

The Role of Theatre in the Development of the Modern Human

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Abstract: Theatre, along with all other forms of the performing arts - music, literature and visual arts, in their various manifestations - have always accompanied humanity, offering, among seductive ways to spend the free time, entertainment, moments of wonderful introspection, beneficial soul healing, indispensable spiritual development. Theater, through its specific means and effects, must be seen as material for reflection and thought, as a forum for implantation in contemporary consciousnesses or future of healthy moral and social concepts, as a space of prophylaxis or emotional recovery. Consequently, the actor as direct witness and keen observer of the times, can encompass, gratitude to his art, various functions: from histrion - in an appreciative sense, to spokesperson of the system or the collective, or the therapist.

Keywords: theater, actor, communication, therapy, psychology

Introduction

Man is by definition a social being, for whom communication is a need, a requisite which can serve, in addition to all the other functions, as a "refuge against anxiety, loneliness and even oppression".¹ In his book, *Games People Play*, Eric Berne, who will be mentioned in the following lines, claims that any communication is useful and beneficial to people, and theatre offers an excellent opportunity in this regard. As an art of collective origin and nature, the theatre performance is created by man, for man and it endures through man. It is well known that theatre has a multitude of functions ranging from educational, social, entertainment to propaganda, etc., and it is clear that it possesses a crucial role, in particular, in the formation of young generations, especially if the productions also feature recent topics in which the protagonists are acting like themselves, with their specific issues, in addition to traditional stories, with a classic, timeless plot.

And yet how does theatre influence human life, the human psyche? What exactly does it bestow upon it so that even while being in fierce competition with the latest innovations of television and cinema, with the increasingly acute need for entertainment, it still manages to maintain its role, which is not only weakened, but in countless cases, actually strengthened exponentially? Also, in general, how useful

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¹ Amado Gilles, Guittet Andre, *The Psychology of Group Communication*, Bucharest, Polirom, 2007, p. 10

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is it to go to the theater? Is there any point in going to all this trouble?

To begin with, we could discern the role of the theater according to the words of *the Great Will*:” the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as ’twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”.² Some of the reasons why theatre would be important in human life could also be listed. We might think that it helps us gain awareness of our humanity. Only by observing daily situations, the permanent endeavour in which we and our peers are involved, we can realize what exactly makes us human by using empathy. Regular visits to the theatre develop the ability to communicate, to express our feelings and emotions, to improve mutual understanding of the world in general, and communication with other people. It enables us to acquire an understanding of how our consciousness works and how our environment affects our thinking and behavior. In the modern world, dramatic art has come to be a tool used in various activities, for example as an ally and help in psychotherapy, pedagogy, civic ceremonies, historical commemorations, etc., thus overcoming both the setting of the stage and the theatre as a cultural institution.

Theater and modern human

The epicenter of the individual's existence is not limited to himself and his own body, it is continued, by extension, through the concepts of anthropocentrism, which changes the terms of our relationship with everyone, everything, and with technological processes, and forces us to make them our subordinates, rather than let them take over our existence. I believe that, more recently, theatre has the role of expanding consciousness and helping us accept other cultures, mindsets and characters different from our own. It is difficult to appreciate how much this can influence us, but in order to achieve successful globalization and socialization, this is an important aspect. The modern world dictates its own rules, and those who do not keep up with them may be doomed to isolation and segregation.

Theatre is a great way to explore and analyze the world as well as human relationships. It acts as a gigantic laboratory, in which we experience, like in a mirror, parallel lives and situations, with *the magical If* as a substance of contrast, as a revealer or reactive. Theater performances develop creativity using the power of art, they inspire new achievements and provide the confidence needed in solving various issues. Just like literature, painting and music, theatre educates kindness, purity and integrity. Fine arts influence people through the field of visual perception, music delights the auditory organ, but theatre activates all the senses and offers the most dynamic impressions. Every performance raises issues of conscience and morality.

² Shakespeare, William, *Hamlet, The Complete Works*, vol. 5, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986, p. 375

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Theatrical science is rightly considered the main means of the aesthetic and spiritual education of the individual. The stage action temporarily takes the man out of routine. The show conveys the thoughts, emotions and moods of its creators to the viewer. As a result, theatre, by means of stage action, provides people with a vivid reflection of reality, thus also educating empathy.

There are different studies on why the visits of the common man to the temples of Melpomene have a positive effect. From personal observations, as an active witness or actant, I can assume that the secret lies in the fact that during the theatrical performance, the spectator receives a flow of positive emotions, which lowers the level of cortisol in the blood, the stress hormone, while optimizing its synthesis serotonin, the element responsible for good mood, the natural antidepressant. Moreover, for many theater consumers, theater attendance is an additional opportunity for personal development. The plays, through their theme, topic, scenic situations, the characters' ways of relating to each other, are thought-provoking and elicit introspection, as well as quests for something hidden and impenetrable. In other words, theatre acts as a springboard for spiritual self-development (self-improvement).

In Ancient Greece, theatre was a true institution of collective psychological practice. We see here a remarkable way of healing and correcting the psyche through empathy, in anonymity, as well as a universal artistic idea. Even then, the world was aware of the fact that theater had an impressive influence on the individual. In modern psychoanalysis, this would be called the transition from stress (harmful and unpleasant stress leading to pathologies) to eustress (beneficial and pleasant stress leading to recovery).³

According to statistics, in recent years, theatre attendance has become a cool, ultra-modern activity among young people. The new directorial poetics, the avant-garde scenic formulas, the advances in technique and lighting, as well as contemporary dramas, opened totally different opportunities for the theatre industry. Nowadays, going to the theater is popular even among those who just until recently deemed theatre a relic of the past. Repertoires and productions provide a range of stories and topics of interest for modern audiences. Theatre helps its viewer visualize the problems of life from various perspectives, providing multiple possible ways of solving them, in various tones, from a tragic, comic, dramatic, to a romantic, fantastic, philosophical, or grotesque tone. After watching each performance, the viewer suffering from chronic stress will see the light at the end of the tunnel, life will acquire new colors, other horizons will open, creativity and creative energy will sprout.

Cinema may seem, in a certain way, the opponent of theater. In fact, these two forms of art have complementary purposes, through different forms and

³ https://essay.utwente.nl/72588/1/MARTEN_BA_BMS.pdf, accessed on 06.03.2023

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methods. In cinematography, the image unfolding in front of the viewer is a continuous process, with unprecedented fluency and dynamics, which far exceeds reality and which may not give the viewer time for reflection. Theatre, on the other hand, unmediated by the subjective eye of the camera, implies a live contact with an alternative reality, in another dimension, where a special atmosphere is established, generating direct energies and lively emotions, intangible for the cinema. This does not mean it cannot elicit excitement.

Theatre art can be seen as a form of education. The living word, if uttered in front of the audience, is influenced in an absolutely magical, unique way, one might say. The theatre, as a mirror of society, faithfully reflects its vulnerabilities, problems and achievements. Addressing social issues was and still is one of the essential tasks of theater. The following thoughts of Nicolae Iorga can serve as testimony to this idea: "Art, in all its forms, must come, if it is not a toy, from all the depth and seriousness of the life of that society which it is called to cleanse spiritually. When there are decisive questions and worthy writers, it behooves them to bestow upon them a garment of art. Among our novelists, the one who will fathom more profoundly and tackle more boldly the leading questions of today's life, not in a soon forsaken attempt, but in an entire work of struggle, of awakening consciousness and redeeming actions, will develop in a more poignant way, will be better received by the public and will endure."⁴

Theatrical art, contrary to prejudices, relies on the truth. In order for the message to be conveyed and reach the viewer unaltered so as to touch the heartstrings, the actor needs, in the construction of the role, to find those details, springs, and those informational and emotional benchmarks, i.e. the truths of the character he is playing. They should practically merge with a stranger, for a few hours, and substitute for him, while the audience accepts this convention until they forget that they are in a theatre, and possible fictional characters and situations are presented before them. It all starts with the process of creation and co-creation between the actor and the viewer. This fact includes imagination, role-playing, playful freedom, belief, the division of consciousness into Self and the Other. After that, the transition from distress to eustress⁵ takes place, and it is based on psychological defence mechanisms. Here we can include: aggression, projection, exclusion, fantasy, denial, repression, metamorphosis. And finally, what comes at the end is catharsis - the main goal. It appears as a result of the merging effect of all the listed mechanisms, which occurred at different levels of perception: emotional, behavioral, vegetative, cognitive and socio-psychological.

Carl Gustav Jung, the well-known psychologist, disciple and collaborator of Freud, speaks of the role of the theatre as a mystical cooperation in which the

⁴ Iorga, Nicolae, *Theatre and Society*, Bucharest, Eminescu Publishing House, 1986, p. 51

⁵ <https://snpcar.ro/stres-eustres-distres-eustresori-distresori-consideratii-generale/>, accessed on 02.03.2023

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personality is immersed. Here the viewer feels like a community, not like an individual. Jung also believed that the best effect of getting rid of complexes would be an objective and impersonal work of art.⁶ Practically the actor, through his play, consciously encourages the audience to find, unconsciously, something which requires compensation and rehabilitation in the character. This was also intuited by Shakespeare: "Dress me up in jester's clothes. Give me permission to speak my mind, and I will through and through cleanse the sick body of the infected world – if it can accept my medicine."⁷

Love or indifference to the theater arise for various reasons. It could be assumed that there is a reason for the psychological ones. The viewer recognizes himself in the character, identifies his weaknesses, judging his own behavior. And here comes the important part, where he can find within himself the wisdom to rise above his own weaknesses and evaluate his negative side. Analyzing various experimental data, Eric Berne, a Canadian-American psychiatrist, known for creating the method of transactional analysis in psychotherapy, noticed that the absence of emotional and sensory stimuli can lead to mental disorders. He suggests that man must organize his life in such a way as to operate at a high emotional level, and theater is his ally in this regard, especially since theater abounds in hidden communication.⁸

Comedies and dramas equally influence human emotional health, even if the types of reactions are different. The purpose of drama is not always catharsis. During the stage action, the spectator, starting from the depicted data, can project in his mind his own scenario, which may no longer have anything to do with the subject or the genre of the performance. Comedy, despite its initial definition, has long ceased to be about humiliating or ridiculing one's neighbor. If Berne is to be right, theatre consists of all the games we all play every day. We could speculate that the theatre, despite liberating man, also condemns him, makes him somewhat liable to a certain type of addiction. This is if we were to assume that the spectator comes to the theatre as if for therapy, hoping to solve his problem, immersing himself in the same situations as the character he identifies with, in order to use them for healing.

If we interpret theater according to the psychological theory of emotions, we can notice that it ultimately contributes to empathy, compassion, and allocentrism. Through empathy, the viewer understands and excuses the protagonist's actions as his own. He can resonate not only with the positive character but, as I said before, he can also identify with the actions of the negative character, finding his motivations and arguments for those facts.

And yet, what is the beauty of theater as a psychological tool? When man

⁶ Jung, Carl Gustav, *The Complete Works, Volume 6, Psychological Types*, 2004

⁷ Shakespeare, William, *As You like It, The Complete Works*, vol. 5, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986, p. 149

⁸ Berne, Eric, *Games People Play*, Trei Publishing House, 2017

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practices healing with the help of traditional medicine, he is aware of himself as a patient, and this fact acts, more often than not, in the form of distress (an element with harmful effects on the human being), while theatre offers freedom, suppresses the burden of one's own conscience, depersonalizing the patient, thus generating eustress. Theatre has the ability of influencing everyday stress, banishing it, and therein lies its unique power.

The flexibility of the multitude of stage situations is a priceless opportunity for various people to unite in a collective moment of empathy, as they can find their own meaning in them. Ultimately, we take part in group therapy, which preserves the anonymity of each participant.

David D. Burns, an American psychiatrist and specialist in cognitive-behavioral therapy, developed the concept of the Self (I), which leads to the realization of inner consistency. The audience constantly compare themselves to the action on stage, trying to integrate into this newly created theatrical world. In this way, they tend to avoid cognitive dissonance. In order to succeed in this, a few simple conditions need to be met: *acceptance* of everything that happens, (being prepared for co-creation), *adaptation* (obeying the rules of the game), *activating psychological protection*, (choosing rules acceptable for oneself), or refusal (not accepting the rules of the game).⁹

Carl Ransom Rogers, an American psychologist, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and the founder of the humanistic approach in psychology, claims in his theories that man cannot change events, but he has all the prerequisites to change his attitude towards them, and when he perceives and accepts all his sensory and emotional experiences in a compatible system, he can understand and tolerate others more easily. The theatre performance also encourages this, acting as a reality uniquely perceived by each individual. One cannot forget the famous phrase also written by the father of English drama, William Shakespeare, in *As You Like It*: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances, and one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages."¹⁰ These words are as brilliant as they are contemporary. Every day people play on the stage of life, each according to their own script, and whether it is comedies, farces, dramas or tragedies, life is an endless improvisation.

Naturally, there are plenty of modern people who are skeptical of the theater. Perhaps it is because they have never seen a show, or maybe it is because they prefer other genres of art. It is true that television and streaming channels have grown exponentially in recent years, offering the public the option to enjoy the wonders of technology without leaving their homes, in their own comfort and privacy. Or they prefer the cinema, with increasingly sophisticated films, full of effects and images,

⁹ Burns, David, D., *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*, Litera Publishing House, 2022

¹⁰ Shakespeare, William, *As You like It, The Complete Works*, vol. 5, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1986, pp. 151-152

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from 3D to 7D, which offer not only exceptional visual and auditory sensations but also physical sensations. Admittedly, the temptation is great, but theatre offers something completely different. It manifests the ideas of humanism, forms aesthetic values, enriches spiritual life, making it bright and more fulfilling. Theatre is a living art, where everything happens here and now, where the actor, without the option of a second, third or "n" double, is much more vulnerable, the process is more fragile and subject to ephemerality, it is a way to perceive life, a way of understanding oneself.

Conclusion

Modern society often downplays the influence of theater on human life. With the advent of technology and gadgets, people seem to forget true art, and in a society where there is no genuine art there will always be difficulties. Theatre embodies and expresses all the good and bad that exists in the social world, but, quite importantly, it is indicated that theatre should position itself outside of politics. Theatre develops man's fantasy and imagination, the sense of the beautiful and the sublime, and all these contribute to his spiritual development. In the theater, the viewer has the opportunity to see himself from the outside, and such detachment from reality has a valuable effect on his mental health and emotional state. Another aspect, equally important, is that, unlike television and the Internet, theater does not impose its point of view, but leaves the viewer the freedom to decide everything for himself, to draw his own conclusions.

Taking everything into consideration, I have referred in particular to the audience as a beneficiary of therapy through the art of theatre, but to the same extent I analyzed the actors, through the work they practice, through the characters they embody, as they experience metamorphosis, reveries, realizations, exorcisms that contribute directly to their personal development. Cristina Briciu, in her book *The Actor: A Histrion and Therapist of Contemporary Society*, claims the following: "If we were to limit ourselves to appreciating and analyzing only the aesthetic valence of the actor's art, the indisputable peak of his work, we could not reach aesthetic excellence without passing through the sensitive point of the therapeutic value.. For this reason, we consider that the actor defines himself in the unity of the histrionic-therapeutic duality."¹¹ Quoting Aristotle from *Poetics*, Cristina Briciu states that the feelings of pity, fear and humanity, to which the most important philosopher of mankind refers, as a consequence of art, "do not have a horrible and destructive result, but a therapeutic one, of psychological healing."¹²

It appears that, at the end, I have opened another topic of discussion, for a further topic of thought, regarding the essential repository of the theatrical mystery -

¹¹ Briciu, Cristina, *The Actor: A Histrion and Therapist of Contemporary Society*, p. 233

¹² Idem, p. 138

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the actor, not only as a therapist and histrion, but, why not, as a beneficiary of psychodrama therapy. Eventually, the theater, as an intermediary between the creators of the work and the audience receiving artistic content, offers not only food for reason, conscience and soul, but above all, healing, it offers a few hours of magic.

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