

Metaphorographic - Performative Experiences In Performances: (*In Between*) *Homes/ Ulysses* and *Thrill Me : The Story Of Leopold And Loeb*

Raluca LUPAN*

Abstract: The article aims to analyze the choreographic structures in the performances made by companies in the independent sector. The realization of performative atmospheres specific to immersive theater within artistic products represents an area of research still unexplored. Traveling from concept to artistic materialization requires a reordering of the professional relationship between the director and the choreographer or the stage movement coordinator. These professional relationships and the principles under which they are established are often discussed, but their mapping often remains in an ambiguous area. The objective of this work is to re-discuss the role of the choreographer and/or the stage movement coordinator in the creation of artistic products.

Keywords: stage movement, choreographic playwrights, independent theater, performative atmospheres

The cultural associations present on the scene of the independent theater in Romania, the association *Create. Act. Enjoy*¹ (founded in 2012) and the *Touchstone Creative*² association (founded in 2022) offer the art-consuming public alternative cultural offers that are based on metatheatrical structures, ensuring the viewer unprecedented performance experiences.

Through the infinite generosity of the managers (Diana Buluga-manager-*Create.Act. Enjoy* and *Dragoș Ioniță- Touchstone Creative* manager) of the two associations, I had the opportunity to participate actively in the generation and co-editing of the structures associated with the stage movement in the two productions mentioned above up.

* PhD university lecturer, Theater Department, Faculty of Theater and Film, Cluj Napoca, Babeș Bolyai University, freelance performer

1 <https://createactenjoy.com/>

2 Theater association, founded in 2022

1. The atmosphere of performative bodies within the Symposium of *the Ulysses: European Odyssey* (UEO) project by *Create. Act. Enjoy*

In the period July 7-16, the association *Create. Act. Enjoy* proposes within the European project *Ulysses: European Odyssey*³(2022-2024) together with eighteen other cities (Athens, Trieste, Vilnius, Budapest, Marseille, Paris, Berlin, Lugo, Copenhagen, Istanbul, Cluj, Zurich, Groningen, Eleusis, Oulu, Lisbon, Dublin, Derry) a reinterpretation of James Joyce's novel - "Ulysses", through artistic approaches that respond to some social and cultural themes present in the novel mentioned above. To the independent group of artists co-opted by *Create. Act. Enjoy* has another chapter "Sirens"⁴ inside J. Joyce's novel. The artists, coordinated by the project manager - Diana Buluga, imagine in the space of the Clujana Factory an immersive *performance of a promenda type, with the title (In Between) Homes*, where the public could explore the theme of migration and the problems of the transnational family. Inside the Clujana space (original space intended for the manufacture of footwear products) the theme of migration is recomposed in an artistic sense and nine performative spaces, exhibitions and interactive atmospheres are built to offer the public the chance to sensory experience the effects, difficulties, helplessness and joys that families transnationals welcome them in a continuous vertigo of crossing borders in search of a better future. In his journey through this reinterpreted space, the spectator becomes a participant, an active part of the story by almost totally annihilating the distance between the *performer* and the spectator. Each space proposes a sub-theme of migration, is surrounded by its own scenographic and sound atmosphere, and of course a dramaturgy and direction signed by Andreea Iacob. The theme proposed by the artistic team from the re-dramatization of the chapter "Sirens" from Joyce's novel assumed in the structure of the *Ulysses: European Odyssey* project and the creation of an event to complement the main theme presented in the project: a performative symposium⁵ (July 12, 2023). In order to decipher the "madness behind the structure"⁶ in the first stage of the construction of the performative symposium, directors Andreea Iacob, Raluca Lupan (choreographer) and collaborators involved in the project: Călin Deneș,

3 <https://ulysseseurope.eu/>

4 <https://ulysseseurope.eu/episode/cluj/sirens-in-between-homes/>

5 <https://ulysseseurope.eu/episode/cluj/sirens-now-navigating-dangers-of-migration-and-habitation/>

6 Gigi Caciuleanu, *Wind. Volume. Vectors*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2008, pg.14

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Maialgesa Dat, Victor Muntean, Mic Octavian, Clara Roman, Oana Rotaru, Ana Maria Marin (3rd year students - Performing Arts - Acting, tutors and coordinators: Lupan Raluca and univ. lect. dr. assoc. Cătălin Codreanu, Faculty of Theater and Film - Cluj Napoca) went through a collective reading those passages of James Joyce's novel from which the main themes emerged that they were going to build in the improvisation sessions, the choreographic dramaturgy of the entire symposium. The performative reading within the event on July 12 was to be carried out by: Rareș Moldovan (author of the recent Romanian translation of the novel), from the perspective of the relationship with the text of the chapter; Elena Păcurar (professor at the Faculty of Letters), from the perspective of the relationship with Joyce's novel and universe and Viorela Telegdi-Csetri (director of the Center for the Study of Transnational Families), from the perspective of studies on the phenomenon of migration. In the reading session of these passages, the artistic team identifies three major themes that will be debated and ultimately choreographed: 1. Forward-Backward, 2. Fissure, and 3. Presence-Absence. Having as a construction basis the reading of the texts integrated in the performative product and the three themes to be explored, the choreographer together with Andreea Iacob and her assistant director, Varga Hunor-József propose in the rehearsal stage the exploration of the interactive relationships between the performer and the physical space (the last *room* of the Clujana factory set up like an 80s disco), the sound space (composed by József Iszlai) and the imagined space completed by *videomapping* : Diana Drăgan-Chirilă. The mocking and illusory spaces become the playground for *the performers* , *with an infinite network of creative possibilities*. The immersive devices near *the performers* gave them the opportunity to understand the importance of relational approaches and what Gigi Căciuleanu expresses so clearly: "The gesture brings music, not the music brings the gesture, and the choreographic nuances are built on the structure" ⁷. Master Căciuleanu's pleas for effervescent choreographic playwrights, for life and death, for assiduous work with pure metaphor and with their own physical disabilities, with the specific forms of dance, can be found throughout the choreographic construction within the symposium, and can constitute dogmas worthy of following . The aforementioned themes (forward-backward, fissure and absence/presence) are debated in the first rehearsal session, then begin to find their psycho-physical materiality in choreographic improvisations. The choreographed movements

7 Gigi Căciuleanu during the rehearsals for the show *La vie en rose*, Satu Mare, 2023

interwoven with the speeches of the 3 *speakers* at the symposium, aimed to introduce the viewer to the deep layers of the main theme: migration. Along with the speeches presented, the dance-actors were accompanied throughout the event by an almost imperceptible sound background, but which managed to lead the entire construction towards a result that resonated with the viewer. The difficulties present in the realization of the entire choreographic concept found their solutions through the remarkable professional availability of the dance-actors-students of the second year of acting, from the Faculty of Theater and Film in Cluj. Trained to constantly solve complex stage tasks during the educational process, the dance-actor students were easily able to bring their personal contribution to the realization of the final construct. Their professional as well as personal solutions in relation to the theme of the symposium and the aesthetics proposed in order to realize the finished product reflect a real desire to be involved in the creative process. Given the opportunity to become creative parts of the process, not just performers, they found that environment in which to exercise and display all their artistic talents. The work of the choreographer or stage movement coordinator was able to reach its highest points, the creative process being fully supported by this type of collective involvement.

2. Body reductions in Touchstone Creative's production⁸ of Stephen Dolginoff's *Thrill me: The Story of Leopold and Loeb*

As part of the project submitted for financing to the National Cultural Fund Administration, the *Touchstone Creative association* proposes the realization of the chamber musical *Thrill me* in the period 15.02-15.11.2023. Obtaining the necessary funding for this production, the management team of the association proposes to its collaborators to join a new creative process, in order to be able to bring a completely new product to the artistic market. Convinced of the chances of success of the project proposed by the producer, Dragoș Ioniță, the artists involved embark on new artistic quests. Of course, we have the pleasure of mentioning the artistic team of the project: distribution: Dragoș Ioniță and Andrei Mărcuță (*performers*); translation: Ionuț Grama; piano: Mihai Murariu; direction: Ionuț Grama & Dragoș Muscalu; scenic movement:

⁸ <https://touchstone-creative.com/>

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Raluca Lupan, scenography & costumes: Vladimir Turturică; vocal training: Georgiana Mototolea.

In the first stages of the creative process, under the demanding and attentive guidance of the artistic coordinator, Ionuț Grama, *the performers* establish the limits of the narrative thread: two young men considered brilliant, in 1924, law students, no longer wanted to answer multiple existential questions, to the suppressed "whys" and excited by Friedrich Nietzsche's theory of the superman which they interpreted in extremis, fully assume the status of *Übermensch* by the act of killing another human being, an act which is represented by the character *Richard* as the last step in their becoming superhumans. During this time, a 14-year-old boy, *Bobby Franks*, is kidnapped by *Richard* and *Nathan* (the main characters), and becomes the victim of the "murder of the century" - as the Chicago newspapers bombastically headlined a century ago. The seemingly simple dramaturgically constructed story reveals its complexity in the original musical compositions that provide *the performers* with a difficult score in the confrontation of the two game plans: the real plan of the present in which Nathan stands for the fifth time before the Commission for the release conditioned to plead his case again and the imaginary plan- constructed from the memories of young Nathan who commits the "crime of the century". Built for experienced actors or *performers*, the two poses of *Nathan*, the 19-year-old and the 54-year-old adult, intertwine throughout the libretto. Initially, the hypothesis is built around the character *Richard* that he was the "brain" of the whole operation of kidnapping and killing a 14-year-old child, so that later we understand that he too was deceived by the one who worshiped him and adore, by *Nathan*, his friend and lover. The complexity of the relationship between the two, between *Richard*, this fascinator and *Nathan*, eternally in love and submissive, is revealed through the songs composed by *Stephen Dolginoff*.

The directorial concept, eighty percent instilled by Ionuț Grama and subtly and much too discreetly adjusted by Dragoș Muscalu, allows rehearsals to take place in any type of space, but in the finalization stage of the project by *Touchstone Creative*, the show *Thrill me* financed by AFCN, supported by ARCUB, and performed in the stage space provided by the ACT Theatre, the body dynamics realized in the first stage of rehearsals suffered major destruction. The directorial concept imagined, translated in an extremely personal key by the director and artistic coordinator, Ionuț Grama, is based on the way of constructing the character abundantly Stanislavkian approaches, almost marginalizing the rules of construction imposed by the scores specific to fixed forms, such as the musical. Tempering the taste for director Ionuț Grama's approach from inside to outside, his second, Dragoș Muscalu, emphasizes the need for performative constructs, or characters shaped

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

sculpturally in relation to the playing space and the fixed form of interpretation: the musical. The intervention of the stage movement coordinator (possibly a choreographer) meets the concepts proposed by the two directors in order to be able to balance the stage situations in relation to the playing spaces, but above all to prevent possible dissensions regarding the theatrical methods (in-out or out -in) character building.

Perfecting the assembly of psycho-physical expressions through body training exercises, the corporeal structures suggested by the stage movement coordinator (Raluca Lupan) will be reduced to their minimum values of stage materialization. The physical exercises suggested for *the performers* by the movement coordinator in order to keep the muscles active and prepared to be able to take on any stage situation, were broken, not being correlated with the vocal training sessions. Gestures and behavioral traits embodied in bodily expressions specific to theatrical art, built for the two main characters: *Nathan* (Dragoș Ioniță) and *Richard* (Andrei Mărcuță) are the responsibility of the movement coordinator. The relationship of the characters with the imagined spaces and with the concrete space of the stage, represents the first stage in the path of artistic searches from the external form to the interior content of the characters.

The construction of the stage movement focused on simple, essentialized forms, in order to achieve the correct bodily attitudes in the stage situations present in the libretto. In order to preserve the essence of the connection between the characters and the absolutely fabulous situation in terms of interiority and psycho-physical actions, the actors had to reduce their body and facial expressions, because the distance between them and the audience is only half a meter. Approaching the viewer so intimately and creating the fictional space of the characters, forces the actors to dose the psycho-physical output of body expression and energy throughout the performance. In the context of the rehearsals, we tried to figure out if there was a need for more generous movements in relation to spatiality, and the stake was to find a balance between the bodily exuberance that the musical demands as representations of the forms of bodily expression in relation with the material and concrete volumes of the scene and, of course, the correct dosage of the expressed form preserved in the very intimate relationship with the audience - because, in a limited space, too much movement can seem artificial. We worked a lot on the precision of the path in space, to help the actors contain and control the movement as best as possible, and if a gestural or bodily expansion was needed, they should be expressed with a fair measure and always adjustable to the game conditions. The bodies of the actors must always be available to be able to achieve this precision, and thus there should be as little uncertainty as possible in relation to the other bodies present in the

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

scene, with all the objects and implicitly with the physical distances present in the playing space.

In the context of the realization of the entire project, the stage movement coordinator's attention was then directed to the body-situational adaptations necessary when the performance space is not similar to the space where the rehearsals took place. The directorial concept, eighty percent instilled by Ionuț Grama and aesthetically recalibrated by Dragoș Muscalu, allowed rehearsals to take place in any type of space, but the adaptation of the directorial construction made in rehearsals to a new space was the responsibility of the stage movement coordinator. The relationship with the playing space (captured in the real-imaginary duality) of the actors during the rehearsals represents, in our opinion, the foundation on which the directorial concept can be placed, fully developed and fulfilled from an artistic point of view. Configuring, establishing and memorizing the spatial routes, the distances traveled by the actors in the stage space, the relationship with the objects on the stage, the bodily relationships with the stage partners represent the basis that any artistic system needs to be able to embody the directorial concept. The stage movement coordinator starts his search in the first phase from the identification of the performative bodies present on the stage, then gradually moves on to their possibilities of expression, always keeping in mind the elementary principle with which the actor works, builds and creates: *body-mind (voice and imagination)*. Subsequently, the re-adaptation to a new playing space implies a re-interpretation and revisiting of the original directorial concept. The stage movement coordinator, rethinks stage situations in relation to a different spatiality, redistributes, adjusts, reconsiders relationships and reconceptualizes directorial proposals. The artistic contribution of the one who reimagines the entire show in a new playing space did not need to be diminished or removed in any way. Of course, we can believe that those theatrical constructions that start from form, volume, and distances are widowed by inner subtleties, or that a stage movement coordinator creates only a form devoid of content, but it is necessary to remember that a professional in the art of scenic movement understands movement as a codified ensemble of patterns generated by a thought, an emotion, a feeling present in a dramatic situation. Regardless of the aesthetics or the key in which a show is played, the directorial idea, the actor's relationship with his own body, with that of his partners, the relationship with real and fictional space, the distances present in space, (Brechtian) distancing as a game technique and implicitly the secure identification with the characters are the aspects that the stage movement coordinator will not omit in his work. These concepts represent to a professional stage movement coordinator the fundamentals upon which all his spectacular constructs are based. Stage

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

movement cannot be devoid of thought, interiority, and interiority without precise, almost sculptural stage expression is only an amateur facade not completed by a theatrical technique well mastered by the actor. The stage movement coordinator prevents any events that may aesthetically and theatrically disfavor the directing concept, which may lead it down a derisive slope and which in a final stage may compromise the quality of the entire artistic product. The permanent dialogue between the director and the stage movement coordinator has the following goals: identifying the bodily possibilities of the actors, adjusting and gestural-body coordination within the stage situations imagined by the playwright, readjusting the entire body score in the actors' encounters with the spaces proposed by the scenographer, calibrating the movement according to the musical background throughout the construction of the musical. (in this case). Of course, we can, at any time, delegate these professional tasks to the director, producer or actors endowed with those qualities that can provide an objective vision of the quality of the artistic product, from the perspective of the stage movement, but perhaps, it would be interesting to be able to observe how the solutions offered by a professional with some experience in deciphering stage movement can be useful and can even streamline the creative process of the whole team. Working on such a project (a chamber musical), carried out within the independent theater sector, can often seem like a deep dive without a safety net. The creative process, in this particular case, needed a constant renegotiation of the professional state, a personal and professional repositioning in relation to that higher quality of the product, desired by each member involved in the process.

The creation process of the two artistic products mentioned above, where I had the pleasure of being able to intervene, either as a choreographer or as an unnoticed manipulator of the stage movement, represented for me, in a professional sense, opportunities to practice the theatrical principles acquired in the years of study and perfected later within this profession. Observations that never end up turning into categorical conclusions almost always give rise to a set of questions: how clearly are professional roles defined in the process of making an artistic product? How do you negotiate overstepping the responsibilities of any role in the production process? Who is directly responsible for making decisions about product quality in a production that involves collaborative practices? How does going beyond the specific duties of your role in the production process affect the quality of the product? Do the interventions outside the area of expertise that a certain role entails (director, choreographer, movement coordinator, etc.) affect the final quality of the product? Total involvement in the production process in collaborative practices does or does not need a singular authority to clearly decide the visual,

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

corporeal aesthetics present within the product? Can the role of the choreographer and stage movement coordinator still be placed on a lower level than that of the director or the production team? How are the assignments of these roles negotiated in the collaborative practices often encouraged by independent theater companies?

The most relevant answers are always found in theatrical practice, either institutional or independent theater. Great anxieties are often present in the professional relationships in which artists with different visions about the ways of practicing this job, with varied directorial and choreographic aesthetics and poetics are involved. Observing closely the processes of creation and realization of the artistic products specific to the independent theater, which is most of the time in the situation of using the human resource to attract as many sources of funding as possible for the project, we can still hope that the inner motivations of the artists represent the most valuable resource that often knows no limits. The creative restlessness, the desire to materialize stage fictions that are imagined at the very core of the project by all the artists involved becomes a sublime form of cultural resistance.

Bibliography:

Allain, Paul&Harvie, Jen, *The Routledge companion to theatre and performance*, (translated by: Cristina Modreanu&Ilina Tamara Todoruț), Bucharest, Nemira Publishing House, 2012

Carlson, Marvin, *The Theories of the theater (A Historical and Critical Survey from the Greeks to the Present)*, US, Cornell University Press, 1993

Căciuleanu. Gigi, *Wind. Volume. Vectors*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2008

Herwitz, Daniel, *Aesthetics-key concepts in philosophy*, New York, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008

Murray, Simon&Keefe, John, *Physical Theatres-A Critical Introduction*, London and New York, Routledge-Taylor&Francis Group, 2016

Lecoq, Jacques; in collaboration with Jean Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias, *The poetic body (a pedagogy of theatrical creation)*, Oradea, Artspect, 2009

Malița, Liviu, *Theatrical space-a synthetic view*, Cluj Napoca, Eikon Publishing House, 2013

Lecoq, Jacques; in collaboration with Jean Gabriel Carasso and Jean-Claude Lallias, *The poetic body (a pedagogy of theatrical creation)*, Oradea, Artspect, 2009