

The Evolution Of A Performance Not Only For The Young. *The Magic Land* At Luceafărul Theatre Of Iași - A Look From Within

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Abstract: The present paper aims at highlighting and promoting the importance of two main elements in the evolution of drama or animation theatre performances as well as in cinema productions that insure appropriate audience understanding: emotion, the expression of the character's inner feelings through the actor, and precision, reflected in a series of stage rules. Offering in the beginning a number of professional views on the characteristics of interpretation in the above artistic domains, with a focus on theatre performances, the paper approaches next a 2020 production at Luceafărul Theatre of Iași, *The Magic Land*, in an attempt to point out its grounding on the two elements. The performance in title was not a random choice: its evolution on stage was closely followed from within, as a direct participant in its "making", while its abundance in complex choreographic moments provided a rich source for debate on the necessity of precision and emotional involvement.

Key words: audience, emotion, performance, rules, understanding

The present article originates in the existence of indisputable stage norms similarities between drama theatre and animation theatre, focusing on the importance of emotion in the evolution of a performance, in a dramatic text, in directing and acting. Among the many definitions of *emotion*, offered by dictionaries or specialized works mostly from the psychology domain, the following definition: "Emotion: a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioral changes in the body"¹ applies completely in the case of the performing arts.

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¹ "Emotion: a conscious mental reaction (such as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by

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Except for the specific forms that are deliberately deprived of emotion, following, for instance, the Brechtian technique, theatre stagings are based on and fueled by emotion. "Nearly everything that happens in a show has a purpose and causes an emotion. This is why emotion is incredibly important in the world of theater. Different directors, designers, and actors go about showing emotion in a multitude of ways. Not one is the same. Which makes sense since everyone is different and they all have different ideas."²

The performance that was selected to point out the present need for emotion on stage as well as for the existence of precision in the evolution of a theatrical production, *The Magic Land* that was part of the "Luceafărul" Theatre of Iași repertoire between 2020-2023, is a very good example in the given context. As part of the production, and often more intense in terms of emotion and rule observation than the performances themselves that depend solely on the actors after the première, rehearsals themselves can be discussed in a distinct paper. The present paper will not debate on the matter of rehearsals, though; it will merely offer a brief classification of the emotions involved in the process: 1. emotions when building characters, 2. emotions arising from the interaction among the members of the artistic crew, 3. emotions arising from the actors' agreement/disagreement with the director's/choreographer's/scenographer's opinions.

"Emotion is part of our lives. Of a theatre performance, too. Despite having lost much of our empathy, and become cynical, practical and pragmatic, we are at times invaded by emotions and the more we try to escape them, the more overwhelming they become when they reach us. There is no shame to feel butterflies in your stomach, to be afraid, to laugh out loud or be terribly sad. It is human and beautiful. Especially when it happens on stage."

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physiological and behavioral changes in the body", *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, in <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/emotion> (accessed on 05/04/2025)

²*Emotion in Theatre*, in Louis Andrew's blog, 17th October 2019, in <https://lnapolitano.wordpress.com/2019/10/17/emotion-in-theater/> (accessed on 05/04/2025)

³ Alina Epîngeac, "«Our town» lacks any emotion", *d'Ep-pîn-geac*, 17th July 2023, in <https://epingeac.com/2023/07/17/orasul-nostru-lipsit-de-emoție/> (accessed on 05/04/2025)

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The direct contact with the audience involved in any theatre production facilitates its understanding by the audience, which happens to a certain extent also in watching TV or cinema, except for a slight decrease in the viewers' perception due to the existing screen. A related art, cinema is mentioned briefly in the opening of the article as a comparison among the three arts from the above perspective would require a more generous space. Without ignoring the differences between stage acting and screen acting, in both cases the partial observation or rejection of the norms involved in the process will result in an alteration of their main goal: their reception. Actor and acting coach Nick Dunning points out in a concise presentation the main rules that govern both theatre and cinema: Rule 1: Know Your Craft, Rule 2: Understand the Character, Rule 3: Embrace Vulnerability, Rule 4: Master Physicality, Rule 5: Listen and React, Rule 6: Connect with the Audience, Rule 7: Master Vocal Techniques, Rule 8: Be Professional, Rule 9: Collaborate and Adapt, Rule 10: Keep Learning and Growing.⁴

"A truly competent stage actor requires deft technical skill as well as the ability to convey a vast array of emotions in a short space of time. (...) While there is some overlap, acting on stage generally requires a different skill set than acting for the screen. A stage actor needs to convincingly communicate emotions to each and every member of their audience, including those situated far from the stage. Therefore, the actor needs to be louder and more expressive with their performance than if they were acting on camera. Screen acting, where actors' most expressive emotional beats are frequently conveyed in close-up, generally requires far less to sell more..."⁵ Norman Quarrinton, who supplies the above list of rules, also mentions the obligation of every actor to memorize their part and follow the right order of the lines (which applies to a certain extent to film actors too), turn them into appropriate

⁴ Nick Dunning, *The Top Ten Rules Of Acting 2024*, Nick Dunning's blog, 13th August 2024, in <https://www.nickdunning.com/blog/the-top-ten-rules-of-acting%202024> (accessed on 05/04/2025)

⁵ Norman Quarrinton, "The Basics of Stage Acting: A Guide for New Performers", *Backstage*, updated on 13th November 2023, in <https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/acting-on-stage-basics-tips-76126/> (accessed on 03/04/2025)

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body reactions, improvise at need when stage partners skip lines or props are missing, as well as change costumes frequently during the same performance. At the same time, acting on stage for a long time may prove a disadvantage on camera as the theatre actor is used to speak loudly while in the filmmaking process the camera may be placed in his proximity and he should keep his voice low. Stage actors are used to speak very clearly and in a staccato manner which contradicts the fluency of cinema speech; they should also diminish their face and body reactions.

The actor in a Romanian animation theatre has the ability to play in both animation theatres and drama theatres. The rules the stage actor has to observe have been briefly described above so I will deal in the following paragraph with the different (or extra) rules a puppeteer has to obey as a new element makes its appearance in this case: the puppet or the marionette. The presence of this new element between himself and the audience makes the actor speak more loudly than in a stage performance; his body is hidden and his face is rarely seen except for the few situations when he is not wearing a black hood. Showing emotion becomes a more difficult process now, partially due to some actors' inability to "lend" their voice completely to the puppet. The necessity to match the voice and the whole body with the puppet's reactions makes manipulation an even more difficult process which leads, as in the previous situation, to an incomplete reception of the story message on the part of the audience.

"I think theatre turns life into a small world. The stage is like a magic stove on which a variety of things happen; theatre does not mirror reality, theatre builds worlds-to-be, people-to-be, happenings and fates. Whose imaginary existence is as powerful as true existence."⁶ Unfortunately, animation performances, at least in Romania, are not as frequent as they may be taking into account the socio-educational role they could play, being still regarded as a minor art as Petru Valter, who was to become a director himself, and the 'apprentice' of Manole Al. Foca, the first director of the Puppet

⁶ Crenguța Manea, „«Drama builds worlds-to-be». (I) An Interview with David Esrig”, *Observator cultural*, 27th April 2004, in <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/teatrul-cladeste-lumi-possibile-i-interviu-cu-david-esrig-2/> (accessed on 03/04/2025)

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Theatre of Iași, once stated. Consequently, the animation theatre is considered a form of art in which rules and precision are not as important as in drama theatre. As an actor myself, that has acquired enough experience with the world of puppets, I can testify that all rehearsals and every performance in the animation theatre are governed by identical rules to drama theatre, adapted to its specific circumstances.

The Magic Land (2020), an adaptation by Oana Leahu who was now directing her second play at „Luceafărul” Theatre, after the 2010 *Jungle Book*, demonstrates the importance of observing the rules mentioned above as well as the major role played by the emotions actors convey to the audience. She proved deep knowledge of animal behaviour the characters in both plays were based on, and she watched closely on the making of the big puppets, confessing her attachment to the animation theatre, formally or in the informal meetings with the acting crew after the rehearsals. "My meeting with the animation theatre was a big chance for me because I had the opportunity to show people a part of my soul, that of a child. Fragile, naïve and forceful at once. I think theatre should incorporate all three of them. I am also very much attracted to metaphorical theatre. And the animation theatre is metaphorical by definition."⁷

An adaptation of African stories and myths, *The Magic Land* is made of sequences that follow the evolution of the lion cub, Amiri, from his playing with little lioness Aisha, to the profound change he goes through after his father's, king Adopho, death, his leaving for nowhere and his return to his native land, getting revenge for the death of his parent. The play is a combination of animation and drama, difficult choreographic sequences, remarkable *live* singing, a large number of props, video projections and diffuse stage lights, that have all turned the performance into a valuable experience for the entire crew. The precise choreographic moments that were carefully, but enthusiastically managed, the frequent turnings from one animal character

⁷ Magda Bratu, „Oana Leahu: «Meeting with the animation theatre was a big chance for me», *Puppets Occupy Street Festival*, 12th September 2020, in <https://puppetsoccupystreet.com/2020/09/12/oana-leahu-pentru-mine-intalnirea-cu/> (accessed on 05/04/2025)

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into another, which required adequate changes in behaviour, in both body and voice, contributed to the making of an impressive performance.

"We invite you into a magic land where hyenas, giraffes, eagles and gnus live together with two lion cubs that are taught jungle rules and grow up. Their evolution is made through playing, meeting strange animals and going through difficult times. And the question the two charming main characters, the lion cubs Amiri and Aisha, ask themselves (and I invite you to ponder on) is: ««Between now and always, who am I?». Meeting the talented actors of the „Luceafărul” Theatre in a colourful performance, with original music, impressive and emotional choreographic moments, a variety of images and costumes and lots of happy and bright thoughts, smiles but also deep questions on life and recollections are the many elements that I hope will lure you into *The Magic Land*. And please don't forget that the world of stories is open to everybody!", is Oana Leahu's greeting word for the public of all ages in a few sentences that summarize her script concept.

The performance that was meant mostly for the young, but was also well received by the adults, according to their informal reactions during the few times *The Magic Land* was played, took almost three months of hard body, voice and emotional work. Guided by the late Hugo Wolff, a worldwide famous choreographer for his remarkable activity in the domain, the complex morning and afternoon rehearsals resulted in a homogenous work which brought all actors together. An often difficult task to accomplish, the amazing collaboration among the actors was mainly due to their trust mostly in the choreographer for the numerous moments when movement was fundamental; he was passionate, resolute, encouraging and compassionate at the same time. A subjective viewpoint, trust was basic when it came to the actor's showing his physical abilities in the evolution of his character, and Hugo was very supportive and offered pertinent instructions with amazing results. "When it comes to acting, love is huge. (...) Always look for love (...). Generosity is the most wonderful thing. It is there and you should cherish it", was Mircea Albulescu, the great actor's advice for the young actors little before leaving the stage of life. Hugo was certainly embracing this view as he was firm, but also smiling and cracking jokes during every rehearsal. He was the founder and the main choreographer at his dance company *Microbis*, awarded the Choreographer of the Year prize in 2013, always working with passion with

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Romanian or foreign dancers or actors, as some of them confessed. After passing away in 2023, he has been often remembered by his *Microbis* dancers as well as by many others that worked with him. "In every movement, in every song and every costume, he left some of his passion and dedication as a gift of his love for the ephemeral beauty of art and life", they confessed after his disappearance.⁸

During the reahearsals for *The Magic Land*, Hugo proved his well-known passion, dedication and firmness: he was very clear about his perspective on the choreographic moments, he was both patient and understanding, very imaginative in group or individual sequences, extremely careful with the whole as well as with every detail. Some of the very difficult sequences, taking into account the fact that the actors were confronted with such requirements for the first time, given the profile of the theatre, were rehearsed over and over again, changed and adapted according to the actor's physical abilities. As a result of his repeated clarifications on every movement sequence and a combination of hard work and preciseness, wonderful moments with great emotional and visual impact were created, such as the fight scene between Aisha and Hor (Beatrice Volbea, Dragoş Maftעי), Aisha's solo or the final meeting of the two young lions, Aisha and Amiri (Beatrice Volbea, Alex Iuraşcu). The rehearsals proved once more the importance of consistency and precision in every movement as partial rendering, neglection or discarding of any of them would lead to obvious deterioration of a particular fragment.

The complex movements that included acrobatics at times were gathered in an exceptional ensemble that was emphasized by the moving songs of Diana Roman, a talented actress of the "V. Alecsandri" National Theatre of Iaşi and a singing teacher too. There was extensive reahearsing for the more difficult sequences that were based on complex choreography and

⁸Hugo Wolff,

https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=pfbid0d8xCDBK2r8HEqNCEnyePSPChAgxm8U41YQncqJk65gptJqoXbiupK6TDgDpUtpabl&id=100057303946559&_rdr (accessed on 03/05/2025)

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accompanied by singing as animal characters, with firmness and admirable patience on Diana's part. Her musical creations proved a perfect match to the acting moments and her empathy, patience and perseverance were of great help throughout the singing rehearsals. As no live example can be supplied in a paper, the impact of her music on the public could be summarized in the following lines from the beginning of the play: "Our world is but a magical land/Once you get in, you cannot escape/The jungle's filled with wonders and stories/Sounds also an' movements that will lure you in." that the young would hum at the end of the play.

Alina Herescu's scenery completed the image of the play by beautiful props and wonderful costumes, getting much admiration from the public. While following the director's suggestions, some of her costumes were slightly difficult to wear due to their weight and amplitude. She joined all rehearsals and was very careful about the actors' needs, adjusting stage elements and costumes not to hinder their movements. She also took care of the actors' make-up, matching it with the animal character they were playing.

When I had the opportunity to watch a copy of the play, the importance of lights and video projections, designed by Andrei Botnaru and light-designer Daniel Klinger became more evident. While on stage, an actor pays careful attention to match the lines to movement and emotion and be in the appropriate light. They both proved very creative on this occasion as well as a deep understanding of the evolution of the stage moments.

The result of the work for the above performance was expressed in enthusiastic words by two of the young actors, Dragoș Maftai and Alex Iurașcu, the second, a graduate of Drama classes within the "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași, manipulating a huge rod puppet for the first time in his acting career. The cast also included Aurelian Diaconu (king ADOPHO), Ileana Ocneanu (queen ADAMA), Gabriel Lazăr/Viorel Vârlan (AFI, the Wise Monkey), Beatrice Volbea (young AISHA), Iulia Deloiu Trif (AISHA's mother), Sebastian Munteanu (AKOKO, the parrot), Cristian Gheorghiu (hyena Hei), Ionela Arvinte (hyena Hai), Cosmin Rotaru (hyena Hui), Liliana Mavriș Vârlan (beautiful singing AYO), Carmen Mihalache/George Cocoș (big chief HANI), Alexia Botezatu, Ioana Iordache, Raluca Pintilie, Elena Zmuncilă, Cătălin Cucu.

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An optimistic performance by its final message, a complex structure combining a variety of stage elements, *The Magic Land* will be long remembered by the public of all ages that had the opportunity to watch it on the stage of the „Lucafařarul” Theatre as well as by the performing actors that worked under the guidance of the remarkable Hugo Wolff.

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