

Correspondences Between Reflection and Scenic Action

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Abstract: The present paper aims to highlight the connection between the scenic action and the necessity to reflect on it from the point of view of performing arts practitioners. By considering the act of improvisation as an act independent from the act of reflection, we observe an interdependence between them from the spectator's point of view. At the same time, considering theory and practice inappropriately separated, we analyse how the two ways of knowing intertwine. We could say, in this regard, that theory is not the exclusive prerogative of theorists and practice of practitioners. Let us just consider the fact that the papers written in the field of performing arts are not exclusively written by theorists; works written by practitioners can be recorded as a testimony to their method of stage work. These should not be labeled as theoretical works, but if they were labeled as such, then clearly the theory is done by the practitioner. In conclusion, the rigid boundary drawn between theory and practice, action and reflection proves to be meaningless in reality.

Keywords: action, reflection, authenticity, spontaneity, improvisation

We live in a period in which theatre is experimenting, once again, with the idolization of the principles of stage improvisation. At least in our geographical area of Eastern Europe. But these principles do not seem to be those described by Andrea Perrucci. They align, rather, with those that animated the movement of the soytaris in the past centuries. So, it seems that we are dealing with a resurrection of cabotinism. Stage improvisation no longer designates that paradoxical state in which what is achieved is conceived, appreciated and adjusted at the speed of thought in precisely that tiny bit of time that precedes, contains and concludes the practical execution. Thus, somehow relying on the fact that in its quality of stage action, stage improvisation always turns out to have been “An action [that] was always an

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interaction”¹, we find out that “... Improvisation means that some people go on stage... they have nothing... they don’t have text, they don’t have costumes, they don’t have a script, they don’t have a director, and yet they have to create a... story”². To better illustrate why it is possible that this definition of stage improvisation is not only unusable in the stage space, but even pernicious to the quality of the performance, we should consider the fact that this determination was made by word of mouth and something more than the words spoken should be considered. As far as possible, a description of the elements of behaviour that make up the sum of the bodily stage actions should be added. In this case, we would read as follows: “*(She’s sitting on the edge of the stage with her feet dangling towards the audience; she wears a light brown microphone which can be seen under her hair, and in her right hand she holds another microphone; she is speaking in a slightly muffled and fast voice) Improvisation means that (she inhales through her nostrils creating a small pause in speech) some people (she makes a wide gesture with her left hand behind her back, as if giving the space on the stage to those in the hall, then returns with her hand between her knees and lightly touches her right knee, keeps her legs crossed, from time to time she squeezes her left palm from the right knee between both knees, in a somehow slightly spasmodic gesture) they get on stage, they have nothing, they don’t have text, they don’t have costumes, they don’t have a script, they don’t have a director (she lowers her left palm to the level of the boot in her right leg and plays lightly with the zipper, using two fingers, while with the other three fingers she tenderly touches the leg, just above the boot; something draws her attention to the right and with a movement of her neck she quickly looks to the right side, fixes with a sharp look what caught her attention and then returns with her gaze forward), and yet they have to create a... story (with a quick gesture she raises her hand between her legs with her palm up and then brings it back; all this time the beam of light of the spotlight in which the person is is narrowing a*

¹ Barba, Eugenio, *On Directing and Dramaturgy. Burning the House*, translated by Judy Barba, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 34

² Sîrbu, Mihaela, in *Asociația Social Art Mihaela Sîrbu: Act now, justify later! Ce este teatrul de improvizatie?* la <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Ry9P-8-TJI>, published: 05.02.2015, accessed: 30.11.2024, min. 0:38-0:51

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little in perimeter and diminishing in intensity)”³. Looking at the definition of improvisation in this way, we notice that gesticulation, according to the above didascalía, functions as a commentary that accompanies the utterance in a way that seems to contradict it, to undermine it. Suddenly we are no longer in the paradigm where the story emerges out of nothing. We notice in the gesticulation the appearances of unspoken desires, of goals to be achieved. The stage improvisation, as stage action, becomes subject to a deep reflective X-ray. The stage action is not only accompanied by thought, but is determined by thought. But in the example above, it seems that the person says one thing and thinks another. In fact, what she utters confronts, or in other words, enters into dramatic tension with what she gesticulates, hinting at elements of the judgment process or the reflective-active process that underlies the stage action, whether improvised or not. At the same time, to set out on the path of an apparent liberation from all conditioning must probably be based on a logical structure that substitutes, in Nae Ionescu’s terms, the truth of reality with authenticity. Authenticity as the result of a process of judgment is very likely to derive from the assumption of another person’s thinking. Authentic becomes the idea that “wherever it was born, it becomes mine if I am able to assimilate it to such an extent that it sprouts in me”⁴. It is therefore the appropriation of the idea that becomes important, not the truth of the reality represented. The obvious, the unquestionable, the truthful are therefore used as a substitute for the real, the original, the true. Here we see an incongruity, even a semantic distance, between truth and authenticity. Under these circumstances, can truth become inauthentic? Is authenticity sufficient for something to exist? Is authenticity only found in the unexpected, the sudden? In fact, the condition for the manifestation of liberation from the conditioning of one’s own reasoning imperatively demands its replacement by someone else’s reasoning, outside one’s own subjectivity. This someone else imprints his own thinking on the improvisation. After all, it is nothing more than an exercise in spontaneous recollection. I saw someone’s behaviour, I liked it, I memorized it, I forgot it, I unconsciously recall it, I reproduce it as much as possible. That is why the imperative condition of manifestation must obscure,

³ Ibidem

⁴ Ionescu, Nae, *Prefață în Immanuel Kant – Critica rațiunii practice*, traducere D.C. Amzăr și Raul Vișan, București, Editura Institutului Social Român, 1934, pag. XVI

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mask the series of impulses described above in order to be able to claim the possibility of the existence of this type of improvisation. In reality it is not improvisation. But the spontaneity, the liveliness, the promptness may, for an inattentive spectator, leave the illusion of naturalness. But it is an unnatural naturalness since it is defined as follows: “Spontaneity is the absence of thought. That is, you must have the courage to say something before you think. Being spontaneous... That means that you have to be in such a rapid process that you don’t have time to think”⁵. But this so-called spontaneity generates a scenic action, and *an action is the actor’s smallest perceptible impulse and the director identifies it by the fact that even if the actor makes a microscopic movement (the tiniest displacement of the hand, for example) the entire tonicity of his body changes*⁶. But what if the spontaneity of stage action can come not only from abandoning thought itself? Perhaps one of the radical errors in recent acting seems to be to reduce thinking to reasoning. From a scenic point of view, thinking, if we may be allowed the metaphor, does not end where the throat begins. Thought reverberates in both the central and peripheral nervous systems. The nervous system does not cut off and isolate at the level of the cranium. Thought, continuing the metaphor, circulates through this nervous system spreading throughout the body. Reason or intellect, of course, tries to capture thought. In similar terms you might say: “We are normally led into everything by the intellect. It is used to being in charge of our lives. Because it is in a position of authority, the intellect does not relish letting go of the reins, so to speak. Chekhov said the intellect is a kind of enemy to the artist; he called it the ‘little intellect’. We know this little intellect, it is the critical, judging, discerning and divisive part of us”⁷. Basically, it is reason, understood here as intellect or even theorizing, analysis, reflection, that prevents an authentic, spontaneous behaviour in stage improvisation. The two wrong solutions to this problem are therefore either to abandon it altogether, a kind of mental decapitation, or the other extreme, to reduce the mind to reason, a kind of abandonment of the body. In fact “When

⁵ Sîrbu, Mihaela, op. cit., min. 3:21-3:38

⁶ Barba, Eugenio, op. cit., 2010, p. 26

⁷ Petit, Lenard, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook: For the Actor*, London and New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 31

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we are properly concentrated, then we are one with our images and our intentions. The necessary things are moving through us. We are being creative”⁸. Thus, it seems that we have entered a reality of the unspeakable, a fresh, new reality, a reality genuinely lived. Unfortunately, it’s just a momentary, false, misleading sensation. Because “This is not the moment to analyse it”⁹. The moment of analysis seems to come only later: “When we have finished an exercise, we can look back at what we have done, and benefit from pressing the little intellect into service”¹⁰. This is not an extraordinary fact, actually, it can even be said that it is a common fact in art: “Practitioners do reflect on their knowing-in-practice. Sometimes, in the relative tranquility of a postmortem, they think back on a project they have undertaken, a situation they have lived through, and they explore the understandings they have brought to their handling of the case”¹¹.

However, reflecting on one’s own actions can have two perspectives. Practitioners “may do this in a mood of idle speculation, or in a deliberate effort to prepare themselves for future cases”¹². We know that it is even recommended to do this retrospective on stage actions that we have improvised or practiced in order to master them. We can often observe actors on stage who are overwhelmed by the role they play. It is always because they refuse to analyse in the name of an authenticity that they think is unbeatable. They ignore the fact that the role is built precisely by experimentation, by exploring stage actions through improvisations which are then structured, fixed and assumed through this retrospective, reflection on the actions created. We thus have a moment of action and a moment of reflection. We note here that with long practice of this working method, the conceptual and practical means necessary to carry out reflection during action can be created. It is an advanced procedure of controlling the development of the scenic action

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 32

¹¹ Schön, Donald A., *How Professionals Think in Action*, New York, Basic Books, 1983, p. 61

¹² Ibidem

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towards the intended goal. Reflection in action “... is central to the art through which practitioners sometimes cope with the troublesome *divergent* situations of practice”¹³. If reflection in action is, in practice, a useful working tool, we ask ourselves where does the separation between reflection and action that common sense vehemently claims to exist come from? This separation, which has sometimes become radical, can to some extent be seen as a reflection of another irreconcilable difference. The seemingly insurmountable gap between theory and practice. However, in the case of this gap, we can argue that “... reflection for Kant involves bridging the theory–practice gap, and [...] it is the very condition of experience. [...] Kant identified another quintessential gap that plays a role in reflection, and it resides between one’s individual sense and a communal sense”¹⁴. Therefore, reflection understood as a product of the dramatic tension between theory and practice empathizes experience as an instrument of knowledge as well as a statement of ontic reality. At the same time we can also identify a moment in which the individual sense is mistakenly contrasted with the common sense, which provokes an impossible choice. Either you choose the individual sense or the common sense even if only for the moment. Either you choose theory or practice. It is related to what we can find, from an anthropological point of view, in an analogous way, in the distancing between mythology and ritual in the case of the dissolution of a set of beliefs. Unfortunately, if in the case of the relationship between mythology and ritual we can observe the survival of mythological elements such as fairy tales and stories, and of ritual as a strictly formal activity that no longer has any mythological reference, in the case of the relationship between theory and practice neither can survive independently, at least in the field of performing arts. Because, starting from the observation: “Ancient Greeks possessed a wide array of words, denoting the act of seeing under varying aspects (amongst them *blepein*, *horan*, and *skeptomai*) and included the verb *theorein*, *theasthai*. Paradoxically, this is the act of seeing most distant from philosophy, although

¹³ Ibidem, p. 62

¹⁴ Schaepkens, Sven Peter Charlotte, Thijs Lijster, “Mind the Gap: A Philosophical Analysis of Reflection’s Many Benefits”, *Teaching and Learning in Medicine*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2023, pp. 368-377

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it gave its name to *theory*”¹⁵, we can notice the erroneous conclusion that the act of seeing is far removed from the idea of philosophy since it fails to take into account the proximity between the idea of philosophy and *vision*. The *vision* indissolubly linked both to ancient Greek philosophy through its Platonic tradition and to the performance through what we call *director's vision* or the vision of the performance is an aspect of vision that is extremely close to philosophy. As regards the spectator's seeing, “Kierkegaard wants the spectacle, the theater, to be there in front of him, even if it is unseen; he is not arguing for a nonstaged performance of the opera in the manner of an oratorio”¹⁶. In fact, this way of seeing seems much more complex: “... the spectator glimpses pebbles of different sizes, shapes and colours in the riverbed of the performance. In the complex process of making his montage, he completes it with his own pebbles and thus he creates his own dramaturgy”¹⁷. *Theorein* is thus a gaze that even the spectator can practice. *Theorein* is something extremely distant from philosophy unless we reduce, once again, in a process of intellectual self-mutilation, philosophy to a reflection in itself, isolated from any reality, of experimental, corporeal, external action. Here, of course, we should also consider the idea of transforming the theatre into a philosophical theatre par excellence. To achieve this, however, a new attitude would be necessary: “The philosopher, in particular, emphasized the spectators' new attitude: They were to witness the actions unfolding on the stage from a distance, similar to a scientist watching the progress of an experiment. They were to never let themselves be overcome by emotions but remain critical observers. In order to become a philosophical institution, theatre was to transform into a kind of laboratory. By no means was it to imitate ‘nature’ or ‘reality’ but it had to allow the

¹⁵ Lehmann, Hans-Thies, “Philosophical Theatre: Some Reflections on the Concept”, *Anglia - Journal of English Philology*, vol 136, issue 1, 2018, pp. 61-74

¹⁶ Puchner, Martin, *The Drama of Ideas – Platonic Provocation in Theater and Philosophy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 133

¹⁷ Cozma, Diana, *Eugenio Barba and the Golden Apple. Witnessing Odin Teatret's Rehearsals*, Gloucester, The Choir Press, 2021, p.126

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spectator to analyse and recognize what was happening and why”¹⁸. Unfortunately, this procedure applied to theatre performance devitalizes it. It reduces theatre to just another source of information. It eviscerates its status as an event. Fallen into an insignificant everyday life, philosophical theatre fails to make up through the spectator’s attitude and imagination what the director and the actor refuse to do. Here we can see a limit of the gaze as theorein. And the spectator’s dramaturgy can exist only if the performance is exposed to the spectator’s sight and not concealed from the spectator’s sight by all sorts of obscure semantic codes. What we should always keep in mind is that “from this point of view, from the human point of view, we can no longer think of life as mere and pure spontaneity—and by the same token we can no longer think of reflection as life’s antagonist. On the contrary, it seems to me essential that we should grasp the fact that reflection is still part of life, that it is one of the ways in which life manifests itself, or, more profoundly, that it is in a sense one of life’s ways of rising from one level to another”¹⁹. If reflection is not always conducive to life, and the performance does not always remain a living work of art, this may derive from the fact that the term reflection determines a rather ambiguous meaning. By the term action we mean something that we undertake in virtue of achieving an objective, and by scenic actions: “A series of stage events produced mainly through the behaviour of the characters, the action is both the entire process (theatrical process) of visible transformations on stage on a concrete level and, at the level of the characters, that which characterizes their psychological or moral progression”²⁰. Action can thus be treated as the visible part of the organic impulse that occurs at the moment of physical realization of intention. But the clarification of intention, of what triggers the pursuit of a goal, is indivisible linked to reflection. If the actor’s reflection fails to clarify the scenic action, the spectator’s dramaturgy certainly cannot be created either, since the

¹⁸ Fischer-Lichte, Erika, “Philosophical Theatre: Some Reflections on the Concept”, *Anglia - Journal of English Philology*, vol 136, issue 1, 2018, pp. 43-60

¹⁹ Marcel, Gabriel, *The Mystery of Being – I. Reflection & Mystery*, translated in English by George Sutherland Fraser, Chicago, Henry Regnery Company, 1950, p. 82

²⁰ Pavis, Patrice, *Dictionary of the Theatre: Terms, Concepts and Analysis*, translated by Christine Shantz, preface by Marvin Carlson, Toronto and Buffalo, University of Toronto Press, 1998, p. 9

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spectator remains at that scientific level where he can no longer *see the pebbles in the riverbed*, being forced to analyze and mechanically recognize the product he is witnessing. And, once again, we consider it a priority to clarify the meaning of the concept of reflection, especially in relation to theatre. We know that theatre can be a reflexion of the world. At the same time, the reflexion seems to multiply when those involved in the performance reflect on their own actions. If we take into account that reflection can also be defined as a turning of consciousness on itself, we can say that both action and reflection can be attributes of consciousness. However, the term reflection is synonymous with the term reflexion, which adds to the above-mentioned meaning that of the physical phenomenon of waves returning when they encounter a certain surface. Therefore, we notice at first glance that the partial synonymy between the term reflection and reflexion can be speculated. Essentially the concept of *reflection* seems to account for numerous meanings, even going as far as to challenge the relevance of reflection. For example, “Hilary Kornblith in his book *On reflection* (2012) points out that the common interpretation of reflection is problematic since reflection actually cannot provide that which many believe it can”²¹. Even more than that, it operates “the division of knowledge into a reflexive (animal) form and a reflective form”²². To arrive at such a radical statement, questioning the very usefulness of the act of reflecting on something or some acts that have been done previously, one starts from the idea that “On this account, animal knowledge governs direct responses to one’s sensory impacts, whereas reflective knowledge governs a wider understanding of one’s responses and how they came about”²³. The difference between the two concepts creates a space of doubt that unnecessarily prolongs the act of reflection. In fact, it is precisely this that is lost sight of in such radical appraisals of reflection, the reality that reflection itself, which can unravel the meaning of an act, is itself an act. Thus, to make such artificial distinctions and to conclude that reflection brings no added value and that we can abandon it may lead to the very abandonment of

²¹ Tjøstheim, Stephens, A., T.A. “The Cognitive Philosophy of Reflection”, *Erkenn*, vol. 87, 2020, pp. 2219–2242

²² *Ibidem*

²³ *Ibidem*

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the act of thinking and consequently to the abandonment of regulated social behaviour.

In fact, it can be observed in various professional situations not only that “reflection helped identify personal beliefs, gain insight into one’s professional strengths and weaknesses, recognize personal bias, and attitudes, decrease stress and anxiety, and prevent burnout”²⁴, but also “increase empathy, [...] help practitioners transition from theory to practice, and many more”²⁵. At the same time, reflection generates “an ameliorated attitude towards work; a development path for one’s job potential; an enhancement of their introspective knowledge; an enrichment of their expressive capability; an improvement of their interpersonal relationships [...] and their use of critical and reflective thinking”²⁶. Taking these aspects into account, it is quite possible that living the moment with obstinacy or, in other words, living the present on the edge, in the absence of reflection, can deprive us, in the field of performing arts, of the very possibility of engaging in a presentation. The present can pulverize the presentation and, thus, the performance can be reduced, somehow, to chance, at least from the perspective of the group of artists engaged in producing the performance. But from the spectator’s perspective, the performance will not be observable as chance. Behind the so-called chance, the spectator will always suspect a meaning, an intention. The action will always have an agent who will carry it out and who wants something. Strictly speaking, we could say that it is precisely this decryption, the pursuit of volition that attracts us to a performance. Reflection, in the performing arts, is not a secondary act, but a first act.

In conclusion, we can see that all this problematic derives from the basic characteristic of the act of reflection. Namely the dimension of imagination that is engaged in it. Imagination, with the precise role of foreseeing what is necessary to follow in the chain of scenic actions, is itself

²⁴ Schaepkens, Sven Peter Charlotte, op. cit.

²⁵ Ibidem

²⁶ Artioli, Giovanna, Laura Deiana, Francesco De Vincenzo, Margherita Raucci, Giovanna Amaducci, Maria Chiara Bassi, Silvia Di Leo, Mark Hayter and Luca Ghirotto, “Health professionals and students’ experiences of reflective writing in learning: A qualitative meta-synthesis”, *BMC Medical Education*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2021, pp. 1-14

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an inner act. To an outsider, the human body engaged in an act of imagining or even of reflection cannot usually be distinguished from an inert body that is not engaged in any of these acts. In fact, “From the outside, someone looking at me might not be able to tell which of my actions were truly free if I always acted on impulse. But from the inside, from the first-person point of view, acting on impulse can be as much a free act as acting on sober reflection”²⁷. Thus, the act of lucid reflection lies strictly in the responsibility of the stage actor. Perhaps here we will again ask the question; what use is reflection since the free act seems to be indistinguishable from reflection? The answer to this problem might be formulated as follows: the spectator cannot observe the act of reflection, but this is not his horizon of expectation. The spectator is not interested in the act itself, although he is able to perceive the difference between an improvised act and a structured play of the actor. The actor's play only occurs when the improvisation is subjected by him to reflection. Of course, this perspective can be valid for everyone involved in the realization of the performance. Thus we can understand that authenticity in itself is not a value in the performing arts, for it, the authenticity derived from the spontaneity of the artistic act, must, at least from the perspective of the spectator, have an intentionality that we can only identify after an act of reflection. What could be the reason for this? Simple. The spectator's gaze, the very act of witnessing a performance is in reality an act of reflection. An act of reflection accompanied by a double projection: one from the outside in and one from the inside out.

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²⁷ Searle, John R., *Rationality in Action*, Cambridge & London, MIT, 2001, p. 156

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