, we appreciate the work of the two artists, Krõõt Juurak and Alex Bailey, because they, through a chain of movements, propose a closeness between man and animal. In the creative act, in addition to the elements of perfecting the expressiveness of the body, we meet the mime, because the facial expression also contributes to the completion of the representation. In order to deepen expressiveness, we have many personalities who have developed studies, we only mention Étienne Decroux - the father of modern mime - who proposes physical exploration down to the finest detail, the pantomime elements of Marcel Marceau, the biomechanics of Meyerhold, the psychological gesture of Michael Chekhov.

The subject under analysis, performances for pets, perceived as an experiment, gains value through the originality of the idea, but the attribution of a theater show for dogs and cats remains in the area of literary metaphor. The plea in favor of art and the theater performance was made by a multitude of personalities, who left us a rich specialized bibliography. The artist, along the long path of his development, stands above the primates, because his nature highlighted him as a superior being. By belonging to the creative act, he persists in finding himself. He directs himself in the state of awareness of the position of the being and his being. The fact that he approaches, in the study, various themes, leads us to emphasize, if it were still necessary, the need for knowledge; aspect specific to man. The artistic act becomes emblematic only by involving human superiority. The complexity of the psychological structure, intellectual qualities, reasoning, memory, emotion transposed into feeling, are just some of the elements that distinguish man from the animal kingdom, placing him on a higher level. To accept the ideas of cultural posthumanism, a concept that defines the 21st century, that questions the human and human nature through hypothetical and subjective trajectories, we consider that we are deviating from the mathematical order of the unfolding of life. Art was, is and will remain a fundamental component of culture. To the detriment of its noble purpose, it favors nonsense, attracts lack of form and value, causing disorder and social destabilization.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

The artistic cultural manifestation is addressed exclusively to man, his superior qualities and capacities. The actor's art is not limited to the faithful copying of movements, reactions or sounds, but is a deep process that brings together the physical and the spirit in perfect harmony. Beyond the expressiveness of the body there are a multitude of tools that serve the artist. To listen to your stage presence, to learn to be silent (because the voice comes from silence and balance), to listen and act according to the stimuli coming from the partner (concept supported by Meisner) are only a small part of the subtleties that complete and differentiates man from other living things. In cinematography, in the form of fiction, we can admit the presence of metamorphosis, but for an artist to disregard his status as homo sapiens, sapiens, sapiens...

We remain at the conclusion launched by Leonardo da Vinci, "The soul wants to coexist with the body because, without its members, it could neither act nor feel"⁹.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Babel-Malaev, Andrei, *The Vakhtangov Sourcebook*, Routledge, London, 2011
Brook, Peter, *Spațiu gol*, Editura Nemira, București, 2014
Morris, John Desmond, *People watching. The Desmond Morris guide to body language*, Editura Vintage, 2002
Cehov, Michael *Despre tehnica artei dramatice*, curs tradus la UNATC de L. Cernasov și Geta Angheluță, București, 1980
Cojar, Ion, *O poetică a artei actorului*, Editura Paidea, București, 1998
Stanislavski, Konstantin, *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, traducere de Lucia Demetrius și Sonia Filip, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1951

Websites:

- DEX online, spectacol - definiție și paradigmă, dexonline.ro
Ekman, Paul <http://atlasofemotions.org/>

⁹ Leonardo da Vinci, *apud* Michael Cehov, *Despre tehnica artei dramatice*, curs tradus la UNATC de L. Cernasov și Geta Angheluță, București, 1980, pag. 30.