

## Actor and Character from the Perspective of Uta Hagen's Method

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**Abstract:** Regardless of the type of theatre researched and practiced at the beginning of the third millennium, what remains constant is the aspiration of theatre practitioners to confront texts of the great dramaturgy capable of generating revelation and emotion and in which we find characters structured on the narrow strip between misery and ecstasy. From this perspective, the present work discusses aspects of Uta Hagen's method according to which the actor creates his own *character* through series of *transfers* from his personal experiences to the life of the character in the play. We advance the idea that Hagen's method makes the connection between K.S. Stanislavski's method and that of Eugenio Barba, respectively between the creation of the role through *affective identification* and the creation of the *score* by weaving characteristics of a mythical or contemporary figure with parts of the actor's biography.

**Keywords:** transference, perception, senses, emotion, scenic truth

It can be stated that the existence of the twenty-first century theatre is linked to scenic worlds inhabited by both archaic and contemporary myths, and that depending on the director's vision we witness different ways of intertwining concatenation and simultaneity, the presence or absence of the cause-effect equation, of the temporal and spatial changes, of the space-metaphor, of the symbolical meanings, of the coexistence of opposites, of the creation of the scenic language at the confluence between theatre and performance, of the archetypes, of the ritual forms, of the journeys into the depths of the human self. Regarding the social and political issues, the educational theatre, the reminiscence theatre, the verbatim theatre, the forum theatre are preoccupied with analyzing and putting them on stage. However, it can be noted that, even when the performance puts into discussion themes in a certain precisely outlined historical-social-political context, sometimes, the way they are treated tends to reach the dimensions of timelessness and spacelessness. Thus, in this case, many a time, the word spoken on stage is essentialized, connoted as a verb, that is, as an action. At the same time, dealing with crucial themes such as birth, death, eros, violence to which might be added the role of artificial intelligence in the life of

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the individual, the use of projections, holograms, we note here that, many times, the text of the performance is made by making use of a poetic language or a language of the image. In this sense, one can speak of an exploration and scenic transposition of a poetic corporeality or imagistic corporeality. At the same time, today, following the model of Robert Wilson, some directors are prone to conceive theatre performances that *transcend traditional genres, theatre, dance, opera, visual arts, performance art, video, film, music, opening paths for the visualization of new spaces of representation*<sup>1</sup>. However, in the New York of the 1960s, there were *countless artistic experiments that had a major influence on theatre*<sup>2</sup>. So, what could be called theatrical forms, emerging in the twenty-first century, have already a history and, we could say, even a tradition.

Undoubtedly, one of the fundamental issues of the twenty-first century theatre seems to be related to experiments with the actor's corporeality in the relationship established with the character he prepares to play. Uta Hagen's method, according to which the actor is the bearer of experiences, which on the basis of a selection can be inserted into his score, arouses the interest of today's practitioners due to the ingenious approach to the character and the dramatic text. Thus, for instance, characters from the dramaturgy of Henrik Ibsen, A.P. Chekhov, Tennessee Williams or Edward Albee require the actor to make a series of *transfers* from his personal biography to the biographies of the characters. The discovery of the character within the actor occurs through series of *substitutions from the actor's experiences and remembrances, through the use of imaginative extension of realities and inserting them in the place of the fiction in the play*<sup>3</sup>. Hagen observes that, in fact, *the basic components of the character the actor plays are somewhere within himself and that is why self-discovery is an endless process in which the actor becomes aware of the variations of his personality, of how his self-perception can change from one moment to another. There are hundreds of different people inside the individual/the actor who surface throughout every day, and the self-image changes a hundred times a day, the actor's body-mind being influenced by circumstances, by the relationship with others, by the nature of the event. In this case, the actor does not copy the behaviour of others, but*

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 1

<sup>2</sup> Ibidem, p. 2

<sup>3</sup> Uta Hagen, with Haskel Frankel, *Respect for Acting*, foreword by David Hyde Pierce, Hoboken, New Jersey, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008, pp. 34-35

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*reveals the countless facets that spring from his own interiority*<sup>4</sup>. The method proposed by Uta Hagen is a specific modality to acquire interpretative authenticity at the intersection between the actor's experiences and the character's fictional life through series of transfers.

Hagen speaks about the human condition, about the actor's incursions into the past as concrete ways of bringing back to the present situations that then had a certain meaning for him and that can present elements in common with those in the character's life. Since reconstructions are in fact recreations, since both the content and the form of the remembrance change from the moment immediately following the consummation of the experience, an appeal to an associative thinking is necessary through which the actor is given the opportunity to identify similarities between his experience and that of the character: "It is not only that we have been insufficiently trained in our understanding of the human condition to evaluate the psychological similarities between a past event in our own lives and that of the character in a play, but the fault often lies in our [...] literal mindedness, which bogs us down in a hopeless search for similar *events*, similar story lines. Now, having understood that emotional recall is supported by the inner logic of association rather than by the outer event, we should be liberated from such trappings to find instead the psychological essences that feed the imagined circumstances of any scene"<sup>5</sup>. Regardless of the interpretative technique, the transformations of the actor's self are the object of study, and the transfers he operates are concrete ways of creating the role.

At the same time, the authentic interpretation of the actor achieved through *transfer* directly addresses his perception. Thus, a first objective for the construction of the role is to sharpen the actor's senses, to reach the state of awakening, to change the perception by getting out of a state of body-vocal-mental normality. In this regard, Hagen notes: "Open your senses, no matter how painful it may be. Doing so will heighten your sensitivities, which are an integral part of the actor's talent. It will also increase your understanding of the world in which you live and may even induce compassionate actions in your daily life"<sup>6</sup>. The modification of the actor's perception therefore appears to us as a complex and necessary process in his rediscovery through the character. In this sense, we could note that we are no longer dealing with the actor-character dichotomy, because the actor is no longer defined as the one who assumes a character. The character, dramaturgically forged so as to symbolize existential

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<sup>4</sup> Uta Hagen, *A Challenge for the Actor*, New York, Scribner, 1991, pp. 55-58

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem, p. 91

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 75

realities, states out of the ordinary, is another way of naming the actor in a state of play. In this sense, Hagen asks the actor to become aware of the alteration of perception during the process of creating the role, which allows him to relate *differently* to the character, respectively to see the character within himself reflected in the mirror of the scene: “As human behavior is the raw material of any acting, understanding the concepts and processes involved in perception, understanding, and the creation of meaning is of great value to the actor. The recognition of the crucial role of the body in perception and conceptualization leads to the concepts of the embodied mind, the cognitive unconscious, and metaphorical thought”<sup>7</sup>. Only then may the actor be prepared to perfectly follow the playwright’s intention. Immersed in the organic experience of the bodily senses, the actor strives to become aware of the perceptual process that leads to self-knowledge. The deconditioning of the actor’s perceptions is a necessary datum in the experiential transfer.

Here we advance the idea that Hagen’s method might make the connection between Stanislavski’s theatrical thinking and that of Barba, respectively between the creation of the role through identification with the character’s life, imaginative expansions through *what if*, the living of an authentic experience (Stanislavski) and the creation of the score by weaving characteristics of a mythical or contemporary figure with parts of the actor’s biography (Barba). For Stanislavski, *if* should position itself at the beginning of any creative process, represent the driving force in the elaboration of the actor’s score, and at the same time have the function of a *lever* that would make possible the displacement from the reality as such to the fictional universe. Thus it can be seen that there is an *if* that gives an *impulse* during the creative process of generating and elaborating a theatrical act, an *if* that does not speak of facts that are in reality as such, but of facts that could be, on one condition. Thus, *if* appears as an *impulse of creation*<sup>8</sup>. For Barba, the actor does not reproduce and interpret a character, respectively he *no longer approaches a character that has an independent existence in a dramatic text, no longer tries to build it on stage, but creates it according to his reactions to a certain theme*<sup>9</sup>. In Hagen’s case, in order for the actor’s performance to be convincing, for the spectator to be penetrated by the truth of

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<sup>7</sup> Rick Kemp, *Embodied Acting. What Neuroscience Tells Us About Performance*, London and New York, Routledge, 2012, pp. 16-17

<sup>8</sup> K.S Stanislavski, *Munca actorului cu sine însuși*, traducere de Lucia Demetrius și Sonia Filip, București, ESPLA, 1955, pp. 61-64

<sup>9</sup> Diana Cozma, *Eugenio Barba and the Golden Apple. Witnessing Odin Teatret’s Rehearsals*, Foreword by Eugenio Barba, Gloucester, Choir Press, 2021, p. 17

emotions, feelings, sensations, thoughts of the actor, he transfers parts of his memories and experiences into his character: “the making of art consists of the selection of appropriate life realities to create a new canvas, to make a new living, breathing statement”<sup>10</sup>. In a way, it is as if the actor builds himself as a character from parts that he has selected from his own life because of their similarities to parts of the life of the character he plays. The actor, himself an object of study, reconstructs himself by using the montage technique on himself. Transferring the actor’s emotions and memories into the character he creates a new score/a new character that is his character. His memories, kept in the *secret drawers of the unconscious*, are activated and re-understood through the prism of the character. *The unconscious underneath does not remain inactive, but betray itself through the characteristic influences of the contents of consciousness. They produce, for example, fantasies of a specific nature or produce certain disturbances characteristic of conscious processes, which are also reducible to repressed contents. A very important source for the knowledge of unconscious contents are dreams, direct products of the activity of the unconscious. The essential in Freud’s reductive method lies in the fact that it gathers all the unconscious indications of the underneath and reconstructs through their analysis and interpretation the processes of the unconscious pulsions.*<sup>11</sup> It is a shocking image that of the woman’s body with open drawers in Salvador Dali’s painting, *The Burning Giraffe*, which, undoubtedly, is also a metaphor of the human being seen as a depository of individual and collective human experiences, of the individual and collective unconscious. Precisely in order to acquire authenticity and organicity of the interpretation, the actor investigates his own psyche, revisits traumas, subjecting his own thoughts, feelings, emotions, sensations to vivisection. It is a body whose ever-open drawers reveal affective and intellectual fragments of experiences that once aroused strong impressions; it is precisely *the reconstruction of impressions from memories that they have never been forgotten in reality, they have remained inaccessible, latent, repressed in the unconscious*<sup>12</sup>. In this respect, Hagen’s method is reminiscent of the Surrealists’ preoccupations, their dreamlike vision, free association of images, meaningful reassembly of disparate objects and the element of play; for creating a new structure or a new image or *the character of the actor and not*

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<sup>10</sup> Uta Hagen, 1991, op. cit., p. 90

<sup>11</sup> C.G. Jung, *Despre fenomenul spiritului în artă și știință*, în *Opere complete*, vol. 15, traducere din limba germană de Gabriela Danțiș, București, Editura Trei, 2003, p. 72

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Introducere în psihanaliză. Prelegeri de psihanaliză. Psihopatologia vieții cotidiene*, traducere, studiu introductiv și note de Leonard Gavriliu, București, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1980, p. 193

of the playwright, collage seems to be the right technique. At the same time, in order to build his own character, the actor would have to operate with “two forms of thinking, directed thinking and daydreaming or phantasma”<sup>13</sup>, to combine psychoanalytic and theatrical instruments, to make efforts to remember as “The remembrances that we evoke when we are awake, no matter how remote they may at first appear, are always linked in some way to our present activity”<sup>14</sup>. The series of *transfers* from the actor’s experiences to the character’s life should begin with the *origins*, and the search for similarities should be based on a series of questions, such as: *Where was I/the character born? What games could I/the character play? Which of the real playmates could be transferred to the imaginary games?* Thus, within the creative process, the actor’s work consists of “how to pursue this task of taking personal realities to put in the place of fictional concepts, how to weave them imaginatively into the circumstances of the character’s past life”<sup>15</sup>. Equally relevant are the *transferences* regarding the *relationships, the phenomenal complexity of each individual and the infinite possibilities of interaction with other human beings*: “We already know that, in our own way, we must pursue the hunt for an understanding of the human condition as diligently as philosophers, writers, playwrights and psychologists do. Although we may tremble at the hugeness of the task ahead of us in exploring the relationships between our character and those of the others in the play and in finding relevant substitutions that will allow us to identify with the character, we can achieve our goal if we undertake our explorations patiently, in separate stages”<sup>16</sup>. In the absence of *transfers*, we could note that it becomes almost impossible to weave parts of the actor’s biography with parts of the character’s biography, to select and insert temporal information.

In *A Challenge for the Actor*, Hagen proposes, from the perspective of the series of transfers operated by the actor, a detailed analysis of the character Blanche in Tennessee Williams’ play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche belongs to the category of the great *defeated* characters, under the sign of *imbalance*, on the thin edge of madness, evoking some of the great Shakespearean figures who “are often nothing more than beings lacking strength; Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most powerless of all, and if this is beauty - and no doubt she is a great beauty - it is the

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<sup>13</sup> C. G. Jung, *Simboluri ale transformării. Analiza preludiului unei schizofrenii*, vol. 5, traducere din germană de Daniela Ștefănescu, București, Editura Trei, 2016, pp. 42-43

<sup>14</sup> Henri Bergson, *The World of Dreams*, translated from the French by Wade Baskin, New York, Philosophical Library, 1958, p. 36

<sup>15</sup> Uta Hagen, 1991, op. cit., p. 64

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 262

beauty of disease, and not the supreme beauty”<sup>17</sup>. Tennessee, like Chekhov in *The Cherry Orchard*, reveals the end of an aristocratic world and the beginning of a new world, devoid of compassion, empathy, humanity, in which the individual is prone to sacrificing the other for the satisfaction of his own interests. Like Lady Macbeth, obsessed with cleanliness, purification, washing away her sins, Blanche is gripped by moments of loss of connection with reality as such and withdrawal into illusion. For her, as for Emma Bovary, both characters are *educated*<sup>18</sup>, the entry into illusion inexorably attracts death into illusion. For Blanche, reality is harsh, barbaric, violent, dirty, her behaviour showing signs of a *traumatic neurosis*<sup>19</sup>. The discrepancy between what she thought existed and what really exists in her relationship with her young husband induces the impossibility of returning to that Blanche in her who saw reality with the eyes of purity.

In her creative process, the actress who builds her character Blanche using the method of *transference* must keep awake *the five senses which are the avenues of our psychological as well as of our physical perceptions*<sup>20</sup> in order to be capable of investigating the darkness of the human psyche: “The five sensory organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue and skin) are our receptors of external stimuli. The more sensitive we are, the more intensely we respond to the stimuli that induce in us everything from spiritual ecstasy to excruciating pain – because the *physical* responses evoked by these stimuli are, of course, accompanied by *psychological* ones”<sup>21</sup>. In fact, Hagen in the period of conceiving her method had as a dialogue partner the psychologist Jacques Palaci who confirmed that it is imperative that an actor does not investigate a traumatic experience from the past from which he has not been able to take an objective distance: “Here I would like to warn you about probing into any past experience that may have traumatized you to the point of your still being unable to deal with it. I am referring to an event about which you have never spoken or wanted to speak, from which you have no objective distance. If you do probe this, you will be on dangerous ground. You will risk becoming hysterical. And hysteria is a state to

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<sup>17</sup> Edward Gordon Craig, *Despre arta teatrului*, traducere de Adina Bardaş şi Vasile V. Poenaru, Bucureşti, Fundaţia Culturală Camil Petrescu, Revista Teatrul azi (supliment) prin Editura Cheiron, 2012, p. 228

<sup>18</sup> Gustave Flaubert, *Doamna Bovary. Salammbo*, traduceri de Demostene Botez, Alexandru Hodoş, ediţie critică, studiu introductiv, note şi comentarii de Irina Mavrodin, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 1979, p. 86

<sup>19</sup> Sigmund Freud, 1980, op. cit., p. 243

<sup>20</sup> Uta Hagen, 1991, op. cit., p. 84

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 75



be avoided by the actor at all costs. It is a state in which one is flooded with truly uncontrollable emotions, in which one becomes illogical to the point of losing awareness of any contact with surrounding realities. It is of no artistic use. It is anti-art! My criterion for deciding which of my past experiences can serve me is that they must be experiences about which I have achieved a degree of objective distance by talking about them, airing them until I have understood how they affected me”<sup>22</sup>. Therefore a major role in realizing *transfers* is played by associative thinking, imaginative expansion and critical distancing.

In conclusion, along with the methods of K.S. Stanislavski and Eugenio Barba, based on rediscoveries of the actor’s self through the character/mythical or contemporary figure, there is Hagen’s method that proposes the actor creating his own character by making series of transfers from his experiences to the fictional existence of the character in a dramatic text. This way of thinking and shaping the scenic reality belongs to that actor who inserts living parts of his personal experiences into the creation.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 89



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