

The Power of Discretion – The Figure Actor

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Abstract: The central theme of the present study brings to the fore the figuration actor, seen not as the one who carries the tray or as a decorative presence within the theatrical performance, but, on the contrary, as a necessity, because, in essence, it is a stage presence with a role in supporting the stage atmosphere only through gestures and attitudes, and sometimes through short but significant lines. But theater also presupposes the emergence of a collective figuration, nothing more than a complex instrument, sometimes discreet, sometimes central, but always controlled in detail to serve the meaning of the ongoing performance. Therefore, the figuration actor, whether he evolves individually or is a component of a group, becomes an integral part of the direction, because he gives scope to the production through fluidity and expressiveness. In support of the comments and descriptions that refer to the characteristics and purpose of the figuration actor, I presented two experiences from my own artistic activity. The arguments demonstrate that alongside the main and secondary characters, there is a world of discreet, but at the same time absolutely indispensable, creative presences or entities to the theatrical performance.

Keywords: actor, figuration, theater, show, role

Introduction

Theatre is a complex art, in the context of which every detail contributes to the creation of a living, moving and credible universe. In this space of encounters, personalities such as: the playwright (sometimes), the actor, the director, the set designer, artists whose sole purpose is the theatrical performance are found. Orienting our research towards the art of the actor, without ignoring the title of the present study, we highlight the fact that the performance, in itself, does not propose only main or secondary characters, but there is a world of discrete creative presences or entities, but at the same time absolutely indispensable to the concept as a whole. The figuration actor, as we will refer to him, through his simple presence, traces the dramatic background and contributes to the creation of a well-contoured, coherent, fascinating in image and intention, defined and captivating performance. The situation we are

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THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

bringing to your attention concerns figuration captured from two angles: the presence of individual episodic roles, often lacking lines or with a reduced number of words, and the existence, within the performance, of a collective character, an ensemble composed of several individuals, also with a limiting text as scope or not involved in verbalization, but with a much more consistent visual impact.

We would like to emphasize that the contribution of the figuration characters should not be underestimated, because the role performed is precisely that of emphasizing subtleties, of making additions at certain key moments of the performance and of establishing the connection between the actions and events in progress. Therefore, the extra represents a binder between the stages of the unfolding of the acts that compose the performance, and his presence cannot be accidental. Thus, through the stage attributions that fall to him, he becomes a human decoration with a well-defined function and role.

Through the present approach, *The Power of Discretion – the Figuration Actor*, we aim to explore the definition of the term figuration actor and to demonstrate its importance and value within a performance. At the same time, we wish to highlight the need for such a presence and to launch a debate aimed at the challenges and difficulties to which an artist is subjected in the encounter with apparently anonymous alterities. Through the plea that will be presented, we will want to develop in the minds of young actors the fact that figuration is not an unimportant act that must be treated with indifference, but, on the contrary, it can constitute a challenge, a discovery of one's own interpretive qualities or a revelation of the creative work of the authentic artist.

The figure actor - a necessary presence

Researching the etymology of the word, we discover the term *figuratio* equivalent to modeling or giving shape. According to the *Theatre Dictionary* elaborated by Patrice Pavis, figuration is „The ensemble of extras, actors in secondary and silent roles, playing the anonymous crowd, the social category, the servants of the house, etc.”¹ We can say that the term assigned to a character who represents only a figuration would be translated as protagonist without specific features, a silhouette with a blurred entity, whose particularities are mentioned only in general terms. Therefore, it is an imprecise individuality, which does not possess distinct

¹ Patrice Pavis, *Dicționar de teatru*, traducere Nicoleta Popa – Blanariu și Florinela Floria, Editura FIDES, Iași, 2026, p.152;

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

characteristics and whose importance is given by the place it occupies in the unfolding of the action in which it participates.

The term extra can be an occasion for amusement or relaxation or dissatisfaction in the artist's mind, when he sees himself mentioned on the theater noticeboard in such a distribution. But, in order to further mitigate the reactions that develop within the artist, we will start in the present research from the definition of the title of extra actor, perceived as a stage presence with a role in supporting the stage atmosphere only through gestures and attitudes, and sometimes through short but significant lines. Obviously, a single actor cannot have a consistent exposure in the context of the performance, but if the extra is transposed into a collective, then the number of those who make up the group and the weight of their presence within the show can designate hierarchies. The group, also called collective character, does not appear with a sense of creative singularity, but with a value of uniqueness that sums up several entities, all acting and functioning in a single direction and with the same purpose.

Analyzing in depth the terminology of extra, which derives from figure, we can attribute to this performer the meaning of a component of the stage picture, with a role in filling the space, or of an animator with meaning. *Discreet and silent, he makes his presence* with mathematical precision, because his function is not accidental, but his responsibilities are multiple, diverse and transposed into: integration into the context of the play, respecting the time and space intended for his interpretative scores, as well as involvement in the stage story through subtle reactions to the actions in the foreground. Passers-by or those who carry the tray, as these characters are sometimes ironically called, with reference to the artists who are cast in such roles, are indispensable, because they become a lively stage universe, a setting or a living landscape, which supports the entire dramatic score. Although they are aware that they only embody silent entities, without psychological development, they know that by their simple presence they support the stage action, offering veracity to many moments with a major role in the stage narrative. So, even if the figuration does not propose an evolution of the character, with reference to participation in the dramatic conflict or with openness to a complexity of the psychology of an individuality, it becomes a pawn capable of formalizing the relationships between the characters and the logic of the actions. Therefore, we discover here a double meaning of the extra, one that arises precisely from the difference given by the apparent anonymity and the mission imposed by the conjuncture.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

By excluding verbalization, orienting ourselves towards a visual sense, we turn our attention to a direction that explores the relationship between the costume, the actor's personality and the character of the character, with an emphasis on corporeality, expressiveness and stage identity. In all this conjuncture, knowledge from the field of psychology, those that target character and temperament, are of great utility, because starting from certain fundamental traits, through techniques such as the psychological gesture developed by Michael Chekhov, the performer will find real points of support in creating otherness. When we mention the costume, we refer to some archetypes existing in a certain historical space and time, where the figuration, through the garment, nothing more than a mask of the body, contributes through the authenticity of the attire to emphasizing certain clues and traits dictated by the era, social class, origin or proposes certain absolutely indispensable landmarks for a certain stage moment. Moreover, the costume comes to life through the movements and attitudes of the actors and completes identities. Reflecting various states such as: tension, agitation, joy or fear, the costume, organically integrated into the artist's performance, contributes to creating a consistent emotional background. In the absence of words, the physicality and power of expression through the body becomes a major factor of the performance, which outlines the stage identity of the interpreted character.

If we refer to physicality, obviously, we will advance several allegations oriented towards play, improvisation, body plasticity, artistic expressiveness and mime, all of them, together, summing up instruments that complement and support each other within the artistic act. We know that the atmosphere of a play is not built only through dialogues and actions accompanied by words, but also through visual or sound elements that serve the entire story. Looking at things from this point of view, we can claim that the extras add a vital dimension to the entire atmosphere, transforming the static setting into a dynamic one that highlights the living, that is, life. „A „body – in – life” is more than a body that lives. A „body – in – life” expands the actor’s presence and the spectator’s perception.”²

The game is a fundamental element of acting creation, whether we are talking about the main, secondary or figurative roles. Through the game, one penetrates the atmosphere of the stage, and with the help of the interior monologue,

² Eugenio Barba, Nicola Savarese *Arta secretă a actorului, dicționar de antropologie teatrală*, traducere de Vlad Russo, Editura Humanitas, București, 2012, p. 24;

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

the figurative artist reacts credibly to the actions in which he participates, integrates himself into the context and transmits subtle emotions. Thus, the idea of a decorative element is overcome and he becomes a constitutive part of the story. But the game does not represent a distinct process or procedure, but is in a total subordination to the creative imagination that triggers improvisation, a procedure with the help of which a personal universe is built. In this way, the performer outlines a way of working through rhetoric of the form: who the character is, what he does in that place, where he comes from and where he is going, what relations he has with the other participants, what is the purpose for which he is in that situation... The answers are transposed through natural and coherent movements and reactions, in accordance with the state and the role he has to fulfill, favoring adaptation, integration and synchronization with the rest of the cast. Even if the space of manifestation is not vast, the extra has a much more difficult mission. He must build, repeat and control his gestures, expressions and positioning down to the finest details, because only in this way will he be credible and be able to contribute decisively to the realism and coherence of the artistic act.

In the absence of words and lines, the extra is left with only two directions: plasticity and bodily expressiveness, two tools through which the body becomes the main means of stage communication. The two elements work in balance, because movements do not aim to attract the viewer's attention at any cost, but rather to support the atmosphere and to highlight a distinct entity with a role in transmitting a meaning and authenticity; the character becoming an organic part of the stage universe. Corporal plasticity describes the way in which the actor uses his own body in the creative act: posture, gait, gesture or the rhythm of movements. Every detail of his physical presence can outline a world, can excite or can give value to a space. The symbiosis between expressiveness and bodily plasticity derives from the interiority of each artist who, in the intimate laboratory of creation, builds his otherness, then embodies it and maintains a certain evolution through a continuous interior monologue. But the veracity of an interpretation, even in the form of figuration, requires the knowledge and improvement of the capacities and abilities of expression. The practical verification of the means and principles of artistic expression existing in the specialized bibliography produces an experience derived from experimentation, which defines the entity of a creator. The techniques require being studied until they are fully assumed. Space does not allow us to detail the working instruments, because our approach has other objectives, but we recall that the study starts from the neutral body, that is, one that is medically and anatomically fit, a body with resistance to physical effort and with a certain routine that includes frequent physical activity. As

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

a research benchmark, we suggest studying: the archetypes existing in *Commedia de'll arte*; biomechanics proposed by Vsevolod Meyerhold in whose conception the priority is the precision of movement, and the body is seen as an artistic instrument; the art of living and identifying the body as an instrument of emotion, an idea found in the techniques proposed by Konstantin Stanislavski; the principles launched by Michael Chekhov with reference to the psychological gesture; Jaques Lecoq's principles regarding the neutrality of the body, improvisation and the study of forms and space as a playing partner; the theater of the sign in the vision proposed by Anne Bogart, who researches time and rhythm or improvisation in space, including developing the Viewpoints method, an improvisation technique in order to build the character with the help of the expressiveness of gestures and body movements; the dance theater researched by Pina Bausch, who considers that the two arts become one body; the poor theater, an idea developed by Jerzy Grotowski, but not with a sense of impoverishment, but oriented towards the creative actor who considers that internal transformations (emotional and psychological) are in total harmony with external ones (movements and gestures); Tadashi Suzuki with the method that bears his name, through which he emphasizes the strong integration of movement and body control of actors with a focus on the body's center of gravity; Yoshi Oida, who initiated into the mysteries of Eastern philosophy, Noh and Kabuki theater, Kyogen (the art of storytelling) and passionate about movement, form and discipline techniques, promotes the invisible actor; Viola Spolin who proposes improvisational theater, are just a few of the great visions that have stood the test of time and have imposed themselves in the performing arts.

But physicality or corporality also includes mime, a process that creates the illusion of real life only by simulating conventions; natural and credible facial reactions in accordance with the different events in which the performer participates, but without producing sounds. The means of expression maintain the same discretion and do not trigger behavioral exaggerations that would distract the audience from the main action. However, mime, even if it is under the sign of discretion, requires to be clear and performed with very good control of the body and face, because from a simple movement to a look or gesture everything must have meaning, purpose and be integrated into the context. Special attention is required regarding rhythm, synchronization with the other stage partners and with the director's instructions, everything being oriented towards supporting a credible and necessary presence in the stage construction.

The specific challenges of the figure actor

Dramatic art is a continuous challenge, because theater imposes a space of hierarchies and specializations, and actors are divided according to the importance of the roles they play or the genres they are part of, an aspect that I personally do not agree with; the pre-established labels for actors regarding the genres they can play kill creativity and limit the activity of artistic research and exploration. Referring to the artifice that aims at the weight of the scores, we encounter: *main roles*, those at the center of the plot, with ample scores and a complex evolution of the character, with weight within the narrative and with a psychology that promotes a strong emotional quantity; *secondary roles*, complementary scores, with limited lines, but with significant influence on the development of the action, because they provide information, create conflicts and support the main characters; *figuration roles*, scores devoid of dialogue and psychological development, but which, although silent, their presence is fundamental, as they enrich the space by supporting the action and providing veracity to the scenes in which they participate. We believe that this differentiation does not divide the characters into important or less relevant, but according to the characters and structures they present, they require different types of abilities such as: creativity, availability for play, emotional maturity, plasticity and bodily expressiveness, movement control, the ability to integrate into the whole and to react subtly without leaving the context...

When we say figuration, the mind generates an answer in the form of – few details, everything vague, lacking substance and many questions!

Certainties exist, because the actors' playing space is well-defined, both outside and inside. Gaston Bachelard, in his volume *The Poetics of Space*, proposes the vision according to which „The house is a body of images that give man motives or illusions of stability. We constantly reimagine its reality: to distinguish all these images would mean to say the soul of the house, would mean to develop a true psychology of the house.”³ And from here we extend our research by appealing to personal activity. We thus enter the house called the *V. I. Popa* Theater in Bârlad, which presents the show *Ciuta* by Victor Ion Popa directed by Irina Popescu – Boieru. Among the few figurations in which I was cast, three in seventeen years, is also a

³ Gaston Bachelard, *Poetica spațiului*, trad. Irina Bădescu; pref. Mircea Martin, Pitești, Editura Paralela 45, 2005, p. 48.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

maid; a character that did not appear in the script of the car, but became a component part of the director's vision, in addition to four other entities of this kind.

I only had a few entries. Passages through the stage and sometimes relationships with some characters. I received no instructions and I had no support from the director. I often wondered why this character was necessary, what was his purpose on stage and how he could contribute, by his simple presence, to the plot of the show. In the absence of any instructions, I realized that it was a kind of filler role, as we actors sometimes say. And yet I had a stage mission.



Servitoarea – Otilia Huzum și Costea Modeanu – Gruia Novac Jr. în spectacolul *Ciuta* de Victor Ion Popa, Teatrul *V. I. Popa* Bârlad.

Gaston Bachelard's house can also be the interiority of each individual, because there is a huge world outside us, but a universe inside ourselves. I started my personal study from several directions: adaptability to the era, to social status and to the director's instructions, if any, attention to the stage implications and to the relationship with the partners. Apparently, it was a simple mission, but at the same time it represented a challenge that required discipline and even high professionalism,

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

considering the stakes of the show – a tribute to the institution on the occasion of its semicentennial, an event that brought together a connoisseur audience.

The study began with a game – *I have* and *I don't have!* What do I have? The status of a maid, the costume appropriate to the character, a typical one, a neutral black color and a white apron in front, a few lines spoken backstage, a few passages through the stage, two interactions and a participation in one of the dramatic actions. What don't I have? Details about the character, characteristics or characterizations, directorial instructions, specific requirements, evolution, character and psychological profile - what kind of maid. The conclusion was quite concise and aimed at: responsibility and synchronization with the other constituent elements of the show, concentration throughout the stage appearances, adequate reactions to unforeseen changes (scene accidents or different situations) and keeping the character alive. At the same time, another mission was public recognition. Without a score and major involvement, shaping an identity that would remain in the public's mind became a challenge and even a priority.

The external world did not offer support in creating the character, an aspect that led me to look for a strong internal motivation, one that was doubled by the passion for theater; eloquent, in this sense, was Leonardo da Vinci's statement „The soul desires to cohabit with the body, because without its limbs it could neither act nor feel.”⁴ I turned to two techniques: the one proposed by Konstantin Stanislavski and that of Vsevolod Meyerhold, starting from the idea that bodily expressiveness had to be an organic consequence of emotion. Thus, the body is not just a vehicle that generates movement or choreography, but a means of expressing authentic emotion. The mission, quite difficult I might say, was to find the scenic truth, one that was appropriate to the context and that would trigger strong inner emotions in the audience. The character sheet was built on the structure of a servant who goes beyond the sphere of the submissive person, with humble or even obedient attitudes. I led the character towards a typology of the *Commedia de'll arte*, Colombina somehow. A young woman, with behavioral impudence appropriate to her age and the uneducated environment in which she grew up, but who had the advantage of knowing certain details that governed the lives of the main protagonists. Thus, we have an inner support point, which triggered my imagination and with it an infinity of states. Following Stanislavski's logic, *authentic emotions* can trigger well-defined physical

⁴ Leonardo da Vinci, *apud* Michael Cehov, *Despre tehnica artei dramatice*, curs tradus la UNATC de L. Cernasov și Geta Anghelută, București, 1980, pag. 30.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

actions, exactly one of the characteristics of the artistic behavior of the figurative actor. In the study, we started from the magical *IF*, from the *PROPOSED SITUATIONS* and from the rhetoric of *WHY I* make a certain movement. I found the answers in a logic of silence, in the interior monologue, more precisely. It justified the external actions and determined me to follow a logic of the evolution of my character. Obviously, the interior monologue was not just a simple action carried out at the level of thought speech, but was embodied in attitudes and reactions appropriate to the situations in which the maid participated. Following the logic of the technique proposed by Stanislavski, the art of living, the emotions that accompanied the interior monologue were found in the few words spoken. For example: it is known that a simple greeting, hello, can have many connotations, depending on the message that the greeter wants to convey. Thus, in accordance with Colombina's archetypal boldness, adapted to the situations imposed by the scenes in which the maid participated, the greeting highlighted both the character's traits and the key in which the stage narrative unfolded. Moreover, having *Commedia de'll arte* as a starting point, I gave the character a certain type of gait. A jerky, ostentatious one, with small and firm steps that highlighted a certain personality, that of the man who knows and sees everything. The proposed idea went in a comic direction. Each appearance triggered a good mood, even laughter. There were several rehearsals in which I tried to find the most credible forms of manifestation. I wanted the maid to have an identity. I wanted to break away from that simple passage through the stage, an anonymous and meaningless one. In the actions taken, the techniques of Meyerhold's biomechanics were useful to me. Precise movements were a priority and studied to the point of refinement, after which I felt how the body transformed into a true instrument of artistic expression. The research and joy of giving life to such a character did not last long, because sometimes we would blur the presence of colleagues who had scores, which caused a disturbance and so, I received as a director's instruction *to simply walk through the scene, as if you did not exist*. I had many moods, from revolt to indignation, from refusal to respect the director's instructions to an apparent acceptance. And so, a character with an identity became anonymous, the actor's creativity was removed and the pride of other protagonists triumphed. What remained was the tenacity to find means of artistic expression, the desire to give life to a character and the pleasure of living with him in the same body.

The second perspective is represented by collective figuration. In this sense, we draw attention to the performance *Fata Morgana*, adapted from Dumitru Solomon, an artistic project carried out with Romanians from the Serbian Banat and financed

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

by the Department for Romanians Abroad, subordinate to the Government of Romania and the Government of the Republic of Serbia, for which I signed the direction.



Spectacol *Fata morgana*, adaptare după Dumitru Solomon, trupa de teatru a românilor din Banatul Sârbesc.

The director's vision also included a prologue, out of the desire to introduce the viewer to the atmosphere of the proposed subject. The collective figuration, even if it evolved only in the prologue, had the mission of giving life to the scenic universe, thus influencing the viewer's perception of the dramatic conflict. The entire action took place in the dream state of the main character, positioned right in the center of the stage. The group of extras was an anonymous and homogeneous collective that, through its appearances, punctuated certain events preceding the unfolding of the action. The entire stage activity took place while maintaining the unity of the group; we mention that the collective character evolved in almost identical clothing and in neutral colors. Their actions were characterized by synchronicity in gestures and rhythm, as long as they formed the compact group, because the proposed vision

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

provided for a mixture between the collective and individual figuration, so that the compact entity of the group dispersed into individuals with different stage missions, in order to then regroup and continue the unary activity.

Drawing a parallel between the figuration actor and the group transformed into collective figuration, we conclude that there are no major differences. Essentially, the features, characteristics and purpose are the same, with the difference that in order to build a collective figuration, the ability to manipulate the masses into a coherent overall conception is necessary. The group does not function separately, but as a single voice with a special meaning, because it is an active element of stage expression.

The adopted working method included several stages. Thus, we started by establishing the role of figuration within the performance. More precisely, we clarified what that group should create in terms of atmosphere and visual impact. In the case of the performance *Fata Morgana*, the prologue brought to the fore the nightmare of the teacher subjected to pressures, coming from people with a powerful position in society, in order to facilitate admission to the baccalaureate exam. The construction of the movements was a systematic one, with clear paths, with rhythms that alternated depending on the actions performed by each participant, but preserving the naturalness of the bodily expression. The entire collective character had simultaneous reactions, for example by pronouncing the word baccalaureate in chorus, verbalization accompanied by identical gestures, alternating with individual ones, which respected the coherence and the central theme – the psychological abuse of the examining teacher. The logic of the facts cannot be missing the relationship of the actors with the stage space. The basic idea was to group around the teacher to indicate aggression, followed by dispersal precisely to emphasize the diversity of social categories that wanted undeserved benefits. Thus, the entire stage became a useful space covered by scenic movement. The image was concentrated in one point, which described a painting with a strong emotional impact, after which it was decomposed into precise entrances and exits, with precise and well-coordinated reactions. We should not omit the lighting effects from the decor. The stroboscope used perfectly described the dream state, with enigmas and unclear silhouettes, but, through the flashes of light, it also maintained the state of chaos produced by the existing agitation. Once the teacher woke up from his reverie, noting the existence of a nightmare, the collective figuration completed its mission.

My experience has shown me that collective figuration is a complex instrument, sometimes discreet, sometimes central, but always controlled in detail and directed towards serving the meaning of the ongoing performance. Thus, figuration,

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

whether individual or collective, becomes an integral part of the direction, as it enhances the production through fluidity and expressiveness.

Conclusion

The figure actor, whether we are referring to a single entity or to a collective figure character, is a necessity in the artistic theatrical context. Even if he has no lines and does not directly attract the audience's attention, his presence becomes indispensable for the authenticity of the show. Through his discreet, but attentive and responsible role, the figure adds depth, realism and emotion, demonstrating, if necessary, that theater is an art of details and multiple presences, which together build a living and convincing world. The fluidity of his actions, his involvement in the stage narrative and his very presence within the artistic act, demonstrate that the art of the show is not built by giving priority to the word. It cannot be privileged. It does not have an absolute value, but gains meaning through presence and movement, and sometimes loses its importance in front of the two means of visual communication.

The role of the figure artist is essential for the realism and dynamism of the performance, because without their existence the scenes would seem empty, and the atmosphere much poorer, which translates into a low emotional impact on the viewer. Through their presence, the extras contribute to filling the scenographic space, and the main characters can evolve in a believably animated context. Moreover, when we refer to the collective figure character, transposed through groups with different origins and stage missions, the artists have the responsibility of transmitting an agitation with a certain purpose, and the audience's experience will be a sensory and complete one. At the same time, they, the extras, are responsible for achieving transitions between scenes, creating rhythms and sustaining dramatic tension, and their ability to transmit emotions and states only through well-studied gestures and positioning, amplifying the message of the show, demonstrates that their state is a special one in the construction of the theater performance.

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THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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