

Acting between Rigor and Freedom

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Abstract: The article analyzes the relationship between rigor and freedom in the actor's training program, emphasizing the fact that they are not mutually excluding, but complementary in the training process of the professional actor. Discipline is not seen as a form of constraint, but as an essential structure that provides support and direction to freely expression. Through rigorous exercises, the actor develops control over body, voice and emotion, thus preparing for the release of spontaneity in a guided manner. The studio becomes a space of exploration, where the rules learned can be creatively overcome, in an act of deep and authentic artistic engagement. It is made clear that scenic freedom is not possible without a solid foundation of knowledge and technical rigor. Theater, by its own nature, is a space of paradox, of conflict. Between rigor and freedom of expression is the essence of the actor's creation. Starting from the idea that theater is similar to playing - with clear rules, but infinite freedom within them - the article shows how the actor is able to transform technical constraints into lively and authentic expressive means.

Keywords: discipline, spontaneity, freedom, rigor

The question of „What is perfection?“ has still not found a perfect answer. This philosophical question has historically been answered in different ways, depending on the field, culture and epoch. In a general sense, it is an ideal state, complete, without deficiencies or mistakes. In Greek culture, perfection is associated with harmony and balance. But the Greeks also had different views of perfection. Platon, for example, saw it as an eternal idea, existing beyond the real world towards which man can only aspire. His disciple Aristotel took a more pragmatic view, associating perfection with functionality, considering something perfect when it fulfills its purpose.

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When it comes to art, here we have a more unitary view of philosophers and theorists. Artistic perfection is not the absence of mistakes, but the presence of truth, authenticity, deep emotion. Often it is actually these imperfections that succeed in expressing and producing the highest level of vulnerability in the spectator. In art, in particular, perfection is not measured in precision, but in emotional truth and impact on the scene partner and the spectator.

Applying this concept to the field of theater, more specifically in the Actor's Art class, the search for perfection can lead to a powerful creative block, causing anxiety and sometimes leading to a denial of authenticity. Perfection is less a concrete destination and more a process of becoming, as professor Ion Cojar said, in the Actor's Art class the process is important, not the success.

Nikolai Evreinov said that for him, theater is "infinitely more vast than the stage. It is more necessary and more precious to humanity than all modern discoveries"¹ because theater is omnipresent in our lives, from the mating rituals of animals, from the falling leaves, from the way we relate to the people we interact with on a daily basis by assuming various roles - citizen, shopper, parent, employee, etc... Theater is present in all aspects of our lives, that is why we are so attracted to this art that is seen as a fusion of all the arts.

Although theater is everywhere in our lives - in everyday gestures, in the way we build our social relationships or in the way we present ourselves to the world - translating this expressive potential into a conscious artistic approach requires one essential difference: the rigor of the working process. In the space of the theater atelier, spontaneity is exposed to a process of refinement, which requires discipline, rehearsal and self-control. Here, it is no longer the result of happenstance or instant impulse, but of deep research and a lucid, constantly trained presence. Thus, the atelier becomes not only a place of creation, but also a space of exigency and transformation, where scenic freedom is possible only through the adoption of a conscious and coherent discipline.

¹ Nikolai, Evreinov, *Teatrul în viață*, București, UNATC Press, 2020, p 11

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Discipline in freedom

Discipline is a fundamental element in the training of the actor and in the practice of the theatrical art, going beyond simple conformity to external rules and becoming a form of inner rigor, consciously assumed. In the context of the artistic process, the discipline does not contradict creativity, on the contrary, supports it, providing it with a coherent framework for expression and a solid foundation on which genuine freedom of expression can be built. The artistic process requires the actor to be constantly in control of his or her own means of expression: to control his or her voice with precision, to coordinate his or her body consciously, to manage his or her emotions consciously and without repressing them, and also to keep his or her attention focused on the *here* and *now* principle. These skills do not emerge spontaneously, they are cultivated through rigorous and constant training, which begins in the formative years of school and continues throughout artistic life. Discipline thus becomes an essential practice, not only for improving technique, but above all for building and maintaining a lively, credible and moving stage presence. Through rehearsal, self-control and dedication, the actor develops a state of total availability, in which artistic expression is not the result of chance, but of an inner structure built up progressively and consciously.

The best known and most widely used methods for studying the actor's art - from Stanislavski's system to Meyerhold's biomechanics or Grotowski's rigorous training - are based on a conscious discipline, focused on refining the actor's expressive tools. In the view of these pedagogues and theorists, the actor's art cannot exist in the absence of a rigorous, continuous and personalized training process, through which body, voice and mind are gradually shaped to make the actor available to the most authentic possible stage expression.

Stanislavski, for example, insists on scenic truth and inner believability, both of which are possible only through careful self-observation, analysis and emotional control. Meyerhold, by contrast, proposes a physical approach to acting, in which movement is organized with meticulous, even mathematical precision, requiring an almost athletic kind of rigor of body control. Grotowski, in his approach to essentializing theatre, emphasizes the importance of pushing personal limits through a training involving sacrifice

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and total dedication; in his conception, the actor is stripping himself of all external convention, of the mechanics of formal representation, in order to access a deep level of inner truth. This process involves a radical discipline, not only bodily but also spiritual. The intense exercises, repeated until exhaustion, are not intended to require a form, but to release the actor's vital energy, enabling him or her to communicate authentically beyond form.

In all these methods, the discipline is not an external one, but becomes a transformative practice, assumed with commitment, with an impact not only on artistic performance, but also on the development of the actor's personality and inner balance.

In the contemporary theatrical pedagogy, the discipline is considered indispensable for achieving stage authenticity, being not an goal in itself, but a way for the actor to develop a vivid, conscious and empathic presence. "Only a climate of freedom and discipline can develop personality, the attribute without which there is no great actor"². Paradoxically, true stage spontaneity - that living, unrepeatable moment of communion with the partner and the audience - is only possible within a solid inner structure built on rigor, perseverance and self-demandingness. Discipline thus becomes the fertile framework in which creative freedom is not only allowed, but truly enhanced.

Rigor in the actor's art should not manifest itself as an external imposing of rigid rules, but as an inner assumption of a journey of self-discovery, refinement and empowerment in the mastery of the art. However, such a perspective demanded in certain contexts of institutionalized training risks reducing discipline to a simple control mechanism, cancelling out its profound formative potential.

"The discipline of the actor's art can be a ritual of constraint and subordination to rigid canons, training, in which censorship and self-censorship of individual and collective behavior take the leading role"³. When consciously integrated into the pedagogical process, discipline becomes a supportive framework rather than a form of constraint, allowing the actor to explore his or her limits, control his or her impulses and freely access

² Ion, Cojar, *O poetică a artei actorului*, București, Paideia, 1999, p 83

³ Ion, Cojar, *op.cit.*, p 83

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emotional resources. The necessary rigor in acting is not intended to standardize behaviour, but to create the necessary conditions in which the individuality of each future actor can blossom coherently. "In the reality of theatre schools institutionalized on the model of higher education (...) the common spirit of unitary professional training proclaimed and pursued by the analytical programmes (...) is a false ideal, in which no one believes anymore"⁴. Thus, far from being a simple training, apparently contradictory, discipline becomes a form of structured inner freedom, in which spontaneity, creativity and expressivity not only exist but are amplified.

As we well know, theater is often likened to the game, exactly because of the freedom it offers to the participants within the boundaries of specific rules. Huizinga said that „an essential characteristic of playing is freedom”⁵. This analogy is not random: both involve a convention, a unanimously accepted imaginary world in which those involved can explore other identities, relationships and realities. The actor, like a child playing, is free to explore, to experiment, to create, to propose. However, like playing, this freedom is not chaotic, but manifests itself within a well-defined boundaries. It is precisely this structure that makes possible the appearance of authentic freedom - a freedom that does not exclude rigor, but requires it. The actor's job is to learn to be free in and through the rule, to be creative within the limits of convention, while preserving his artistic identity.

Evreinov said that the actor's very existence is in playing, and "playing attracts. It is enough to respect its rules and play honestly, it will fascinate the spectators"⁶. When the actor respects the rules of the game and enjoys the freedom of playing, his stage performance is authentic, alive and attractive to the spectator, who is led by the actor in the story he is creating. Honesty in acting does not mean merely conforming to the rules, but also authentic dedication, total involvement in the reality of the stage, however fictional it

⁴ Ion, Cojar, *op.cit.*, p 11

⁵ Huizinga, Johan, *Homo ludens*, Univers, București, 1977, p 38 apud Bogdana, Darie, *Curs de Arta Actorului*, București, UNATC Press, 2015, p 27

⁶ Liviu, Lucaci, *Nașterea actorului*, București, UNATC Press, 2017, p 20

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may be. It is precisely this honest, profound and lucid assumption of playing that creates fascination. The actor, by assuming the rules of the game, succeeds in bringing into existence, for himself and for the spectator, what does not exist, as Ibsen said. If the actor does not respect the rules of the game, if he does not believe in them and only pretends, then the fake will be installed in the scene and the spectator will certainly spot it. The fake is something that the spectator cannot see, the spectator feels cheated, lied, disgusted. Like in games, those who break the rules and cheat are rejected. "The game in the theater is a game, but of a much higher level (...) the actor must have the necessary strength and training to be able to sustain this ample process"⁷. The relationship between acting and theatre emphasizes the necessary harmony between discipline and freedom, and true scenic freedom is built over time, through training, reflection and total availability to the creative process. This creates a beneficial tension that sustains the authentic artistic act.

Freedom in rigor

"Theater without freedom is only a form of training that satisfies the frustrated who crowd the art world, those who feed eating the pain of the actor, fearing his freedom. Freedom and true theater go hand in hand. Theater is and will remain an exercise of freedom"⁸. Authentic, quality theater can only exist in a space where freedom is guaranteed and cultivated. To limit an actor's freedom of thought and expression means to annihilate the living essence of theatrical art, which is not born out of conformity, but out of confrontation, exploration and risk. Without this freedom, the stage act becomes a bare performance, and the actor - an empty mechanism, like a lifeless puppet struggling to show the spectator false images. In this sense, the theater becomes a special space in which freedom is learned, negotiated and manifested through every gesture, word or silence. Only in this way does theater remain a living exercise of humanity - an art that is not afraid of truth, but searches for it with lucidity and courage.

⁷ Bogdana, Darie, *Curs de Arta Actorului*, București, UNATC Press, 2015, p 38-39

⁸ Liviu, Lucaci, *op.cit.*, p 21

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Drama comes from the tension of opposites, from inner and external conflict, from the clash between opposing forces that coexist and influence each other. Drama is never linear or single - it involves ambiguity, split, tension, paradox. The method of professor Ion Cojar has been constructed in this sense, who affirmed that "what is not paradoxical is not really dramatic, it is only monological illustration and epic narrative"⁹. Where there is not this tension, this pendulation between "yes" and "no", between desire and impossibility, we are no longer dealing with drama, and a creation without paradox is reduced to a demonstration. It may inform or impress aesthetically, but it does not involve reflection. Authentic drama instead raises questions in the mind of the audience. It does not align meanings, but breaks and reconstructs them. That is why theater, by its very nature, is the space of paradox, of multiple truths, of identities, of moments of crisis in which certainty is replaced by searching. "Good theater is always against things"¹⁰. In this sense, the paradox becomes not only a characteristic of the dramatic structure, but the very condition for the creation of theatrical authenticity.

"Does not the essence of theater itself exist in the violation of the norms set by nature, by the state, by the public? Yes, theater, in the philosophical meaning of the word, is nothing but a crime. If it were not, it would lose its charm, its irresistible appeal, in a word, its reason for being. It is proper to add here that the theater is sometimes criminal in its methods, not only in a philosophical sense, but also in a strictly legal sense. Lies, simulation, trickery, the use of false names"¹¹. The profound fascination of theater is not in its docile representation of the world, but in its ability to interrogate it, to create tensions between what is and what could be. Lying, simulation, the assumption of false identities - all these apparently "criminal" things become in authentic theater the instruments through which truth is revealed. Thus theater is not an identical imitation of the real, but a confrontation with it, an exercise of artistic freedom in which "crime" does not mean destruction, but liberation from convention. In this philosophical sense, theater affirms its

⁹ Ion, Cojar, *op.cit.*, p 8

¹⁰ Liviu, Lucaci, *op.cit.*, p 21

¹¹ Nikolai, Evreinov, *op.cit.*, p 108

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reason for being precisely by having the courage to contravene, disturb and fascinate.

In her book *Improvisation for the Theatre*, professor Viola Spolin said that when "the reaction to an experience is produced at this intuitive level, when the individual goes beyond the restricted intellectual level, his intelligence is released". The actor is no longer operating only on the basis of pre-established rational structures, but is accessing a deep, organic form of understanding in which knowledge is experienced and felt, not just analyzed. This liberated intelligence is creative, adaptive, able to respond in a vivid and nuanced way to present reality. Such intuitive awareness allows the actor to get to the heart of a dramatic situation without depending exclusively on logic or analyzing the text, rather through a kind of direct, bodily and emotional perception. In that moment, the performance becomes not just a reproduction of a directorial intention or an intellectual construct, becoming an authentic live manifestation in which intuition, emotion and reflection work together. In this way, true creativity is not based on the accumulation of theories, but on the ability to transcend their limits, free from mental constraints and open to vivid experience.

In the same book, Viola Spolin added the idea that "spontaneity creates an explosion that in the moment frees us from old reference systems, from memories suffocated by old facts and information, as well as from theories and techniques discovered by others and not assimilated". This inner explosion of spontaneity is not just an emotional release, but a creative break from the automatism and mental patterns that block authentic expression. In that moment of freedom, the actor is not merely acting according to a learned method, but rather from a living, present core of his being. It is a point of contact between the conscious and the unconscious, between what is known and what is felt, between what is learned and what is experienced. This is the only way to discover gestures, reactions or scene truths that cannot be entirely planned or controlled. Spontaneity is not the opposite of discipline and rigor, but the highest result of an inner discipline that leaves space for the unexpected, as a space of freedom that is not averse to the construction. True performing freedom is built over time, through training, reflection and total availability to the creative process, or in other words, through discipline.

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Conclusions

The analysis of the relationship between discipline and freedom in the actor's studio reveals a complex but essential relationship in the process of artistic training and expression. The rigor of the exercises and self-control are not in opposition to spontaneity and creativity, on the contrary, they create the necessary environment for their authentic manifestation. The laboratory becomes a privileged space in which artistic freedom is not exposed to chaos, but is built on a solid structure, the result of a conscious and assumed discipline. The actor, faced with his or her own self, is guided to discover the expressive resources of his or her nature through a process in which rigor supports exploration and rules become the support of freedom. In this dynamic, discipline does not cancel freedom, but shapes and channels it in the direction of a profound expressivity, and freedom does not reject discipline, but ennobles it. It can be said that in the actor's art, discipline and freedom are not mutually exclusive, but their coexistence is the necessary condition for achieving authentic artistic performance and expression. The actor's art is the result of a fragile but vital balance between these two. This cultivated balance is what transforms the craft into an art and the actor into a performer capable of moving, communicating and creating with authenticity. "Yes, theater is always a crime, but, in its best forms, a crime so seductive, so inoffensive and capable of sublimation, that as long as life still exists on our planet, humans and even animals will never stop committing it" . This "crime" is the result of a freedom consciously exercised in a rigorous structure. The actor does not break the rules in order to ignore them, but to rethink them, to transform them into expressive means. It is precisely this balance between rigor and freedom that transforms the performance into a sublime ritual, a form of 'artistic crime' in which reality is suspended, questioned and rewritten.

In the conclusion of this paper, it becomes clear that true acting skills are not born out of uncontrolled freedom or enforced discipline, but from the meeting of these two. In this sense, the words of Pablo Picasso are relevant and can be applied to the actor: 'learn the rules like a master so that you can break them like an artist'. The actor, like any creator of value, must first learn the rules (of the game), the techniques of expression, in order to be able to transcend them consciously and creatively. Only in this way does the performance become meaningful and a source of vulnerability. As an

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encouragement to all artists reading this article, but especially to artists in formation, I invite you to follow Picasso's words.

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