

The Traps of Reflection and the Danger of Action

Lorette ENACHE*

Abstract: We often surprise our critical instinct, quick to judge the lack of reflection before the realization of the artistic act, but we forget to consider the other side of the coin, the lack of action and the unproductive prolongation of reflection. Of the other two variants, which involve only reflection, or only action, we seem to choose an impulsive act as being more authentic than a preparation for an act that will never take place, even if a series of ideas and concepts, in principle valuable, have been created as a result of this process. Giorgio Strehler can undoubtedly be considered a personality who can be defined by action, for as he himself said, his work was not a story about theater, but one about "life and blood". And it is only through the power of the example of the great creators that we can understand that for a true man of art, there is, in fact, no demarcation between reflection and action. That the whole process of creation, but also the momentum that precedes it, constitutes a unitary whole in which there is not one element without another. Why the meshes of reflection? For when the intellect tries to build an order and an unfolding, it may or may not be one that can be faithfully and self-evidently represented. It may lead to representation, or it may produce, as Kierkegaard puts it, "the trappings of an illusory perspective". Why the danger of action? Because once we enter the process of externalizing what we have thought and created in the imaginary, the living elements will certainly react differently, surprises and unexpected moments will certainly appear that can either enrich the act or spoil it. It is also in the hands of the creator to distinguish where everyone belongs, what serves the creative act and what does not.

Keywords: theatre, art, directing, acting, coreography, Giorgio Strehler

A long reflection can be, as Søren Kierkegaard said, a far too long engagement ¹, after which the marriage already loses its breath, and the one who wanders in passion can have as many excuses as the one who secretly knows that he is being deceived by reflection. The mission of reflection can

* Associate Professor PhD, Faculty of Theatre – UNAGE, Iași

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clear itself into a higher form of existence only if it is anchored to the present and allowed to come alive.

In the introduction to his book, *For a Theater of the Human*, Giorgio Strehler wonders to what extent what he has written corresponds to the true unfolding of things and whether the result of a theater book may not be only a heterogeneous and disharmonious material constructed from glimpses of theatrical life, transformed, surely, by their preservation in memory. Theater work, in his opinion, is fundamentally alien to everything that is not direct expression on stage. Therefore, the preliminary stages of the artistic act, the documentation, construction, deepening, even the creation of ideas and concepts, pale into insignificance in the face of the concrete work in rehearsals, even if the form in which it takes place is, of course, based on reflection. There is therefore a very fine line between reflection and action, and too much stretching of the intellect in preparation for perfect action can lead to a conceptualization that distances the artist from the living manifestation, which, too much over-baked and over-ripe, loses its freshness and authenticity, and alienates the element of suspense, so necessary to any development involving life.

We often surprise our critical instinct, quick to judge the lack of reflection before the artistic act is accomplished, but we forget to consider the other side of the coin, the lack of action and the unproductive prolongation of reflection. Of the other two variants, involving only reflection, or only action, we seem to choose an impulsive act as more authentic than a preparation for an act that will never take place, even if a series of ideas and concepts, in principle valuable, have been created as a result of this process. The test of life, the test of coming out of the laboratory, is the test of the creative work, the stage is the fertile soil on which the concept will not give life, but the act based on the concept. "Don't live with your fists clenched behind a wall, afraid of the void... Maybe you will live to be ninety. You will live a long life, but what good will it do you? No, do what you want! In the end you will have suffered, you will have been disappointed, but you will be human beings. Life lived like that is worth living. Not otherwise! What I'm saying here is also true for an art theater." ² What does a theater teacher prefer to feel about the candidates he selects for the acting class? That they know how to conceptualize very well or that they are ready to throw themselves into action?

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In the first phase, inner freedom and courage prevail, so that later on, the inner molding will provide the tools of expression with security and precision. But without the courage of the one who is ready to dive in, any list of methods and descriptions of the process will remain bland material.

We return to Giorgio Strehler, who can undoubtedly be considered a personality who can be defined by action, for as he himself said, his work was not a story about theater, but one about "life and blood". And it is only by the power of the example of the great creators that we can understand that for a true man of the arts, there is, in fact, no demarcation between reflection and action. That the whole process of creation, but also the creative impulse that precedes it, constitutes a unitary whole in which there is not one element without another. Strehler talks about the moment when the need to make theater "sprang up", precisely because he found himself unable to make theater at the time due to the international context and having to squeeze in between the breaks that the war gave - leave or illness. When he arrived in Switzerland he made his first play, Thomas Eliot's *Homicide in the Cathedral*, and then his second, Albert Camus' *Caligula*. When the war ended, he had the choice between staying in Switzerland or going back to Italy, and he chose to return, because "in that country that was mine, everything had to be done". "I felt that I had the strength to carry the world on my shoulders," he said, recalling the moment. He makes a stark and startling analysis of what a full house really means and how a theatregoer should appreciate the quality of his audience rather than the quantity, and realizes that there is a need for a change of direction so that the success of a performance is no longer quantified in the number of spectators or the number of ovations at the end, noting that although the repertoires of the theaters of the time moved easily from Shakespeare to Guitry, the performances were applauded with the same conviction, accusing the audience of losing the ability to judge and react correctly to a work of art. Can this kind of reflection be included in the picture of reflection that precedes the creation of an artistic product? How broad does a theater-maker's vision have to be, and what are all the points he has to reach, in order to have a complete vision of the space and time in which he is to develop his work? To what extent is this kind of thinking still part of the inner structure of a theater-maker today? Although we claim that the surest way to success is for everyone to perfect his or her own segment of activity to the best of his or her ability - the actor to do the acting, the director the directing, the coreographer to do the

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dancing, the scenographer the set the design, etc. - we forget that the geniuses in the history of the universal theater had a vision that went far beyond their own scope and that this is, in fact, a visionary spirit. "Having no money, I did everything myself: sets, costumes, music, direction." Of course, this is not an apology for someone who claims to be able to do anything and replace anyone, but rather for someone who, in his great desire to create, does not run up against the obstacles that the context can bring, but fights by all possible means to be able to cover as wide an area as possible of what becomes necessary to create a show. The lack of good organization, which we blame today, the lack of involvement of those who should provide the materials and the framework necessary to put on a show, our revolt today about not being supported, helped, financed, may be legitimate in this day and age, but when our needs are not covered from outside, do we not give up too quickly, classifying it as impossible to bring our projects to life? We forget that there were times when it was precisely this lack that made the determination of the one who wants to create even greater and this, together with his creative force, gave birth to solutions and ways to remove any limit of the impossible. This is a type of creative action that says no to a NO. When we talk about reflection and action in art, we are talking about a permanent inner restlessness designed to bring together all the elements, which, once assembled, bring to light the result of creation. We are talking about inner motivation, the primary dream, we are talking about personal vision, we are talking about warm analysis, but also cold analysis, we are talking about the imagined spectacle, the created spectacle, with the risk that both the traps of reflection and the danger of action may entail. Why the traps of reflection? For when the intellect attempts to build an order and an unfolding, it may or may not be one that can be faithfully and self-evidently represented. It may lead to representation or it may produce, as Kierkegaard puts it, "the trappings of an illusory perspective". Why the danger of action? Because, once we enter into the process of externalizing what is thought and created in the imagination, the living elements will surely react differently, surprises and unexpected moments will surely appear that can either enrich the act or spoil it. It is also in the hands of the creator to distinguish where everyone belongs, what serves the creative act and what does not.

Giorgio Strehler founded Piccolo Teatro in 1947 and describes his mission as "daily, assiduous and continuous, a physical and spiritual mission".

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He chooses, for his repertoire, *The Night Asylum*, *Pariziana*, *Nora*, *Lulu*, *The Ideal Wife*, *The Seagull*, *Little Eyolf*, *The Tempest*, *The Nights of Wrath*, with each choice trying "to resuscitate a harmony in the bosom of contemporary society", reaching 115 performances in 20 years. He ended his first stint at the Piccolo Teatro in 1968 with *The Giants of the Mountains*, stating that the battle for a public theater in Italy had been won by mediocrity, and then returned in 1970 when he was offered total responsibility and the opportunity to try again to create "a theater of reason, of poetry". In a radio dialog with Siegfried Melchinger on Norddeutscher Rundfunk in Hamburg in March 1974, published in the book "For a Theater of the Human", Strehler says: "I believe that great theater, artistically powerful theater, is based on a powerful conception of life, of things, a conception of being that we can call what we like! It is not art, no doubt, but a condition of art. When I look at a book, a performance, a painting, or listen to music, I always feel an 'inner idea' about life vibrating intensely or less intensely. And the larger the work, the more intense this vibration. "Reflection and the creation of a conception of life is therefore not art in itself, but a condition of art. But the passionlessness of reflection, as Kierkegaard put it, makes it a ship that just floats aimlessly, that can only be admired for its lines, that is of no use in the passage of someone or something on the water, that just floats gracefully. Just as the action's lack of passionate reflection makes it a cumbersome marcar that merely transports someone or something from one place to another, without the thrill of the journey, in nights without scenery.

Performing art is not situated between reflection and action, it is reflection and action, and these two elements are in perfect symbiosis, and each of them has multiple, intertwining ramifications. Positioned in time, as unfolding, reflection is continuous, both on the ground of concepts and on the living ground of facts. Positioned in the laboratory of the stage, they are both attributed to all those who participate in the creation of the artistic act, be they actors, directors, scenographers, even if the directorial vision is the one that sets the tone, the instruments of the orchestra must be constantly lucid and attuned to the whole. Here the danger of action arises, when the concept branches out through each of those who participate in raising the construction. Equally there is the danger of destabilization, but also the possibility of upliftment and enrichment as the construction passes through the filter of each individual. The meshes of reflection are to become straight lines when they

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come to life, without becoming intangible and rigid. They become straight paths that serve only to create a corner of the world made up of labyrinths that one walks through knowing where they begin and end. The actor reflects on his character, on the spaces in which he finds himself, on his relationships with other characters, on situations, but also on the final result, which is seen through the eyes of the viewers. The actor acts from the point of view of his character, according to the spaces in which he finds himself, in relationships with other characters, in situations, but also to orchestrate, correct and sing his own performance.

"Is it not the only true proof of a conviction to express it by one's own life in deeds?"¹ We can use this question of Kierkegaard's to extrapolate, broadening the horizon of the artistic domain to that of everyday life. Conviction comes from reflection, and fact is action. The artistic process is not, after all, subject to different rules from those of everyday life. Just as facts speak more profoundly about our inner selves than what we say we feel and believe, so the theatrical performance speaks more profoundly about the spirit of those who create it and their vision, including the author (whom Strehler, by the way, places as the most important of those who take part in the creation of a performance). Subject to the passage of time, just like a slice of life, the performance has an effect on the spectator that bears the exact value of those who gave birth to it. And the richer their inner world, the more intensely the performance vibrates, becoming a story of 'life and blood'.

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