

## **The Psychological Gesture in The Theater of Animation - Case Study of the Performance *The Butler* Directed by Ciprian Huțanu**

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**Abstract:** Animated theater uses, when directorially appropriate, theories and methods from dramatic theater. In this article, we aim to find the landmarks of the psychological gesture, a method of theatrical pedagogy initiated by Michael Chekhov, in animated theater performances. In this sense, we analyze the show *The Butler*, an adaptation of the novel *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro, a production of the Faculty of Theater and the Synchron Company, from 2024. Following the director's (Ciprian Huțanu) message about a society with its declining customs, in the troubling historical context of the beginning of World War II, we detect how key principles of psychological realism or psychological gesture are involved in the animated spectacle. The intersection between the *bunraku* style adapted to the European stage, the scenic image, the sound universe build a cohesive production that appeals to the viewer's affective memory, creating emotional and powerful moments.

**Keywords:** animation theatre, psychological gesture, Michael Chekhov, The Butler, Ciprian Huțanu, Faculty of Theatre, Synchron Company

### **Introduction**

The psychological gesture - a method by which Michael Chekhov helps the actor to get to the essence of the interpretation of the character - is an effective tool even today in the construction of a role, even if the theories and practices have improved the process over time and diversified<sup>1</sup>. The one

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Strasberg and Sanford Meisner are the ones who, in the United States of America, improve the method of K. Stanislavski and that of Michael Chekhov. In this sense, the books in which the authors present their ideas are known: Lee Strasberg, *A Dream of Passion. The Development of a Method*, New York, Little Brown & Co Inc, 1987; Sanford Meisner,

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who was the nephew of the playwright Chekhov believed that the effect of an actor's action in the interpretation of the character reverberates, on a subconscious level, in the viewer, involving his memory as well. Memory also plays a fundamental role for the actor involved in the construction of the role. Here, for example, in the chapter *Imagination and the Incorporation of Images*, Chekhov proposes that practitioners appeal to memories in such a way as to nourish and further help the character: "You run again through the streets, pass familiar houses, read the signs. Passively you follow the motley images of your memory. Unnoticed by yourself you step back over the boundaries of today, and in your imagination slowly arise visions of your past life. Your forgotten and half-remembered wishes, daydreams, life's aims, successes and failures appear as pictures before your mind"<sup>2</sup>.

The inner life of the character, with the past and the present, with his expectations and breathing, is reflected in the psychological gesture, from which the actor must take a distance. Contrary to the Stanislavskian method, where the interpretation must be as realistic as possible, Michael Chekhov leaves freedom to symbolic actions as well. As long as a concrete action is only suggested on the stage, the spectator's mind becomes itself a searcher for references from its own experience or the sphere of its knowledge, and the effect of the stage is stronger. We can say that suggestion ultimately leads to conceptualization, a fundamental term in the theater art of the 20th and 21st centuries.

Although Michael Chekhov has as his target the art of the actor, the animation theater has also turned to this technique. Taking a distance from the classical forms of theater for children, with origins in folk puppet theater, animated theater for adults often uses the concept in performance. Drawing inspiration from Edward Gordon Craig's theories of marionette and super-marionette, the dramaturgy of Maurice Maeterlinck, and later the performances of Peter Schumann, the coordinator of the Bread and Puppet Company, the animated theater for adults knows on the stage of the 20th centuries and XXI a niche but constant evolution. The importance that the director Tadeusz Kantor gives to the mannequin and the automata in the

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Dennis Longwell, Sydney Pollack, *Sanford Meisner on Acting*, New York, Random House, 2020

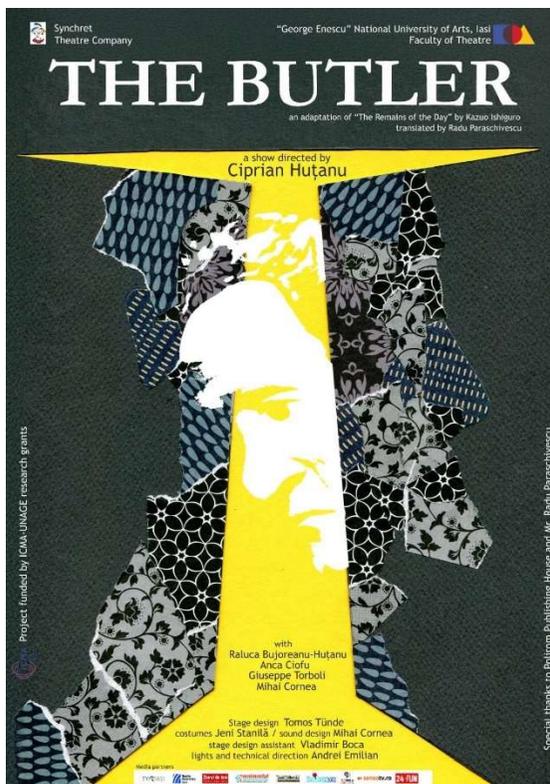
<sup>2</sup> Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor. On The Technique of Acting*, with a preface by Yul Brynner, New York, Barnes & Noble Books, 1953, p. 21

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dramatic theater, in performances that have remained in the history of the theater such as the *Dead Class* or *Macchina dell'amore e della morte*, was for the European stage another important moment in which elements of the theater of animation were reconfigured into the dramatic one.

In the 80s, animated theater productions for adults also appeared in Romania. Notable among these is Ștefan Lenkisch's *Don Quixote* (1979), Irina Niculescu's *Nocturn Stravinsky* (1982). Cătălina Buzoianu, a renowned director in dramatic theatre, is also attracted to the sphere of animation and directs *Tyl Eulenspiegel* (1979). After the 90s, Romanian theater direction is increasingly inspired in this direction. Whether they are creators from the dramatic space who, alternatively, also approach animation theater, such as, for example, Alexander Hausvater who directs *Svejk Galaxy* (2010), or whether they are famous names from animation theater, such as Cristian Pepino (*The Gathering of Birds* from 1993, *Candid* from 2006 and *Play Shakespeare* from 2012), the artists aim and promote the immersion between genres, styles and techniques of animation. Last but not least, Ioan Brancu and Gabriel Apostol stage classic texts in the field of animated theater (*Faust* from 2016 and *Golem* from 2013). This is how it happens that, the cliché that had come from the communist regime that had given the law by which theaters for children and youth were created, where the animation theater was used as a tool of propaganda, considered as educational for the young ages, the mentioned directors stubbornly show another facet of this art. They - and they are not the only ones who do it - change the perspective, and it is a daring act of attitude by which they support the public's taste for professionalism. The message also reached young people who discovered the potential of animated theater in expressing themselves for adult audiences. Such an example is Ciprian Huțanu, professor at the Faculty of Theater in Iasi, and founder of the Synchron Theater Company. Within the company, he created niche shows, working with classic texts, mixing genres, creating bridges between animated and dramatic theater. Shows such as *A Love Story* (2003), *The Cid* (2007), *Ana* (2015) are some of the highlights of the project's existence. Ciprian Huțanu's most recent adventure in the Synchron "laboratory" is called *The Butler* and we will dwell on this production in the following pages, with the intention of understanding the relationship between the psychological gesture and the ways of expression of the animation show.



## The butler or on the stylistics of the psychological gesture in the theater of animation

A puppet on stage, three handlers, another voice actor and a revolving set. This is the simple structure on which the show *The Butler* is built. A show about loneliness, about old age, about the troubled world of the Second World War. At the same time, *The Butler* is a complex scaffolding in which the art of animation is defined by the bunraku-type technique (the presence of the adapted puppet and the *yoruri* performer attests to the genre), but it drifts into sequences with a cinematic effect and leaves an impression of contamination with dramatic theater, thanks the application of the psychologizing method. Likewise, seen as a whole, the show constitutes a broad discourse about theater. The way in which the acting actors (Raluca Bujoreanu, Anca Ciofu and Alex Torboli) as well as the *yoruri* actor (Mihai Cornea) act on sight, switching the voices, manipulating the scenery, changing the doll's costume, leads the show in the direction of the discourse of metatheatricity. Naturally, the bunraku theater has this specificity of leaving the performer visible, but as

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the production directed by Ciprian Huțanu hybridizes European realism with animation of Japanese origin, the exposition of how theater is made is all the more obvious. The game between the shots cuts between a present of the scene and one of the action, of the story. The director opted, moreover, for an adaptation of the novel *The Remains of the Day*, reformulating the protagonist's narrative in the opposite sense. The opening scenes, like a kind of prologue, place the butler in an antechamber of death or absence, where he seems to wake suddenly as if from a deep sleep. Only after the moment of bewilderment, smart in absolute solitude and difficult to recognize, the main character recalls fragments of his existence. He finds a logical thread to the big question of what he's heading for at zero, the repeatable beginning. What is this whoop that has absorbed him? This temporal absence, this dream of nothingness that he entered against his will? Perhaps, at its core, it is theater that makes it possible, through convention or its destruction, for time to be overturned and with it the ordinary course of events. The theater that interrupts, overlaps, recomposes moments from a life as it was.



*The Butler* – from left to right, Mihai Cornea and Raluca Bujoreanu © Vladimir Boca

Butler Stevens performs alone on the stage – in the sense that the other characters (Lord Darlington, Miss Kenton) are absent, but marked by the different voices of the *yoruri* and the gestures that emphasize them. There is a close relationship, to the point of simultaneity, we would say, between the movements or expressions that the puppet has and the actors handling them. We read on the face of Raluca Bujoreanu, who handles the head and torso (the

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*omozukai* actor in classic *bunraku*), or on the face of Anca Ciofu (who handles the hands – *hidarizukai* from classic *bunraku*) bewilderment, sometimes sadness or stubbornness, in some situations. We look at the doll and we look at the actors between whom a symbiosis seems to have been born, as if they were a whole. This is *bunraku* theatre, but more than that, this is the perfect fusion of the living and the animated – a surprising effect of puppetry when practiced with confidence. The mirroring that takes place between the animated object and the minimalistic expressions on the faces of the handlers is remarkable. Actors embody the psychological reflexes of the character that they transmit to the animated body. However, even if the puppet is in the foreground, we cannot pass unnoticed this joint actor-puppet body working in unison. Metatheatricality demonstrates how loneliness is, paradoxically, the presence of a group. A group welded into the doll's mechanisms. Likewise, welded into the state of the protagonist - be it melancholy, dignity, regret or disillusionment. The servant or the act of serving becomes a metaphor, because the impression is strong that the handling actors are serving the puppet to come to life. And they also offer the public a story from which essential themes, as old as they are current, shine through. Stevens compromises to fire servants of Jewish origin since they contravene the laws imposed by the situation of World War II. He understands that norms change, because history dictates change. And the viewer feels how even today political changes affect our beliefs that we considered immutable. Sometimes even the most valuable ones that define us as people. Stevens sees himself more and more alienated from those who populate his life, trying in the pages of his records to illusory recover something that is extinguished. The slightly ridiculous posture of meditating in soliloquy about one's own utopias can be, for some of us, that mirror of the theater in which we find ourselves. The directorial finesse with which the scenes cut from Ishiguro's novel are worked determines the clarity and sensitivity of the scenic moments. An unfinished sentimental story, the aria from *Madame Butterfly*, a dusty gramophone record or the ringing of a bell in the master's room and some old trousers that need sewing are the remnants of a day. They are the symbols of an unrecoverable world that Stevens and each of us take with us where there is no time and no space dimension.

As I mentioned earlier, absence is a theme that runs through the show. The characters are ghostly; Miss Kenton and the Lord are made of sounds and the voice of the performer Mihai Cornea, in perfect accord with the puppet's actions. Also, other elements score absences-presents. Stevens' father, William, the senior servant in Ishiguro's novel, unable to carry out the

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service accurately but eager to undertake old duties, is in the show represented by a photograph. Sometimes the doll looks towards her, as if trying to bring back the one she lost. Lord Darlington, beyond the voice, is present through the sound of the door opening or closing, through the tinkling of the bell. Except that he too gradually disappears, and the room Stevens enters at first is empty, with furniture covered in white sheets, frozen in one continuous moment from which the human has been extracted. We hear the thin, strange, unreal voice of Miss Kenton, but we also feel it through the knocking on the butler's door. Sometimes they are annoying, sometimes they come as a joy. Even Stevens bifurcates between the always-on-duty servant and an invisible, sensitive side that he rarely brings to the surface. When listening to the aria from *Madama Butterfly*, and the viewer seems to have a tear in the corner of the eye of the one who activated who knows what precious memory. The Butler is a show built from effectively placed and painstakingly crafted details. The life built from the duty to respond to the master's requirements, from the desire to make order everywhere, almost obsessively, this secondary life, when the purpose is to organize, as if directing, everything that is in a house, is all for Stevens. He seems to forget himself in the tumult of daily duties, but he is master of the whole world when he retires to his room. Servant and master at the same time. A role-playing game that Firs from the *Cherry Orchard* also plays. Firs dresses Gaev, whom he has served all his life, so that he is not cold, he remembers the jars of cherry jam whose recipe is completely forgotten. Firs is the forgotten servant after everyone disappears from the property and the doors and shutters have been closed. Alone, muttering something only he understands, he rests a little while waiting for death. Or waiting for the curtain to fall on the stage. Subsidiarily, The Butler carries echoes of the Chekhovian *Cherry Orchard*. In fact, the affective memory of the viewer is set in motion. George Banu talks about the paradoxical aspect of memory in the art of theater and notices the role that the actor has in the relationship between the past and the present: "The theater almost always immerses itself in what comes from the past, and the actor weaves into himself the celebration of the marriage of the past and the present. He serves as a support and mediator, as a bridge and a trap - he is at the intersection of durations, because in the theater the past becomes incarnate, becomes present"<sup>3</sup>. In addition, it is possible to arrive, also in this way, to moments of catharsis - deep emotions are born in the mind of the viewer. Moreover, Michael Chekhov pays special attention to *The Cherry Orchard*. He makes an analysis of this play from the perspective of some phases, some key moments

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<sup>3</sup> George Banu, *Teatrul memoriei*, traducere de Adriana Fianu, București, Editura Univers, 1993, p. 11

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of the action that have Lopachin as the protagonist. So he distinguishes between a first phase in which the administrator cautiously attacks the Lyubov Andreievna family, a second in which he strikes by buying the orchard at auction, and a third phase when he tears down the orchard to leave the land ready for the new venture. However, more importantly, for Michael Chekhov, the forgotten Firs locked up and preparing to die is a "as if symbolically showing Lopachin's victory"<sup>4</sup>. The power of suggestion makes the message go deeper. And this depth of ideas is also enjoyed by the directorial construction of *The Butler*, in which the visual metaphor, pauses or sound effects are carefully studied to awaken emotions, memories, where what is reflected in the viewer's subconscious.



*The Butler* – from left to right, Alex Torboli, Anca Ciofu and Raluca Bujoreanu © Vladimir Boca

The scenography, made by Tünde Tomos, has a defining function in building the filmic character and in formulating psychological effects on the audience, relying on the suggestive force. As I mentioned before, all the

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Chekhov, *To the actor*, ed.cit., p. 156

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actions are left visible. The scenographic structure is a mixture of realism and miniature. The rooms – that of Lord Darlington – , the halls, the central entrance of the mansion or Stevens' room, are represented on a reduced scale. They have features as true as possible, at the same time. Lord Darlington's house is a full-length setting, also referring to the play of the bunraku actors on the table with the doll. The decor rotates on rails so that a cinematic effect is born. The changes of scene, of frames, by rotating the horizontal scenery, to the left or to the right, manage to create focal planes. They are like moving paintings that represent the space in which the respective scene takes place. Also, by rotating the scenery when the doll is also moving, a paradoxical effect is born, an illusion in which the impression is that walking in one direction or another is actually a fixed point.

Next to the set is the technical table, where the voice actor has his own dedicated space. Mihai Cornea works simultaneously with the voice filters, thus outlining the absent characters. We hear his sometimes labored breathing, Stevens' flinches, the unintelligible words the character speaks into his beard. And, at the same time, the correlation with the other three handling actors is impeccable. On top of that, he also superimposes noises, some real, some recorded: the ringing of the bell in the Lord's room, the sound of a car engine, a lady's high heels, the fragments of the radio transmissions Stevens listens to that chronologically place the action. Mihai Cornea actually has the work of a group of actors on his hands, at the buttons of the technical equipment, slightly camouflaged in the shadows, he shows maximum concentration. In a way it is like a sound-creating membrane that covers, gives meaning and completes the entire stage action. Through this contradictory effect of imitating reality, which makes up corporealities and realities from something artificial, it appeals, in the end, to the principle of the symbol and to that of suggestion. Michael Chekhov points out in his notes for actors that the psychological gesture is "a strong, well-shaped but simple gesture"<sup>5</sup> which repeated and rooted will be like a force that stirs the will power in general. Which only means that the gesture, detail provided by the actor has a strong impact on the viewer's emotional level. It detects meaning, through suggestive power.

The presence of the puppet with its actions coordinated by the handling actors, the voices and the effects that determine the movement of the scenography are carefully synchronized. Thus, a rhythm is born for the whole show, for the unfolding of the paintings, and a less visible rhythm, internal to the actors who have to coordinate to the millimeter. Fluidity is one of the most important results, along with the message and the affective involvement of the viewer in the room. Cursiveness manifests itself at the level of the show as a

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<sup>5</sup> Idem, p. 63

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whole, starting from the script and the unfolding of events, up to the gestural details. But there is also a continuous internal flow, the one in which the bodies of the handling actors, through the impulses they receive during the manipulation of the puppet, and the actor who makes the sounds and voices of the characters feel and reflect it as a natural course in the stage movement.

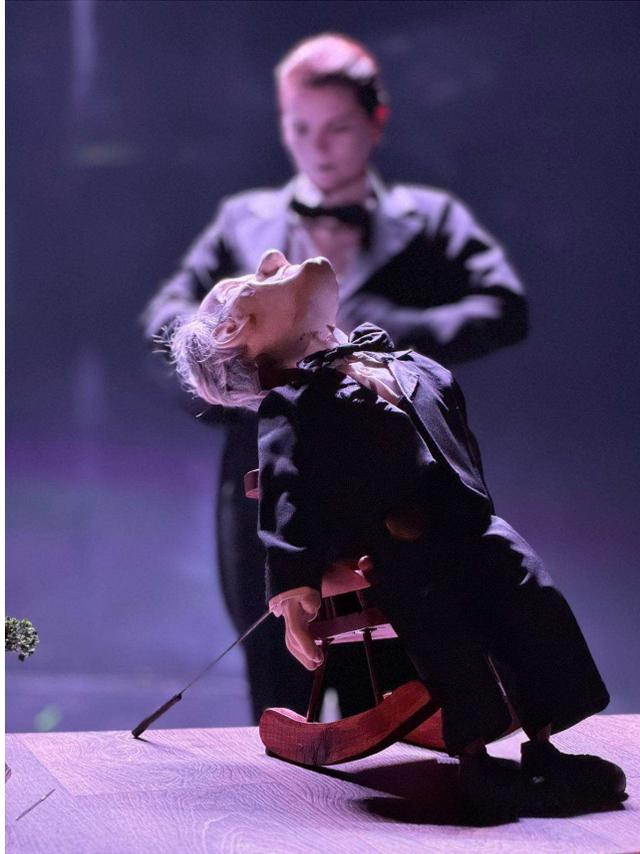
With certainty, the Butler show highlights, in addition to its success as a product of high artistic dress, and the promotion of the genre of animation theater for adults. A theater where interpretation, the amalgamation of techniques and the directorial dimension focus on essential ideas. Puppet theater places itself in the present, shows that it is full of vitality and promotes to the audience of the vocational ages that nothing is out of date in this area and that the potential can still be successfully explored. That is perhaps why it is very important that the Butler is a production of the Faculty of Theatre, as the students have the opportunity to see that the art of puppetry can be taken to high levels of expressiveness, and the cliché according to which it is intended only for fun and only for children remains a cliché.

### Conclusions

*The Butler* is yet another proof that the psychological gesture can be used successfully in animated theater, with valid and surprising results. The use of different plans through fusion, the force of meaning that is born in each spectator in the functions of various individual data, visual metaphors and psychologization are some of the elements in the method proposed by Michael Chekhov that are recognizable and that conclude a show with a strong impression on the audience. The skill of the actors in combination with successful directorial explorations - fine and detailed - creates an ensemble in which the character seems to float, in a cursive and illusory movement at the same time. There is nothing magical about the work of handlers who wait for the perfect moment, the ideal juncture, the propitious impulse and landmark. It's teamwork, auditory, muscle memory, continuous training. However, on the viewer the perception can be one of an "act of magic". It's just that the director Ciprian Huțanu breaks the convention, he shows us how the actors are in turn butlers, creators of the show, he takes them out and puts them back, in the absence of the scenes, from the position of handlers to that of performers in a dramatic theater. Comical details filter through the unsettling atmosphere, and the viewer would probably want to stop this beautiful moment of theater.

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*The Butler* – Raluca Bujoreanu © Vladimir Boca

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