



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2020.4.123-128>

MCDSARE: 2020

International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

THE CONVENTIONAL APPROACH OF DRAMATIC SITUATIONS TO THE DISADVANTAGE OF THE ORGANIC APPROACH FROM A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

Florin Toma (a)

(a) Associate Professor, "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galati, Romania, E-mail: tomanflorin@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study aims to present some arguments that would highlight the difference in the approach of a dramatic text from a literary, conventional perspective and from an organic, violently subjective one. The analysis of drama from an acting perspective involves a set of difficulties and peculiarities resulted especially from its dual nature, because it is in the same time literature (fiction), as well as theater (action, show). The completion of a dramatic text involves, most often, its transformation into a show, but also into a processually-objective reality through the actor's creativity. The logical mechanisms typical to the acting creation process can often be inhibited by the need to exert self-control, due to a pattern of thinking extensively promoted in contemporary society, and that mostly aims success instead of encouraging an honest journey of self-discovery through theatre.

Keywords: actor; dramatic text; conventional; personal subject; fiction;

1. INTRODUCTION

If painters use the canvas and the brush as key elements to express creative ideas, actors communicate theirs through a semiotic system, as professor Ion Cojar defines it, structured in a literary form. Dramatic texts fulfil a communication function in acting, and, in fact, this sign system that expresses ideas builds the conventional framework where actors express themselves, that is the dramatic situation proposed by the playwright. The depicted character does not actually exist, but is just a potential descriptive model, conveyed through literal signs. Consequently, the actors' creation consists in developing an organic, believable behaviour, starting from a work of fiction, from a convention that would determine a positive answer to the ever-present questions: Do I understand? Do I believe?.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

«Literary texts can be analysed as literature, but, when put on stage, they suffer modifications, updates, cuts which happily alter their literary independence» (Runcan Miruna, 2005, 4). Essentially, dramatic texts are for actors nothing else but maps that guide them to the character, with many variables and different paths to take. There are many possible ways to approach it, and danger awaits at every



corner, because, “in order to become a living material system, such a system has to be created, imagined, made real” (Cojar Ion, 1998, 45), professor Cojar warns.

Making things real, bringing into being dormant potential worlds adequate to the actor’s personality stands at the basis of the creation process. By making use of tools and work methods specific to their art, actors must undertake a new identity on behalf of which to act, to make reasonable choices, but, above all, to take chances. One thing is certain: in order to succeed in such an endeavour, actors must clearly understand who they are and what is the reason behind the behaviour. However, on many occasions, actors don’t actually grasp the situation and the identity of the character, and the lines and actions executed according to the script do not trigger genuine behavioural pattern. In fact, we see the actor talking, moving and acting on behalf of the character, hiding behind fiction, betraying the principle stating that “acting is directly and strictly connected with creation, as well as with transformation. The difference between true and false in authentic actors consists of the sheer contrast between to be and not to be inside an essential process” (Darie Bogdana, 2015, 149). Conventionality actually takes the place of authentic processuality, generating theatricality, a form “deeply rooted in discourse conventions” (Runcan Miruna, 2005, 4). Dramatic texts indeed have, at their core, a potential for theatricality, and when this is approached only from the perspective of stage performance according to the dramatic concept elaborated by the playwright, the results shall be a purely conventional.

3. FINDINGS

Dramatic texts, unlike novels, are often elyptical, and less generous with the details that might easily clarify some directions related to understanding motivation, character or feelings. Starting from Umberto Eco’s idea that text is a lazy mechanism that requires readers a permanent cooperation in filling up the blanks between what is not being said and what has already been said, we could argue that dramatic texts are even lazier, given that they are available and adaptable to an entire range of languages that go beyond words.

In the beginning, during first readings, the analysis of dramatic literature takes place at a theoretical level, active imagination playing an important role in envisaging various approaches to stage situations. The aim of these work stages is to acquire a certain level of understanding on the circumstances proposed by the author. Actors work mainly at a rational level, by “interrogating” the author and questioning his/her intentions for the characters and their on-stage relations. This step is designed to prepare the field for activating the vulnerability potential of the actor, which will allow him/her to also get involved emotionally in the theatrical convention, transforming it subsequently into a processual-objective reality. As the fictional project found within the dramatic text gradually moves forward, it starts becoming a stage project, with new implications and challenges. Simply put, actors go from theory to practice.

4. DISCUSSION

Throughout all these work stages and during the journey to a new possible stage truth, actors fight with the text, as well as with theatre semiotics, but, most importantly, with their own preassumptions that limit their capacity to understand and undertake. Miruna Runcan argues that “theatre semiotics has always been (...) in the position to generate confusion, especially because the decision related to the start point remained ambiguous” (Runcan Miruna, 2005, 5). If we accept the fact that the semiotic system typical to the dramatic project follows the same confusing paradigm, due to numerous possible interpretations or paths to get to the meaning proposed by it, the actor’s work on a role involves, above all, a selection process. However, Miruna Runcan warns that “the transmission of information elaborates its own functioning systems, independent of the nature of the contents, according to quantitative and qualitative rigors” (Runcan Miruna, 2005, 6), which determines an unconscious phenomenon: the actor analyses the text in view of the number of lines and of the way it can better solve the scenes / part.

Unfortunately, this approach excludes human touch from the analysis and keeps it in a conventional area. The paradox appears, in most cases, when actors consciously try to escape theatricality, clichés and apply the principle according to which, when on stage, they do not deliver or play parts, but solve problems. Of course, the term theatricality is used in opposition to reality, paralleling

dichotomies like true vs. false, objective vs. subjective, as explained through the study of professor Nicolae Manda (Manda Nicolae, 2006, 6).

Nevertheless, sociologist Jean Duvignaud warns that “nobody escapes the show or the theatricalization of existence” (Duvignaud Jean, 1970, 15). Consequently, that stereotypical thinking is a most probable hazard, as the actor is about to embark in a journey into the unknown (part / character), in an area where he/she does not have full control and does not know how to act or react. He/she experiences a state of restlessness and agitation, generating discomfort that does not allow a clear view of reality, but only part thereof. This is how preassumptions are formed.

The actor’s mind is preoccupied with how to access an unknown territory, in the attempt to rebuild a human destiny (depicted by another creator), and repeated worries and doubts appear. “What if I don’t know how to...? What if I don’t succeed to...?” When the actor’s reason is contaminated by such uncertainties, attention drops and the focus is on the effort to identify the best set of solutions. “Transforming the unknown into something known, namely the adequate clarification of the difficulties of a problem, through which one attempts to find the similarities, the connections between a new problem and an old one” (Sălăvăstru Dorina, 2004, 119) makes the actor go beyond his/her comfort area and engage in investigation behaviors, in order to find possible solutions. Their processing aims the evaluation and use of those who better fit the previously set criteria.

Nevertheless, creative effort is, without a doubt, a cognitive challenge, and this phenomenon involves an excess of information whose meaning can be volatile, especially when acting is concerned. This can make it difficult to figure out how to decode unknown information or whether you do enough to manage it, argues Eric Zillmer, neuropsychology professor at the Drexel University of Pennsylvania, related to this cognitive process. Additional obstacles appear when actors strive to reconcile the fictional proposal with their psycho-emotional structure, in order to transform solutions found into specific behaviours or, even better, into habits.

However, this process is a long one and follows the “small steps” method, which often discourages, because it means a lot of self-discipline, and a special state where you know unknowingly, you find out to forget and discover. Still, this approach is always in contradiction with the actor’s desire for control. It is common knowledge that people need control. The study of the psychologist Kelly McGonigal shows that self-control is one of the psychological ingredients that contribute to emotional well-being, and her study (McGonigal Kelly, 2011, 288) shows that the ones who master their attention, emotions and behavior are healthier, happier, and with more satisfactory social relationships. In the same time, this makes people convinced they can shape results and events as they choose. The more we feel we have control, we experience autonomy and competence, we feel more efficient in attaining desired results, and this feeling of independence increases our well-being. Consequently, one of the qualities capable actors practice regularly is self-control.

What is the impact of the search for self-control in the acting creation process? We could say this is useful, but only to a certain degree, beyond which authentic processuality starts to be affected. If the actor is too focused on this search, chances are he/she will sabotage his/her reactivity potential, the response to unpredictable situations and his/her spontaneity.

Contemporary society encourages successful people obsessed with getting results, that have all the answers in any situation. Actors are, before all, individuals which are affected by such patterns of thinking promoted high scale in today’s society. The projection of this model is based upon the theory of success, launched by Earl Nightingale, in 1956, explained in the volume “The Strangest Secret” (Nightingale Earl, 2019, 44). He discussed the law of attraction and believes that everything that was ever achieved was initially visualised in somebody’s mind and then transposed into reality. However, as all theories, it can have multiple interpretations, and there is a misguided version of it that stresses the importance of visualizing the objectives without mentioning action or work. However, Earl Nightingale’s definition mentions that success is the progressive fulfilment of an ideal that is worth pursuing (Nightingale Earl, 2019, 44). Consequently, he does not pretend to know the recipe and does not exclude the necessity of making efforts and taking steps to achieve a goal.

Acting is not precluded from approaches related to this instant success mentality. This obviously triggers a self-evaluating mechanism where actors negotiate with the playwright the version of the part where they see themselves looking better. This is how authentic learning, necessary to reach the desired result, is often hijacked. The pressure to have control on results and solutions means, most of the times,

a shallow learning process and is almost synonymous to missing the creative experience. Basically, this approach counterfeits the specific action of redefining the semantics of the semiotic system and, implicitly, of bringing it to life. The relations between the actor and the text will remain deeply rooted in convention, and the psychological path of the character will not be true, but artificially built (as the actor believes it should be).

Processuality is replaced by behavioural patterns that only comply with conventions, without a personal conviction. The actor will find many motivations for each line, arguments for each action, explanations for each gesture, but without strong conviction and personal involvement, there will be nothing but words, nothing truly surprising and real. Guy Debord explains that theatre performances “constitute the actual life model dominating at social level” (Debord Guy, 1998, 39). This involves a broader understanding of roles, especially from a psychological, human, and social point of view, according to the evolution of the terms as analysed by professor Măndea: “roles in theatre have a more restricted meaning that is subordinated to the character: the part of the text, the succession of actions and relations that belong to a character within a play and a show, sometimes associated with the narrative function (in Propp’s sense). The opening from a psychological (J. L. Moreno’s psychodrama) and social (E. Goffman) perspective has significantly broadened the meaning of this notion.” (Măndea Nicolae, 2006, 85). So, the reading of dramatic texts must be made, above all else, in view of its practical aim.

Some studies highlight the fact that the most important reading is the director’s one, because it intends to transform for the stage the proposal of the text. We agree that the director’s reading is a specialized one, given that he/she becomes “a mediator that oversees the transposing of the text into a show” (Viegnes Michel, 1999, 55), but the process of identifying the fictional world does not consist only of that. The entity that decodes this world is, in the end, the actor. This is why the analysis of the dramatic material from the viewpoint of the human subject proposed by the playwright becomes a *sine qua non* condition for the material to come to life and gain meaning. The examination must happen not only by analysing what is said about the subject, but mostly what is involved – the complete undertaking of the role at a psychosomatic level.

Beyond the information given by the playwrights, the study of the character involves a mandatory trip to the personal, intimate world of the actors. The ability to assume a conventional story (to take things personally) is a prerequisite for the faculty admission exam, clearly mentioned by lecturer Mihaela Bețiu in the Guide for Theatre Candidates: “In fact, the story must be approached sincerely, as a witness or participant to an event (this is why the exam commission requires that the text be written in first person). And if I, a young actor, understand the situation well, I believe in the reality of the story I am telling, I assume the part, then I will also have the capacity to make a *captatio benevolentiae* and to support the entire story” (Bețiu Mihaela, 2016, 83).

In fact, the previous recommendation refers to the fundamental reconfiguration of the relation with the dramatic text, through the evolution from an objective vision to a subjective one, individualized in the process of reaching out to the character. In Claude Bremond’s opinion, the character refers to “the person that intervenes in the events told in order to play (...) a part” (Bremond Claude, 1981, 173), a conceptual structure that contains two dimensions: desire and will. The character wants something, and the actor has to get it. Things are apparently simple. However, “the actor is both the creator and his/her creation; he is an actor (an individual), but also the character (whose concept, way of thinking, he / she undertook). It is difficult to establish precisely how much of this behaviour belongs to the one or the other, as they become a unity, an indecomposable totality that cannot be distracted” (Darie Bogdana, 2006, 148). Approaching drama (the fictional project) through this double nature of the artist, corroborated in its turn with an aprioric knowledge of the whole (the evolution of the character), can many times determine a superiority relation that is mostly conflicting with the character, rendering many actions and lines he/she delivers questionable. The interaction with the character from the point of view of someone who has the overall picture, knows beforehand what will happen, what obstacles will appear and how to approach them affects the assumption of the character.

The overall picture can affect the reactivity potential of the actor, its capacity to let himself / herself be genuinely surprised. He/she has the map, he/she knows the route, he/she sets a destination and begins to anticipate. This is when an essential element is omitted: personal motivation that transcends dramatic text and comes from within the actor, making the story his / hers. This is when the actor transforms from the advocate of the character (and a witness to his/her story) into the defendant, the one

inside the story, who lives it *hic et nunc*, thus exceeding the strictly factual approach of the text. “This capacity to draw the attention on myself as a storyteller and, especially, on what I have to say naturally results from other skills – the ability to create a personal subject and the one to find at least a reason why I want to tell the story” (Bețiu Mihaela, 2016, 83) and can be trained in drama school through specific tools, such as the concept. “The use of the concept in order to grasp the consequences of approaching a specific point of view, different from the actor’s, offers an extremely valuable work tool”, explains the theatre pedagogist, Mihaela Sârbu (Sîrbu Mihaela, 2013, 99).

In order to reach a better understanding of this type of conventional approach, we would like to use our personal teaching experience, recounting an episode happened while working on Sam Bobrick’s *Passengers*. In one of the scenes, two former lovers meet again in totally unusual circumstances. Following a romantic impulse, he comes back to his home town, after many years since seeing her, and saves her from a marriage of interest with a wealthy lawyer, by running away with her at the wedding. The responsibilities of a serious, long-term commitment are scaring the man again, and he gives up the romantic relations with his lover in exchange for being free. The conflict on stage is related to the following paradigm: the love story against the serious commitment. The masculine character (Boby) proposed by the author is a free spirit, with a holistic approach of life, defining himself through statement such as: “the same dreamer as always”, “I am happy like a fish in water and not a penny to my name”, “my life is my profession”, “I am not impressed by the worldly traps of society”.

One of the concepts proposed by the student playing Bobby was the following: Life is my profession, this is why I enjoy life without entering the worldly traps of society. It is important to point out that the concept complies with the statements above and is in accordance to the text and to the profile of the character. However, despite this correct assessment of the character, the concept could not liven the actor’s play and generate an authentic behaviour, because, in fact, there was no personal, intimate connection to the character, the character did not speak to the actor in any way. Bobby, with his thinking and behaviour, remained a stranger to the actor. Skimming the text maintain acting at a shallow level, in a tame area, not letting the inner world of the actor be genuinely involved in the creation process. Before we decide what it means for the character to say „Life is my profession”, it is necessary for the actor to clarify the definition of a life lived to the fullest. What would that mean and how would this unconventional life style impact the actor, what does it involve this fight with rules and conformism? How would this prioritize the people and relations of his life? These are only some of the questions one could ask that would determine the actor to make an intimate and sincere assessment of the part, in relation to his/her own life and experience. The road to the character’s truth must start from the actor’s truth. This is why a correct approach of the dramatic material, complying with the spirit of the story, cancels the instances of an authentic processuality. The simple uttering of lines that come from an external semiotic system and not from inside, originating in a necessity to say those things, maintains communication purely informative on stage, and has no chance of generating an authentic relation, but only a simulated one (as the stage requires!).

5. CONCLUSION

An authentic process means that the “dialogue (...)takes place according to all the rules of a real one: X says something (acts verbally), Y hears and processes the information, chooses what to do next according to his / her concept and interests and will act verbally and physically as a consequence. All this process shall be undertaken by the actor, who delivers the text by putting himself/herself (...) in the place of the characters, assuming the problems of the characters” (Bețiu Mihaela, 2016, 84). If the personal relation with the text is missing, when confronted with the situation where he/she must talk and act on behalf of someone else (the character), the actor will try to solve the problem schematically: he/she will approach a comical scene in a comical note, and a drama with a serious note. “The note of the text is not our concern – it was the author’s. If assumed with sincerity and coordinated in a natural story, by paying attention to processuality, text will be more than just comical, dramatic or tragic. The actor’s gifted nature will happily complete what he/she obtained through direct experimentation and experience in the field” (Bețiu Mihaela, 2016, 85).

A genuine creation process specific to acting means to approach dramatic texts from a violently subjective perspective. The text is just a pretext for the actor to use all his/her creative potential, to discover the forces that sleep inside him/her and are ready to act when on stage circumstances require it. During conflicts, the best solutions result from intuition, and this only comes in when the problem we face is real, when there are personal stakes. We mustn't forget that the best way to express identities is theatre. The ability to act is innate. As children, we discover through play our own skills and limits. Altogether, play allows us to develop internal reflexion capacities, as well as social behaviour. Amanda Gummer reminds us that, starting from childhood, by playing children "will discover their own identity (...) while exploring new ways to do things, all being influenced by their social environment (Gummer Amanda, 2016, 179). By extending Amanda Gummer's statement on acting, we would like to corroborate it with professor Ion Cojar's comment, who considered acting to be different only in degree, not in nature from the most complex stage performance.

In conclusion, play remains the only trigger that favors the practice of the capacity to personally assume a convention that establishes the communication and behaviour rules. All actors must do is enter that special state where they become reactive (and creative), connecting with all their being only to the present, abandoning all ready-made solutions discovered previously. Theatre can only happen here and now, because a true experience is unique and irrepeatable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- [1] Bețiu, Mihaela, *Ghidul candidatului la actorie [A Guide for Theatre Candidates]*, Unatc Press, Bucharest, 2017.
- [2] Bremond, Claude, *Logica povestirii [The logic of the story]*, Editura Univers, Bucharest, 1981.
- [3] Cojar, Ion, *O poetică a artei actorului [A Poetics of the Actor's Art]*, Paideia, Bucharest, 1998.
- [4] Darie, Bogdana, *Curs de arta actorului [A Course on Acting]*, Unatc Press, Bucharest, 2015.
- [5] Debord, Guy, *Societatea spectacolului [The Society of the Spectacle]*, Editura Rao, Bucharest, 2011.
- [6] Duvignaud, Jean, *Spectacle et société, du théâtre grec au happening, la fonction de l'imaginaire dans les sociétés*, Denoël/Gonthier, Paris, 1970.
- [7] Gummer, Amanda, *Joaca. Soluții distractive pentru buna dezvoltare a copiilor în primii cinci ani [Play. Fun solutions for the good development of children in the first five years]*, Editura Trei, Bucharest, 2016
- [8] Nightingale, Earl, *The Strangest Secret*, Sound Wisdom, 2019.
- [9] Manda, Nicolae, *Teatralitatea – un concept contemporan [Theatricality - a contemporary concept]*, Editura Unatc Press, Bucharest, 2006.
- [10] McGonigal, Kelly, *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It*, Avery Publishing Group, 2011.
- [11] Runcan, Miruna, *Pentru o semiotică a spectacolului teatral [For a semiotics of theatrical performance]*, Editura Dacia, Cluj Napoca, 2005.
- [12] Sălăvăstru Dorina, *Psihologia educației [The psychology of education]*, Polirom, Bucharest, 2004.
- [13] Sîrbu Mihaela, *Conceptul – instrument de lucru în dezvoltarea personajului? [The concept - a working tool in character development?]*, Revista Concept vol 7/nr 2/2013, Unatc Press, Bucharest.
- [14] Spolin, Viola, *Improvizație pentru teatru [Improvisation for theatre]*, Editura Unatc Press, Bucharest, 2008.
- [15] Stanislavski, K. S., *Munca actorului cu sine însuși [An Actor's Work on Himself]*, Nemira, Bucharest, 2013.
- [16] Viegnes, Michel, *Teatrul [Theatre]*, Bucharest, Cartea Românească, 1999.