

Cehov exercise. Eloquence of silence

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Abstract: *Pantomime is one of the fields being studied at the acting school. This paper brings forth a case study based on the play before the play, focusing on the theatrical piece ‘Three sisters’ by A. P. Cehov. The pantomime approach, from the visual perspective of this theatrical piece, the movement combined with the text, with a certain rhythm dictated by specific sounds, alongside the silence, discerning and the closeness of the word and feeling, the specific cehovian atmosphere made possible the road for students towards understanding the artistic concept. The theatrical representation of “Eloquence of silence” was born from the idea to point out the show „Three sisters” before the show actually begins.*

Keywords: *theatre, student, Cehov, silence, pantomime.*

I. The evolution of the pantomime exercise – the theatrical show

Through the many experiences that I had within the University of Arts, there is also one exercise from the dramaturgy area of A. P. Cehov; it’s an area usually covered by the studies from the second year of university, during acting courses. It is about the pantomime approach, from the visual perspective of this theatrical piece „Three sisters”.

The cehovian writing, combined with the movement, the body expression and a certain rhythm dictated by specific sounds, alongside the silence, discerning and the closeness of the word and feeling, the specific cehovian atmosphere made possible the road for students towards understanding the artistic concept. When everything that is happening on the stage is done in silence, when the show comes to life before anything else, the movements, gestures, objects, colours which further create a world that is easier perceived by the audience; it may seem that the idea relies more on the choreography than acting.

Pantomime was studied long time ago also as a course within arts universities.

The first dramatic manifestations (ludi scaenici and ludi circenses) amplified through music and words made room for a new type of shows based on verbal improvisations by making use of spontaneity. Even if the closeness towards the cehovian dramaturgy, relying on the silence before and after the word was initially a pantomime exercise in the end it transformed into a theatrical representation born from the idea to highlight “Three sisters” even before the show actually begins. The play before the play, was named for some of the student who graduated in 2008 – acting „Eloquence of silence”.

I have gathered all the play indications from the first act of the piece “Three sisters” and I noticed that before the spoken word, the silence is written first: “Olga, in a blumarine high school teacher’s uniform, always searching, either standing or walking, the children’s notebook. Masha, in a black dress, with a hat on her knees, sitting in an armchair and riding a book. Irina, in a white dress contemplating”¹.

From the rhythm, sound and colour, this is how the play before the play was born. Regarding our own exercise, the spoken word found itself next to painted gestures, exterior expressions (that start from interior impulses), images and sounds. The experiment was not focusing totally on removing the spoken words, but instead it combines the diversity of the meanings and in the same time going through the stages that define the ceremonial scene: reality – transfiguration – reflection – truth and value.

¹ A.P.Cehov, *Teatru, volumul X*, Ed. ESPLA – Cartea rusă, București 1960, pp. 285-286

The word has changed through thought. “It is a great thing to be silent, then the precision of the word is even greater”².

At the base of the visual scene of the exercise, which evolved as a show, was situated for 20 minutes the classic sound of the pendulum: „the clock strikes 12”, says A. P. Cehov exactly before the first act starts. That tic – tac, tic – tac, always equal, without hesitation, a tic – tac from an old and forgotten world, maybe a little worn out. The language, the communication through sound, was always present during the play, the same way it is present always all around us, overtaking us, up until the point it leaves us behind. After the twelve strikes, pendulum was still moving in his own czechovian rhythm, always moving, tic – tac.

At the start of the play, the silence is predominant.



II. The make of the show ‘Trei surori’ by A. P. Cehov from the pantomime perspective

This is how we find the three sisters, at the start of the play. Each sister finds herself in front of an imaginary window, suggested by the position they have: Olga, in the left corner of the stage, rests her elbows on her window (imaginary), on the right side of the stage, Irina, with her chin on her palms, she also leans on a window. Between them, Masha is looking out the window, also imaginary, with her sight lost somewhere behind the horizon (while facing the audience).

The life of cehovian sisters and their drive to start moving comes from the hidden thought of the road, of the thoughts, of the hopes and of the despair; all bearing the same name, MOSCOW.

Before this name is shouted by the youngest, the three sisters get up, each on her own time, but in the same time keeping the basic characteristics of the character written by A. P. Cehov; after they leave, retreating slowly towards the background and taking with them the chairs like some suitcases and the frame of their imaginary window.



The frame is to be painted literally on a spotless background wall thus becoming a frame. The symbol of this frame painted on with the marker on the wall, in turns by the three sisters, can be that of a window: „our senses are the windows through which we look at the

² Michaela Toniza-Iordache, George Banu, Arta Teatrului, Klaus Michael Gruber/ Fraze din repetiții, Ed. Nemira, 2004, p.511.

surrounding world, while in return they give us the first letters from our life's alphabet"³, one's image, one's painting, one's space through which spacing can be distinguished.

Soon the enigma of these frames will be revealed, presenting the hidden thought or the one that can be distinguished from the four sides painted.

It's a shout, it's a thought, from which the word Moscow is born. The thought shouted with joy by Irina, immediately followed by Masha and then Olga with different resonance. But this shout will only be heard as an eco that will be fading each time is shouted by the characters.

So, beside the pantomime elements that evolved on the stage, pronunciation makes itself present as well, the basic instrument of an actor. Pronunciation will repeat itself, allowing the viewer to accept quicker the idea proposed, and the students can give their best based on their interpretive talent; taking into consideration that short dialogs present are very short and concise.

Irina: „We should leave to Moscow, sell the house and everything we have and we leave to Moscow. This morning, since I woke up, I remembered that it is my birthday and felt happy... I remembered my childhood and ... what wonderful thoughts went through my mind...”⁴.

Olga: „I remember well that during this time ,at the beginning of may, in Moscow it's warm, everything is blooming. When I woke up in this morning I saw the sun, the light, the spring and I felt a longing to return to those beloved places!”

Masha: „on the wide field under the lash of the sea covered in gold lies an oak. When my father was alive there was always a big noise when we had birthdays. Thirty or forty officers used to come. Today there are only a few...I'm leaving...I'm sad today...I can't find my place...don't mind me. (Laughing through her tears). We'll talk later...Now I'm leaving”⁵.



This text and only this we can hear during the whole show, Eloquence of silence. Otherwise the image constructed on movement is demonstrating that in cehovian dramaturgy the silence lasts longer than dialog: “A big part of body art explored the subjectivity complexities as it was conceived in the postmodern theory. It interrogated the limits of the personal will and concepts of identity as part of the body”⁶.

III. The story of the play is told so that numerous symbols and the object's perspectivism can be observed

THE SCENOGRAPHY is composed only by three chairs. The only objects in the play are the folding chairs and after they are used for their purpose they transform in briefcases or even toys becoming in Irina's hands the image of a wooden toy horse form childhood.

³ Florin Zamfirescu, *Actorie sau magie*, Ed. Privirea, București 2003, p.101

⁴ A.P.Cehov, *Teatru*, volumul X, Ed. ESPLA – Cartea rusă, București 1960, p.289

⁵ Ibidem p.286

⁶ Paul Allain, Jean Harvie, *Ghidul Routledge de teatru și performance*, Ed. Nemira, București 2012, p.281

THE COSTUMES used by the actors are black suits specific to mimes and every character wears a piece of fabric of different colours like a simplified skirt around their waist. The colour of the characters in the play by A.P. Cehov: Olga – blumarine, Irina – white, Masha – black.

At the end of the play these pieces of fabric are bound together using Velcro and they become the symbol on the bond in time between the three sisters.

THE MAKEUP suggests that we are in the realm of no words specific to pantomime. The eyes of the characters almost become masks using makeup using the specific colours used for each character: blumarine for Olga, white for Irina, black for Masha.

It is important to note that at the end of the play the make-up is trickling on the actor's faces symbolizing the wrinkles in time and the ageing of the characters in their endless quest to go to Moscow.

The exploration of different styles of performance based on masks is diversifying the expressive abilities of the performers. The masks and the masking still bring a significant contribution to the research of the contemporary performance even if the technological progress and the recent theories have pointed us towards the mythical veneration inspired by the ancient totemic masks.

Now the clock strikes twelve, when they say your wishes come true but this moment catches the three sisters still walking, walking towards somewhere, still searching, still hoping (hopeless).

Although the three sisters grow old in the “Eloquence of silence” play they still remain young. After the clock strikes twelve it doesn't stop. While the curtain goes down you can hear the tic-tac of eternity which invites us to take part in what is beyond time and space, the silence.

The play has scenic emotion; it is not a mute film with and image playing with music in the background

IV. Conclusion

This exercise highlights and recomposes the struggle of A.P. Cehov, the characters maintain through the gesture's expressiveness and through the variety of rhythms in movement, the common world, the world decomposing, a world without a way of salvation. Each character through the artistic means brings in foreground the idea of struggling within your own limits, the banality and at the same time the hope in truth: “To Moscow, to Moscow...”, followed by...silence.

The play Eloquence of silence was invited to participate at the Artensiv Festival, 2007 edition, in the Artistic creation section, representing Faculty of Arts, Ovidius Faculty, Constanta.



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About the author

Dana Trifan Enache is lecturer at the Faculty of Arts, University Ovidius. Her scientific research is oriented towards the art of acting, stage speech arts, pantomime and improvisation on stage.

Doctoral research activity was focused on the analysis of Cekhovian play in terms of identifying action paradigms for the female characters and it resulted in the thesis: "Chekhovian character, formative-paradigmatic concept".

She is also working as an actress at the State Theatre of Constanța. Her professional experience in theater has emerged in roles as: Student in "Lesson" by E. Ionesco, directed by Michael Maniutiu; Polly in "The Roundabout" by V. Havel, directed by Peter Brook; Mariana of "Tartuffe", by Moliere, directed by Mircea Cornișteanu; Hypolita of "A Midsummer Night's Dream", by William Shakespeare, directed by Tudor Marascu; Varia of "The Cherry Orchard" by A.P. Cekhov, directed by Dan Vasile; Elisabet Proctor in "The Cenci" by A. Miller, directed by Gordon Edenstein; Banța of "Fools", Marin Sorescu, directed by Iulian Enache, Agave, of "Dionysus" adaptation texts Bacantele by Euripide, directed by Daniele Salvo (theater in rehearsal).

She flirted with the film industry, creating roles that have drawn the attention of the public in production signed by directors like Verou Mircea, Nicolae Mărgineanu, Mircea Moldovan and Andreea Rugină. She has numerous collaboration with radio and television studios.