

The influence of John Cage in contemporary theatre

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Abstract: *Contemporary theatre reality presents increasingly more hybrid forms of performance. From shows created using the devised method, to working with a playwright who studies actors' improvisations to compose a narrative structure, to the growing mix of playing styles (Brechtian, Stanislavskian), to the ever more present playing with the theatrical convention itself. In this context where classical theatre is often abandoned for hybrid forms such as performance art, respectively installation, an analysis of the origins of all these ideas, which in the Romanian theatre reality seem completely new, becomes necessary. The current work seeks to clarify through the study of the influence that the work of John Cage has had in the performative arts, a set of working principles for contemporary creators, and theatre educators of the moment.*

Keywords: *theatricality; surrealist; chaos; performativity; unrepeatable;*

Introduction

In the "Routledge Guide to Theatre and Performance," authors Paul Allan and Jen Harvie refer to John Cage as the "founder of performance art" without exaggerating his merits in any way. Although it cannot be precisely periodized; in such situations, various artistic and innovative tendencies manifest in different parts of the world, in places with diverse art schools and cultures, where people live under apparently antagonistic political directions such as those in Eastern Europe and America, it cannot be denied that the first performative acts that have been written about, and thus have remained in the public consciousness, belong to Cage's initiative. A prominent figure of the 20th century, his creations have radically influenced the way we perceive music and theater today, challenging the very essence of what we call art. This work seeks to analyze the unprecedented questions raised by his creations, in an attempt to see how the perspective on what constitutes an act of creation has fundamentally changed.

1. Influences. First discoveries.

Allan and Harvie's research suggests that Cage's explorations were strongly influenced by Marcel Duchamp, whom he also knew. The surrealist work "Fountain," created in 1917, is considered by many as the starting point of modern art. Duchamp submitted the work under the pseudonym R. Mutt to the Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, which had no selection jury, only for it to be rejected by the board, composed of various members, including Duchamp himself, who resigned following the decision. This action challenges the idea of the artist as a great creator and the artwork as a unique object. Through the concept of "ready-made," any everyday object can become a work of art in the right context, if exhibited by the artist. The artist becomes the one who frames the work and directs the viewer's gaze, blurring the line between high and low art. This shift marks a significant move from retinal art to cerebral art.

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Influenced by these ideas, during his teaching period at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, Cage "invented the prepared piano"². By placing various objects inside a piano that come into contact with the strings to alter the sound, he creates an additional effect akin to percussion sounds. This act challenges the notion that music should consist solely of pure sounds produced by a musical instrument. The prepared piano suggests that any sound produced by an artist in relation to any object declared as an instrument is, in fact, music. Beyond this, the presence of objects interacting with the strings in a piano introduces another relevant concept in Cage's explorations: that of chance. While a pianist may intend to play a specific piece, the objects will distort the sound, making the outcome not solely the result of intention. This raises the idea that only from intention and intellect will dead-born works be produced. Only chaos and unpredictability give rise to something truly unique and unrepeatable.



Fig. 1. *Prepared piano*

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prepared_piano

Another influential work is the musical piece "4'33''" from 1952. The piece consists of 4 minutes and 33 seconds during which no instrument plays, no voice is heard, nothing, and everyone listens to the silence. Obviously, the work has sparked and still sparks controversy because it questions what we define as music. In this case, the composer simply sets a time interval in which we, the spectators, focus our attention. All the sounds we hear accidentally or not during that interval, from our own breathing to distant noises from the street, or all the silence that fills our ears, is actually music. It's fascinating that in the meantime, one of the

² Paul Allan, Jen Harvie. 2012. *Routledge Guide to Theatre and Performance* [*Ghidul Routledge de teatru și performance*]. București: Editura Nemira, p. 73.

famous apps on the App Store is the 4'33" app, which always sets an interval in which users listen to the silence or the surrounding noises. Many users claim it's a disturbing experience, always different, that makes them reconsider the surrounding reality. Through the frame provided by the app, any surrounding sound becomes art because we choose to invest it with this function.



Fig. 2. 4'33" App

Source: <https://icareifyoulisten.com/2014/04/app-review-john-cages-4-33-app-for-ios/>

2. The first performance

Obviously, one cannot talk about Cage's creations without mentioning "Untitled Event", later known as "Theater Piece No. 1" held in the cafeteria of the Black Mountain College, considered by many as the turning point from theatricality to performativity. Thus, it can be considered that we are transitioning from an art of experience to one of existence, being the moment when no one tries to represent anything other than what it is, the birth moment of performance art. Firstly, Cage breaks the theatrical convention of "us" and "them," imposed by the Italian box scene. The audience is seated in the center of the cafeteria in 4 triangles oriented with their tips towards each other. All events take place around them, thus they witness an act that they complete with their presence, being integrated into the work. This results in the transition from an amorphous mass observing in the dark to the idea of the audience participating in an unrepeatable moment.

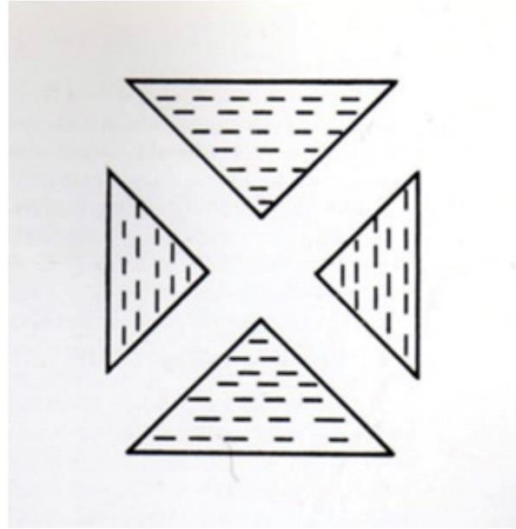


Fig. 3. Audience diagram in *Theater Piece No. 1*
Source: Personal archive

Around the performance participants, a series of events unfold, all bearing significance for today's understanding of performance art. John Cage reads a series of texts, poets perched on a ladder recite their own poems, David Tudor plays the piano, Franz Kline exhibits paintings with various light filters, and Robert Rauschenberg operates a phonograph. Amidst them dances Merce Cunningham, the renowned choreographer and Cage's partner, alongside a group of dancers. They improvise based on a dog, reportedly rabid. The introduction of an unpredictable element (in this case, the dangerous dog) serves multiple functions. Firstly, it ensures that the creative act is vibrant, irrepeatable, and surpasses a product of simple intentionality. Secondly, the spectator is completely removed from his comfort zone, being in the presence of a potentially dangerous animal.

The moment is structured by Cage solely in units of time, allowing each artist to dose their own unit of time. At the beginning of the performance, all participants received a glass. Throughout it, each did as he pleased with his respective glass. Some kept them clean, others used them as ashtrays. By the end of the performance, these were filled with water, once again conveying the idea: everything is what it truly is. It's evident that we can use a glass of water for a different purpose, but it will never cease to be a glass of water.

Another important aspect is the relationship with space and temporal references. The performance being located in a canteen, the cafeteria's cook was projected on the wall, and the projection moved simultaneously with the sunset. This fundamentally alters the optics: if I, as an artist, perform in a canteen, I do not pretend it to be something else, it remains a canteen. I do not attempt to disguise the space. The movement of the projection marks the passage of time, linking the creative act to the "now" and not to a fictitious time. Therefore, the role of art becomes that of art of the present.

3. Influences in contemporary performance art

Similar to the influence of the Dada movement on literature, performativity has fundamentally changed the way creators engage with art. While some of Cage's creations may

appear as eccentric manifestations, acts of rebellion more valuable for their underlying concept than their content, they have indeed revolutionized the tools used by directors and actors. The first principle, skillfully adopted by directors following Cage, is that of essentialization. Cage has the ability to convey a profound and complex idea through a small object (such as a glass used as an ashtray) or a brief moment (e.g., a pianist sitting at the piano without playing). His approach challenges the conventional expectations of the audience. This idea is further explored by directors like Peter Brook, who begin to treat spatial elements in a text not in a realistic, conventional manner, but by seeking deeper meaning and essence. The setting, such as a forest, is no longer about its literal representation but about conveying the essence and generating that idea simply in the viewer's mind.

After extensive exploration, for his renowned play "The Tempest," Brook chooses to represent the island with a carpet. The goal shifts from creating an illusion of the island for the audience to co-creating a unique moment with them. "The play has a certain rigor, helping you to separate what is valuable, from what is useless"³. Grotowski refers to his audience as "witnesses", emphasizing the search for an essential representation of Princess Turandot's mystery. Lucian Pintilie's decides to stage the play with dwarfs, with Turandot being the only full-sized character. "Dwarfs, an allegory to the humanity buzzing around a central mythological axis"⁴.

Another significant principle is that the text becomes a tool like any other at the director's disposal in his creation. Until that point, theatrical art was largely seen as eminently representative. The director and actors were tasked with grasping the playwright's written text in detail and conveying its meanings as closely as possible to the author's intention. This aspect later evolved. Grotowski makes cuts to the text, rewriting the Faustian myth as a series of flashbacks, Richard Schechner rewrites the ancient play "The Bacchae" into the performance text "Dionysus in 69," followed by Andrei Șerban reimagining ancient myths in the renowned La MaMa production "The Ancient Trilogy". This shift migrates from the cult of the playwright to the cult of the director. Subsequently, devised theatre emerges, blurring roles. Actors improvise on themes that concern the entire group, the playwright draws inspiration from the actors' improvisations, and the director becomes a role played by various group members in turn, with the text also emerging through documentation. A conclusive example is Joël Pommerat's production "The Reunification of the Two Koreas."

A completely distinct development direction is the exclusively performative realm. Performance art has evolved into a standalone art form, gradually distancing itself from classical theatre. Marina Abramovic is a key figure, yet numerous performer groups exist. Performance art defies a strict definition as it seeks to exist beyond clear theatrical boundaries.

Lastly, with Cage's performance, a vast system of self-referential writing emerges. For Cage, a cup is just a cup, and recalling reality enhances convention rather than diminishing it. Nowadays, self-referential construction is a common scenic technique used by directors. Actors often break the convention, engaging with the audience, drawing parallels between themselves and the characters, sharing insights into their work experience, and understanding. This approach creates a multi-layered structure within the performance, encompassing infinite levels: the story's plot, actors rehearsing the story, actors performing and occasionally disrupting the convention, and the audience engaging with one another. An example is Simon McBurney's production "The Encounter," where the actor initially interacts with the audience, recounting how he engaged

³ Peter Brook. 2012. *No secrets [Fără secrete]*. București: Editura Nemira, p. 123.

⁴ Lucian Pintilie. 2003. *Bricabrac*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 60.

with the author of the text, featuring dialogues with the novel's author, the character's story, insights from psychologists, and the actual text's narrative, all through continuous shifts and leaps between different levels.

4. Conclusion

It is evident that we cannot encompass the entire activity of a personality like Cage in such a succinct work. We can only synthesize a series of principles that have radically altered the perception of artistic expression. Over time, the two art forms (theatre and performance) have intermingled and mutually influenced each other, with John Cage being one of the pillars underlying the concept of performance art. "The differences between traditional theatre and performance have been blurred to the extent that even theatre critics have begun to write about performances."⁵

Furthermore, it becomes a paradox that over half a century since Cage's creations definitively shaped performance art, although we often use working principles derived from his artistic approach, there is no systematic study and we do not incorporate more performance elements into theatre schools. In a system where the number of positions in repertory theatres is far fewer than the number of graduates, young actors often find a place in performance art. Perhaps as theatre educators, we should prepare them for what many of them end up doing.

5. References

● Books

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⁵ RoseLee Goldberg. 2001. *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*. New York: Editura Thames and Hudson, p. 199.