

***Persona*. Artistic Research on Acting Processuality within a “Practice-Based Research” Paradigm**

Octavian JIGHIRGIU*

Andreea JIGHIRGIU*

Abstract: The research project “*Ingmar Bergman’s Persona. An Applied Investigation of Actorial Processuality*” proposes an innovative exploration of the mechanisms of constructing, transferring, and deactivating a character in contemporary acting, using a practice-based research methodology. The study aims to generate a set of pedagogical and artistic tools related to entering a character and exiting it instantaneously, in the context of small cast productions and the contemporary need for increased actor versatility. The article seeks to analyze the structure of the project, its interdisciplinary directions, and the novelty of the approach in relation to national and international research. It is also a reflection of the working dynamics within an artistic laboratory, illustrating how, at times, research objectives can produce unexpected outcomes that enrich a field of knowledge.

Keywords/Key phrases: *actor, performer, method, practice-based research, character transfer, artificial intelligence*

As a recurring practice of the last decades, one can observe the increasingly evident integration of artistic research methods into theatre studies. In its European understanding, *artistic research* is an endeavour that generates knowledge through practice, experimentation, and critical reflection on process. “*Persona by Ingmar Bergman. An Applied Research on Acting Processuality*”, a project carried out between September and December 2025, was conceived within this paradigm, proposing a theatrical laboratory centered on the exploration of the *Persona* screenplay by the influential Scandinavian filmmaker Ingmar Bergman¹. Previous research initiatives conducted through national and international grants (“*Fondane’s*

* Professor PhD at the Faculty of Theatre, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași

* Assistant Professor, PhD. at the Faculty of Theatre, George Enescu National University of Arts, Iași

¹ <https://www.ingmarbergman.se/en/about-bergman>; date of access: september 11, 2025

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Last Cigarette,” 2015; “*Completely White*,” 2017; “*PanDemon*,” 2020; “*No Exi(s)t*,” 2021; “*The Manole Effect*,” 2022; “*Silent Chekhov*,” 2023) served as a foundation for this research team concerned with the dynamics of the performing arts and the new human and technological dimensions that shape contemporary society.

The working format adopted in this artistic research project involved, among other elements, reducing the script – the investigative base – to the two female characters: the actress Elisabet and the nurse Alma. During the internal debates of the process, we decided to orient our inquiry toward the transfer of scenic identities between the two actresses participating in the project, Alexandra Diaconița and Andreea J. Darie, both assistant professors, PhD., within the Faculty of Theatre at UNAGE Iași, joined by senior lecturer, PhD. Irina Scutariu as consultant. The research team was further completed by professor, PhD. Octavian Jighirgiu (project director), lecturer professor, PhD. Andrei Cozlac (visual artist), associate professor, PhD. Cosmin Pleșa (director), and professor, PhD. Călin Ciobotari (theatre critic and playwright).

Through its complex nature, the artistic research project unfolded at the intersection of several disciplines within the fields of art, education, and psychology – acting, directing, cinematography, visual design, theatre pedagogy, and psychoanalysis. The theoretical framework and working premises probed multiple artistic layers: the interiorization of character, the human and professional relations between the two feminine identities proposed by Bergman’s screenplay, the real–virtual dialogue in a scenic context, or fluid performativity².

The continuous return of practitioners and theorists of the performing arts to the tradition of the 20th century – particularly the revolution in acting initiated by the methods of Konstantin Stanislavski, Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, or Jerzy Grotowski – has been grounded in the depth of the concepts of psychological exploration and character internalization. Although these methods proposed, in different ways, a gradual, slow, and organic trajectory toward the “inner truth” of the role, we observed that none of them provides efficient tools for *rapid character-switching during live performance*. The project “*Persona by Ingmar Bergman. An Applied Research on Acting Processuality*” began from this observation. The dynamics of role exchange, the assumption of multiple scenic identities are recurrent phenomena in the evolving

² A concept that refers to the way in which identities – especially gender and sexual identities – are not fixed or essential, but are continuously created and re-created through actions, gestures, language, and everyday performances. The term originates from philosophical and sociological theories and is strongly influenced by the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler on gender performativity.

landscape of the performing arts, which increasingly embraces innovative performative formulas, small casts, and fragmentary dramaturgies.

The research endeavor, made relevant in light of the premises outlined above, required a re-evaluation of the relationship between scenic identity and personal identity³. At the same time, the project brought into discussion the differences that arise when a character is approached as a continuum, as opposed to situations in which its construction is fragmented and manifests as interrupted performativity. Furthermore, a fertile investigative layer was identified in the deconstruction-reconstruction binomial, within the complex conceptual transfer from film to theatre. Achieving this transition required a reinterpretative recalibration for both actresses. Through a process of transforming their own modes of thinking and creative pathways into a space of continuous research – the actresses simultaneously acted as experimenters and as experimental material – the two protagonists becoming *laboratory-artists*⁴. In doing so, they surpassed the traditional notion of the *actor-as-instrument*, replacing it with the concept of the *actor-as-system*, engaged in a permanent process of self-investigation and reinvention.

The interaction with Artificial Intelligence generated, within the project, a systemic context for exploring the Constructed Emotion Theory⁵. This theory posits that emotions are not automatic, predefined reactions, but are dynamically constructed

³ Artistic research projects explicitly focused on identity have been carried out by Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña. In their performance *The Couple in the Cage* (1993), they explored identity from three angles: ethnic identity, colonialism, and the anthropological gaze. Another type of identity process – grotesque corporeality, fragmented identities, bodies in becoming – has been examined in the performative works of Marlene Monteiro Freitas. Research grounded in the theme of identity can also be found in several doctoral projects at the Academy of Creative and Performing Arts (ACPA), Leiden University, Netherlands, as well as in the “Artistic Research” program at Stockholm University of the Arts, Sweden, where numerous autobiographical and performative projects have been developed.

⁴ The concept of the artist-as-laboratory – a performer who becomes simultaneously subject, object, and method – was introduced into artistic research by Marina Abramović. The body, perceived as both limit and psychophysical laboratory, has generated investigations into physical endurance, presence, and the human condition. Artistic landmarks in this direction remain the works *Rhythm 0* (1974), in which the artist’s body became a working material and the audience was given the freedom to act upon it, and *The Artist Is Present* (2010), a research into presence, relationality, and the vulnerability of the body within performative interaction.

⁵ Lisa Feldman Barrett, *Cum iau naștere emoțiile. Viața secretă a creierului*, Editura ASCR, București, 2018

by the brain through the combination of internal experiences (such as bodily sensations) with external stimuli, learned concepts, and individual interpretation. In the performance developed within this artistic laboratory, the role of the doctor was assigned to AI, challenging the actresses to explore new modes of relating and new models of scenic presence. The coexistence of the organic and the technological required a reconciliation of traditional acting techniques in order to trigger a process of co-creation with the AI⁶. In this case, the emphasis no longer fell on the final product, but on the process that generated it. A defining characteristic of artistic research derives precisely from its focus on the process as a primary object of study. Insufficiently explored in the Romanian context, this research direction aligns with contemporary international approaches such as postdramatic acting, interpretive fluidity, and embodied cognition.

As indicated in the title of this study, the project was conceived as a staged interdisciplinary laboratory, following the method of practice-based research, wherein knowledge was generated through the creation of a prototype performance and the critical analysis of the process. The chosen methodology included a case study of the *Persona* screenplay, filmic and bibliographic documentation on Bergman's aesthetics, comparative analysis between film and theatre, the semiotics of silence versus verbal expression, and the contrasting individualities of the two actresses. Additionally, the research employed instruments such as observational methods applied to the acting laboratory, ongoing feedback from all project team members, and a step-by-step analysis of the process. Equally significant was the maintenance of a reflective work journal, which served as an efficient research tool and forms one of the bases of the present article.

Conducted within the National University of Arts "George Enescu" in Iași and presented as a final result at the International Center for Contemporary Art – Baia Turcească, the project unfolded in four major stages. The first consisted of documenting and creating the script (including translation from English). The second stage comprised reading rehearsals and conceptual brainstorming. The construction of the performance during rehearsals and the development of the visual design defined the third stage. Everything culminated in the public presentation of the resulting performance, as well as in the dissemination of the outcomes.

⁶ A relevant example of practice-based research in the relational direction of body-technology (somatic practices) is the artistic project *Closer: Performance, Technologies, Phenomenology* developed by Susan Kozel.

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The novelty of the project rested on two major directions. First, the transfer of characters without causing narrative discontinuity. Initially regarded as a radical proposal, this working method was used only during the rehearsal phase and involved the instantaneous switching of roles between the two actresses during laboratory sessions. For the continuation of the process into the performances, a less risky solution was adopted – assigning roles prior to each show. The aim of character transfer during rehearsals was to avoid altering the rhythm, tension, or interpretive clarity of the performance, regardless of timing or the contrast between the actresses' expressive intensities. Later, the decision to fix the roles before each performance ensured that both actresses remained in a state of productive creative tension. We consider that this technique directly challenges traditional models of character construction and simultaneously invites a reevaluation of the presumed unity between actor and role. Initially controlled by the director, the transfer eventually became spontaneous and free in the later rehearsal stages, allowing us to examine acting mechanisms such as rapid cognitive adaptation, instantaneous emotional reorientation, reconfiguration of corporeality⁷, and the development of performative memory. This element of randomness in role transfer created intense processes of self-knowledge in the actresses. Investigating cognitive and practical acting mechanisms within this niche approach may, over time, lead to a clear and efficient method for entering and exiting character for actors required to assume multiple roles within the same production.

The second research direction involved integrating cinematic aesthetics into theatrical space. The performance retained a cinematic atmosphere, but one created through theatrical means, exploring light, video, and sound design as agents of character identity. This research layer aligns with contemporary debates on the increasingly pronounced relationship between film and theatre and the hybrid forms that emerge from this interaction.⁸

⁷ A form of bodily reconfiguration was also proposed by Yvonne Rainer through her “No Manifesto,” which focused on the deconstruction of performative corporeality. The rejection of virtuosity and the use of the “everyday” body were applied in representative works such as *Trio A* (1966), where the dancer's body functioned as a mechanical, non-spectacular entity, and *This Is the Story of a Woman Who...*, in which movement took on autobiographical accents and the body became a political instrument; https://www.answers.com/performing-arts-ec/What_was_Yvonne_Rainer%27s_NO_Manifesto; date of access: november 13, 2025

⁸ <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/pub/film/issue/89072/1520455>; date of access: november 14, 2025

The four phases of the laboratory functioned both as an artistic process and as a research tool. From the very stage of translating the film script and documenting, new analytical premises began to take shape. Text readings and discussions clarified the stakes intuited in the first stage, as well as the types of relationships between characters and the potential zones of identity transfer. The stage of constructing the scenic universe required visual structuring and the testing of interactions between the actors' bodies and objects, space, and light – an essential aspect in relation to Bergmanian aesthetics. The rehearsals and controlled transfers unfolded in the proximity of a virtual entity, a “big brother” type identity created with the help of Artificial Intelligence. This allowed us to investigate blockages, emotional transformations, and the emergence of a technique centred on the “affective leap” of the two actresses. The constant feedback offered by the research team served as a reflective tool for calibrating the creative process.

Although “*Persona by Ingmar Bergman. An Applied Inquiry into Actorly Processuality*” proposed, in our perspective, an innovative and fertile theatrical laboratory, certain methodological and conceptual limitations had to be assumed by the artists involved, in order to preserve scientific rigor and to ground potential future developments. Our investigation focused on a single text (dramaturgy generated by adapting a film script) and on a small cast (two actresses). This offered the advantage of a concentrated and intense practical undertaking. At the same time, it limited the possibility of generalizing the findings to projects with larger casts, non-psychological dramaturgies, theatrical contexts with different aesthetics, or acting models outside the Western sphere.

Starting from Bergman's *Persona*, which places at the centre of the characters' affective universe the paradigm of *being exposed through the Other*⁹, our laboratory proposed a step-by-step probing of self-identity, mirrored through the encounter with the Other, in order to achieve instantaneous role transfer between actors. It thus became clear that character transfer functions exemplarily within Bergmanian aesthetics, but its efficiency in other paradigms requires further testing. Consequently, practice-based research can produce emergent knowledge, but it is strongly context-dependent (space, collaborators, resources) and cannot guarantee full replicability, since creative processes vary from project to project. Moreover, this method may be affected by the inevitable subjectivity of the performer. A *metadiscipline of self-*

⁹ Ingmar Bergman, *Imagini. Viața mea în film*, Colecția „Yorick”, traducere de Ioana Ghișa, Editura Nemira, București, 2022, pp. 55-61

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*relation*¹⁰ is needed, a calibrated objectivity reached either through distancing or through the conscious acceptance of other researchers' perspectives. Self-reflexivity marked by subjective limitations does not invalidate the project, but indicates the need for further iterations in distinct contexts to consolidate its conclusions.

Working with two actresses capable of alternating roles instantaneously required extensive rehearsal time and demanded high emotional and physical availability from them. The actresses' professional experience eliminated the risk of the transfer becoming mechanical or superficial. Despite the fact that repeated role switching generated an innovative scenic discourse, we anticipated several risks during the project's debates. The first risk concerned the possibility that the audience might not manage to follow the narrative thread, the development of the characters, or their evolving relationships. Another concern was that the performance might be perceived as excessively conceptual. To avoid potential cognitive overload, we had to carefully manage the balance between experimentation and comprehensibility. We therefore decided not to employ the role-transfer technique during public performances, as previously noted.

In any case, the technique proposed in our research transformed the actresses into performers, through identity flexibility and bodily availability. This blending of distinctions between actor and performer brought new layers of understanding to the concept of "persona," from three different perspectives. First, with the disappearance of the idea of representing an Other, the two performers integrated the textual material organically, without interpretative intention or, rather, without actorly over-interpretation. Second, the fiction-building typical of the actor's art was replaced by the simple materialization characteristic of performance art. Third, the actresses no longer communicated the story; they became agents of communicating their own lived experience.

We consider it important to present several conceptual references on "persona," as collected and used from the documentation phase onward. The term originates from Latin and initially referred to the theatrical mask worn by actors in Greco-Roman theatre, an instrument with aesthetic, ritual, and acoustic functions.

¹⁰ The performer's relation to the self has an equivalent in autobiographical art, with its practice-based examples in theatre: the projects of Tim Etchells and Forced Entertainment (works in which performers use their real identity as dramaturgical material), Spalding Gray's *Swimming to Cambodia* (a series of autobiographical monologues functioning as research into his own performative identity) and Rimini Protokoll with their technique of performative documentary (the use of non-actors, "experts of everyday life," whose bodies and biographies become objects of scenic inquiry).

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Thus, from the beginning, the term integrated two fundamental ideas: that of a mask functioning as a constructed identity¹¹, and that of a mediator between the individual and others. It was only in the twentieth century that Carl Gustav Jung systematically theorized the concept. According to Jung's definition, the "persona" is the social aspect of the self, the psychological mask through which the individual presents himself to the world. It represents the assumed social roles, the adaptive behaviours, and the filter through which identity passes in order to be accepted by society. Its main functions, from a Jungian perspective, are an adaptive one (enabling functioning in social contexts) and a protective one (safeguarding the authentic self from excessive exposure). At the same time, Jung acknowledges certain risks associated with over-reliance on the "persona." On the one hand, its overuse may lead to a loss of contact with the deeper self; on the other, the rigidification of roles may generate emotional and creative blockages.

In performance art, "persona" is understood as performatively constructed identity – a living fiction, a process rather than a final product – and sometimes it may paradoxically overlap the artist and the role. Performers such as Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, or Orlan have used "persona" to destabilize identity conventions. In cultural and media studies, the concept is essential in analysing contemporary identity. The "digital persona" is represented by any online avatar, social profile, or media identity. It is no longer merely a mask, but a curatorial product of the individual. The concept is also central in personal branding, where artists and influencers consciously manage public identity through narrative and aesthetic construction.

As a space of hybridization, "persona" allows the exploration of key questions: Where does the individual end and the character begin? Which parts of ourselves become visible or invisible in performative acts? How do we construct artistic identities consciously and reflexively? In practice-based research, it becomes a methodological tool, enabling us within the laboratory to explore the creative self of the performers and to establish systemic boundaries between the real and the fictional. Our object of study – the theatrical script adapted from Bergman's film *Persona* – thus received precisely the analytical filter that its title suggests. The actresses' identity transformations, navigating the relationship between body-role-context¹² and

¹¹ Not only the character, but the artistic projection of the actor themselves – that hybrid between personal identity and fictional convention.

¹² The body as a therapeutic instrument and generator of knowledge was the primary focus of Anna Halprin's research in postmodern dance. Her exploration of the body as a living document – connected to health, trauma, and community – generated projects such as *Movement Rituals* (a system for

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negotiating between the biographical and the aesthetic, took the form of an identity experiment. The initial dramaturgical vehicle, the adapted script, became in our project a scenic materialization of an idea or social issue.

The project “*Persona by Ingmar Bergman. An Applied Inquiry into Actorly Processuality*” represents a robust example of practice-based research, investigating a highly relevant acting problem: how to perform an instantaneous character transfer without losing scenic coherence. Through its interdisciplinary nature, methodological innovation, and pedagogical potential, we believe that this initiative contributes to the development of artistic research in Romania and introduces a replicable model for future scenic investigation projects. It is not only an artistic research endeavour, but also a valuable pedagogical tool for actor training in a continuously changing theatrical landscape. Developing the ability to shift rapidly between acting registers – achieving character transfer without dramatic pause – trains psychological flexibility, instant emotional adaptation, bodily reactivity, and real-time identity reconstruction. These competencies are essential, in our view, for postdramatic theatre and for productions with reduced casts.

The actresses involved in the project had to do more than “perform” – they had to understand structurally the function of each line, the position of scenes within the general architecture, and the trajectories of meaning within the “Bergmanian double consciousness” (character-reflection)¹³. In this way, they enhanced their capacity to participate in the dramaturgy of the theatrical laboratory, moving beyond mere interpretation or execution of directorial indications. The tools developed in this research project represent forms of consolidating the actor’s dramaturgical intelligence. Actorly metacognition, developed through role alternation, also manifested at the level of becoming aware of internal mechanisms. Self-observation, real-time process analysis, and the capacity for distancing and re-engagement represent competencies insufficiently cultivated in traditional pedagogies, yet highly relevant in artistic research.

One of the authentic outcomes of our theatrical laboratory was the awareness of vulnerability and its management as a professional resource. The project confronted

investigating bodily potential) and the *RSVP Cycles* (a method of performative documentation that integrates the personal and social life of performers).

¹³ The concept of “double consciousness” (or “the splitting of consciousness”) in Ingmar Bergman’s cinema refers to a profound psychological and existential theme, explored through the inner conflicts of his characters, who are often haunted by guilt, wavering faith and the relativity of identity.

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the actresses with the risk of error, with emotional instabilities, and with the “wound” of total performative exposure. Integrated into the educational process, such risks – when correctly managed – can help actor-students develop a work ethic grounded in responsibility, solidarity, and resilience, essential values in training new generations of artists.

The exploration of identity transfers generated a fertile paradigm of scenic relationality, where the actor-partner relationship simultaneously acquired dimensions of mirroring, contrast, and potential substitution. Regarding the actor-audience relationship, under the conditions of a dynamic double casting (varying from one performance to another), we can affirm that the second element of the binomial – the audience – becomes a witness to the actor’s “internal mechanisms,” a type of pedagogical transparency rarely encountered in traditional educational formats. Thus, an aesthetics of assumed vulnerability is instituted. The project’s relevance from a university perspective lies in the proposed laboratory model, which can serve as a foundation for introducing artistic research into master’s curricula in the performing arts. A hybrid pedagogy aligned with European trends could thereby be validated.

By shaping a cinematic atmosphere on the theatre stage – through internal (actorly/directorial) and external (video/light/sound design) means – and by enabling character transfer without producing ruptures in the narrative, predetermined meanings, scenic rhythm, or previously established tension, our project became an identity construction situated between the authentic and the fictional, between the inner self and the demands of the external world, between social function and artistic expression. The reproducibility of the activities and the potential for generating future research are ensured through two strategies available to the implementation team. First, we will attempt to introduce some methodological results into specialized pedagogy. In developing new tools for actor education, we will start from two seldom-debated questions in the theatre world: What techniques are required for an actor to relinquish their own character and instantaneously assume the discourse and affective load of another character during a live performance? How can we develop pedagogical tools centred on this type of process, given the unprecedented versatility of contemporary theatrical and performative concepts? Second, we aim to ensure the project’s continuity by including the resulting performance in national and international professional festival circuits. The research team intends to submit the final performance to the *Ingmar Bergman International Theatre Festival* in Stockholm and to *Stockholm Fringe Festival* (Sweden), in order to disseminate the project’s results in the director’s home country. We will also apply to future editions

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of major Romanian theatre festivals (*Sibiu International Theatre Festival*, *Arad International Festival of New Theatre*, “*Matei Vişniec*” *International Theatre Festival* in Suceava, or *Undercloud Festival* in Bucharest). In this way, we aim to ensure a meaningful international dimension for the project by disseminating its results in as many specialized events as possible.

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