

The Return to Storytelling in the Theatre of the Third Millennium

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Abstract: After a long period of postmodernism, theatre at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as Anne Bogart observes, is marked by a return to the story. Storytelling is considered an act of transmitting deep human experiences through which bridges are established between storyteller and spectator, particular and universal, past and present. Thus, problematics regarding the human condition are expressed in current language addressing the body and the mind of the spectator. For a story to produce emotion, it is necessary for the storyteller to master nonverbal language, his interpretative techniques, marked by rigour and precision, to be transcended in a continuous process of personalization. Whether archaic or contemporary, a story must have the capacity of inducing in the spectator the state of active listening, to generate empathy, to *create memory and identity*, by appealing to archetypal figures and actions.

Keywords: story, hero, emotion, technique, rigour

In 2015, at the conference *The Role of Storytelling in the Theatre of the Twenty-First Century*, Anne Bogart argues for the necessity to return to storytelling after a much too long period in which postmodernism dominated. In the context of the necessity to return to the narrative thread of a story, to empathy and emotion, Radu Teampău emphasizes that “The postmodern emphasis on metanarrative had as a secondary, deliberate or not, effect the apparent pulverisation of narrative itself and not just of narrative structures. But the narrative infrastructure resisted this assault. Perhaps, in terms of theatricality, the resistance to dismemberment was given precisely by the fact that the multidisciplinary involved in the construction of the performance led to the stage practitioners’ habit with the interpretative deconstruction meant, in its turn, to coagulate the narration on multiple narrative levels, spaces and

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times”¹. Thus, Bogart who notes that “Post-modernism is actually about knocking down classical, pre-classical - all other forms of storytelling - and then picking them up again and looking at them separately”² launches the idea of reconstruction, seen as a stage that naturally comes after that of deconstruction, which is based, in essence, on demythologization, on the highlighting of the absurdity of existence in the absence of a sense of being. This fragmented existence, represented on stage in a fractured manner, in distorted images, sometimes superimposed like those reflected in the shards of a mirror, illustrates the *vicious circle* of the uprooted, marginalized, ostracized, identityless individuals, an existence rendered in Marinettian hues. It is *a futurist theatre born out of a frenetic passion for the fast, fragmentary, elegant, complicated, cynical, muscular, fleeting life of the present, which represents a cerebral vision of art according to which no logic, no tradition, no aesthetics, no technique, no opportunity can be imposed on the genius of the artist who must be concerned only with creating syhnthetic expressions of cerebral energy that have the absolute value of novelty*³. It is a theatre of innumerable perspectives, of simultaneity, discontinuity, disorder and rupture of logic. The role of multiple perspectives in a period of creation of a theatre performance is also noticed by Peter Brook who, in a process of essentializing the scenic language and forging the coexistence of strong conceptual oppositions, comes to consider that, in fact, human beings share the same story: man is born, reaches the peak of life, and dies. Nevertheless, this angle of representation of the human condition does not exclude, in Brook’s case, the story treated as a suggestive modality of both transmitting human experiences and triggering emotion.

After all, any story, be it from ancient times or the present day, be it fairy tale or myth or family story or urban tale, be it tragic or comic, realistic or fantastic, is established as a path of self-discovery and knowledge along which the singularity of the destiny of the human being is highlighted. Every story takes things out of their usual mould in order to bring about a change

¹ Radu Teampău, ”Theatre Performance in Postmodernism”, *Theatrical Colloquia*, 25/2018, pp. 187-205, p. 191

² Anne Bogart, *The Role of Storytelling in the Theatre of the Twenty-First Century* at [The Role of Storytelling in the Theatre of the Twenty-First Century | HowlRound Theatre Commons](#), accessed 27.03.2025

³ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifestele futurismului*, traducere, introducere și note de Emilia David Drogoreanu, București, Editura Art, 2009, p. 149

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that requires the individual to go beyond his limits, setting him apart from the crowd, urging him to undertake a journey of an initiatory nature, giving him the status of hero, emphasizing the idea that “The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation—initiation—return*: which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth”⁴. Undoubtedly, the hero, the one who connects the world of the visible with the world of the invisible, the possible with the impossible, the ordinary with the extraordinary, is destined to perform exemplary deeds in order to restore balance in times of crisis: “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man”⁵. This journey is meant to make connections between a past under the sign of a crisis and a future that is intended to bring change.

If in the theatre performance, Brook identifies three types of relationships, the relationship between the actor and himself, between the actor and the stage partner, between the actor and the spectator, in the storytelling performance, as Ffion Lindsay observes, we deal with four types of relationships, identifiable in the structure of the story, based on conflict, namely, *man fights man*, *man fights society*, *man fights nature*, *man fights himself*⁶. These conflictual relationships emerge from the very substance of the story, which is conceived in such a way as to produce strong emotions for the spectator who experiences a *change of state*: “When you’re told a story, however, your whole brain wakes up. In addition to the language parts, the parts responsible for sensation and emotion also spring to life – and you experience the story’s events almost as if you were living them”⁷. In fact, through the story, the actor induces in the spectator the state of active listening in which “The brain doesn’t look like a spectator, it looks more like a

⁴ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, third edition, Novato, New World Library, 2008, p. 23

⁵ *Ibidem*

⁶ Ffion Lindsay, *The Seven Pillars of Storytelling*, Bristol, Sparkol Books, 2015, pp. 77-81

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12

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participant in the action”⁸. However, for a story to produce emotion, it is necessary for the storyteller to assume the principles of nonverbal language: “Recent research shows that much meaning in interpersonal interaction is communicated non-verbally. A focus on the body, its actions, and its cognitive mechanisms identifies principles that underlie a variety of training methods and performance styles, be they linguistic or imagistic. When this understanding is allied to the perspective of cognitive science on the way that the body and its activities shape abstract thought and conceptual meaning, it is possible to identify foundational principles of activity that link the three elements of theatre: story, space, and time. The three meet in, are defined by, and expressed through the actor’s body”⁹. Regardless of the *training methods and performance styles*, the actor has the duty to transcend them within a continuous process of personalization. Here we note a kind of similarity between the actor’s technique and the psychoanalytical technique which *consists as far as possible in the deciphering the enigmas by the subject being analyzed*¹⁰. From this point of view, every character is an enigma, and the path that an actor follows in order to appropriate the life of a character is at the same time a path into his interiority. Thus, the unraveling of the mysteries underlying the actions of a character is understood as a process of the revelation of the actor’s self.

In the dialogue between the storyteller and the spectator, it is important that the storyteller has the capacity of creating narrative units by making use of words, images, gestures, actions, sounds. The mastery of vocal and physical techniques is necessary not only to build many characters, but also to produce emotion, empathy, catharsis. After all, as Bogart remarks, it is important *to tell stories effectively*: “You need three things to tell a good story in the theatre in particular. One: you need technique. Two: you need passion. And three: you need to have something to say”¹¹. In the second half of the twentieth century

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ Rick Kemp, *Embodied Acting. What Neuroscience Tells Us About Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, p. XVI

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Introducere în psihanaliză. Prelegeri de psihanaliză. Psihopatologia vieții cotidiene*, traducere, studiu introductiv și note de Leonard Gavriliu, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1980, p. 122

¹¹ Anne Bogart, 2015, op. cit.

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and the beginning of the twenty-first century, acting techniques have become study material in theatre laboratories. Undoubtedly, when the actor, whose body is like a perfectly tuned instrument, gives life to a character on stage, he does not consciously use certain techniques, but his way of creating the role is rigorous and effective, with an immediate effect on the spectator, precisely because of his virtuosity. The need for the actor to use theatrical techniques comes precisely from a major objective that he pursues, namely, to create his stage presence. An eloquent example in this respect is the creation of the stage presence of a Balinese actor who has to initiate by imitating an interpretative code marked by precision and rigour. *Balinese techniques require the performance of dance segments in continuous tension and a dynamic alternation of body and vocal rhythms. It is based on exploring a diverse range of character-specific compositional voices. The slightest blink of the eyes, a tiny movement of the head, a brief startle, a certain posture are carriers of meanings*¹². The rigour of interpretation is achieved exclusively due to the mastering of interpretative techniques.

From the perspective of the relationship with the spectator, in order for the story to have an immediate impact, the storyteller often opts for a studio space in which his relationship with the spectator is defined by directness, an intimate space, marked by simplicity and expressiveness of the means of expression. In such a space, the emphasis is placed on the significant detail which contributes to the logical stringing together of the narrative units that make up the structure of the performance. Therefore, on an empty stage or with a minimal décor, with unsophisticated costumes and few scenic objects, the storyteller triggers powerful inner images in the spectator's mind, revealing to him the connotations of visual and aural narratives, always *carrying the meaning with emotion*¹³. It should be noted that, in fact, the storyteller is always in a kind of *extreme attention*, which "constitutes the creative faculty of man"¹⁴, in a kind of vigilance, of awakening of his mind-

¹² Diana Cozma, *Dansul efemer al acțiunilor actorului*, Cluj-Napoca, Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2016, p. 110

¹³ Anne Bogart, 2015, op. cit.

¹⁴ Simone Weil, *An Anthology*, edited and introduced by Sian Miles, London, Penguin Books, 2005, p. 232

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body, aware that the smallest segment of movement or the faintest sound carries meaning. The vocal and physical segments compose small choreographies in which actions and gestures intertwine to create the story. The rigour of the execution of the actions, the ways of relating to the scenic space, to the objects, are ways of creating states, thoughts, emotions. Thus, the actor's body is the bearer of signs that arouse emotions which often are unconscious: "much of emotional life is unconscious; feelings that stir within us do not always cross the threshold into awareness. [...] Any emotion can be – and often is – unconscious"¹⁵. The actor comes to be able to generate strong emotions through his stage actions, thanks to the work during the creative process when he explores both the cognitive and the organic, intuitive, sensation-related aspects, focusing his attention on what has been called the metacarnality of his acting.

After all, any *good story* manages to evoke heroic aspects, archetypal figures and actions in order to produce emotion: "All emotions are, in essence, impulses to act, the instant plans for handling life that evolution has instilled in us. The very root of the word *emotion* is *motere*, the Latin verb 'to move', plus the prefix 'e-' to connote 'move away', suggesting that a tendency to act is implicit in every emotion"¹⁶. It is no coincidence that Grotowski set out to identify modern archetypes, in his attempts to recreate a ritual theatre, in order to induce in the spectator the cathartic state, to move him, to reach the deep layers of his being, to activate the genetic memory of his body; from this perspective, it seems that he pursued the idea of the necessity to provoke the *tragic katharsis* that corresponded to a *ritual katharsis of the Dionysian mysteries*¹⁷. It is a difficult task to arouse emotion in the spectator, to create empathy, to urge him to action, to change, through the series of physical and vocal actions that are actually performed in a fictional world. It is difficult to lure the spectator into the world of the story, but, above all, to unsettle his ideas and beliefs. It is clear that, in this sense, a story needs the archetypal dimension, given the fact that "we too often confront postmodern dilemmas

¹⁵ Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*, London, Bantam Books, 2006, p. 75

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 26

¹⁷ Joseph Campbell, 2008, op. cit., p. 19

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with an emotional repertoire tailored to the urgencies of the Pleistocene”¹⁸. Thus, what always resonates with the spectator is precisely the archetypal action accomplished by the hero of the story.

According to Lindsay, there are twelve archetypal figures whose actions are capable of moving the spectator precisely because he experiences existential states at the deepest levels of his being, namely, the *dreamer* or Don Quixote, the *warrior* or Achilles, the *everyman* or Bérenger, the *parent* or Cronos, the *artist* or builder Solness, the *wanderer* or Odin, the *revolutionary* or Jean-Paul Marat, the *lover* or Don Juan, the *magician* or Prospero, the *king* or Lear, the *jester* or Touchstone, the *sage* or Tiresias. In this regard, the story aims to put the problem of the human condition at its heart, to transpose into modern languages extreme situations that cross centuries of culture and civilization, directly addressing our limbic brain: “In terms of biological design for the basic neural circuitry of emotion, what we are born with is what worked best for the last 50,000 human generations, not the last 500 generations – and the certainly not the last five. The slow, deliberate forces of evolution that have shaped our emotions have done their work over the course of a million years; the last 10,000 years – despite having witnessed the rapid rise of human civilization and the explosion of the human population from five million to five billion – have left little imprint on our biological templates for emotional life. For better or for worse, our appraisal of every personal encounter and our responses to it are shaped not just by our rational judgments or our personal history, but also by our distant ancestral past”¹⁹. Since the human being is the possessor of both a *reptilian body/brain* and an *actual body/brain* within which a *continuous transposition/displacement of the unconscious into/to the conscious*²⁰ takes place, it confirms that a story necessarily addresses both affect and reason. Starting from “the fact that the thinking brain grew from the emotional reveals much about the relationship of thought to feeling; there was an emotional brain

¹⁸ Daniel Goleman, 2006, op. cit., p. 25

¹⁹ Ibidem

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, 1980, op. cit., p. 352

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long before there was a rational one”²¹, Grotowski goes even further, proposing a *body of essence*, of the union between affect and reason, instinct and intellect. His research, which revealed the coexistence of the archaic with the actual in the genetic memory of the human body, also led to a holistic approach to the actor’s work, confirmed by cognitive science: “The idea of experiences that are ‘internal’ or ‘external’ rests on a conceptual separation of the mind and body that is now disproved by cognitive science. A shift to a holistic concept of the bodymind will support practices that embrace the reflexive and integrated relationship between physicality, thought, emotion, and expression”²². Eugenio Barba, after all, makes numerous references to the actor’s *body-mind* that he treats as being and manifesting in a symbiotic relationship. Lenard Petit observes regarding the relationship between emotion and reason: “Actors come to believe that if they think sad thoughts they will become sad. But what is in fact happening to us as humans is that we are thinking sad thoughts because we are sad. And that it is our bodies and the sensation of sadness within the body that is leading us to have sad thoughts. We fail to notice that we are sad in our hands and shoulders and legs, that our movements are heavy, and that we are having sensations that are downward moving. This is always true and we can recreate these downward movements with our imaginations. Once the sensation begins, the natural flow of events comes unimpeded, so that the sensation awakens the feeling and the feelings lead us to the emotion, which is the final outer expression seen by the audience”²³. Obviously, the sensations of sadness, joy, happiness, anger, fear, disgust, courage are the ones that invade the whole body triggering thoughts and not the other way around.

In conclusion, we note that the return to the story treated as a means of producing emotion is also reflected in the work of directors Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Lenard Petit, who in their research are concerned with achieving a state of balance between body and mind, emotion and reason, instinct and intellect. The story, full of suspense, dramatic tension,

²¹ Daniel Goleman, 2006, op. cit., p. 30

²² Rick Kemp, 2012, op. cit., p. XV

²³ Lenard Petit, *The Michael Chekhov Handbook for the Actor*, London and New York, Routledge, 2010, p. 58

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unpredictability, manifestations of the *invisible made visible*, allows the storyteller to address directly the spectator's affection and reason.

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