

## Live Dissection - A Theatrical Perspective Inspired By The Work Of Aureliu Manea

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**Abstract:** For a performance to encompass an entire universe in a single gesture, it requires a meticulous dissection of all the elements—real and imaginary—that made the birth and existence of that gesture possible. Dance is the movement of the inner world, but also the movement of the surrounding air. The theater is the place where living bodies shed untruth, and the word becomes mere confession. The spectators' gazes are varied, like the gazes of the seven witnesses in Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*. We intuit a few, and we sense the many, from the stage, diluted into the single gaze of the entire hall. "To witness an experiment is to enter into secret formulas, into that poetics of new reactions, of new communication in which the formula is tested in its vitality."<sup>1</sup> - these timeless words, belonging to director Aureliu Manea, a genius of Romanian theater, guide me even today in my first attempt to create, and in the second, even harder one, to inspire young choreographers to move their hearts and minds, and ultimately, their bodies will follow. Then, in the very end, on the night of the performance, hearts, minds, and bodies will vibrate only if the Living perform on stage.

**Keywords:** choreography, theater, dance

Seven "spectators" are immortalized in Rembrandt's famous painting, *The Anatomy Lesson*. However, in reality, around 100–200 people attended the dissection performed by the surgeon Nicolaes Tulp, who, by virtue of his honorary title of *praelector anatomiae*, had the right to teach and conduct public demonstrations. The great director Aureliu Manea draws an absolutely revealing parallel between the position of the spectators in the hall where a human dissection takes place and the position of those watching a live performance, in the volume *The Energies of Performance*, referring to Jerzy Grotowski's play, *The Constant Prince*: "I saw a performance that sent shivers down my spine: *The Constant Prince*. (...) The actors entered a narrow, round enclosure, singing, shouting, and thrashing about. You were

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<sup>1</sup> Aureliu Manea, *He, the Visionary*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing House, 2000, p.12

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caught in an almost psychopathic whirlwind. You were witnessing a nightmare. (...) The architectural refinement of the performance went so far as to suggest that, in relation to the actors, the spectator was in the position of the students in Rembrandt's famous painting, *The Anatomy Lesson*.”<sup>2 1</sup>

Aureliu Manea, whom Andrei Șerban described as “the most visionary of their generation”<sup>3</sup>, (the 1963–1968 generation, IATC Bucharest, class of Radu Penciulescu and Mihai Dimiu), and Cătălina Buzoianu, who said that “he was the only director in our country whose art became mythology”<sup>4</sup>, made his debut in 1969, but life did not allow him to create as much as he would have liked and as his creative power demanded. The depth with which he approached the concept of performance, his attention to detail, for the meticulous unpacking of every segment that constitutes the creative act—whether it be playwriting, the actor's expression on stage, or the images, emotions, and ideas he wished to convey to the audience—make Aureliu Manea a unique and under-studied figure. Through the lens of his approach, which we can discern from his two books, *The Energies of Performance* and *Imaginary Performances*, from the interviews he gave, and from the testimonies of those who knew him, I understand that the creative effort requires intense study, but above all, vision. This profoundly cultural act we call research, when it becomes a profoundly human act, takes on unexpected dimensions and transcends the world of ideas. His uniquely special work is a source of inspiration for those who, perhaps, have not yet discovered what it means to truly delve into a theme or an idea and to forge one's own path based on a personal philosophy. As a choreographer, I am among those who have been deeply impressed and inspired by his vision. Both regarding his own creations and the performances that interested him and about which he wrote, always viewing them from a surprising angle. Everything is new and everything is unique, right from the start. This is how I choose to approach every project and every interaction. More often than not, what has helped me gain an authentic vision has been a distant perspective rather than a close-up one, based on the idea that the farther the object is, the clearer and more complete its image becomes. Although perfection is not what I seek, I have always believed that a detail observable only up close, if chosen as representative, can be better highlighted by shading out those that recede into the background. If, for example, through the gesture of raising a hand, I wish to convey the intention of touching with the fingertip, the foreground will not feature the finger

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<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, p.5

<sup>3</sup> Florica Ichim, *El era „vizionarul”*, Teatrul Azi, 1999

<sup>4</sup> Yorik, *Aureliu Manea, the visionary director, died on March 13*, Yorik.ro, 2014

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making contact, but rather the tenderness of the entire arm, which, in its movement toward the target, follows a cautious and careful path. If, through the gesture of resting my head on the other person's shoulder, I wish to convey the intention of being fully embraced, the focus will not be on the touch of the shoulder, but on the pleading gaze. If, through the gesture of kicking a chair, I wish to convey the anger of not being loved, the focus will not be on the violence of the gesture, but on the pain of rejection. If, through the gesture of rolling around, lost, on the floor, I want the despair to be felt, the focus will not be on the chaotic spinning of my body, but on the lack of direction.

Alexa Visarion said: "You cannot speak of Aureliu Manea, you cannot write about him without losing something emblematic of the contours of his uniqueness. Attempting to decipher him may overshadow the poetic essence of the visionary master's personality. A prophet of the art of theater, a director-poem, stellar and ritualistic, a guide through the fog of existential unknown, incandescent and subtle, Aureliu Manea was the hot, hypnotic core of a fated vocation with a dual presence: author and work, creator in creation and creation in the creator."<sup>5</sup>

Theater and dance must stir the soul by simultaneously opening up to and connecting with all the values of life. For this to happen, the very balance of the visionary creator, with all the elements that make up their own creation, must be built on their own stable ground. Leveling the inner terrain, which allows for the balance of things unfolding on its surface, requires understanding the rough patches and smoothing them out to perfection. But for this, we need eyes that look beyond what is visible. Our eyes, the eyes of creators. If our gaze penetrates beyond the tangible, the viewer will feel moved, even if, perhaps, they do not intuit or faithfully interpret the original intention. And this is so important and yet so often overlooked among artists... The desire for the message you want to convey to be understood exactly as it was intended is a desire that falls, rather, into the category of "*what you see is what you get*," and does not fit at all into the process of artistic creation. We hear it so often in rehearsals—"What will the audience understand?"—and it's a perfectly legitimate question that every creator needs to keep constantly in mind. It's just that it's not always about "what do we understand?". If that were the case, our entire lives would be dull and exceedingly predictable. This I understand, that I don't understand... And the rest is silence. There, in that silence where the effort to perceive correctly weakens, there feeling grows stronger. And for feeling, there is the artistic act, above all else. Of course, the construction of a rational intellect, whose path can be framed within a

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<sup>5</sup> Alexa Visarion, *Remembering Aureliu Manea*, Viața Românească, 2026

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valid scheme, is admirable, but the emotional impact can never be surpassed by any victory of the mind.

During the 1967–1968 season of the Sibiu State Theater, Ibsen’s *Romersholtm* was staged, directed by Aureliu Manea. He recounts that the first sensation he had upon reading Ibsen’s text was “that of color”<sup>6</sup>, a sensation evoked by the characters’ words, which became “a pictorial commentary on the setting.”<sup>7</sup> As a result of this “sensation,” the director decided that all the actors should be dressed in black, the only moment he calls a “moment of purity” being that of Pastor Rosmer’s monologue, during which the actor held a white flag between his teeth and spoke the words “so agonizing that his desire for purity became his own torture”<sup>8</sup>. Speaking of Ibsen’s characters, he said: “their words sound monstrous, and black venom flows down the walls of the rooms through the breath of their utterance.”<sup>9</sup> Manea’s conviction was that the attempt to surprise the audience through the way the subject of a well-known play is told is banal, and that one needs the maximum power of distancing oneself from the words, letting them sound “not from the sentimentality that created them, but from the states they instill in us, from the sensations they give us.”<sup>10</sup> Here is the profoundly cultural act that becomes a profoundly human one, which I mentioned earlier.

We move from ideas to sensations, from words to colors, in a perfectly justified metaphor that is conveyed to the viewer on a visual, sensory, and emotional level. But how can you learn to adopt such a broad approach, how can you gather elements so that you can develop your own philosophy, and, going further, how can you convey these elements in the teacher-student relationship, for example? What constitutes the power of the one in the position to educate, and what constitutes the most dangerous of their weaknesses? How do you learn to give, and how do you learn to receive? Can we truly imagine that a creative genius “learned the craft” from a master and then simply continued to apply it? No, of course not—the pedagogical goal is not to create geniuses, but to spur personal discovery, to guide students toward methods of intellectual and personal mobilization, and to open the mind to infinite

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<sup>6</sup> Aureliu Manea, *He, the Visionary*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing House, 2000, p.14

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem

<sup>8</sup> Aureliu Manea, *The 1967–1968 Season*, Teatrul Azi, 1999, p.23

<sup>9</sup> Aureliu Manea, *He, the Visionary*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing House, 2000, p.14

<sup>10</sup> Aureliu Manea, *The 1967–1968 Season*, Teatrul Azi, 1999, p.23

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possibilities and infinite angles of approach. The same process is necessary in refining a role, in refining a choreographic moment. For a performance capable of encompassing an entire universe in a single gesture requires a meticulous dissection of all the elements—real and imaginary—that made the birth and existence of that gesture possible. To manipulate this puppet, one needs skill, practice, malleable strings, but above all, study and knowledge of the tools. Any way to achieve this is welcome, whether it be personal study, doctoral research, or the diligent search for a truth that resonates within you through the works of those you admire, whether they are contemporaries or figures of the past.

Treating culture as a giant monolith into which one must enter and come to know all its structures takes on an organization that is not theoretical but instinctual; it is internalized through personal filters and then takes on unusual forms and places in the creative process, forming connections that we could never have foreseen.

Aureliu Manea spoke with great admiration of personalities, sometimes from different eras or fields, whom he placed side by side: “There are two directors who thrill me with their fanaticism: Jerzy Grotowski and Lucian Pintilie. I often think of them and search for the meaning of their striving.”<sup>11</sup> It turns out that mentors can be found among educators, but also among contemporaries whose art resonates within you. Just as, in my own work, I too have experienced this feeling and this calling in the presence of the great figures Cătălina Buzoianu and Gigi Căciuleanu. Sources of inspiration regarding ways of making art can be found anywhere—in reading, in visual art, in music—but especially in those who choose to elevate art to a higher plane, whether you have the honor of observing them at work or come into contact with the legacies they leave behind.

Regarding what the physical expression of an actor or dancer entails—the actual movement on stage, whether it involves translating emotions and concepts through gestures or through dance—Manea said that “any imposed physical action is a dangerous game with the idea of terror. No actor will adhere to the mandatory ritual without sacrifice.”<sup>12</sup>, an idea I endorse and incorporate into my approaches to creating performances, as well as in training students—the future choreographers. An imposed movement can be gradually adopted, it can even be felt, but then we have diminished the immense potential of the present a little and made room only for the imaginary, which has found fertile ground.

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<sup>11</sup> Aureliu Manea, *Imaginary Performances*, Dacia Publishing House, 1986, p.17

<sup>12</sup> Aureliu Manea, *He, the Visionary*, Bucharest, Coresi Publishing House, 2000, p.10

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The superficiality of our times seeks to be saved—whether declared or not—by a series of individuals from every generation, throughout history, among whom I often, and modestly, count myself. And the degree of success always depends on probing the cultivated inner strength and never on probing the lack of strength in those who seem lost in a continuous circular motion that fails to rise vertically. Learning and forgetting what has been learned for the sake of fruition—here is a nonconformist pair whose dynamics, once understood, transform straight lines into sacred geometry. I have always tried, when creating stage movement in performances or choreography, to ensure that the gesture arises naturally, that the movement is necessary, not imposed. Here, once again, lies the ability of every director or choreographer to awaken in the performer that feeling, that need which will lead to the desired expression. And here, the necessary tools are required both to describe the stage situation and situate it within a broader cultural and human context, and to awaken, through a lively dialogue, the resources the actor or choreographer needs to achieve the desired goal. It is essential to use all possible resources, including music and lighting, which, through emotion, aid the process. Manea said: “No function of the apparatus has emotion except in an action related to human situations, and then sound or light possess the emotion that the actor signifies.”<sup>3</sup> and considered the actor to be “an instrument conscious of emotion” and being in the presence of an actor during rehearsals, an opportunity to follow “the stirring path of Emotion and the control over it, of its intensification and release.”<sup>13</sup>

The ability to treat every encounter as unique, every moment as unrepeatable and an infinite source of creation is a goal to pursue moment by moment. We are not aware of our emotions in everyday life; we simply find ourselves, at the end of the day or along the way, feeling tired or satisfied or worried. The range of impressions is quite limited, and even so—or perhaps especially because of this—we no longer reflect on anything, letting night fall over day. On stage, however, any failure to convey an emotion proves to be an extremely serious matter.

Recalling the alarm sounded by Peter Brook in *The Mortal Theatre*, Manea speaks of the crisis of vitality in which theater found itself at that time, and indeed this impression deepens even today. He laments “the disappearance of innocence in the face of the act of experiencing the theatrical event”<sup>14</sup>, a sentiment we also share today, perhaps to an even greater extent. This is, however, a delicate subject, because this innocence pertains to a much broader spectrum than what the Theater School, the

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<sup>13</sup> Idem, p.11

<sup>14</sup> Idem, p.19

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Choreography School, and educators can offer. The student's inner world is already, to a certain extent, shaped by a society in which there is effectively little room left for reflection and for the identification of the artistic self. Even so, the efforts of those who guide an artist must be maximized through every possible means. "Theater is an art of mystery and poetry,"<sup>15</sup> said Manea, "and when it becomes routine, it suffocates and dies."<sup>16</sup> But routine is fueled by the lifelessness of ideas, and ideas come to life when they are rooted in a culture capable of giving birth to them and allowing them to flourish.

I constantly struggle against this danger of stagnation—both within myself and in my evolution—regarding my own approach, but also in my interactions with others, whether students, actors, or choreographers. My written works, whether books or bachelor's and doctoral theses, are addressed to actors and performers. I try in every possible way to encourage total openness toward culture, in all its forms, and toward the unique inner self of each person, toward finding one's own paths. Speaking of human behavior, Manea observed its "fixed quality." "A person is composed of gestures that have become habit. There is a stable aspect to behavior; what is unstable is rejected by society. (...) Over the course of a day, one person's gestures do not differ from another's. The differences are minimal; people resemble one another. That is at first glance. Where the artist transcends the ordinary gaze, profound and fascinating human portraits emerge. "That is why I believe that true art transcends the mere observation of human behavior,"<sup>17</sup> says Aureliu Manea, speaking of theater as a psychological reality. Finding that unrepeatable gesture can only be achieved against a backdrop of sincerity and through mental detachment from the patterns ingrained in society or in one's own life. But fear... ah, fear! We are afraid of what others will say, of what others will think if what we express can be interpreted as strange, unusual, out of place. If we hear that our mind has gone too far, that the images, feelings, and situations we've brought to the stage bear no resemblance to anything recognizable, will we take a step back? Perhaps. But who can judge what is normal and what is not, what is credible and what is not, and on the basis of what convictions? To create means, ultimately, to accept into your thoughts even those you do not recognize among your memories. But you recognize them through sensations and emotions. And you can arrange them in such a way that your artistic message—which, in the end, only you know, which need not be explained but only passed on, with the naturalness

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<sup>15</sup>Idem, p.20

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem

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of a May breeze whose origin you do not know—may touch the one who is present. For, yes, being present as a spectator is, too, an art.

For a performance to encompass an entire universe in a single gesture, it requires a meticulous dissection of all the elements—real and imaginary—that made the birth and existence of that gesture possible. Dance is the movement of the inner world, but also the movement of the surrounding air. The theater is the place where living bodies shed falsehood, and the word becomes mere confession. The spectators' gazes are different, like the gazes of the seven witnesses in *The Anatomy Lesson*. Each looks at a different detail; each thinks something different about what unfolds before their eyes. In each there is a different echo. Some we intuit, and many we feel, from the stage, diluted into the single echo of the entire hall. However, “the notion of considering theater solely from the audience’s perspective can, I believe, become a danger for creators. Experimentation means, first and foremost, an individual, passionate, and long-term search—to which you may call witnesses, but whose presence must neither interrupt nor alter the process,”<sup>18</sup> says Manea.

To be aware that while you create, everything is irreversible, that everything depends on the precision and certainty of the movement of your body and mind, that movement is equally important in all its degrees of penetration into the body of ideas, that through your gestures you reveal more or less, more superficially or more deeply, that the tools at your disposal must be impeccable and their handling careful—means being aware of what you reveal to those who watch. The performance you offer must touch, shake, move, amaze, thrill, and soothe. The Living gives birth to the Living.

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<sup>18</sup> Aureliu Manea, *Stagiunea 1967-1968, Teatrul Azi*, 1999, p.23

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