

Heart In The Bag, Love In The Sack And Hope Still Alive? The Magical Realism Of Playwright John Cariani. Study On The Metaphor In The Text *Almost Maine*

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Abstract: In the magical universe of the American playwright John Cariani, the explosion of symbols and metaphors completes the creative process of both the actor and the spectator. The ease with which deep themes of human nature are approached is due to the mastery with which references of the soul are used in the identity of real and mundane objects. The characters carry their love in bags, their heart in sacks and their hope in inches. The magical world where the city of Maine exists but does not exist at the same time, is the world where any human dream or thought or need can become reality. The contemporary language of the text brings the soul closer to its organic understanding. One will focus their attention on the inner and outer structures of the characters, on the human themes approached, on the acting tools necessary for the organic assumption of the performance. *Almost Maine*, a universe of dreams and hopes, was staged in Romania in six theatrical institutions relevant to the contemporary artistic landscape. The space between real and imaginary, concrete and magical outlines the inner world of John Cariani characters.

Keywords: imaginary, magical realism, metaphor, organic.

What happens when all the love becomes so big that it cannot fit in the soul anymore? If a heart breaks, can it be mended? When we lose hope day after day, hour after hour, do we also lose life? Can there be life in a place where hope disappears? In John Cariani's ¹magical universe, every trace of

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¹ John Cariani, renowned American playwright and actor. Known for his dramatic work *Almost Maine*, John Cariani weaves contemporary reality with the magical realism of his situations and characters. The play *Almost Maine* was originally published in 2007.

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reality is accompanied by considerable magical touches in constructing situations and characters. In the theater play *Almost Maine* one comes into contact with magical characters and situations from the first glance. The text is structured into nine stories of the people of *Maine*, where love, hope and the need for belonging and alienation is present.

The people of the mythical little town live for a thousand lives. The nine love stories are rounded off by the presence of a prologue and an epilogue that manage to bring in the spectator the feeling of a dream that is born in the presence of other people. The feeling of intimacy and introspection proposed by the playwright offers the reader the opportunity to escape for a few moments from the immediate reality, in the imaginary space of Cariani's metaphor. In Cristian Juncu's translation, the text offers readers an exercise in imagination designed to transpose objective reality into a magical reality 'a little town that exists, and not quite.'²

On the stages of professional theaters in Romania, the text *Almost Maine* was staged for the first time by the 'Anton Pann Theater' in Râmnicu Vâlcea. The translation and direction of the text was signed by director Cristian Juncu in 2012. The text was also staged by Teatrul Tineretului Piatra Neamț³, directed by Vlad Cristache, Teatrul 'Sică Alexandrescu' ⁴Brașov, directed by Adrian Iclenzan, Teatrul Excelsior București⁵, directed by Eugen Gyemant, Teatrul Clasic 'Ioan Slavici' ⁶Arad, directed by Antonella Cornici, Teatrul de Nord Satu Mare⁷, directed by Theo Marton.

The balance between psychological realism and magical realism is often difficult to measure. We meet characters who are present on the other side of the world just to say goodbye to their deceased spouse. Others, with

² John Cariani, *Almost Maine*, Translate by Cristi Juncu, 2012

³ *Aproape* – Teatrul Tineretului Piatra-Neamț

⁴ Fata „cu inima în pungă“ | adevarul.ro

⁵ *Aproape*(teatrul-excelsior.ro)

⁶ *Aroape de tine. Încă!* Teatrul Clasic Ioan Slavici

⁷ teatruldenord.ro spectacol ALMOST,-MAINE

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their last remaining strength, are fighting to recover all the love they have been given in the last years of their relationship. Big red bags contain every drop of love offered in a relationship of more than ten years. In another story, we meet Hope; the choice of name is not accidental, crosses hundreds of kilometers from the other side of the world just to answer a question for her lover. Another picture of magical reality represented by the aurora borealis, which in the dramatic text has many functions. The aurora borealis becomes for John Cariani's characters both a play partner and the purpose of their existence in the magical reality. Aurora Borealis, this magical expression of the stage universe accompanies each character in their inner and outer struggle to find, recover, revive or discover love.

If in the actor's performance, under the umbrella of psychological realism, he can easily respond to the stage parameters, the magical notes of John Cariani's text could produce misunderstandings in the actor's performance. In his course on the art of the theater director, director and professor, Octavian Jighirgiu defines psychological realism. 'Realism is an aesthetic current in which the emphasis is placed on the relationship between art and reality, the indispensable tool of which is the careful observation of reality and its truthful, objective reflection in creation.'⁸ The careful observation of reality cannot be ignored in the case of the magical realism present in John Cariani's text. As well as the psychological realism, its characters have a purpose, a personal stake, and act actively and present to fulfill them. Thus, the game between the characters of a magical world needs to exist in the concrete, real and present plane as truthful and organic as possible.

The metaphor, having conceptual value in its construction, risks producing cracks in the process of assumption of the characters. Imagination, playful spirit but, above all, the degree of vulnerability in the creative process represent the package of tools necessary for John Cariani's assumption of situations. The exclusively rational structure of acting becomes for the actor the space of non-assurance. Attempting to assume this kind of magical realism

⁸ Octavian Jighirgiu, *Arta regizorului de teatru*, Universitatea Națională de Arte „G. Enescu”, Iași, 2019, p.13

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using rational tools is bound to fail. In a magical world, reason exists to counterbalance the danger of irrationality at most.

In a space where the aurora borealis (metaphor of life and death, end and beginning, old and new) becomes the central element of the performance. In the absence of a rich imaginary universe prone to playfulness and play, the text can instill in the actor the tendency to opt for the superficiality of either the comic or the emotional. The structure of dramatic events is often a mixture of emotion and comedy. Choosing one of the two directions produces the immediate need for the other. The overly emotional needs the comic, and vice versa.

In the actor's art course dedicated to students as well as actors, Mircea Gheorghiu shares thoughts and exhortations offered by professor Ion Cojar. 'Professor Cojar used to say that the only creator is each actor's potential for vulnerability. The more vulnerable you are, the more creative you are. The lack of naturalness, atrophied by the aesthetic and beautifying components, has made us lose the joy of living, innocence, grace, and put more and more limits on ourselves stemming from prejudices.'⁹ Thus, for the actor or student actor who comes into contact with John Cariani's text, his inner structure will become his creative spring. Reason will be able to offer a limited range of understandings and explanations to the psyche. In the space where reason will be in a limiting process, feeling will become an indispensable tool for the structure of the characters in *Almost Maine*. Reason will be able to carry out the psychic processes necessary to understand the situation, but by using this tool exclusively, the performance will become sterile and superficial. Reason, like the look that can include a collection of objects and spaces, which cannot include a total that defines the real structure, and size of an event, is often limiting.

In the structure of each character in *Almost Maine*, reason is often challenged. East character from the heart-in-a-bag scene finds himself in a constant struggle between reason and feeling. His outward structure of character suggests a note full of concreteness and reason. A young man in the business of repairs meets a young woman with a broken heart. His impulses of irrationality appear in the structure of the scene from the first lines between

⁹ Mircea Gheorghiu, *Actorul și natura umană*, Editura UNATC Press, București, 2017, p.46

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the two. The action of the kiss initiated by East, followed by the line *I don't know what's gotten into me, I just love you*, emphasizes the transition between rational and irrational in a blink of an eye. A young man who is only good at repairing objects ends up bringing his soul closer to another soul in a reality that is hard to explain. The dynamic between the two characters is often interrupted by accents of rationality such as *wait a minute, but how do you breathe? If your heart is in that bag, how are you alive?* The need for the characters to translate the magical events that happened is present in the structure of John Cariani's text. The strangeness of a kiss out of nowhere, a heart in a bag that's broken and turned to gravel, a soul carried by the aurora borealis across the flat *Maine* sky, these series of irrationality and magic often linger in the space between reality and fantastic.

The metaphor of the heart in the bag manages to penetrate deep into the subconscious of the human being. In a vulnerable and available vehicle¹⁰, it can move the tectonic plates of the soul trapped in everyday reality. However, in a vehicle in an external and rational structure, the heart-in-a-bag metaphor can become a bottleneck in the actor's performance. Within the Faculty of Arts in Galați, in the actor's art laboratory, the text *Almost Maine* has become study material for second-year students. The magic and the fantastic of the text represented a blockage of assumption by the actors in the first stages of work. Thus, although the playwright's indication for the one who will play Glory, the girl with the heart in the bag, is to not be able to breathe and live in the absence of the bag, for the actor this investment of a real object with the quality of the source of life is a real challenge. The acting had become sterile and at odds with the situation proposed by the playwright. This apparent detail of the acting performance had become the necessary heart to take over the stage. However, can an actor transform the metaphor into a working tool? Can the concept become the source of real and organic action for the actor? Following an exercise designed to ignite the actor's imagination, the heart in the bag made the transfer from object to idea, metaphor and need. Acting on the actor's imagination by identifying a real need, the transfer from the general to the specific was achieved. From doing to real and organic existence. Adding

¹⁰ In the research, we use the term vehicle intended to represent the outer and inner structure of the actor. Therefore, the vehicle is both the physical but also the mental and emotional component of the actor.

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to the real cardboard bag all the things, objects, people, events that she cannot live without, the actress managed to stimulate the organicity and authenticity necessary for the creative act through her imagination. The transition from the actress who completely neglected the bag where her heart was, to the actress who could not breathe in the absence of the bag has now been realized before the spectators. Acting in John Cariani's dramaturgy has a responsibility to remain alive and organic. In the absence of life, it is sacrificed to mastery or craft. Adolphe Appia emphasizes the necessity of the living and the life in artistic creation. 'Living art addresses the whole soul, and the more contributors can give it of their lives, the nobler will be its mission.'¹¹To give contains for the universe of *Almost Maine* the actor's capacity to be generous and vulnerable. Thus, once the quality of life and air of the cardboard bag was assumed at an organic level, the performance became alive, present but at the same time wrapped in the metaphor of the new and the beginning. Each new sliver of life exists in the real space of the magical universe just as cold air.

The scene with the heart in the bag has a classic dramaturgical structure in which the character East, representative of freedom and love acts on Glory, representative of failure, misfortune and safety. One can define both characters in key concepts. The old and the new. The past and the present. A metaphor of the meeting between life and lifelessness. In the creative freedom used by the appearance of the heart in the bag, one may dare an exercise of imagination in which individuals will associate with the contents of the bag rather the sensation and the feeling of non-life. For Glory, the girl who has reached the end of the earth, any trace of life awakens a paradox in her existence on earth. A sincere kiss underlines the existing lack of life. A sincere *I will fix it* (referring to the heart) emphasizes its need for life.

However, does the metaphor and magic of a creative act exist exclusively in the relationship between actor and space, text or partner? Does the spectator not need the processes of imagination to step assumedly and organically in his turn in the creative act? In the world of *Almost Maine*, the

¹¹ Adolphe Appia, *Opera de artă vie*, Translated by Elena Drăgușin Popescu, Editura Unitext, București, 2000, p.79

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characters are dared to dream, hope, fight, recover their love and find themselves. The spectator will inevitably transit the same needs and desires as the characters. The director Nikolai Evreinov urges the spectator to an exercise of assuming convention with the actor. ‘At the moment of theatrical perception there is and must be a kind of tacit agreement, a kind of *tacitus consensus* between the spectator and the actor by virtue of which the former agrees to adopt a certain attitude towards the actor, who in turn tries to remain faithful to this agreed attitude, as best as possible. The spectator says to himself: This is a piece of cloth, but I will take it for the sky.’ If he fails to achieve this, it is the fault of the artist who made the sets, the fault of the actor who betrays through the apathy of the gaze a skeptical attitude towards this ‘sky’, or of the spectator himself, whose imagination is not capable of perceiving this solution as a real sky.’¹² If for the actor of John Cariani’s scenes the imagination is the source of the emergence of vivid and organic images necessary for the creative actor and the authentic assumption of the magical reality, for the spectator of the text he needs the exercises of safe withdrawal into himself. The safe space of the spectator’s imagination gives him the opportunity to perform an exercise of contemplation and return to the moments or even the persons appearing in the imagination. Therefore, the metaphor of the heart in the bag cannot just be the one acting. Everyone who reads, sees, or performs the heart in the bag scene will connect with the exact measure of what this heart in the bag represents to their soul. The magic of this happening under the umbrella of magical realism takes on essence and value conveyed by an explosion of the self from the metaphor used by the playwright. ‘José Antonio Portuondo, in 1955, uses the phrase ‘magical realism’ in a similar way, wanting to emphasize the ability of a certain type of realism to manifest a total openness to lyricism of substance, magical realism becoming, therefore, a kind of artistic reworking of reality and, at the same time, the attempt to impose a vision through poetic excellence on the external universe.’¹³

¹² Nikolai Evreinov, *Teatrul în viață*, Translate by Nicolae Manda, Editura Unatc Press, București, 2020, pg.128-129

¹³ Rodica Grigore, *Realismul magic în proza latino-americană a secolului XX*, Editura Casa cărții de știință, Cluj-Napoca, 2015, p.19

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In scene four, *I Gave You a Ring*, Gayle and Lendall live with the real possibility of breaking up after more than ten years of dating. Gayle gives back all the love she received from him. Love is translated into stage reality in huge but fluffy bags. Their size and texture create a feeling of preciousness and inner need. The bags (love) contain all the events of a happy relationship. The first walk on the seashore on a cool September day, the first love you, the place where they met for the first time, the moments of play and joy, etc. If for Gayle love must be carried with difficulty, symbolizing the value and weight of real and organic emotions, for Lendall love, although as heavy, full and big, fits in a small bag. The symbolism of the bag that transits from the space where useless things are thrown to the intimate space of an engagement ring reinforces the need of belonging of each character. The engagement ring Gayle receives at the end of the scene contains a universe of vivid, organic emotions and images.

The necessary playfulness in the dynamic between Gayle and Lendall is one of the possible obstacles to the creative act. There is an impulse to turn the scene exclusively into a process of psychological realism by organically assuming the situation without allowing the metaphor and the playful and the comic to emerge, the performance can become incomplete. A highly comical yet soulless approach cannot be complete. A purely emotional one, but devoid of the playfulness and jovial life of John Cariani's characters, will create gaps in the spectator's perception. 'The game is a feature full of meaning. Something that goes beyond the immediate instinct of preservation, something that sets an interpretation into action.'¹⁴ The life present in the dramatic text requires the actor to return to the need to play and perform to the detriment of the attempt to produce the emotional. One may use the term emotional precisely to emphasize the willed action to produce emotionality in others without letting the emotion arise as a result of a living and present psycho-emotional process. The artist Mihai Măniuțiu leaves no room for a superficial approach to the playful in the performance act. 'The origin of the playful act lies in the irreducible impulse that arises fully and immediately within the

¹⁴ Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, Translated by H.R.Radian, Editura Humanitas, București, 2012, p.39

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actor...'¹⁵Thus, John Cariani's universe of metaphor presupposes a sustained effort of the actors in which the playfulness, imagination, contemplation and organic action will support the transfer of the conceptual metaphor inside the spectator. The entire dramatic text is embroidered with metaphors of the soul and of human needs. In *the scene Street of Hope*, we find Hope. Many years ago, Hope was proposed. Young age, a limited life experience, the need to pursue her dream and career prevented her from giving a direct answer to the marriage proposal. Thus, Danny remains waiting for Hope's answer for many years. As the years go by, the spectator/reader finds Danny again - a tall and well-built former basketball player, short and hopeless. The metaphor used by the playwright to express how great the loss of love can be for the human being, places the actor who will play the character Danny in the situation of being small, very small. Thus, Hope does not recognize the stranger with whom she engages in dialogue in an attempt to find Danny. The stranger who traveled thousands of kilometers because she remembered that she too once had her place in the world enters into a dialogue with the one who no longer represents anything of what he once was. The loss of hope leaving it smaller and smaller until it vanishes completely.

John Cariani's character building is sublime. They provide actors and spectators with the necessary mask in the shadow of which the soul can be explored without fear of becoming visible. Thus, under the names of the characters Danny, Lendall, Hope and others, the metaphor of the soul used in the dramatic structure of the text allows the receiver to truly exist in his intimate space. The magical and metaphorical universe of the text places the reader in a new, inner and meditative world. The text becomes an opportunity for contemplation on human nature, life, inner need and desires. Personal human truth is born in the honest relationship between the receiver and the dramatic material. Can we consider that all love can fit in the palm of your hand? Why not. It is there, it is within us. In conclusion, we can affirm the fact that although apparently the magical realism of the text may represent a key factor in the actor's assumption process, the imagination and fresh spirit of the performance, but above all the need to feel and translate the metaphor of life,

¹⁵ Mihai Măniuțiu, *Despre mască și iluzie*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2007, p.97

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exists in each of those who are willing to make an honest confession about themselves.

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