

The Art of Acting in Postdramatic Theater

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Abstract: *This paper examines the significant transformations in acting within postdramatic theater, emphasizing the shift from a text- and character-centered paradigm to one that foregrounds presence, physicality, and autonomous scenic composition. Drawing on Hans-Thies Lehmann's theoretical framework, this study demonstrates how contemporary theater prioritizes fragmented discourse, interdisciplinarity, and the performative experience, as opposed to traditional modes of classical narration. Within this framework, the actor is reconceptualized not merely as an interpreter but as a co-author and originator of scenic material, actively shaping meaning through embodied performance. Consequently, theatrical pedagogy must evolve to incorporate methodologies that foster autonomy, improvisational skills, and heightened corporeal awareness. While classical traditions remain relevant, they are recontextualized and supplemented by emergent practices. Postdramatic theater thus redefines both the status of the actor and their training, promoting adaptability and receptivity to innovative artistic paradigms.*

Keywords: *the art of acting; postdramatic theater; embodiment; text; improvisation; autonomy;*

Introduction

In recent years, theater productions — as well as artistic and pedagogical projects — have increasingly presented forms that, until recently, would have been difficult to conceive. Beyond innovations in scenography, multimedia integration, and other technical elements, theatrical performances over the past decade have undergone profound transformations. Contemporary theater frequently transcends classical frameworks, reflecting a shift away from theater's traditional cultural and educational functions. Instead, new aesthetic paradigms are emerging, innovative stage practices are being developed, and artistic priorities have shifted toward social and political engagement or more broadly accessible modes of entertainment. Genre-specific festivals have largely lost the thematic cohesion that once defined them, and practitioners — both within independent circuits and institutional contexts — find themselves compelled to seek differentiation through the creation of distinct niches, thereby consciously distancing themselves from established models. This evolution should not be construed as inherently negative. Rather, the present analysis refrains from critique or rejection of these developments in Romanian and international theater, offering instead a paradigmatic overview of prevailing tendencies. It aims to synthesize and critically examine the implications for theater pedagogy in adapting to these emergent conditions. Central to this inquiry is the question of the new acting paradigm: What expectations and requirements are now placed upon the actor? This study investigates how the actor, liberated from the conventional role of character interpretation, assumes the function of an agent of scenic presence, embodiment, and co-authorship in the creation of theatrical events. The aim of this research is to analyze the transformations occurring in the art of acting within the framework of postdramatic theater. This paper further investigates the impact of text decentralization and the emergence of performative composition on the redefinition of the contemporary actor's role and status. The specific objectives include identifying the main aesthetic shifts affecting acting practices,

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analyzing the relationship between physicality, presence, and stage autonomy, and exploring the pedagogical implications of these developments for theater education. Additionally, this paper seeks to contribute to the advancement of an applied methodology for actor training within this evolving theatrical paradigm.

1. Methodology

Postdramatic theater is a theatrical phenomenon with roots in the second half of the twentieth century, which emerged as a response to the established norms of modernism and postmodernism. In this context, the prefix “post” suggests a movement beyond the conventional limits and modes of performance, significantly influencing the interpretation and experience of theatrical productions. This indicates a shift toward a different level of understanding of key notions such as drama, theater, character, and text, wherein the notion of “absolute” authority has diminished in significance. Within this framework, traditional norms are not necessarily invalidated or supplanted; rather, they coexist with emerging paradigms that address diverse needs and broaden the range of perspectives and meanings. This development creates the potential for scenic art to respond with greater subtlety and sensitivity to contemporary societal challenges, which are characterized by increasingly complex social, economic, political, and identity-related crises. Such responsiveness enables a broader diversity of artistic expression that is more attuned to shifting paradigms. Rooted primarily in experimentation and aesthetic exploration, these concepts confer a redefined status upon the actor in relation to text, direction, and means of expression, thereby redefining the very nature of their craft.

Tracing the historical trajectory from Aristotle’s principle of unity in diversity within classical dramaturgy (focused on dramatic action, mimesis, and catharsis), through the ascendancy of textual supremacy in Classicism, and onto the rise of the director and directorial poetics exemplified by figures such as Meiningen, Antoine, Artaud, Stanislavski, Meyerhold, Brecht, Grotowski, Brook, and Wilson, one observes a continual evolution culminating in what is often termed the crisis of drama. Despite these changes, both actor and theater have preserved their essential identity while undergoing substantial transformation. In the Romanian theatrical context, this evolution has been more modest, yet far from insignificant. From Ion Sava, Sică Alexandrescu, and Camil Petrescu, to Penciulescu, Esrig, Ciulei, Moisescu, and Cojar, extending to Șerban, Hausvater, Purcărete, Frunză, and Buzoianu, and culminating with the newer generation represented by Afrim, Cărbunariu, Măjeri, Massaci, and Mititelu, the Romanian theater has continuously synthesized and renewed its own resources. This revival has been especially pronounced in recent years, facilitated by distinct, nonlinear dramatic structures and marked by diverse ideological orientations.

The following pages aim to explore the transformations within the art of acting, focusing on how it has been reshaped by the fragmentation of scenic discourse, the decentralization of the text, and the evolving relationship between actor and spectator. This study also considers how these new elements become active tools of performative composition. At the same time, the inquiry is framed from a pedagogical perspective, focusing on how actor training programs might be structured and adapted to align with these emerging artistic practices. This analysis draws on recent theoretical interpretations of contemporary theater, grounded in the work of German theater scholar (professor, critic and researcher) Hans-Thies Lehmann, i.e., *Postdramatic Theater*². Moreover, the study incorporates other relevant contributions from performance studies, theater anthropology, and acting pedagogy. Methodologically, this work tackles multiple directions by analyzing aesthetic shifts (from

² Hans-Thies Lehmann. 2009. *Teatrul Postdramatic [Postdramatic Theater]*. București: Editura Unitext.

representational to presentational modes), examining the relationship between physicality and stage meaning, investigating processes of collective creation, and interpreting the pedagogical implications derived from contemporary practices.

2. Postdramatic theater

Although Lehmann's theory forms the conceptual foundation of this study, the analysis of postdramatic theater cannot be limited exclusively to this framework. As Lehmann himself acknowledges, "postdramatic theater must be understood within a broader field of performance practices that exceed the traditional limits of drama and theater."³ This perspective on physicality and stage presence is supported by Erika Fischer-Lichte, who defines performance as an autopoietic process based on the interaction between actor and spectator. She states that "the performance generates a feedback loop between actors and spectators in which both become co-subjects of the event, thus bringing forth a self-referential, autopoietic system"⁴. In the same vein, Richard Schechner develops the concept of performance as an expanded practice situated between ritual, play, and theater. He asserts that "performance is a broad spectrum of activities, including ritual, play, games, sport, theater, and everyday life"⁵. Furthermore, Josette Féral's theories on performativity and the hybridization of forms complement these perspectives: "...if this is truly a characteristic of current theater, a theater inherited from the wave of performance art in the nineteen-sixties, and the confluent influences of Artaud, the Living, and Grotowski that still affect the stage, it is the quality that illuminates how numerous current theatrical experiences have effectively divested themselves of any relationship to representation, illusion, story, and sometimes even performance itself"⁶.

Conceptualized by Lehmann, the term *postdramatic* marks one of the most radical reconfigurations of the performing arts, and describes a fundamental shift from theater centered on text, conflict, and dramatic character interpretation toward a new stylistic focus on presence, embodiment, and autonomous scenic composition. In this regard, the scholar provides the following explanation: "The adjective 'postdramatic' refers to a theater that finds its mode of operating beyond drama, in a time situated after the validity of the dramatic paradigm in theater has expired. This does not mean an abstract negation or a simple turning away from the tradition of drama. 'After drama' means that it continues to exist—however weakened or exhausted—as the standard structure of 'normal' theater: as the expectation of a large part of the audience, as the foundation of many modes of representation, and as a quasi-automatic norm of its dramaturgy... Postdramatic theater thus encompasses the present/ renewal/ continuation of older aesthetics, including those that had already long since bid farewell to the dramatic idea, either in the realm of text or in that of theater"⁷.

Moreover, Sharma and Bhattacharya state the following: "As a philosophy, postdramatic theater stands as an important artistic response that advocates embracing multiplicity/uncertainty by giving space to diverse perspectives. There is an attempt to redefine the understanding of theater and critically analyze its transformative potential in the ever-evolving landscape of postmodern times"⁸.

³ Hans-Thies Lehmann. 2006. *Postdramatic Theater* [Teatrul postdramatic]. Routledge, pp. 24-25.

⁴ Erica Fisher-Lichte. 2008. *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, Routledge, p. 38.

⁵ Richard Schechner. 2013. *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (3rd edition). Routledge, p. 2.

⁶ Josette Féral. 2011. *From Event to Extreme reality The Aesthetic of Shock*, Tdr-the Drama Review – a Journal of Performance Studies, p. 10. Retrieved May 19, 2026, from https://www.academia.edu/4714442/From_Event_to_Extreme_Reality_The_Aesthetic_of_Shock.

⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann. 2009. *Postdramatic Theater* [Teatrul Postdramatic], București: Editura Unitext, pp. 21-22.

⁸ Shuchi Sharma and Mitali Bhattacharya. 2024. "Defying Norms/Categories: Understanding Postdramatic Theater Through Postmodern Times", [Electronic version]. *An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, vol.5, No.1, January-February, p. 20. Retrieved May 20, 2026, from <https://newliteraria.com/articles/v05i1/v05i1-03.pdf>.

The dominant direction of postdramatic theater is rooted in experimental forms such as happenings, environmental theater, and theater of effect – practices that move beyond the boundaries of established theatrical conventions, without necessarily implying artistic quality. Kirby also notices the following: “Happenings have abandoned the plot or story structure that is the foundation of our traditional theater. Gone are the clichés of exposition, development, climax and conclusion, or love and ambition, the conflicts of personality, the revelatory monologue of character. Gone all elements needed for the presentation of a cause-and-effect plot or even the simple sequence of events that would tell a story. Happenings employ a structure that could be called insular or compartmented”⁹.

This suggests that the aim of postdramatic theater is to reframe fundamental existential questions through a different logic; thus, traditional communication through dialogue becomes secondary. What takes center stage is bodily expression, with nonverbal language emerging as a key instrument for conveying both emotional and intellectual content. This, however, does not mean that the actor’s role is invalidated, as is sometimes the case in happenings. “The acting tends to exist on the same level as the physical aspect of the production. While allowing for his unique qualities, the performer frequently is treated in the same fashion as a prop or a stage effect... Performers become things and things become performers”¹⁰.

In dramatic theater, the text is the core from which all other elements derive coherence and meaning. In postdramatic theater, however, the text assumes an optional role: it may appear as a discursive collage, a document, a quotation, or even merely as sonic material. Dramaturgy in this context is processual, collectively created or reconfigured during rehearsals, and rooted in everyday language. The resulting scenic logic is associative rather than narrative. The performance ceases to rely on storytelling for its justification, instead privileging visual and temporal structures that are performatively autonomous. Postdramatic performance takes the form of an episodic, architectural composition, resembling a network of interconnected elements rather than a linear narrative with a discernible thread. The actor’s role, in turn, undergoes profound transformation: actors no longer perform characters in the classical sense; their actions are not simply suggested but made as real as possible. Actors present their biography, authentic voice, and conceptual intimacy, emphasizing exposure, vulnerability, and states of liminality. The body is no longer an instrument of representation; it becomes an expressive raw material in its own right. Multimedia techniques redefine the stage, transforming it into a technological space (via projections, live camera work, video mapping, augmented reality, hypertextuality) or into a polyphonic one (with multiple, layered sound sources). This produces a breakdown in the hierarchy of theatrical elements. A process of formal “democratization” unfolds, rendering these elements almost equal. Lighting design turns into a facet of dramaturgy, spatial configuration assumes protagonist significance, music structures temporal flow, and image generates meaning. One potential risk is that performances may become merely imaginative constructs – simple performative ideas, representations of external forces rather than fully formed, expressive, aesthetic objects. Since more emphasis is placed on the real dimension rather than on convention, on lived experience rather than on catharsis or moral elements, spectators can no longer remain passive witnesses. Instead, they are continuously invited into immersive participation, where meaning is assembled and experience is negotiated through direct involvement.

Nowadays, postdramatic theater stands at the intersection of performance, contemporary dance, visual arts, experimental music, and installation art, giving rise to hybrid, trans-artistic forms—an authentic laboratory of intermediality. It remains in a constant state of evolution, serving as a flexible conceptual matrix for contemporary theater practice.

⁹ Michael Kirby. 1965. *Happenings: An Illustrated Anthology*, [Electronic version]. New York: E.P. Dutton, p. 13. Retrieved May 24, 2026, from <https://ro.scribd.com/document/365991241/Happenings-an-Illustrated-Anthology>.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 11; p. 19.

This tendency may be observed at major festivals (i.e., FNT, FITS, SEAS), where recent selections have prioritized performance-based dramaturgy and innovative forms, and current productions frequently combine social criticism, technology, and interdisciplinary aesthetics. Within this context, Radu Afrim's work exemplifies an aesthetics grounded in fragmentation and poetic physicality, as demonstrated in productions such as *Orașe cu fete sărace* [*Cities with Poor Girls*], *Zi de bucurie* [*Day of Joy*], *Seaside Stories*, *Teatro Lúcido la malul infinitului* [*Teatro Lúcido on the Shore of Infinity*], and *Trilogia memoriei* [*The Trilogy of Memory*]. Afrim creates non-hierarchical productions, where all elements hold equal status. Gianina Cărbunariu creates performative documentary theater (*Magda by Gianina*, *Tipografic Majuscul*); she constructs performances from interviews and real archives, shifting the focus from character development to process and discourse. Here, the actor functions as a conduit, and theater becomes a reflective space rather than one focused on identification. Diana Mititelu proposes a direction situated at the intersection of dramatic and postdramatic theater, reconfiguring classical texts and focusing on visuality and physicality, where the actor oscillates between performer and performative presence (*Machinal*). Andrei Măjeri's intellectual and dense works – such as *Zețe de categoria B* [*B-List Goddesses*], *Medea's Boys*, *Eroine* [*Heroines*], *Cine l-a ucis pe tata* [*Who Killed My Father*], and *Livada de vișini* [*The Cherry Orchard*] – focus on non-linearity, collective physicality, and group psychology, even venturing into dissociative dramaturgy and collage. Răzvan Mazilu is one of the most influential figures in the hybridization of performing arts. He cultivates dramatic language at the confluence of theater, contemporary dance, performance, and musical theater. His staging centers on physicality, the actor-performer-interpreter, and a powerful visual aesthetic (*Un Tango Mas*, *We Will Rock You*, *Cabaret*), serving as a catalyst for the performative dimension. However, Gigi Căciuleanu represents an even more radical postdramatic sensibility. In works like *L'Om DadA*, *From Our Own* [*D'ale noastre*], and *Onirius*, he proposes an advanced physical discipline, a stage convention that imposes body awareness as a performative instrument, while narrative and psychological constructions are replaced by rhythm, energy, and plastic composition. These examples, among others, illustrate a broader trend in which choreographers working with both actors and dancers collaborate extensively with prominent directors. Together, they create impressive choreography that contributes significantly to redefining the actor as a performer capable of functioning simultaneously within both the theatrical and choreographic domains.

The aforementioned transformations, evident in both contemporary directing practices and choreographic theater, inevitably lead to a reconfiguration of pedagogical paradigms relating to the actor's craft. In this context, the actor can no longer be understood exclusively as an interpreter, but must be conceived as a performative subject. This shift highlights the need for training approaches that center on the body as a site for meaning-making, rather than merely as an instrument of representation.

3. How does postdramatic theater influence actor training?

Two preliminary clarifications are essential before addressing the question at hand. First, this discussion does not aim to propose a new pedagogical formula, new methodological systematizations, training types, or specific procedures for actor training. Rather, it offers a complementary outline— additional considerations intended to support student work by enhancing motivation, deepening overall understanding and providing an alternative to familiar or exhausted aesthetic discourses and practices. Drawing on over twenty-five years of teaching experience, it is observed that acting students frequently experience moments of resistance in response to the text-centered orientation characteristic of theatrical modernity. These moments are marked by a sense of saturation due to the volume of plays studied, perceived constraints on creative freedom, and pressures that limit self-expression within imposed frameworks.

Students also express a desire to dramatize their own experiences, often without carefully crafted words.

Second, postdramatic theater should not be seen as merely an aesthetic shift or artistic eccentricity, but as a reality that profoundly transforms the ways in which actors may be trained, perceived, and productively “activated”. In this theatrical form, the actor is no longer a means of representation, but a performative nucleus. They no longer start from the traditional paradigm of character, psychology, and dramatic fiction, but from presence, embodiment, energy, space, and multiperspectivism. This shift entails moving away from character embodiment toward embracing one’s own body as scenic material, prepared to maintain immediate, unmediated visibility of corporeal presence in the “here and now.”

These insights bear substantial implications for actor training. The first premise is that actors must be trained for identity and autonomous stage presence; they must be equipped to exist in space independent of character constructs, dramatic progression, text, or fixed spatial-temporal coordinates. In this context, the twentieth-century psychological traditions and techniques (employed by figures such as Stanislavski, Chekhov, Meisner, Strasberg, Cojar) are relativized. These elements are based on internalization, analysis of actions and objectives, utilization of deep emotional memory, focused attention, psycho-physical relaxation, sensory re-education, avoidance of over-scripting, training of spontaneous reactions, creation of inner atmosphere, construction of the character’s mental image, psychological gesture, the “magic if,” imagination development, self-awareness, alterity, emotional psychology, and mental discipline. While valuable, these elements require reconsideration to align with the demands of postdramatic theater.

Actor training must therefore shift its focus toward corporeality, toward a new way of understanding and relating to one’s own body, which becomes the primary vehicle of perception. The actor is encouraged to develop a harmonious, resilient, and expressive body, capable of performing a wide range of scenic tasks—gestural, choreographic, ritualistic, or anti-narrative—while maintaining a strong sense of rhythm. In this context, mimetic reproduction is replaced by formal freedom, accompanied by acute awareness of the body’s new function: generating and communicating images, rhythms, and tensions through presence alone. Through minimalist gestures, muscular tension and relaxation, shifts in rhythm, and non-mimetic actions, the actor becomes both the primary source of scenic material and simultaneously its thematic focus and protagonist. This model draws on Asian theatrical practices introduced by figures such as Artaud, Tairov, Meyerhold, Copeau, Grotowski, and Barba, who recognized the significant benefits of integrating physical techniques into theatrical communication. In this regard, Artaud noted in his work, *Theater and Its Double*: “It must be said that the domain of the theater is not psychological but plastic and physical. And it is not a question of whether the physical language of theater is capable of achieving the same psychological resolutions as the language of words, whether it is able to express feelings and passions as well as words, but whether there are not attitudes in the realm of thought and intelligence that words are incapable of grasping and that gestures and everything partaking of a spatial language attain with more precision than they”¹¹.

Wittgenstein, in *Philosophical Investigations*, states that: “To understand a language means to be master of a technique.”¹² Banu explains that “this proposition, formulated simply in different terms, consistently reappears as the motto of great directors: *in the absence of a technique, theater does not constitute itself as a language and, implicitly, they add, as an art*”¹³. Thus, building on traditions from Japanese Nō and Kabuki, Indian Kathakali, Balinese and

¹¹ Antonin Artaud. 1997. *Teatrul și dublul său [Theater and Its Double]*. Cluj-Napoca: Editura Echinox, p. 59.

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*: Blackwell Publishers (second edition), §199, p. 81.

¹³ George Banu. 2011. *Reformele teatrului în secolul reinnoirii [The Reforms of Theater in the Century of Renewal]*. București: Editura Nemira, p. 111.

Butoh or ecstatic dance, and informed by research in behavioral neuroscience and motor learning, numerous techniques have emerged embodying this postmodern approach to training (i.e., the Suzuki method, Alexander Technique, Viewpoints, Contact Improvisation, Release Technique, Feldenkrais, Body-Mind Centering).

Without diminishing or invalidating the roles of the teacher and the director, these methodologies contribute to the reconstruction of physical and mental maps by disrupting automatic patterns through structured movement. Rather than relying on the interpretation of a predetermined script, this approach fosters a creative process grounded in improvisation and play, enabling a collective energetic dynamic and generating distinct dramaturgical structures. Thus, young actors learn to navigate across different corporeal and vocal registers, develop rhythmic and intensive playfulness, and attune themselves to plastic and performative composition rather than linear narrative. Their versatility and adaptability are strengthened, which allows them to transcend strict theatrical boundaries. By adjusting to proximity, unconventional spaces, and immersive environments, and by becoming aware of the visual exposure inherent in their roles as compositional elements, actors also develop the capacity to consciously manage the spectators' gaze.

By comparing the traditional training model with these newer elements, several reasons emerge for their exploration, at least within the context of creative workshops, without necessarily requiring a profound reconfiguration of established acting methodologies. This shift in emphasis – from interpreting and constructing a role defined by objectives, emotions, and psychological motivation, to relinquishing “playing someone” and instead resolving the scenic situation through corporeal materiality – requires the ability to generate an active scenic presence unmediated by fiction. It also facilitates the discovery of one's own visibility without the protective layer of character or dramatic progression. In postdramatic theater, the fundamental technique is no longer the construction of a fixed score but active participation in the genesis of the performance itself. The actor becomes a composer of time and body, which entails conceptualizing the scenic laboratory in terms of rhythm, duration, intensity, plasticity, improvisation, and selection. Training in this context is not aimed at psychological coherence but at energetic and sensory coherence, involving the elimination of narrative transitions, embracing discontinuity, working with fragments rather than a dramatic arc, and developing the capacity to rapidly enter and exit different states. Such training demands sustained effort, endurance, exploration of physical limits, and management of vulnerability. It includes micro-gesture work, active stillness, repetition, sudden accelerations or deliberate stagnation, alongside rigorous control of muscular tension supported by distributed attention. The actor must maintain control not only over their own body but also over space, relationships with partners and spectators, as well as rhythm and duration – elements no longer dictated by dramaturgy. This approach also activates fragmented gesture, broken speech, spatial distortion, disruption of conventions, and exposure of theatrical mechanisms without dissolving meaning. The consequences include an emphasis on laboratory work and process, the cultivation of creative autonomy, acceptance of scenic risk, and liberation from a strict hierarchy of text – director–actor. Nonetheless, this does not necessitate a radical rewriting of inherited classical methods, which remain valuable and effective. However, a subtle paradigm shift – one that affords future actors greater flexibility and responsiveness to the demands of contemporary theater—may be worthy of consideration.

4. Conclusion

The analysis demonstrates that postdramatic theater has engendered an essential transformation in the actor's status, resulting in an ontological redefinition of the performer. It has profoundly altered the nature of acting itself as well as the criteria by which artistic work

is evaluated, with significant implications for training and pedagogy. Even when considering only the decentralization of text, the rise of performative composition, the primacy of physicality and energetic presence, and the hybridization of artistic languages alongside the demand for greater artistic adaptability (extending skills beyond the traditional realm of dramatic art), this shift remains highly consequential. It is acknowledged that alongside the democratization of scenic elements, and in the absence of a rigorous artistic awareness capable of maintaining an aesthetic balance between experimentation and meaning, there is a risk that the final product may devolve into a mere visual or performative device, lacking stylistic coherence. However, this very risk presents an opportunity to reconfigure the pedagogical relationship within actor training. Without abandoning the foundations of established traditions and negating classical systems, actor training must integrate these transformations into the very “DNA” of theater, understanding them as extensions rather than departures. Pedagogy possesses the requisite openness to render the educational process more flexible, prioritize process over product, and cultivate in students the ability to operate effectively within any performative context, regardless of its instability or interdisciplinary. In conclusion, acting pedagogy requires a recalibration of educational priorities; however, the future does not lie in the abandonment of tradition, but rather in the capacity to expand and reinterpret it, integrating new forms of expression into a flexible pedagogical system adapted to contemporary performative realities.

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