

The imagined situation – a creative device

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Abstract: *In the context of dramatic patterns becoming more and more diverse, it is important that dramatic teaching adapts to the requirements of the artistic world in which graduates will enter. Yet, we must not lose the essential, in this age where the art of acting is more and more often found in the overlap of multiple aesthetic forms. The imagined situation is the main means for an actor to approach a piece of drama, a character, a psychological reality different from their own. Although the concept of the „imagined situation” is over a hundred years old, the way a modern actor uses it has evolved. This study seeks to prove, through concrete examples, that the imagined situation is the main device actors turn to nowadays, in the process of working on their part.*

Keywords: *situation; imagined; character; dramatic structure; Katie Mitchell; Thomas Ostermeier;*

1. Introduction

Over the past years, theatrical representations have evolved both in treatment of dramatic structures and in means used to represent them. The technological impact of the last few years has altered the way in which dramatic works are staged by contemporary directors. The presence of projections, the use of video-mapping, the use of various forms of amplification (reverberation effect on the microphone, body mics, altered voices), the use of modular sets which actors change in plain view are only a few such examples. To these we add the various new methods of treating a story. The self-referential theatrical tool where the actors are performing the play's action but also play themselves playing at the same time, where the stage convention is interrupted so that the actors can talk to the audience or offer comments on their positions, is becoming a specific way of thinking, which a large number of directors are constantly using it as a construction mechanism in their shows. On top of that, devised theater, where the text is written by a team starting from a topic on which they improvise various situations based on the actors' life stories is also entering the Romanian dramatic scene.

The art of acting must constantly adapt to all of these changes. Nowadays there is more and more talk of the total actor, capable to express various concepts / feelings with their body, to sing, to dance, to improvise freely. In this new paradigm, where acting seems at the convergence of various arts, questions like „What is specific to the art of acting?” and „What is the actor's main tool in working on a part?” are essential for today's theater teachers.

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2. Objectives

If, not long ago, by theater you would understand a play, sets, costumes, a stage, actors etc., in today's theater it may seem that the play is no longer essential (the creative team may write it based on a given topic), what we typically understood by sets (the actual representation of a space) has changed in favor of abstractions, the costume no longer necessarily suggests the character's age or personality, often being a representation of an idea or metaphor of a certain concept from the chosen play, the stage is but a framework where the creative team decides it is most propitious to display their work. The question inevitably arises: „What is the tool that today's actor then works with, in this new paradigm?”. This research does not seek to analyze whether the new dramatic trends are valid or not, if they are more valuable than the old ones. We consider our main focus point, as theater teachers, is an entirely different one: preparing the acting student for the demands of today's artistic world.

This article wishes to prove that the imagined situation involved in a work of drama (be it classical, contemporary or obtained through a live work process) is the contemporary actor's main creative instrument. Next, this article aims to outline the way in which the acting student can use the situation's requirements as quickly as possible in order to solve the tasks of the role they are working on, regardless of the context.

3. Material and methods

The main research material will consist of the various works of theater theoreticians. Another source of information will be the actual experience in working with acting students and in stage work in two positions: the actor approaching the role and the director giving the actor homework.

The quoted sources will include classical methodologies, namely the stanislavskyan system, Cojar's poetics, and then gradually move to the way these concepts are interpreted in their work by world-class directors constantly seeking innovative means of expression (Thomas Ostermeier, known for the reinterpretation of classical drama, his shows based on “Hamlet” and “Richard the IIIrd” having been presented in Romania as well, and Katie Mitchell, who uses an entirely different type of innovation in her approach of classical texts such as „Miss Julie” or „The Seagull”). The sources of information come both from already renowned thought systems and from the studies of contemporary creators, to suggest that, regardless of the phase theater is going through, there are some foundational elements that remain crucial, which we, as theater teachers, must not stray from in our path. „The art of acting, an evolutionary phenomenon – indelibly tied to the zeitgeist – cannot be without a theoretical apparatus by which the dynamic principle ensuring both «unity» in «diversity» and the permanent renewal is correctly defined, in order to eliminate eclecticism, the greatest danger represented by amateurishness in art and most of all in the pedagogy of arts. ”²

² Ion Cojar. 1998. *A poetics of the actor's art [O poetică a artei actorului]*. București: Editura Paideia, p. 4.

3.1 *The creative potential of the imagined situation*

Simplified, Stanislavsky's system, detailed in „An Actor Prepares”, presents any role an actor comes across as a set of questions that the actor answers through action. The action is generated by the tool he called „the magical if”. Each situation described by any dramatic work boils down to the question „What would you do if?”, to which the actor responds through creative action. Thus, in the situation where a role is far from their own psychology, an actor will seek to uncover, in the biography the play presents, or in the imagined one, the intelligible motivations that might lead any individual to the decisions the character makes on stage. Thus, evil characters such as Richard the IIIrd or Edmund from „King Lear” are not reduced to simple representations of a generic evil. They become catalysts of questions: „What makes Richard the IIIrd / Edmund act this way?” The first source of answers comes from the playwright's creation – the richest guide leading an actor's imagination into fertile territory, as director Thomas Ostermeier notes: “The one connecting theater to the world is the actor.”³ Where there are questions the playwright does not answer, or, if the dramatic structure is developed in a devised theater fashion (which did not exist when Stanislavsky wrote his system), the actor's imagination must fill in the blanks.

An actor's imagination can be volatile. Stanislavsky guesses that the actor might taint the creative process by imagining all sorts of unnecessary things for the role. In “Empty Space”, Peter Brook describes an actress's misguided imaginative process as she was trying to imagine she's a tree, during rehearsal. For this reason, Stanislavsky offers a number of specific questions the actor should answer in order to stimulate their fantasy, generically called “situations”: “Questions like who, when, where, what for, how, which we may ask ourselves to loosen up the imagination, help us create a clearer and clearer picture of the imagined life.”⁴

Through these simple, specific questions, an actor may create a framework to improvise in, according to a clear direction. In the paradigm Stanislavsky sets, an actor should bring on stage the reality behind the stage. The character does not only exist for the duration of the play, they have a rich interior life that the actor brings to life through action. Years later, professor Ion Cojar takes Stanislavsky's theory further. He says that action is not enough to express something. Starting from the idea that any man can be themselves but also someone else simultaneously (an idea he elaborates starting from a study of primitive peoples), professor Ion Cojar concludes that the actor's job is to materialize. “The actor is one who MATERIALIZES virtual, latent potentialities from the realm of the possible.”⁵

3.2 *The use of the imagined situation in the creative process*

In the first part of her work “The director's craft”, Katie Mitchell talks about how questions can influence the actual creative process. Although Katie Mitchell is a representative of the new wave of directors, constantly seeking new show formulas in her artistic endeavors, she

³ Thomas Ostermeier. 2016. *Theatre and fear [Teatrul și frica]*. București: Editura Nemira, p. 45.

⁴ Konstantin Sergheevici Stanislavski. 2013. *An actor's work [Munca actorului cu sine însuși]*. București Editura Nemira, p. 167.

⁵ Ion Cojar. 1998. *A poetics of the actor's art [O poetică a artei actorului]*. București: Editura Paideia, p.33 .

admits to being heavily influenced by Stanislavsky's work. Of course, she develops the simple formula proposed by the Stanislavskyan system into a complex mechanism of questioning the text.

Katie Mitchell proposes an almost mathematical method of studying the play's situations. At first, the director is asked to write on a sheet of paper the unquestionable facts of the play, starting from the questions suggested by Stanislavsky. For instance, regarding the „who?“, the director must first write facts about the characters taking part in the action. In the case of „The Seagull“ by Chekhov: Arkadina is Treplev's mother, Nina is Treplev's lover, Treplev is Sorin's nephew etc. On the other side of the same paper, various questions will be written about those participating in the action. The answers derive from series of question, the creators should never be happy with a simple answer. „I've never seen my reader but in my mind he is untrusting and unfriendly“⁶. Here are some possible questions: Who is Treplev's father? What happened to him? Why does Treplev never talk about him? All these questions should exist in a prior phase to the actual rehearsals. In the director's case, this process takes place in the pre-production phase of a project. Actors should face these questions in the reading phase, when the options are set for the characters they are acting.

4. Results and discussion

These apparently simple questions are the actor's guide throughout the entire rehearsal process. It becomes clear to us, as teachers, that it is crucial we familiarize students with the right questions. The general tendency a student actor has is to give a simple / generic answer to the question, which will not help at all in their creative process. For instance, in the case of the question „where?“, the answer will be, for most of Chekhov's works, in a room inside the house or by the lake. Still, a more detailed study of the geography of spaces proposed by Chekhov will reveal ways in which certain scenes may be performed. For instance, in „Uncle Vanya“, act IV happens in a living room. In the living room where uncle Vanya says Serebrennikov will soon tell them something. This gives all scenes urgency, as it can be deduced from the play that all characters know a gathering will take place shortly in that living room. So, „where?“ involves also what is going to happen in that space. Moreover, „where“ also involves a „where from?“. The character enters the stage, but where does he come from? If he comes from a place that caused him to relax, or to become tense, all these are aspects of the situation that the actor needs to imagine. Also, „Where?“ involves the questions „Where to?“. If the character knows they are soon to leave to a pleasant or unpleasant place, this gives them a sense of urgency or relaxation during the scene. „Where?“ often involves the presence of other people nearby. In „Uncle Vanya“ Sonia and Elena want to play the piano, but they refrain from it for fear of bothering the professor. So, it can be assumed that throughout the scene they were aware of the professor's presence in the room next door. Thus, their interaction is different, because they are both aware that an easily disturbed man is in the room right beside this one. When Sonia asks Elena if she is happy, her answer will be different if the character is aware that the man next door is her

⁶ Anton Pavlovici Cehov. 2010. *The cherry orchard; Uncle Vania; The Seagull* [Livada de vișini; Unchiul Vania; Pescărușul]. București: Editura Adevărul, p. 216.

husband. “Use the facts and questions format to collect information about everything that exists or has happened before the action of the play.”⁷

The question “When?” first involves a bodily biorhythm, specific to the time of day. Also, it involves previous action or a possible ulterior action. In the case of the example above, if the characters know something is going to happen soon, this information influences their behavior. But, above all else, in the majority of plays, “when?” involves a certain time for the stage relationships. In the case of Chekhov’s plays, a large part of the characters are stuck in a certain age. Arkadina cannot accept she is growing old, Vanya is obsessed with having ruined his life, Serebrennikov is afraid to die and yearns for the times when he was a respected professor.

The questions „why?” and „what for?” are those bringing the actor closest to the idea of the other, because they involve understanding the character’s purpose and motivation. At first, „why?” may answer simple chains of action such as: Why am I drinking water? Because I’m thirsty. But the closer we get to a character’s psychology, the more complicated the motivations become. Why does Othello kill Desdemona? Why does Treplev take his own life? The answers to these questions are intimate ones. Answering these questions makes the actor master the part, make it their own, start existing as a dual creature as Cojar suggests (they the actor and the other). Also, there is a link between motivation and purpose. Often, the purposes we choose in life are generated by something missing.

5. Conclusions

Although major change is happening in our ways of relating to the theatrical act, there are certain aspects of the acting profession transcending trends and tides. It is important that we, as theater pedagogues, are able to prepare our students for an ever shifting reality, without compromising the fundamental grounds of the profession. Still, theater pedagogy, just like the art of acting, is a time-related profession, tied to its age. It is important that we, the teachers, are connected to the current moment in theater reality.

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⁷ Katie Mitchell. 2008. *The director’s craft – A handbook for theatre*. Londra: Editura Routledge, p. 12.

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