

The stage of the radio theater - new metaphorical space

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Abstract: This research is motivated by theoretical as well as practical, personal examples, explaining why I believe the realm of radio theatre is metaphorical and original. The first part of the article explores three elements of acting technique are presented: *Imagination*, *Voice* and *Tempo-rhythm*. These are inevitably found in radio theatre, showcasing the enduring relevance of the Stanislavski method, which can be a demonstration of the universality over time of the way in which the Russian theoretician thought about the theater. Subsequently, the paper discusses the *National Radiophonic Theatre* as a beacon of top-quality theatre and delves into the independent radio project *Legendele Dobrogei*, conducted in Constanța, in which I participated, portraying twenty roles across twenty radio productions. The final section of the article, brings to the attention of the readers what is the role of the actor in the whole story of the radio theater, a story full of metaphors that appear when you look at them with *the mind's eye*.

Key words: theatre, actor, radio, metaphorical, *Legendele Dobrogei*

Motto:

„When you perform in front of the microphone, you have only one weapon, the voice - and it must take the place of the entire theatre arsenal.”¹

Introduction

Just as many actors of my generation grew up with their ear bent to record players and then to radio shows, so I listened to stories, poems and theatre...lots of theatre, late into the night. Why? Because I was simply attracted to something that made me feel good. Time passed and I kept up with the radio shows, and listened to theatre... until late at night. I grew up, and my ear was still glued to the airwaves of radio and radio theatre. The time has come to break away, for a while and really taste from the dust of the theatre stage. In the beginning I played on the stage of the *Studio* of the *Faculty of Theatre* in Târgu – Mureș and on the big stage of the *National Theatre* in Târgu

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¹ https://tnr.srr.ro/info/84_de_tnr/tnr_84_index.html

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Mureş (1989 – 1993). After that I got to know the stage of the *National Theatre* in Cluj-Napoca, (1993 – 1996) and then, I returned for a short time, in my hometown, to the *Sică Alecsandrescu Theatre* in Braşov (1996 – 1999). Finally, I settled in Constanţa, at the *State Theatre*. All this time, I have flirted with the radio, both in Cluj and in Braşov, but I recently got on the stage of the radio theatre, in 2023, in Constanţa.

I participated in a casting that brought me to the team of actors of the *Legends of Dobrogea* cultural project, organized by the *Carpathian Eagles Cultural-Artistic Association*, in partnership with the *Concordia Oslo Association (Norway)*, intended to promote through radio theatre the traditions and customs of Romanians and of the most important ethnic groups with whom they live in the land between the Danube and the Black Sea and financed by the *SEE Grants 2014 – 2021, within the RO-CULTURE Program*. The experience lived during the 20 roles I built at the microphone certified me that the work of the russian theoretician Konstantin Stanislavski is extremely current, in particular, some of the chapters of the actor's work with himself seemed to have been written for the training of the radio theatre actor.

Imagination

„The task of the artist and his creative technique is to transform the fiction of the play into an artistic life on stage. In this process, an important role is played by our imagination.”²

Imagination is necessary for the actor because it helps him to receive and accept various situations in which, he then gets involved and believes. First of all, the involvement is at the level of thinking, then of the senses. Imagination is developed through improvisational exercises. On the radio theatre stage, improvisation takes place at the level of speech rhythm, the use of intensities and vocal registers. Of course, these elements will be adapted to the situation in which the character finds himself. The capricious microphone does not allow any of these artistic means to be missing, it captures everything and especially the weak links of the actor's creative technique. The problem begins, in the case of radio theater, when, for various reasons, the rehearsals

² Konstantin, Sergheevici, Stanislavski, *The Actor's Work with Himself*, vol 1, second edition, trans., Raluca Rădulescu, Bucharest, Nemira, 2013, p. 128

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before printing do not reach the optimal quality of the actor's empathy with his character, which means that the truth of the situation and implicitly the inner truth of the character is not felt in the voice registered.

The voice

„Be in the voice! – what a blessing (...) for the dramatic artist! To feel that you can control your own voice, that it obeys you, that it reproduces sonorously and powerfully the smallest details, modulations, nuances of creation!... Not being in the voice! – what torment (...) for the dramatic artist! To feel that the sound does not listen to you, that it does not reach the auditorium full of spectators! Not being able to convey what the inner work creates alive, deep and invisible. Only the artist knows these torments.”³

The radio theatre actor comes from a theatre stage... physical. They should have an interesting voice, a special vocal timbre, a trained vocal technique and last but not least an expressive diction put at the service of the word intended for the clear communication of thoughts, ideas and feelings.

„The word is the product of the voice. For each vowel or consonant, the entire speech apparatus goes into action. Breathing, phonation, articulation are the results of the activities of the respective anatomical parts. Everything moves, contracts, relaxes.”⁴

In the creative process, when physical strain occurs in the vocal apparatus, dysfunctions also arise that the actors struggle with and try to cover up on the fly, without stopping rehearsal or recording in the recording studio. From a relaxed and pleasant voice, due to emotion or because the voice has not been properly warmed up, there may appear a hoarseness that is difficult to control, a hoarseness on the vocal cords that causes a scratchy sensation in the throat, or simply, the voice may disappear momentarily. And all this emerges together with the installation of physical tension, for various reasons. Also, the tension of the muscles can prevent the inner experiences, it can stop the emotion so necessary to the acting creation.

³ Konstantin Sergheevici, Stanislavski, *The Actor's Work with Himself*, vol 2, trans., Raluca Rădulescu, Bucharest, Nemira, 2014, p.61

⁴ Cella Dima, *From speech to eloquence*, Bucharest, Albatros, 1932, p.23

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Tempo-rhythm

„ ... we have the direct, immediate stimuli for each of the engines of our psychic life. The word, the text, the thought, the imagination that provokes the judgment act directly on the mind. (...). The tempo - rhythm act directly on the feeling.”⁵

In the case of radio theatre, the tempo - rhythm in front of the microphone, is very important, because everything is based on what is heard, the listener's perception and his ability to imagine the moment when the action happens, the place, the scenery, the costumes, the largely expressiveness of the actor's voice. The actor reads the theatrical score keeping the tempo of the piece, but his inner rhythm may even be at odds with the tempo of the scene played during the recordings. This is where breathing comes in, which the actor can juggle depending on how the tempos demand it. The rhythm in which the character speaks, both on the microphone and in the theatre, depends on the state he is experiencing. Rhythms can be slow, normal, accelerated and highly accelerated. Also, these rhythms can be combined with different intensities, a mechanism that at a microphone also has a special speaking technique. If the aim is to achieve a whisper, it is necessary that the actor is not too close to the microphone and the exhalation, while he speaks, must be very well supported by the diaphragm in order not to pollute the sounds that are born during the speech. Or, if a character has to shout from somewhere far away, he will retreat to a certain distance from the microphone, but the shout will not be as loud as it is on stage, it will have to be somewhat louder, internalized.

I teach these analyses of radio theatre techniques to students from the *Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University Constanța*, in the discipline of *Education and the expression of stage speech*. They are techniques with which the student has first contact, they are the tools they will be able to rely on in building the characters to highlight their inner life, thoughts and feelings.

A new manifestation of art. The radio theatre

⁵ Konstantin Sergheevici, Stanislavski, *The Actor's Work with Himself*, vol 2, trans., Raluca Rădulescu, Bucharest, Nemira, 2014, 267

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There are similarities and differences between stage theatre and radio theatre. The similarities are related to the acting techniques that are very important on the radio, and one of the most interesting differences is the fact that the physical space is eliminated. By means of radio the distances are simply suppressed. The scenery in radio theatre changes quickly, with the help of music or certain sounds specific to the place where the action takes place, which in the theatre lasts and happens during an interval.

The beginnings of the radio theatre in the world are linked to countries like England, France, USSR, Germany, Italy, Austria, and took place between the years 1927-1928. The date of birth of the Romanian radio theatre is not far from this period. In 1929, *Radiofonia* magazine announced: „On Monday, 18 II, the delicious comedy in one act *What the Village Knows* written by V. Al. Jean, is being played at the studio of *Broadcasting Society* in the General Berthelot street. The performance benefits from the precious competition of the eminent artists of the *National Theatre*: Mrs. Maria Filotti and Mr. Bulfinski who are also the creators of the roles in V. A. Jean's play. In Romanian Broadcasting, this production must be emphasized, being the first attempt to give theatre in the studio.”⁶

From that moment until today, 95 years have passed and the mirage of the microphone theatre has gained more and more listeners, viewers with the eyes of the mind, becoming a special form of artistic manifestation and of great importance for Romanian culture.

The *National Radiophonic Theatre* is the promoter of special radio shows that preserve in sound form important voices and their interpretations, emblematic casts of the Romanian theatre. Through cultivated professionalism, the *National Radiophonic Theatre* has assumed a unique sound identity, with its own stories based on coordinates that vibrate all over the world.

„From the written memory of the first live radio shows, to the appearance of the tape recorder, which allowed the recording of radio shows and broadcasts, to the digitalized present, the *National Radiophonic Theatre* has kept up with both the technical evolution of radio and the transformations of Romanian and international theatrical and cinematographic art. In the rich *Tape Library of Romanian Radio*, the oldest radio theatre performance

⁶ Victor Crăciun, *Radio waves scene, (radio theater)*, Masca collection, Bucharest, Eminescu, 1980, p.6

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recorded on tape is *Hagi Tudose* by B.St. Delavrancea (1951), directed by Ion Şahighian and with the great Nicolae Bălăţeanu in the lead role.”⁷

Almost a century has passed since the shows on the wave stage brought together adaptations of texts, original scenarios, both romanian and international, writings in classical or contemporary key. Of course, without the effective participation of a valuable technical team, all the efforts of the valuable artists could not have been crowned with success.

„The romanian radio theatre has played and continues to play a special, specific and unique role in our cultural life, thus fulfilling its educational and formative work that Tudor Vianu has been leading since the beginning, namely that - it must become a real *National Theatre*.”⁸ The recognition of the value of the *National Radio Theatre* was also realized through the awards received by the productions made here, at important international festivals. This year (2024) the 10th edition of the *UK International Radio Drama Festival* features 32 countries that will present 217 works produced by both public broadcasters and independent producers.

„Directed by Mihnea Chelaru, two performances of the *National Radiophonic Theatre* were selected for the 10th edition of the *UK International Radio Drama Festival*. In the *Audio Drama* section, TNR will compete with *Langholzfeld*, by Andreas Jungwirth (translation: Ciprian Marinescu, radio adaptation: Oana Cristea Grigorescu). *To battle* by Răzvan Ursuleanu (radio adaptation: Mihnea Chelaru and Oana Cristea Grigorescu) competes in the *Short Form Drama* section. Under the slogan *Simply the Best*, the event will take place from 25-29 March in the historic city of Canterbury.”⁹ In the 21st century, the productions of the National Radio Theatre can be listened to online, on the e-theatre platform.

The fascination of the acoustic stage

Acoustic stage, microphone theatre, radio theatre, or microphone theatre, means verbal-sound dramatic art. It has conditions of creation - reception and specific means of artistic expression. This means that both the

⁷ <https://www.romania-muzical.ro/articol/teatrul-naional-radiofonic-95-de-ani-sub-semnul-excelenei/3766501/1811/1>

⁸ Victor Crăciun, *Radio waves scene, (radio theater)*, Masca collection, Bucharest, Eminescu, 1980, p.6

⁹ <https://www.constanta.press/news/doua-spectacole-ale-teatrului-na%C8%9Bional-radiofonic-concureaza-la-uk-international-radio-drama-festival?uid=854184>

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sound and the speech play an important role in the creation of the play. It is the actor who releases the emotion and juggles the imagination to convey it to the listening audience.

Radio theatre is a spatial metaphor because everything takes place somewhere in the ether. The receiver recreates, in his mind, what actually never really existed: the setting, the place where the action takes place, the costumes of the characters... The theatrical performance thus depends on the degree of imagination of the listener, on his inner world (richer or poor). To trigger the imagination and maintain concentration, radio theatre has at hand specific elements of expression, starting from music, background sounds, technical effects, up to the voice of the actor who practically speaks into a microphone, but who communicates with the partner his (character). All these means of expression are at the service of the receiver to trigger the world in which the word spoken by the actor is born.

In the radio project I participated in, *Legendele Doborgei*, an independent project, the stages of work and the actual method of realization did not compromise quality and professionalism for a moment. Once I got off the podium of the theatre stage, I found myself in a radio world, without the light design that not infrequently helped me create a certain mood, without the set elements, without the costume that completed my character and, without a rehearsal period where I had time to build and assimilate the character. I was in a world that closely resembled the world I knew but... it wasn't that one. Along with the directors, the fellow actors, a bunch of devices and devices intervened beside me, and a new direct partner: the Microphone. An extremely demanding partner with whom you could not negotiate anything. It all started in a recording studio. Composer Adrian Stavian hosted part of the project's recordings in his studio ensuring the production processes of a radio theatre, the audio part: „The recordings started with the wiring and positioning of the microphones (3 - 4 microphones). The main characters had separate microphones or if it was a group, 2-3 people gathered at a microphone. I tried to position them in such a way as to keep the proximity effect as much as possible, without the signal being distorted in the strong moments. I used pop-filters to soften the strong consonants "p", "b", "d", "t" etc. and *Telefunken Ar 51* microphones, *SE Electronics SE 8 stereo set*, *Rode NT1 5th generation*. These were connected via xlr cables to a patchbay which is an additional part of the *Metric Halo Uln8 3D* sound card connected to the computer via thunderbolt.

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The recording was done in Cubase Pro 15 software. When the recording was over, the sound editing part started (cue selection, noise filtering, processing, eq, compressions, effects, sound-design, etc.). I then made the musical soundtrack consisting of the composition of themes or backing music, where I used different natural instruments or virtual tone libraries, keyboards, etc..., orchestrated in such ways to support different moments. Up next was the mixing of the musical soundtrack with the acting soundtrack. The last process was mastering (final eq processing, compression, final production volume.”¹⁰

Although at first it seemed that all these devices would somehow also do our work as actors, no, it was not so. The screenwriters were extremely inventive with the acting scores. So, my voice has to go from the warmth and empathy of the narrator, to worried and fearful peasant to a witch (a role that forged my voice in all vocal registers; from the head voice, sharp and stilted in the chest voice, hoarseness, cough, snoring...), or a blind old woman (who goes through various states made of course, from the use of the voice, first of all without forgetting the hoarse voice) and even a little boy curious and restless (a voice made up of several vowels). Fig.1¹¹



Fig.1

For all these different voices to be harnessed in front of the microphone, posing and breathing played a big role. Theatre with a microphone also means a different speed of speech than the normal one, and a different kind of involvement than the stage one. Also, no director stuck to a single version of the recording, sometimes I was even put in a position to

¹⁰ Adrian Stavian, Romanian composer, recording/mixing/mastering engineer, administrator at HEAD MUSIC PRODUCTION

¹¹ QR code with recordings from the shows

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improvise on the spot certain moods or sounds necessary for the respective show. But, this is only the technical aspect of acting radio creation. Beyond the external elements that made up the characters, everything had to be passed through the filter of emotion and inner feelings. And this could not be done by halves. The recording was very clear. If the actor's performance was beside the point or the character got lost along the way, the recordings had to be re-recorded and the whole process redone.

This kind of theatre has an element that stage theatre lacks: the mind's eye. And, walking on the metaphorical thread liberating from all that means constraint, we can say that radio theatre is born when you close your eyes so that you can see with the eyes of the mind. The challenge is two-sided, both for creators and listeners. And for me, it was a rewarding challenge.

Conclusions

Renowned figures from the Romanian stage have graced the casts of productions featured on the *National Radiophonic Theatre*. This institution has carved its path through artistic endeavors where romanian plays consistently took center stage. Actors found opportunities to embody roles they had only dreamed of on stage, while directors explored new creative avenues through the power of spoken words and sounds.

The team behind the Constanta-based project, *Legendele Dobrogei*, is part of a vast network of actors who have breathed life into characters via the radio microphone. This project, funded by the *SEE Grants 2014 - 2021 under the RO-CULTURE Program*, garnered an audience of over 100,000 listeners on *Radio Constanța* and *Radio Play stations*.

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