

But does snow have meaning?

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Abstract: Today, people sometimes feel a sense of emptiness, of lack of content, of meaning, which can trigger existential problems. Boredom has become a pathological psychological cause, neuroses have a wider range, especially the noogenic ones, a new clinical form constituting the Sunday neurosis. Theatre diligently reflects everything that has sap, everything that hides some psychological hill, always being present in the song of the hungry soul, in its themes and time. This article proposes a return to essential questions - such as "What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of theatre? The falling snow. What does it mean?" - approached equally alongside psychiatrist Viktor Frankl and the critical exercise on the performance (and the way of working on) *3SIOSTRY* after Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, proposed by Luk Perceval, a co-production between TR Warszawa and the National Sary Theatre in Krakow.

Keywords: Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, Viktor Frankl, Luk Perceval, Three Sisters, Man's Search for Meaning.

I. Introduction. Some References Between Psychology and the Art of Theater

"We spend our whole lives worrying about personal safety, preparing for life, and we no longer have time to live"¹, said Lev Tolstoy a century ago, and if we have any time left, we use it to search for the meaning of life. Viktor Frankl, the Viennese psychiatrist, father of logotherapy, doctor of neurology and philosophy, claims that no one can answer this question, just as asking a good chess player cannot tell you what the best move in the world is. He wrote one of the most important books of our time, *Man's Search for Meaning*, in nine days, sometime in 1945. He was also Jewish, specifically number 119 104, a survivor of four Nazi concentration camps. As in the camp, no one was asked about their name and profession, their fate, or their history, he was not hired as a psychiatrist, nor as a general practitioner, a borderline phenomenon, but all the more human were the conferences held by Viktor Frankl in the barracks, secretly talking about the future, courage, sacrifice, suffering, and finding meaning; he conducted "group psychotherapy" sessions. He was a number who did his best under the given conditions. "I have nothing more to expect from life."

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¹ Adrian Furnham, *50 ideas you must know. Psychology*, Translated by Iuliana Busuioc, "Litera" Publishing House, Bucharest, 2020, p. 21.

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What do you tell a man who believes that?"² He often responded with Nietzsche's statement, with which he was in total agreement: "He who has a *Why* to live for can bear almost any *How*"³. A series of questions related to the ethics and profession of the theater creator arise from the idea that art and turmoil are closely linked in the search for "lost creativity" and the meaning of life for artists. Can we say that many actors have answered a call as others become monks, crossing the boundary of inspiration and transcendence towards chance, doing what they knew best to do? Does theater give meaning to the actors' lives? According to logotherapy, these creators forget about themselves, dedicating themselves to a cause that determines self-actualization, as a secondary effect of self-transcendence. Can we say that others are in fierce competition for fame and territory? Can we say that some actors suffer from anxiety, depression, the thought "I'm not good enough," hesitating in the search for the meaning of life, a life other than the one in theater? What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of theater? "Look at the falling snow. What's the point?" asks one of Chekhov's characters. The Russian director and screenwriter Andrei Konchalovsky, the elder brother of director Nikita Mikhalkov, reminded that Anton Pavlovich Chekhov's wife, Knipper-Chekhova, wrote to him: "What is the meaning of life?" And he replied, "You ask me: what is the meaning of life? And I ask you: what is a carrot? A carrot is a carrot. And life is life. That's all, nothing else is known"⁴. If this answer were enough, hundreds of thousands of people would not buy books that promise to deal with this subject from the title, would not attend dozens of personal development courses, films, and shows that promise solutions. Boredom has become a pathological psychological condition of primary importance, through which existential emptiness manifests itself, bringing to psychiatrists more problems than just suffering. Neuroses have a wider range, especially those of a noogenic nature that lead to states whose apparent nucleus is nonsense or despair. One clinical form is "Sunday neurosis" - when in history people have had episodes of "depression" because the daily tumult fades into silence, because nothing happens, because it is Sunday?

The theater carefully chose the dust of stories, sweeping away the centuries, digging, numbering each fresco, the civilizations in transition, the bread and wine of cultures, the legends of the self, the histories of shadows, the searches, loves and sufferings, personal and social. The theater has always been a mirror of time, and the actor has been the man with the mirror, even in times when only men were actors.

² Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Translated by Florin Tudose, "Vellant" Publishing House, Bucharest, 2018, p. 86.

³ Idem, p. 86.

⁴ Text taken from an interview with Russian director and screenwriter Andrei Konchalovsky, posted on his personal Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?ref=external&v=2874559562775305>. Accessed on March 7, 2023. The translation is taken from the website www.md.noi, specifically: <https://noi.md/md/societate/ce-este-viata-si-care-este-sensul-ei-video?page=74>. Accessed on March 7, 2023.

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Since the time when the gods seemed to have the emotional intelligence of preadolescents, since the time when Helen of Troy had run away from her husband with Paris, and seventeen thousand people sat on the pillows they brought from home for a whole day to see what would happen to the poor women of Troy. The theater has remained a mirror, even in halls with red chairs, velvet draperies and the scent of powder, under the paradisiacal allegories, with the nymphs and angels framed by the rococo stucco of the hall. Close to nature and to the most arid areas of the psyche, the theater has spoken the language of dreams, passions, pains, loves, wars, in all the seasons of the soul.

II. From Chekhov to Luk Perceval - reflections of realism on the contemporary stage

I chose to delve into Luk Perceval's "Country of Mirrors"⁵, a Belgian director who uses theater as a seismograph of everyday life. He created his first play in Poland, the play *Three Sisters* by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov (with inserts from Juliusz Stowacki's *Lambro*, music by Agnieszka Osiecka, and one of Chekhov's poems) in a co-production between TR Warszawa and the National Theater Stary in Krakow, a perfect image of these neuroses inspired by the pandemic we have just gone through and the war that those around us, from Ukraine, are going through, for which paradoxically he chose to stage a Russian playwright. Here, theater is the mirror of time, our time.

Director Luk Perceval has been a frequent guest in Romania, starting with the National Theatre Festival in 2015, where he participated with a production by Thalia Theatre from Hamburg, the play *FRONT / Front*. In 2016, at FITS, he was invited with *Love. My Family Trilogy I*, the first part of a trilogy based on Zola's texts. In 2020, also at FITS, he presented the play *Alone in Berlin*, and in 2022, at the same festival, he returned with this Chekhov production. Taking on the theme of waiting and launching challenges such as "What does my life mean while waiting? And what am I waiting for?" inspired by the main themes of this period: fear, isolation, anxiety, lack of meaning, as well as the image of the war refugee. In the same way, he takes on the stories of all the characters, even though you might expect to find them nested like Russian dolls, he scatters them throughout the play space, perceiving them only if you listen with a certain concentration, as if for music. Music imprinted with everyone's thoughts and voices, whispers, screams to themselves and each other, powerless to hear each other, because only in silence can each person's truth be tied and take root.

Luk Perceval started his career as an actor, working for eight years at the National Theatre in Antwerp. However, he felt unfulfilled because he felt too

⁵ Referring to Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Translated by Magda Teodorescu, "Cartex" Publishing House, Bucharest, 2020.

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dependent on directors with whom he could not work. As a result, he started creating his own productions without ever attending any school for it. Typically, in such situations, the work of this type of director focuses more on actors than on video, huge scenographies or light designs. Perceval is fascinated by the human being, which he considers the most spectacular thing. Another important aspect is that he has been practicing yoga for twenty-five years. These exercises and meditation are mandatory every morning, even for the actors he works with, as he believes it makes them more responsible on stage, aware of their bodies, brings them "here and now," and welds them together as a group. In fact, his approach to theater is reflected in the following Zen story about an old monk walking with his disciples on a beach covered with starfish. This Zen master throws each starfish back into the sea one by one, but there are thousands of them. One of the young monks asks him: "Master, what are you doing? It makes no sense. There are so many." And the master says, "It makes sense for each one of them"⁶. I mention these aspects because it is important to understand Luk Perceval's choices regarding texts, themes, how he works with actors, and the questions he asks, seeking meaning in life through the stories he tells. It is also important to understand the meaning he gave to this production. For example, recently, at his initiative, the team decided to change the text of *Three Sisters* by A.P. Chekhov as a sign of solidarity with Ukrainian society. Instead of Moscow, the characters want to go to Kiev, as a symbol of the lost paradise destroyed by war.

The most recent text adaptations in Romania are as follows: *Three Sisters - an (un)natural script after Chekhov*, directed by Radu Afrim at the National Theatre Bucharest (2019), another proposal directed by Semion Serzin produced by Nottara Theatre and Ioan Slavici Classic Theatre in Arad, created from scratch in six days, also in 2019, and *Three Sisters* at the "Radu Stanca" National Theatre in Sibiu, directed by Andrei and Andreea Grosu (2021). Unlike *The Seagull* or *The Cherry Orchard*, both classified by the playwright as comedies, the play *Three Sisters* is referred to as a "drama in four acts". It is a play without a story. It lacks a plot, conflict, and dramatic tension. In an isolated area of life, today we would call it pandemic, the three sisters - Masha, Irina, and Olga - dream of impossible happiness, longing for the capital of Russia where they were born. The dream of returning to Moscow becomes less and less achievable. They live with their younger brother, Andrei, who wants to continue his studies at the University of Moscow, but soon marries Natasha and has a child. Olga continues to work at a high school, while Irina tries to drown her unhappiness in work. Masha, the only one who is married to a man she does not love, is in love with Colonel Vershinin, who is also married. The three sisters live in a place where every event is watched over by the memory of their father and the image of Moscow, which slowly fades away with the passing of the years.

⁶ Interview conducted by Alexandra Corori, *Capital Cultural Magazine*, 2020. Available at: <https://capitalcultural.ro/luk-perceval-senzualitatea-artei-consta-in-a-lasa-cat-mai-multe-deoparte-pentru-a-putea-crea-potentialul-maxim-de-imaginatie/> . Accessed on March 7, 2023.

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Luk Perceval challenges the audience by offering a remix of a classic play, without creating a "Chekhovian" montage, in a distinct vision with a minimalist set, not highlighting the daughters of General Prozorov, who rather form a collective character alongside the others. An old character, as the actors in the cast are older than Chekhov's characters. Shipwrecked, trapped in an island of memory, unable to confront the present, in whose routine lies the attempt to remember the past, like an aging Europe, with elderly people, whom time and war have taken everything from. All the characters wonder: "What will life be like for our grandchildren, great-grandchildren? What are the political and social consequences of an entire society aging? Do war flames, shiny faces in front of the fire, turn darkness into light? What is the meaning of life?" But ultimately, "What is the meaning of snow?"⁷ Among Chekhov's lines, the idea that work gives meaning to life could be found, of course with comical or slightly derisory connotations. In the play, we see that Luk Perceval emphasizes the idea even more. In his vision, all the characters talk about work, are concerned with future generations, and have the Chekhovian obsession with what people will say about them in a hundred or two hundred years. In 1900, when the Russian playwright wrote the play *Three Sisters*, he said about his contemporaries that "they only eat, drink, eat and in the end... die! Then others are born... who live the same way! To avoid getting stupidly bored, they have fun gossiping, filling their lives with card games and drinks, with pointless judgments [...] A gross education poisons children's souls, stifling any divine spark in them. So they grow up, becoming puppets that look alike, just as pathetic as their parents."⁸

From the very first moment, it is clear to the audience that the *Three Sisters* they are about to see is quite different from a classic version. The play begins with all the characters gathered in Andrei Prozorov's house (played by Mirosław Zbrojewicz) to celebrate Irina's name day. Unlike productions that use clichéd images to convey the spirit of Russia, such as samovars and heavy shawls, these three sisters are dressed in minimalist fashion by designer Annelies Vanlaere. Masha (played by Natalia Kalita) and Irina (played by Małgorzata Zawadzka) wear two light sequined dresses, ready for the party, while Olga (played by Maria Maj) is dressed in black, mourning for her life, just as Masha from *The Seagull*. Except for Andrei, who is dressed in pajamas and a robe, since he is at home, the rest of the guests are dressed relatively elegantly.

The scene depicts a waiting room, a dance hall, and a room prepared for a group therapy session, with each actor occupying a chair and facing a large mirror. It is well known that what was called "Chekhovianism" was actually the Stanislavski

⁷ The line "But what sense does snow have?" is the version chosen by Roman Pawlowski, collaborator on dramaturgy with Luk Perceval, in this play. It belongs to Tuzenbach, translated as "What for? Look, it's snowing outside. What for?" in A. P. Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, Translated by Moni Ghelerter and V. Jianu, Publishing House for Literature, Bucharest, 1967, p. 315.

⁸ Idem, p. 358.

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vision of Chekhov. The fresh dimness of peaceful rooms, the tea, and the steam above the gently beaten water, telling its story in the classic *Three Sisters*, is replaced by set designer Philip Bussman with this mirror, which becomes a portal to the characters' own world, with subconscious memories projected onto it, symbolizing the transition of the soul "beyond". Here, the theater becomes the mirror of time. In this mirror, we also see a series of projections that support the text. The wheat field swaying in the wind, reminiscent of rural life, the waves of the sea that wash and slowly transform into damp earth where worms and worms crawl, transform the space, and with the help of strobe effects and smoke, into a hell, the hell of each character, who also begins to crawl, wriggle, and root themselves even more firmly. *With the doors closed*, the characters do not wake up, they remain trapped in their fantasies, their past, and do not become, or reach "the present", "now", or "Moscow". No one can escape, and although opposite the mirror, we find some wooden scaffolding that Masha and Irina try to climb in the projections of the sea waves at one point, as a sort of suicide attempt, they fail and are condemned to live there forever.

The director exposes the old male bodies, with the men being on stage naked. Perceval's unexpected choice is to place Vershinin (Jacek Beler), often played as a "handsome officer", in a wheelchair. His helplessness, frustration and weakness, including the "love scene" in the wheelchair with Masha, contribute to the little hell by initiating collective orgies, with the actors writhing over each other on the floor in a kind of frenzy, reflecting themselves again in the mirror, in their own hell. The slow passing of provincial minutes opens up infinite spaces, which are not concretized by the dilation of time, nor by long pauses of reflection, but rather by the shrinking of time and space, which seems to compress and become suffocating. A couple, cut off from what happens in the transformed playing space, is represented by Andrei Prozorov-Natasha (Marta Ojrzyńska), constructed almost in line with the psychology of nineteenth-century couples, as well as that of the "contemporary" couple. He loses his self-esteem, falling into the passion of games, she struts, threatens, makes changes in the house, and increasingly exerts psychological pressure on the Prozorov sisters. The characters are cut out from the director's perspective as a style of play, with all the actors maintaining unity, a totality, in what Noica called "Totality of each moment. We live next to each other, totality next to totality, in a world that does not totalize, but which totalizes us, somehow"⁹.

III. Conclusions

In conclusion, Luk Perceval rejects questions and answers, although he formulates them, urging acceptance of silence and contemplation, inspired by Kantor. He does not interpret the text, but transposes it into movement, sound, and visual images, because the text speaks for itself, reflecting the thoughts of our time. "Life is

⁹ Constantin Noica, *Philosophical Journal*, "Humanitas" Publishing House, Bucharest, 1990, p. 59.

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hard. Many of us see it as unfavorable and hopeless [...] The entire humanity searches with passion... And undoubtedly, it will find it. It should do it faster"¹⁰, states Vershinin. The almost perverse play that draws the audience, offering them a scale from agony to ecstasy, the neuroses turned into characters, the dust settled on the path of happiness, like the dust on all the luggage prepared for Moscow, the meaning of life, the question "what is the meaning of life?" help you share the characters' confusion in the face of the absurdity of human condition. You tend to end the performance with Sartre's line: "Hell is other people"¹¹. "What is the point?" says one of the officers: "Look at the falling snow. What's the point?" However, this question does not give you peace. In fact, the phenomenon occurs inversely, as a matter of responsibility, awareness of your own responsibility, taking your life back and honoring it. As for work and future generations, they too will have to learn this. What is the purpose of life? It is life itself. "A carrot is a carrot and life is life." Ultimately, "theater people, by their nature, cannot, should not, and do not know how to explain themselves"¹², they show you.

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¹⁰ Idem, p. 361.

¹¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Flies. No Exit. Dirty Hands. The Devil and the Good Lord. The Condemned of Altona*, Translated by Mihai Șora, "RAO" Publishing House, Bucharest, 1998, p. 134.

¹² Giorgio Strehler, *Letters on Theatre*, Translated by Alice Georgescu, "Nemira" Publishing House, Bucharest, 2015, p. 17.