

Reflection and Action in the Actor's Work

Diana COZMA*

Abstract: The actor, creator of the role, and, in this respect, co-author of the theatre performance, invests time not only to gather the necessary material to structure the role, to document, recall or bring to the present certain memories relevant to the study of the character, to decant the information, reflect on the material in its entirety, but also to create scenic actions. Reflecting on the role and inventing scenic actions, which accompany the creative process, influence and enhance each other. What is a scenic action? What is at the basis of the manifestation of a scenic action? In our brief analysis of reflection and action in the work of the actor, we propose to approach this issue from the perspective of Eugenio Barba.

Keywords: actor, reflection, physical and vocal action, improvisation, spectator

It is impossible to draw a dividing line between reflecting and acting in an actor's work considering the symbiotic relationship that is established between them: *The inner life of the actor, the reflective part and the affective part are made perceptible through precise vocal and physical actions that generate a reaction in the spectator. Precision reveals the necessity of a determined action and at the same time its inner coherence*¹. For Barba, "Action is any change, however minute, which consciously or subliminally affects the spectators' attention, their understanding, sensibility and kinaesthetic sense of the spectator"². Undoubtedly, "actions create changes"³, observes Julia Varley, for whom "an action is the smallest fragment of a

* Ph.D associate professor habil., Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0695-3377>

¹ Barba, Eugenio, *On Directing and Dramaturgy. Burning the House*, translated by Judy Barba, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 29

² Ibidem, p. 106

³ Varley, Julia, *Notes from an Odin Actress. Stones of Water*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 17

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

complex movement”⁴. In fact, Varley proposes the definition of an actress/actor as “a person who executes actions, and of the action as something that changes, differently to a movement”⁵. In the creative process, the actor transcends the methods and techniques he assumed and, sometimes, personalized, leaving space for expression to his memories and emotions, dreams and visions. A *real action*, which “must recreate on stage an equivalent of the forces present in everyday life”⁶, is rooted in the *body-mind* of the actor who *thinks, acts and reacts simultaneously*. During the process of creating actions, the actor often makes use of the *evocative logic*, of *the logic in jumps*⁷, in order to create the conditions in which the word does not imitate reality, but creates reality. The written word acquires both the life and the force of the spoken word, the word itself is action. The *word-action* has a direct and strong impact on the spectator precisely because of the disturbance it arouses in him. If the word acquires the value of an action, there is the possibility that the stage fiction is perceived by the spectator as *real*, because it provokes an intense experience. As regards the *language of action*, under the influence of Antonin Artaud, Peter Brook reflects on it: “Is there another language, just as exacting for the author, as a language of words? Is there a language of actions, a language of sounds— a language of word-as-part-of movement, of word-as-lie, word-as-parody, of word-as-rubbish, of word-as-contradiction, of word-shock or word-cry? If we talk of the more-than-literal, if poetry means that which crams more and penetrates deeper—is this where it lies?”⁸. Like the actor’s body, the action, which is “the very spirit of the acting”⁹, is seen as carrying multiple meanings.

⁴ Ibidem

⁵ Ibidem, p. 33

⁶ Ibidem, pp. 36-37

⁷ Carreri, Roberta, *Tracce. Training e storia di un’attrice dell’Odin Teatret*, edizione a cura di Francesca Romana Rietti, fotografie di *Orme sulla neve* di Guendalina Ravazzoni, Prefazione in forma di lettera di Eugenio Barba, Milano, Il principe costante Edizioni, 2007, p. 100

⁸ Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space*, London, Penguin Books, 1990, p. 55

⁹ Craig, E. G., , *Despre arta teatrului*, traducere de Adina Bardeş și Vasile V. Poenaru, București, Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, Revista Teatrul azi (supliment) prin Editura Cheiron, 2012, p. 127

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

Thinking the theatre performance in series of actions generates transcendences of the first levels of meanings, opening up countless possibilities for exploring ways of telling the story of the performance. Beyond doubt, the stage reflects social and political realities, but the stage retains its condition as a space-time of experiencing existential dimensions precisely because these realities are transcended. Through imaginative expansions, through transgressions of the concreteness of being, scenic fiction can acquire the capacity of proposing new value standards, gnoseological and ontological landmarks. From this perspective, the actor's actions can be considered ways of initiating the process of reflection both in himself and in the spectator. In this regard, Peter Brook remarks: *Theatre is not just a place; it is a metaphor; it helps to make the process of life more clear*¹⁰ and Barba observes: "To act, in the theatre, means to intervene in time and space in order to change and to be changed"¹¹. How can the theatre performance bring about changes? Why is theatre considered to be more than entertainment? The theatre reformers aim, through their performances, to produce *changes in the spectator's consciousness* by shifting the interest from the word to the action, thus giving new meanings to this *archaeological relic* named theatre. But in order to produce radical changes in both the actor and the spectator, it is necessary that the exploring of the themes submitted for reflection be thorough, it is necessary to make use of a *living thinking* which is the equivalent of a *radical activity*. 'Radical' comes from the Latin 'radix', root. Thus, to be radical means to go to the root of things, to get closer to the essences (Peck). From this perspective, the actor's physical and vocal actions, which are linked to archetypal actions and make references to the true existential dilemmas or to the great themes of human life, can be considered radical actions. It is not possible to create scenic actions capable of producing changes in the spectator's consciousness in the absence of an in-depth thinking. Hence, the necessity for the training of the actor in which a significant role is played by his constant effort in order to eliminate simplistic, conventional thinking, unilateral logic, stereotypes, mannerisms, labeling, thinking exclusively in the cause-effect equation, or making use of the same set of techniques he already knows. The actions of a mannerized actor are devoid of life, of that something

¹⁰ Brook, Peter, *Threads of Time*, Washington D.C., Counterpoint, 1999, p. 196

¹¹ Barba, Eugenio, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, translated by Richard Fowler, London and New York, Routledge, 1993, p. 162

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

“both elementary and dramatic that can be found in the changes between different qualities of energy in movement, such as fast and slow, straight and curved, strong and soft, open and closed”¹². The struggle against mannerism brings with it the necessity to explore unknown territories, an exploration that forces the actor to *actively listen* to his body-mind.

The space-time intended for the creation of the stage action is that of improvisation in which different ways of weaving the text of the performance are experimented with both on the level of concatenation and simultaneity, in which the actors’ scores are elaborated and possible relationships with the spectators are explored. During improvisations, the actor’s *mind-body*, consciously or unconsciously, voluntarily or involuntarily, enters an *active meditation* or, in other words, a *reflection in action* on the character/role: “As an actress I create from myself. This doesn’t mean necessarily that my actions on stage are rooted in psychology or in my intimate self, but that I begin from my body, from my own being on stage. Even if I ignore my ego and consider only the effect of what I do, as an actress I see a reflex and listen to an echo of what I have initiated directly. In order to make an action, I transmit information to myself, directly, within my body and with my own senses; I let my physical intelligence lead me without interference. Passages happen without external explanations; intelligence is already immediate action, faster than light: it is a process that is difficult to explain in words, because it is wordless”¹³. Changes occur simultaneously at the level of thought and action that are inextricably linked to the actor’s stage presence: “Stage presence is the premise for transforming ideas and wishful thinking into persuasive actions, for the internal creative forces to be revealed and to take on a communicative form”¹⁴. The actor’s inner life takes the form of the score through a process of objectifying the actor’s subjectivity, of materializing ideas and emotions in actions: “The spectator perceives as objective signs the articulate actions of the actor which are, however, the result of a subjective process. How can the actors be the matrix of these actions and at the same time be able to shape them

¹² Carreri, Roberta, Exe Christoffersen, “The Actor's Journey: 'Judith' from Training to Performance (one-woman show combining personal circumstance, training, and research)”, *New Theatre Quarterly*, volume VII, Number 26, May 1991, Cambridge University Press, pp. 137-146, p. 137

¹³ Varley, Julia, 2011, op. cit., p. 152

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 29

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

into objective signs whose origin is in their own subjectivity? This is the essence of the actor's art and methodology"¹⁵. So, the actions tell a story that follows a path from subjectivity to objectivity, from the particular to the universal, to the archetype and myth. The actions have a symbolic character and thus the chain of stage actions offers the spectator the opportunity to compose his own story. But, in order for a story to be hidden behind each action, it is necessary for the actor to make use, besides memory and emotion, of the imagination, to continuously cultivate his creativity: "If you want to become creative or think creatively, you need to practice what has been called *divergent thinking* in contrast to *convergent thinking*, which adults tend to adopt as they become more and more restrictive in their behaviour. In convergent thinking, a number of stories or a number of themes converge into one. In divergent thinking, an idea moves in many different directions, like the branches of a tree"¹⁶. In the process of creating actions, working on a theme or confronting a theme involves *identifying opposite points of reference in order to avoid illustration, creating connections and divergences between the starting point and what the actor invents*¹⁷. The physical and vocal actions are conceived in order to surprise the spectator, to shock him, to address him through contrasts and paradoxes, to whip his senses. The actions address simultaneously the intellectual and emotional parts of the spectator. It often happens that the starting point in the creation of a series of actions, which, in improvisations, can be a photograph, a painting, an object, a melodic line, a verse, becomes, at the end of the explorations, unrecognizable. Many a time this is due to the changes resulted from the *confrontations* between the actor's subscore and score.

The actor, working according to Stanislavski's method, creates realistic-psychological actions. His actions hide intentions, pursue the achievement of clearly outlined goals, represent *movement of the psyche*¹⁸. In

¹⁵ Barba, Eugenio, *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt*, translated from the Italian by Judy Barba, Aberystwyth, Black Mountain Press, 1999, pp. 38-39

¹⁶ Rosen, Sidney (editor), *Vocea mea te va însoți: povestiri didactice de Milton H. Erickson*, traducere de Nicoleta Radu, București, Curtea Veche, 2008, p. 45

¹⁷ Varley, Julia, 2011, op. cit., p. 57

¹⁸ Fergusson, Francis, "The Notion of 'Action'", *Tulane Drama Review* 9 (Fall 1964), pp. 85-87, p. 86

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

fact, he tries to weave threads between his personal life and the character's life by taking into account the character's physical and psychological data and translating them into a veridical behavioural language. It is a work in which, in order to give birth to a possible reality, the actor appeals to his affective memory, entering a game of possible situations under the sign of *what if*. The transition from realist-psychological action to physical action was based on *Stanislavski's conviction that human reality is a mixture or juncture of outer and inner, material and spiritual, body and soul. For him, the truth of reality was exclusively neither one nor the other. Physical and spiritual were indivisible because organically connected, symbiotic. From this conviction came his later, summary theory of acting, the method of physical actions*¹⁹. Stanislavski's work considers the creativity of the actor to whom the mysteries of the creative process must be revealed: "There are 'seven steps' to access those mysteries: watchfulness, mental alertness, courage, creative calm, heroic tension, fascination and joy. Courage, Stanislavski explains, is the ability not to block the action due to rational calculation but to let it flow organically. Fascination is nothing other than sincerity. For anyone who reaches the final step - man or actor who speaks or sings - it is as if he has become another man. 'A second birth', Stanislavski now says about 'second nature'. Community, spiritual guidance, second nature as a creative state: on stage and, through stage art, in life"²⁰. The actor, working according to Brecht's method, gives a significant weight to critical reflection, speculation, his actions aim at shattering the scenic illusion, transforming the stage into a space-time of the opposites. Also in Brecht's theatre, the actor makes use, in building up his role, to reflection and action which are in a relationship of interdependence. Actions are created through series of alienations and identifications which coexist and influence each other. The performance is mainly addressed to the mind of the spectator who, reflecting on the situations presented on stage, may reach the awakening of his consciousness and thus become capable of taking actions. The actor, working according to Jerzy Grotowski's method whose research is based on the coexistence of opposites such as that between

¹⁹ Jones David, Richard, *Great Directors at Work. Stanislavsky, Brecht, Kazan, Brook*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986, p. 39

²⁰ Schino, Mirella, *Alchemists of the Stage. Theatre Laboratories in Europe*, translated from Italian and French by Paul Warrington, Holstebro-Malta-Wroclaw, Icarus Publishing Enterprise, 2009, pp. 111-112

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

spontaneity and precision / discipline, on the tension created between oppositions, as it is clearly stated in *Reply to Stanislavski*, published in *TDR: The Drama Review*, where Grotowski affirms that precision is the domain of consciousness, and spontaneity is the domain of instinct, makes use of techniques of perception deconditioning, techniques which *lead to action*, of ways of creating *physical actions*, his work being to give birth to a *presence in action*. To do an action, for Grotowski's actor, is at the same time an act of knowledge and self-knowledge, an act of self-becoming. The actor, working according to Eugenio Barba's method, explores possibilities of creating physical and vocal actions: *Every vocal action has its roots in the corresponding physical action, and the actor performs it with his whole body, well aware of synchronising the physical impulses with the vocal ones*²¹. The actions are thought and combined in such a way as to generate ambiguities and unpredictability and from this perspective they address the spectator's senses in order to produce emotion. Barba's incursions into the realm of the *action* lead to the identification of the *word-action*, of the archetypal actions which aim at revealing the changes undergone by the *actual individual*. Reflections on the great crises facing humanity become identifiable in the series of actions marked by dramaticity and dynamism.

The objective to create "a woven fabric of actions which is coherent on the pre-expressive level, precise in its dramatic rhythm, and which contains 'knots' of images that can arouse the attention of every spectator"²² is also part of the area of interest of the director Elizabeth LeCompte of the Wooster Group in New York who ensures that "the stage work is a matter not of interpreting, or glossing, or psychologically embellishing meaning, but of physically, visibly, *doing* something as an action in and of itself"²³. Actors engaged in physical actions are to be seen in Robert Wilson's performances. The director's four major periods of creation, *silent operas*, *deconstructing language*, *from semiotics to semantics* and *'how to do things with words'*:

²¹ Barba, Eugenio, 2010, op. cit., p. 42

²² Barba, Eugenio, 1999, op. cit., pp. 244-245

²³ Innes, Christopher, Shevtsova, Maria, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 226

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

*confronting the classics*²⁴, reveal an entwinement of deep reflection on human existence and the creation of physical actions. As *all Wilson's theatre is metatheatre – asking what and how theatre communicates – so too is all his theatre metalanguage*²⁵. In *Einstein on the Beach*, a meditation on Einstein and implicitly on the human condition, in order to *interrogate all systems of representation indicating their relativity, Wilson organizes space in terms of the shifting dynamics of horizontal, vertical, diagonal. Moreover he succeeds in achieving unity through repetition, variation and reversal and in presenting on stage people who do not relate to each other, people who are not characters, but performers engaged in physical activities*²⁶. From this perspective, Wilson's performances can be treated as *reflections-in-action*.

In conclusion, we note that regardless of the method that an actor uses to create his role, there are a few constants that cross stages of theatre reform and here we refer to the *actor's engagement in physical action*, to the *union between body and voice* manifested in physical and vocal actions, to the presence of the actor as a *body in action*, to the *language of action* capable of telling the performance story which is made up of several stories. The language of action requires more than concocting the concatenative thread of a performance. It brings with it paradoxes, unpredictability, simultaneity, *ways of overturning the obvious links between the different components of a performance* (Barba) and many a time archetypal figures and actions.

Bibliography

Barba, Eugenio, *The Paper Canoe: A Guide to Theatre Anthropology*, translated by Richard Fowler, London and New York, Routledge, 1993

Barba, Eugenio, *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt*, translated from the Italian by Judy Barba, Aberystwyth, Black Mountain Press, 1999

Barba, Eugenio, *On Directing and Dramaturgy. Burning the House*, translated by Judy Barba, London and New York, Routledge, 2010

Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space*, London, Penguin Books, 1990

Brook, Peter, *Threads of Time*, Washington D.C., Counterpoint, 1999

Carreri, Roberta, Exe Christoffersen, "The Actor's Journey: 'Judith' from Training to Performance (one-woman show combining personal circumstance, training, and

²⁴ Holmberg, Arthur, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 2

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 42

²⁶ Ibidem, p. 14

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

- research)", *New Theatre Quarterly*, volume VII, Number 26, May 1991, Cambridge University Press, pp. 137-146
- Carreri, Roberta, *Tracce. Training e storia di un'attrice dell'Odin Teatret*, edizione a cura di Francesca Romana Rietti, fotografie di Orme sulla neve di Guendalina Ravazzoni, Prefazione in forma di lettera di Eugenio Barba, Milano, Il principe costante Edizioni, 2007
- Craig, Edward Gordon, *Despre arta teatrului*, traducere de Adina Bardeş și Vasile V. Poenaru, București, Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, REvista Teatrul azi (supliment) prin Editura Cheiron, 2012
- Fergusson, Francis, "The Notion of 'Action'", *The Tulane Drama Review* 9 (Fall 1964), pp. 85-87
- Holmberg, Arthur, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004
- Innes, Christopher, Shevtsova, Maria, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013
- Jones David, Richard, *Great Directors at Work. Stanislavsky, Brecht, Kazan, Brook*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986
- Rosen, Sidney (editor), *Vocea mea te va însoți: povestiri didactice de Milton H. Erickson*, traducere de Nicoleta Radu, București, Curtea Veche, 2008
- Schino, Mirella, *Alchemists of the Stage. Theatre Laboratories in Europe*, translated from Italian and French by Paul Warrington, Holstebro-Malta-Wroclaw, Icarus Publishing Enterprise, 2009
- Varley, Julia, *Notes from an Odin Actress. Stones of Water*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011