

Theatre Pedagogy Between Art and Technique

Laura BILIC¹

Abstract: *In an ever-changing world, acting pedagogy can no longer remain anchored in the traditional "master-apprentice" model. Today's generations of theater students are different—raised in the digital age, shaped by the accelerated pace of information and an unprecedented emotional fragility. In this context, teachers can no longer be mere transmitters of artistic dogma but must become creators of spaces where young actors can discover their own voices. How can students find their artistic individuality in an educational system that has long emphasized conformity? In an increasingly crowded academic landscape, pedagogical methods must evolve. Acting cannot be learned mechanically; teachers must be as flexible and open to change as their students.*

Keywords: *engagement; feedback; vulnerability; individuality; exploration;*

Introduction

The education system in Romania remains, for the most part, trapped in a formal and rigid model in which success is quantified by grades and exams, and critical thinking and personal discovery are left in the background. Students follow a set path, teachers teach to strict curricula and non-formal and informal learning alternatives are rarely integrated. This creates a misperception that academic performance equates with intelligence and personal worth. But does this system cultivate authentic identities, or does it produce generations of young people who do not know their true potential?

It is, of course, more comfortable to follow a clearly signposted path than to explore alone, facing the uncertainty of your own choices. Faced with the unknown, many prefer the security of a system that dictates their steps. In this context, the essential question arises: how many students who choose acting do so out of a genuine calling and how many come here out of inertia - either because they have graduated from a high school or because they want to follow a predetermined path with no clear alternatives?

In Romania, education is still based on the idea that everyone should develop in the same way and at the same time. It completely forgets that each person has their own pace and their own pursuits. In other parts of the world, success is seen more as a personal journey, a gradual maturing. Here, on the other hand, there is still an obsession with performing quickly and reaching predetermined milestones in order to “catch up with the world”. From an early age, children are bombarded with expectations – to be the best, to choose the “safe” path, to stay within the norm. That's why when they get to college, many enter artistic fields like acting without really knowing what they're getting into. They come in with the idea that someone is going to teach them step-by-step how to become great actors, but without really taking on all the self-discovery and artistic exploration work.

Acting, unlike the other arts, doesn't offer concrete cues – there's no such thing as a portrait like in music, a color palette like in painting, or standard movements like in dance. The only tool

¹ Faculty of Theater, National University of Arts “George Enescu” Iași, laurabilic@yahoo.com.

is the actor himself: his body, his voice, his imagination, his emotions. The great theater pedagogues, from Stanislavski to Anne Bogart, have always emphasized the idea that methods are not universal recipes, but starting points for discovering a personal artistic language.

Therefore, theater pedagogy should focus on exploration, on trial and failure, on the discovery of artistic individuality, and the teacher should not be the one who offers solutions, but the one who encourages students to formulate their own questions. And this search begins, first and foremost, with the teachers themselves. Just as Antonin Artaud spoke of “a cruel theater”, a theater that shakes and confronts, the pedagogy of the actor's art must begin with an act of severe introspection on the part of the teacher. Recognizing one's own limitations, repetitive tendencies and patterns of thinking is the first step towards a lively, dynamic teaching method adapted to a generation that no longer accepts dogmas. Theater is an act of presence, of Here and Now – and its pedagogy must be the same.

1. Pedagogical Reflections

Joseph Chilton Pearce, author and researcher in the field of human development, said, “What we are teaches the child more than what we tell him, so we must be what we would like our children to become.”² With this in mind, I asked myself how I would like my students to be today, now, as I write these lines. Because the way and speed at which the world and generations change are sometimes bewildering, our image of the “ideal” student should, as much as possible, keep pace. Nostalgia is a very dangerous and unrealistic way of making comparisons. What does “what it was like in my time” matter, as long as the conditions for a young person's development have changed drastically since then?

So for me, the ideal student is, first and foremost, curious – in relation to the world, to people, to himself, to art, to the role of theater in society. Curious to experience exceptional life situations that he has never experienced and probably never will. He wants to explore and test himself: what are his limits? And society's? Then, out of the same curiosity, he pays attention to his surroundings – how does it manifest itself in everyday life? What about others? What is the difference between life and theater? What about the similarities? He is also concerned with the depths of the human being, in the same way that he observes its appearances; i.e., he does not judge, but tries to understand the motivations behind an action. In other words, he is a man who seeks to develop empathy, and empathy “is built on self-awareness; the more open we are to our own emotions, the more able we are to interpret the feelings of others,”³ as Daniel Goleman argues in his seminal work, *Emotional Intelligence*.

This is on a metaphysical level. On a physical and concrete level, the ideal student is punctual and interested in maximizing their skills and developing new ones. Therefore, curiosity and autonomy – in the sense of responsibility – should be encouraged, as well as resilience, seen as the pleasure of experimentation rather than “one's ability to return to normal after suffering a shock.” (as defined in the 2009 edition of the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language). Because in theater (and certainly not only in theater), there is no failure. All that happens to us are stages in our development and becoming.

With this profile of the ideal modern-day student in mind, we inevitably come to the question: how should the pedagogical path be constructed? I believe that there should be no pressure on the student to perform in a certain style. Or, in fact, things should unfold gradually. In

² Cf. Brené Brown. 2016. *The Power of Vulnerability*. Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing, p. 239.

³ Daniel Goleman. 2018. *Emotional Intelligence*. Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing, p. 170.

the beginning, the young actor should be left to explore as much as possible on his own, to find out what he thinks about certain ideas, how he would behave in certain situations – what he would think, what he would feel, when he would act, etc. Then, when he starts to have an artistic voice of his own, he can be given certain directions, in the sense of destinations – for example, to get from here to there, to have a certain action happen at a specific moment – but the way there, he should discover on his own. And if even this stage is successfully accomplished, he can be challenged, in the sense that his route is mapped out in detail or is distributed in a surprising way. I think the role of the teacher in theater faculty is to create a routine – and then break it. But this breaking must be done responsibly and at the student's pace.

This whole process can only take place in a space where fragility and vulnerability are not only allowed but encouraged. If, as Professor Ion Cojar said, “in theory, the art of the actor is the same for everyone; in practice, it is different for each one of us,” it means that a young person is at drama school to discover his or her artistic individuality. But “how can we let others see us for who we really are if, out of shame, we are terrified of what they might think of us?”⁴

To expose yourself is to be vulnerable, and if we as teachers become too ambitious about not showing our fragility, I’m afraid we will fail to create a safe space for our students. Do we want them to be involved? But are we? Are we looking at them as individuals? Or just as a group, as “another generation” that will pass? If we want them to have the courage to be themselves, then we should also have the courage to be vulnerable. Sure, if we let them search for their artistic personalities, we may not have exams acclaimed by their peers or ours, and we may not have a concrete semester result. Are we willing to take that risk? Are we willing to invest in a long-term outcome?

This brings us to the essential question: is theater pedagogy art or technique? All acting pedagogues are artists at heart, practicing actors or not. What do they teach? Acting as they see it – how it resonates and vibrates in them. For example, I am a psychological actor, either because that’s the way I am by nature or because that’s the way I was shaped by my teachers. I put a lot of emphasis on the psychology and the history of the character. Is that what I’m supposed to teach my students? To spend half a semester just dissecting the text, every word and nuance of it, just because that’s what I find most important and inspiring? Then what do I do with students who are less rational and more instinctual? Who can’t explain things, but feel them? And if I don’t want to be a pedagogue propagating my own artistic vision, then should I be a technical pedagogue? What does that mean? Being tough? Constantly criticizing in the hope that this will challenge students to discover and rediscover themselves? To act more like a troop commander than a human being with his own weaknesses and doubts?

In fact, instead of seeing the artistic and the technical pedagogue as opposites, perhaps it is more fruitful to talk about how these dimensions meet and support each other in the process of student formation. In my experience, every time I announce to the audience at the beginning of the exam that 90% of what they are about to see is the students’ merit, I feel that I am alive as a teacher. At that moment, it doesn’t matter whether it will be considered a “good” or “bad” act – those terms have no place in art anyway. The important thing is that it is theirs, not mine. This, for me, is a living pedagogy. One that does not separate but combines artistic freedom and technical rigor. For example, even though I give them a lot of homework – which may seem “technical” – the goal is not the exercise itself, but the chance for a revelation. We never know in which theme something is going to happen: when I asked them to find, in their scenes, moments of interweaving lines or to repeat their partner’s line, some discovered an unexpected naturalness – a feeling they can’t

⁴ Brené Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

explain in words. But they saw that without technical rehearsal – a lot of it, insistent – this “artistic naturalness” would not have emerged. They understood that there is not one without the other: the technique supports the artist, and the artist gives meaning to the technique.

Some students have a clear preference for structure, others for improvisation – but beyond these preferences, deep down, they all want the same thing: to discover themselves, to be good, to be appreciated, to be acclaimed. My role is to intuit what they prefer and give them that framework. As an actor, I prefer structure. As a teacher, I prefer improvisation. That forces me to come prepared with structure for those who need it, but also to create that space where improvisation is possible and necessary – precisely to get students out of their comfort zone, just when they’ve settled into it too well. A living pedagogy, for me, means giving them the courage to be themselves – beyond fairness, norms, or even morality. Helping them to have an opinion, a position. So, yes – maybe pedagogy is a spectrum. Between values, passion, responsibility. Between what the teacher wants and what the student expects. It’s not a dichotomy, but it’s a tension. And that’s where life happens.

2. Less method, more presence

I believe that, for now, in Romania, we still don’t fully understand that the profession of actor (artist) and that of pedagogue are two different professions. For the actor, ‘art’ lies in that artistic individuality we also expect from our students, and which, clearly, cannot be taught. If we tried to teach it, it would be like trying to fit a circle into a rectangular shape. But for a pedagogue, ‘art’ lies in their ability to guide, to be aware of the students’ “timing.” An actor works for a role, especially with themselves. A pedagogue works all the time with others.

An actor’s technique is their ability to adapt as quickly as possible, preferably, to the director’s demands, while a pedagogue’s technique is the ability to pay attention to the individual and to create a long-term plan for each student in their class. However, the main quality of both an artist and a pedagogue is involvement. And involvement does not protect either of them from vulnerability.

In pedagogy, there is the prejudice that a distant, inaccessible attitude, as well as constant critical appreciation, contribute to professional prestige, and that if you are too friendly, those around you will doubt your competence. I like to believe that a teacher’s authority does not lie in the tone of their voice or the seriousness of their expression, but in who they are as a person and in how committed they are to their work. In order to discover their artistic individuality, we must encourage students to dare at all costs – even to dare to disagree with us. There should be an exchange of ideas between the pedagogue and the student, not a relationship of the type: “Do as I say. What you say is nonsense.” Therefore, feedback – “criticism” in Romanian terms – should not be accompanied by cruelty, irony, or sarcasm. Observations about students’ work are not law, but rather a suggestion. They open a new path to explore, which the student may or may not follow, depending on their artistic individuality. Students will be much more open to what we have to say if we are ready to listen, to ask questions, and to accept that we may not fully understand the issue.

Learning depends much more on feedback than on the grades written in the register. And if education is meant to transform people, the process will probably be uncomfortable and unpredictable. We all need to have the courage to feel this discomfort as a necessary part of growth. And precisely because evolution is a process that does not initially bring pleasure, feedback must be approached from the perspective of the student’s “strengths.” In the feedback process, the “problem” is in front of us, not between teacher and disciple. The two are on the same side of the

table. Brené Brown says that “one of the biggest mistakes people make in such situations is to put on their armor. It’s easy to assume that feedback only makes the receiver feel vulnerable, but that assumption is wrong. Real engagement is always associated with uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure — for everyone involved in the feedback process.”⁵

And here, in the middle of this exposure, the true pedagogical relationship is born. Not in authority, not in superiority, but in the mutual willingness to be present in the process. The problem is not the curriculum. The curriculum is just the framework. The problem is who we are as teachers when we enter that framework. How much of ourselves is truly there? How much is routine, how much is ego, how much is real curiosity? Some come with the aura of a national theatre behind them and expect their method to be validated. Others, less visible on stage, feel obliged to compensate. But in both cases, the student risks becoming a piece in a foreign puzzle. When pedagogy becomes an appendix to artistic life — a secondary job, a financial lifeline, a place where we replicate ourselves — we lose exactly what matters most: the living relationship between two human beings searching for meaning in art.

True reform will not come from a ministry decision. It may begin with a simple gesture: staying at your colleague’s exam, listening, observing, offering an honest thought. Ideally, we could create a culture of observation. Of presence. Of constructive criticism. But that means getting out of the “this is good / this is bad” paradigm and entering a type of real pedagogical conversation: where did what you did lead? What did I see? What felt alive?

Systemic change is hard. Its slowness is frustrating. But maybe it starts with every teacher who, entering the classroom, has this question in mind: What can I do today to grow together with my students? What kind of pedagogue will I be today? One who acts, in a hurry, by reflex? Or one who searches, together with the others, for a form of truth? Of aliveness? Of presence?

3. Conclusions

The biggest risk a teacher takes when they choose to grow together with their students is that of being vulnerable. To admit that you still have things to learn means to admit that you are not perfect, that effort and discomfort are part of the journey. And yet, what teacher can afford to say “I don’t know yet, I still have things to learn” without being looked at with suspicion? But it is precisely in this vulnerability that the authenticity of a living pedagogy lies. As long as we do not accept our own fears, routines, and comfort zones, how can we pretend to understand those of others?

A culture of authentic feedback cannot exist without honesty, without a real desire to grow. If all that motivates us is the salary that pays our bills, we cannot speak of openness, but of fear. And fear paralyzes. If we want reform — even a silent one — it must start with us. Let us no longer start from the idea that the student is lazy or insolent, but treat them with trust. Let us listen, ask questions, doubt. And if more and more of us do that, maybe change will really be possible. Because if you no longer care — if you no longer see the people in front of you, if you no longer ask yourself questions after a class, if you use the same speech every time, like on a conveyor belt — then pedagogy dies. And what it truly lacks now is this fragile, human side. Real attention for the one standing in front of you. That is what I’m searching for — the art of being a pedagogue.

⁵ Brené Brown, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

4. References:

- **Books**

- Brown, Brené. 2016. *The Courage to Be Vulnerable*. Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing.
- Goleman, Daniel. 2018. *Emotional Intelligence*. Bucharest: Curtea Veche Publishing.