

Pedagogy Theater in the Sphere of Amateur Creations

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Abstract: In the context of contemporary theater, the concept of the *amateur actor* has acquired a metamorphic character. Its functionality is no longer limited to an extracurricular activity, fractured from the professional theatrical climate. Whether it represents an incipient stage in the development of the theater practitioner or it is used in the elaboration of a new decomposed post-post-dramatic or performance language, the amateur actor rediscovers his new status. Acting in its primordial sense becomes vital in the amateur's development and eventual assimilation of theatrical systems and mechanisms, implying with it the transition to professional character. The role of the *teacher-director* is crucial in *amateur theater* in order to equip the actor with the necessary tools to perform a coherent and quality artistic act, but also to facilitate this transition from passion to craft.

Keywords: amateur, play, pleasure, target, pedagogy

Fundamentally the definition of *the amateur* must be delimited from any derogatory connotation, being an entity that manifests an interest in a field without the benefit of adequate professional training, and his ability to cross different fields from art to science, outlines the concept of the transdisciplinary amateur. The amateur consolidates his or her knowledge and skills through personal enjoyment, out of the sheer desire to expand his or her horizon of knowledge through the subjective filter of empathy. The trans-disciplinary amateur does not confine himself to the study of a single field, but embarks on a parallel exploration in another field that arouses his empathy, letting himself be seduced by curiosity and the joy of discovery, the fundamental elements that guide this choice.

Curiosity and enjoyment, together with the principle of competition, are the essential attributes of any form of *play*. *Play* is the relationship to external stimuli that simultaneously mirrors the reaction of our own stimuli,

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and the interaction from one stimulus to another propels conflict and competition. The conflict in *ludic play* is similar to dramatic conflict, and starts from the desire to achieve a goal, with obstacles being thwarted by the play partner, and competition on the other hand, becomes a terminus point in this dynamic, aiming at the denouement of the game. The outcome, whether the goal is achieved or not, gives the participants a positive feeling, characterized by a combination of tension and relaxation, both at a cerebral and psychosomatic level.

These fundamental principles have facilitated the integration of the actor's art in transdisciplinary education, focusing the playful process on a serious form of play, the theatrical. The empathy of those engaged in the *play* results from the individual and singular capacity to substitute for and penetrate empathic and cognitive systems different from the personal. As an immediate effect, the receiver affectively experiences the reality of real or fictitious constructs through sympathetic transposition. From the point of view of psychology, applied empathy is a way of relating to individualities, whether we are talking about heroes in literature, movies or on stage, "through an interpretation of the other's self according to our own self, while from a philosophical point of view, empathy is a form of knowledge of the other, in particular of the social self or something, close to intuition, and therefore also an interpretation of the other's self according to our own self".¹

The personal experience gained in the activity within multiple amateur groups, as a coordinator, director and teacher at the Children's Palace in Timisoara, led to the formulation of essential questions regarding the specific conditions of the process of stage creation. In this context, I took as a starting point Violeta Spolin's statement that "anyone can play theater, anyone can improvise and anyone can become fit for the stage"². The issues addressed concern the pedagogical dimension in working with amateurs, namely the degree of necessity of artistic training in these schools with a theatrical background, the differences between vocational schools and amateur schools and the limits of these training frameworks. In a contemporary artistic climate that places less and less emphasis on formal and structured education and training according to a theatrical chronology, which is currently the main

¹ v. Florin Marcu, *Marele dicționar de neologisme*, Editura Saeculum, 2000; și Florin Marcu, Constant Maneca, *Dicționar de neologisme*, Editura Academiei, București, 1986.

² Viola Spolin, *Improvizație pentru teatru*, traducere de Mihaela Bețiu, UNATC Press, București, 2008.

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argument of the professional theater-maker at the expense of the amateur enthusiast.

Based on and modeled on the methodical systems of the great theater creators, specific to the actor's art, the coordinator of an amateur theater circle faces difficulties in the creative process, which is eminently due to the impossibility of complete assimilation of the theatrical operational concepts by the amateur actor. Professional schools seek a clear demarcation between the spectrum of civil and artistic personalities, as prefigured by Ion Cojar³ in his poetics, in contrast to amateur schools, in which these two dimensions are interwoven and constantly interact, without excluding each other. Creative rigidity, characteristic of vocational schools, is therefore removed in order to protect and encourage creative enthusiasm and freedom. The amateur artist exhibits a high degree of vulnerability, manifested by a tendency to self-discouragement, so redefining the theatrical vocabulary and recalibrating the professional actor's means of expression are vital in amateur theater.

In an attempt to encompass the whole range of interest contained in the phrase "amateur theater" we have mainly resorted to definitions collected from dictionaries and lexicons, to counter the ambiguous meaning often loaded with negative connotations, and then to be compared in parallel with the practical definitions of these concepts, drawn by practitioners of the theatrical art. The explanatory dictionary defines the notion of amateur as a „(person) who likes something, who has a predilection or passion for something; [...] 2. (Person) who is engaged in a trade, art, or discipline, without exercising it as a professional; dilettante. - From fr. amateur, *lat. amator*.”⁴ *The Cambridge Dictionary* sets the elements of *passion* and *enjoyment* as essential to the *amateur's* ability to exercise a particular activity, so the definition "amateur theatre consists of theatrical performances organized by groups of people who are not paid but take part for their own amusement"⁵ contains the fundamental element that the enjoyment of the play is vital to the artistic act.

The concept of 'amateur' is usually synonymous with the term 'dilettante', 'unprofessional', 'non-professional' or 'inexperienced', without

³ Ion Cojar, *O poetică a artei actorului*, București, Unitext, 1996.

⁴ amator, DEX online, <https://dexonline.ro/definitie/amator> [accesare: 15.03.2021].

⁵ „amateur theatre are theatre performances organized by a group of people who are not paid but take part for their own enjoyment”, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/amateur-theater> [accesat: 15.03.2021].

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necessarily implying negative connotations. The term 'amateur theater' should be understood in this sense, in line with the above definitions. A clear perspective on this concept is stated in the *Encyclopædia Universalis*: "However, amateur does not mean merely non-professional. Nor beginner. For a dramatic activity to fall within the scope of amateur theater - or amateur theater, according to the formula still in use in the 1950s - three conditions must be met, in addition to its non-profit character: theater must be the main purpose of the activity; the relationship with the audience must be inscribed in the more or less long-term perspective of the participants; finally, the structure in which the activity takes place must itself be amateur (the individual participation of inexperienced actors or true amateurs in a professional performance does not fall into this category)." ⁶ In attempting to outline the identity of amateur theater, we will note that it can be defined by appealing to the identity of the amateur performer. By analyzing the 'diffuse' history of amateur theatre, we note two vital stages in its incipient stage - the constitution of amateur theatre in the Middle Ages and its evolution in the 17th century, as a 'comparative gap with the present-day phenomenon'⁷, the aim being to perceive its historical 'dynamics'.

According to specialized studies, if the origins of theater can be traced back to ancient Greece, the origins of amateur theater can only be traced back to the Middle Ages. Ekkehard Jürgens postulates: "Theater began in ancient Athens as both state and popular theater. Almost all the performers were ordinary citizens, i.e. craftsmen, merchants and, in some cases, simple peasants without professional artistic training. The audience was made up of amateurs and so the amateurs evaluated the performances and decided the prizes. Only the poets, the directors and a few performers were artistically

⁶ „Pourtant, amateur ne signifie pas seulement non-professionnel. Ni débutant. Pour qu'une activité dramatique relève du théâtre amateur – ou d'amateurs, selon la formule encore en usage dans les années 1950 –, trois conditions doivent être remplies, en plus du caractère non lucratif : le théâtre doit être le but principal de l'activité ; la relation à un public doit être inscrite dans la perspective à plus ou moins long terme des participants ; enfin, la structure dans laquelle l'activité s'inscrit doit être elle-même amateur (la participation individuelle d'acteurs inexpérimentés ou de véritables amateurs à un spectacle professionnel ne relève pas de cette catégorie).”, <https://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/theatre-amateur/1-un-theatre-a-part-e> [accesat: 15.03.2021].

⁷ *Ibidem*.

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trained, just a handful of people"⁸. The term 'amateur' is attributed by Ekkehard Jürgens to the Greek *laos* (people), emphasizing the civil character of the theatrical structure as an ancient institution. With this perspective as a starting point, also postulated by other specialists, amateur theater in antiquity cannot be identified, mainly due to the lack of a complementary phenomenon. "Amateur theater, synonymous with theater, in this sense loses its demarcating boundary."⁹

We can observe in contemporary art a conscious and intentional return to a blurred boundary between the two statutes. If we look at amateur theatre today, we can see that the actors working in amateur theatre are characterized by a lack of specific artistic training, a lack of clear orientation and, above all, a lack of institutionalization. At the same time, many artistic creators resort to a mixed ensemble of professionals and amateurs in order to achieve various effects in line with the perception of reality or strictly from a reactionary status vis-à-vis a tarnished legislative artistic structure.

The amateur theatre cannot be neatly contained within a precise definition, depending on the geographical, social or artistic context, it is either a kind of negative fault line of the institutionalized "normal" theatre or an avant-garde movement. "Nowadays, amateur theater is a diffuse field because an important asset is its freedom compared to the Middle Ages and the Baroque period. This freedom, in its turn, represents a problem faced by the contemporary amateur actor, in fact a paradoxical situation, because in principle he does not have a fixed space, costumes, the necessary technique, etc... Thus, freedom is faced with its restriction, but it can be corrected by subordinating it to an institution, for example: school, university, church, etc., by its own organization, close to the form of organization of professional theatre. Freedom remains the initial form of organization of amateur theater, but it cannot be its purpose."¹⁰ If amateur theatre is consistently aware of its function in contemporary society and of the relevant elements, it has the chance to establish itself artistically over a long period of time in contrast to standardized theatre. The real debate dwells in the relevance of this breakdown

⁸ Ekkehard Jürgens, „Am Anfang war das Laienspiel. "Bürgertheater im alten Griechenland", in: Jürgens, Belgrad, *TheaterSpiel. Ästhetik des Schul- und Amateurtheaters*, Schneider Verlag, Hohengehren 1997, p.13.

⁹ Claudiu Dogaru, *op. cit.*, p.193.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, pp.198-199.

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in a post-post-dramatic climate in which the attributes of the civilian creator serve in a completely different way to construct the theatrical paradigm than conventional definitions of the amateur.

Play - from child to adult, from amateur to professional

"*Play* is a natural collective form that provides the involvement and at the same time the personal freedom needed for experimentation. Games develop the personal skills and techniques needed for each individual game through the practice of it."¹¹

The *play* contributes significantly to the development of skills, provided that the individual shows absolute openness to exploration and trust in the system of that game. Within the boundaries drawn by the rules of the *play*, the actor has an infinite range of action in relation to the situations that a game presents, creating a space for ingenuity and inventiveness. Games are extremely useful in working with beginners (children or adults), in preparing for stage improvisation, but also for professional actors. Often a good director will create a seamless transition from acting to developing a stage stakes and blur the differences between an amateur and a professional. So, whether the subject is the professional or the amateur actor, all individual, personal energy and strengths must be channeled, must be helped to emerge, must be skilfully directed by a coordinator. Whether director or teacher, he or she will be a permanently lucid presence, totally involved in the actor's work and at the same time external, critical, innovative, dependent on a certain type of process through which the actor develops his or her vocabulary. This process is always present in the artistic construction, whatever its nature, introverted or noisy, precise or experimental, novice or experienced, the actor needs a personalized coordination.

In his creation, the actor starts from a system of relatively rigid assumptions, initially from the dramatic text, the director's conception, experience, his relationship to the craft, the playing space, an infinite number of unrepeatable coordinates. The actor assigns the text to himself, and then, first of all through imagination metamorphosed by his own means of expression, it is materialized in a stage incarnation. The text is both a language

¹¹ Viola Spolin, *op. cit.*, p.51.

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of reality and a stimulator of the imagination: "To be natural is not to imitate, but to understand the truth of the character and to give a breath to the imagination"¹². To achieve this, the director/teacher proposes improvisation exercises and situations to the actors, and encourages them to develop the character. These thresholds and stages serve to incite creation by overcoming the limits of lucidity. The inner realism of the *performer character* creates the "slice of life" through real, human feelings. Action is the foundation of the Stanislavskian "system", emotion being a consequence dependent on the veracity of the interpretation and understanding of the cognitive process. Stanislavski believes that it is not "interpretation" but "living" that is essential, one must not play the passions but act under their influence; the actor must abandon his ego and allow the character's personality to enter. This path of creation may prove to be a difficult one without a thorough study, difficult for an *amateur* to follow, but it is not a singular path. After all, theater creates illusion, and the tools it uses to make this convention belong to an extremely vast spectrum.

Amateur actors have a great advantage in the form of their passion for theater, a source of unlimited fuel. In the *amateur's* view, the art remains an art and can never become routine, nor can it ever descend into a profession. That's why they need to be exposed to a certain kind of process unlike professional actors, they need to be supported to discover their ability to expose the truth. Any actor, whether professional or not, must be able to relate honestly to this phenomenon, and without this truth, he remains a dilettante. This is why I propose to research the theme of theatrical pedagogy in amateur theater, anchored in the great theatrical poetics. The actor has the ability to project an inner universe only if he understands the structures of theatrical laws, regardless of the approach or the theories followed: 'The role that the actor fulfills on stage is to create, to bring into the real, from the sphere of the possible, the archetypes, the virtual potentialities, the sense of freeing the prisoner from his own being and from the things that surround him.'¹³

"An actor can only play verbs, but it is significant that each of the verbs must have a target after it. This target is a kind of direct or indirect complement, a specific thing seen or felt and, to some degree, necessary. The

¹² George Banu, *Reformele teatrului în secolul reinnoirii*, Editura Nemira, București, 2011, p.149.

¹³ Ion Cojar, *Maestri ai teatrului românesc în a doua jumătate a secolului XX* - Editura U.N.A.T.C. Press, București, 2006, p.150.

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target will actually change from moment to moment. There are many options. But without the target, the actor can accomplish absolutely nothing, because the target is the source of the actor's whole life." ¹⁴ *The target* that Donnellan talks about is the first brick in the development of a theatrical process, the very purpose of the actor's actions, the overall goal of the play and the finish line. But in order not to miss *the target*, the actor has to be constantly grounded in the present, immune to the greatest enemy: *fear*; which Donnellan associates with the Devil, in chapter three of the same mentioned work. This *fear* has a destructive character, forming fractures between the actor and the character's main objective. The *fear* can be represented by a multitude of problems that the actor faces, either during rehearsals or during the performance, or during both of these processes of developing a performance. The fear of embarrassment or disbelief is common among actors, manifested when the actor projects in the eyes of the spectator his personal image and not that of the character, inevitably changing the focus of attention, the target. This problem of fear is all the more present in the case of amateur actors, who due to a lack of understanding of the process, exposure experience or familiarity with the theatrical environment are often overwhelmed by adjacent feelings.

Problem solving, like *play*, is a personal way of acting, independent, without approval/disapproval, without the appropriation of subjective perspectives, in order to make direct experimentation possible. Confronting these problems awakens in the *student actor* a motivation to develop procedures to apply in moments of crisis together with other partners willing to experiment. In situations in which the teacher or peer labels a process as right or wrong, the individual is disconnected from his or her own source of power, thus making resolution more difficult or even impossible. When working with pupils/students, the teacher should propose an adjacent obstacle in order to discover what they need in their work. The actor must always be assured that every question has at least one answer and a problem undeniably has multiple solutions. *Play* is the original partner designed in perpetual symbiosis with the systems of human development being present from birth, contained in the genetic code. *Play* is an imaginative process through which participants have the opportunity to give birth to a new dimension, limited only by the impossibility of the laws of physics.

¹⁴ Declan Donnellan, *op.cit.*, p.27.

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Play has two valences, directed towards the conscious or the subconscious. Games that address the subconscious are useful to the actor's art - not "logical" games that address reason. Any of the games that address physical dexterity, skill, that tire you out physically, are games that address the subconscious and strengthen and fortify it. On the other hand, games that require perceptiveness, intense attention and excessive concentration tend to generate tension and stress, having the opposite effect of developing freedom of expression. In the actor's training, it is essential to activate latent inner forces and release creative potential, a process which should not be conditioned by logical analysis or an excessively rational approach to play. Scenic reflexes, spontaneity and the courage to expose oneself are not only gained mentally, but mainly practically. Games, are vital in the early stages of acting development because they do not have a capital and over-arching stake, they do not force counterfeiting and they force you to keep your point of concentration. In theater games we look for temperament, spontaneity, expressiveness, skill. Inadaptability to games can be a symptom of helplessness, but it can also conceal an extraordinary capacity cloaked in a tougher shell that requires pedagogical skill to penetrate. We have a subtle differentiation between *play* and *game*, the accepted idea being that *play* contains a strict set of rules, which if followed, develop interest both for the player and, even more so, for the viewer.

The desire to be "someone else" or "something else" is instituted in the human limit of living a single reality, precisely for this reason, children in their games are what they imagine themselves to be: cosmonauts, soldiers, fairies, princesses. They do not reconcile themselves with their condition, like actors who set out to live multiple lives.

The initial steps in the craft of acting are made through the endless process of *play*. The foundation of this craft is improvisation through play, conscious, therefore intensely motivated. Thus practical exercises become sources of unlimited joy and opportunities. Eventual setbacks at this point of the transition should not generate mental strains or physical spasms, even though they manifest themselves through serious work. Everything should be approached with a light-hearted disposition, the process being similar to that of a child learning a new foreign language through play. The pedagogical aim is, in the case of the creative process, to make the most of individual attributes in relation to the present context, to enhance the personality which develops

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courage for action and confidence in the capacity for permanent self-improvement.

"Play is a natural collective form that provides the personal involvement and at the same time the personal engagement necessary for experimentation. Games develop the personal techniques and skills needed for each individual game through their practice. The skills are developed at the very moment a person tastes the full pleasure and excitement that a game can offer - it is precisely at that moment that the person is truly open to receiving them." ¹⁵

The artist, like the common man, acts according to internal processes, but what is specific to him is the ability to materialize these conclusions and the responsibility to display them on stage. Before acting, the actor must thoroughly analyze the impact that his actions may have on the audience, analyze the quality of the information, look inward as in a mirror at what he is about to do. By no means the first impulse to be physically realized by external means, without it being passed through the filter of the ensemble. True living on stage will only be realized by those actors who will understand the play, for it exists only in relation to the audience. "It is important that the artist's eyes, the artist's gaze on stage, reflect the great, deep content of his creative soul. For this, it is necessary that this great content, analogous to the <life of the human spirit> of the role, be accumulated in him; it is necessary that the performer, as long as he is on the stage, communicate through this soul content with his partners in the play." ¹⁶

The importance of today's amateur theater lies precisely in the fact that this theater remains an alternative to professional theaters, worthy of consideration mainly due to the fact that it is synonymous with the first steps in the performing arts. The history of these theatres shows, not infrequently, that many of those who have worked in children's, teenage or student groups have turned their passion into a profession. The fact that those who work in these groups do not do it out of obligation but for pleasure, that the work and rehearsals are much more relaxed than in an institutionalized setting, helps them to discover the beauty of theatre, with all that it means. Even if they do not all become actors or directors, scenographers or playwrights, the important thing is what theatre develops, from socializing, learning to work in a team,

¹⁵ Viola Spolin, *op.cit.*, p.51.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p.247.

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developing skills, enriching general culture and discovering the pleasure of reading or watching a relevant theatre performance. My becoming a professional actor and university teacher is precisely due to these forms of amateur theater. The experience I gained at the *Children's Palace in Timișoara* is a determining factor in my career. The fact that some of the students who took part in the theater circle became high school students in the country, then students at art faculties, culminating in being colleagues with them in professional theaters, gives me the courage to research and deepen, supporting the amateur theater movement. At the same time, amateur theater is also developing a destiny independent from professional theater in the context of post post-dramatic and performance theater. It is a perhaps naive but essentially unique aesthetic with its own resources in a field always in search of new forms.

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