

THEATRE – A PATH TO BECOMING

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Abstract: *An actor works with one main tool - his/her/their own being. One's physique and psyche work together in order to bring forth subtle nuances of one's being. An actor needs to mirror different realities for the spectator in order to move him out of his comfort zone and challenge him to ponder on more profound and complex aspects of life. The actor must first know and understand himself before he can share these deep experiences with others. Self-awareness, one of the most intense challenges for a human being, requires plenty of courage and patience in order for one to explore within himself the deepest emotions experienced that will ultimately reveal the most profound insights.*

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What is theatre if not a reflection game? The one who takes part in the game on the stage, be it an actor or a spectator, assumes the risk of recognizing oneself in the artistic act. The spectator needs to open his soul, perception, and mind to come in contact with new reflections of the world. The actor needs to work hard to become an accurate mirror for the spectator, and a necessary condition for that accuracy is the act of becoming an empty vessel first.

I always found it fascinating how an actor manages to make the audience perceive things which are well hidden from the physical eye, how he brings into the material world the most subtle thoughts and feelings of his own being. For me, the inner world of an actor always seemed complex. The actor is eager for deep understandings,

riddled with daring questions, always in search for the depths of the world he lives in. After this exercise of diving deeper into himself, an actor can share with the spectators these insights.

An actor has to master an “extreme sensitivity of body to the psychological creative impulses”³⁶. The connection between our psyche and the physical body is well known, the two influencing each other. You cannot train the physical body without noticing the effects on the mind. If the actor will limit himself only to physical training, this may have side effects on the psyche, making it more rigid. The actor could risk remaining superficial in his own understanding of life.

Our current life is riddled with materialistic influences. The contemporary man is shaped by the conflicts and interests of the society in which he lives in. Under these forces, the inner impulses are mostly annihilated. The power of social mechanisms attracts people into their whirlpool. Individuality is losing itself in the collective unconscious mass. With this process of dissolution of individuality, both the psyche and the physical structures have to suffer.

As Michael Chekhov observes, during this period of materialism, the actor tends to focus his gaze on the outward appearances of the life phenomena, eliminating the psychological elements of his work, focusing primarily on the physical ones. As a result, the actor’s performance becomes dominated by cliché, superficiality takes hold, the body becomes rigid, the interactions with acting partners on the stage are robotic, the artistic act develops like a fitness session, far from fulfilling its curative function.

Such an actor is far from mirroring something other than his own anguish and powerlessness, failing to reveal to the viewers his own impressions of the world surfaced from the deepest realms of

³⁶ Michael Chekhov, *To the Actor: on the Technique of Acting*, Routledge, New York, p. 2.

his being. His artistic act is similar to a photographic capture. It is unable to fulfil the true inner need of the artist to reveal on stage his individuality and the most intimate understandings on the phenomena of life. A cause of this effect could be the fact that the actor himself does not know how to get in touch with himself.

The road that I hope to travel during these doctoral years is the actor's path to discovering himself. I seek to comprehend how an individual's personality can be released from the hypnotic power of the collective mentality and to understand why we have these unconscious tendencies to follow social norms. By what means can we become aware of ourselves, of our own inner laws, thus breaking the patterns enforced by the system, unleashing our true creative potential? Being trapped in this routine, the individual no longer has control over his own psyche and, abandoning himself to the group, he acts as an uncontrollable force of nature, losing himself in this collective energy, dominated by primal, animal instincts.

The process of individualization, the journey within, requires courage and represents "a trial that scares most people, because meeting with oneself is part of those unpleasant experiences that we avoid as long as we can project to the outside world all what is negative"³⁷. Confronting our multiple facets and facing our weaknesses is often terrifying. To be honest with yourself is perhaps one of the most difficult tasks. When facing our least preferred feelings and thoughts we are often unable to see their true value. Confronting one's shadow and accepting it cannot occur solely through a mental process, because the mind often operates with temporary illusions emerged from our previous experiences. The intellectual judgment tends to generate univocal conclusions, often missing the essential.

³⁷ C. G. Jung, *Opere Complete I - Arhetipurile și inconștientul colectiv*, Trei, București, 2003, p. 30.

The actor who becomes the object of the spectator's reflection builds various realities. Being devoid of content, of identity, he becomes like an empty vessel, which he gradually fills with the information of the embodied character. He understands and assembles within himself the psychological structure of the character, through his own body builds a physical alternative of its manifestation and then, the actor experiences, through the artistic act, the new reality he created. The actor withdraws to let the character experience the new reality.

In Kabuki theatre there is a gesture that represents *gazing at the moon* – when the actor makes the gesture of pointing at the sky with his index finger. Yoshi Oida in *The invisible actor*³⁸ highlights the presence of two types of actors: the first one, who by a gesture full of elegance and grace points towards the moon, impressing people in the audience with his technical skill and, the second one, who simply points towards the moon, the public seeing only the moon, oblivious to the actor's gesture. Yoshi Oida calls the last one, *the invisible actor*. This is the actor who, by his work, does not seek to show the public how good and virtuous he is, does not have the attention directed to the outside. For him theatre is not an act of feeding the ego but, with the attention focused inwards, always in a state of alertness, he is continuously preoccupied with his next step. This actor focuses on the path that he has to walk to reach the moon, brings from the depths of his being insights and bonds that he developed with the moon. He is solely concerned with the journey and his own relationship with the moon, he is not preoccupied with the audience's opinion of his physical movements.

The actor needs to withdraw and position himself as observer of the new reality that is created through him, by him; otherwise the moment of truth will be fragmented and lacking fluidity. As a result,

³⁸ Yoshi Oida, Marshall Lorna, *Actorul invizibil*, ArtSpect, Oradea, 2009, p. 19.

the spectator will not be able to fully immerse himself in this new reality as he will perceive the actor as unable to abandon himself into that reality. In order for the actor to become *invisible* he must be able to observe himself during the play. Each part he plays triggers certain experiences inside of him, puts him in contact with certain emotions, mental patterns, somatizations that have already happened inside of his body and mind.

In order to be able to work freely, the actor must search deep into himself. Through affective memory, certain sensations will be triggered inside of him, emotions that will transpose him within the various situations experienced in the past, situations that have created limitations, fears, anxieties – emotions stored in him. If the actor chooses to hide these emotions, to ignore them by projecting them outward, an increasing distance from his own centre will happen. Helplessness, low self-esteem and revolt will weaken his psyche more and more, having painful effects on his physique. The force with which he will strike outwards will only represent a reflection of the way he sees himself. Only the actor who will make the effort to become “the master of himself and of his craft will eliminate the ‘accidental’ element from his profession. Only a complete control over the body and psyche will give him the self-confidence, the freedom and the necessary harmony for his creative activity”³⁹.

Another goal of my doctoral studies is to try to understand how we can become aware of our most intimate sensations, how we can incorporate them in our own structures. We need to be able to recognize them, label them and accept them in order for us to be able to detect the repetitive patterns that govern our lives and to understand the deeper functioning mechanisms of our being. The goal is to develop the ability to work consciously with ourselves in

³⁹ Michael Chekhov, *Către actori – Despre tehnica artei dramatice*, Biblioteca UNATC, p. 11.

the artistic process, to be able to freely and instantly bring our own inner images in our performance on the stage.

The actor retrieves echoes of his own psyche when reading words from a text. “The function of memory, or reproduction, links us up with things which have faded out of consciousness, things that became subliminal or were cast away or repressed. What we call memory is the faculty of reproducing unconscious contents and it is the first function we can clearly distinguish in its relationship between our consciousness and the contents that are actually not in view”⁴⁰. Reading the character’s part, the actor retrieves his own impressions of the words and the experiences described are stored deep in his own psyche. His conscious work at the part he needs to play starts when he brings from unconscious into conscious images, stories, sensations, situations that made an impression on him in the past. Beyond words, the actor works with these inner images, thoughts and feelings. This intimate, unexplained space that is lived by the actor on stage, will give the spectator the opportunity to retrieve his own inner structures of memory, decoding the new reality that unfolds in front of him through his own experiences. In this way, the spectator is personally involved. He is not only a detached observer but becomes an active participant, decoding the story according to his own experiences and, through his spontaneous reactions, the spectator collaborates with the actor in the act of creation. In this way, theatre can become therapeutic for both the actor and the spectator.

It is necessary for an actor to walk the path of self-acceptance and to understand himself and the context from which he comes. In order for the character to concord with the actor’s own nature, for the actor to be able to *give himself up*, it is necessary to raise awareness of one’s own inner stories. It is helpful to understand

⁴⁰ C. G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology. Its Theory and Practice*, Ark Paperbacks, London, 1990, p. 22.

the stories of the past as they give meaning to the present and open the possibilities of the future.

In 2014, I played a double character in the play *The Good Man of Seciuan*, directed by Andrei Șerban at Bulandra Theatre. Shen Te, the female character in the play, develops a male alter-ego. It was a difficult work to represent accurately the male character. She is overcome by the voracity of the others who cling to her for survival, but especially, she is limited by her own inability to escape these situations, feeling the pressure of the gods' request to be a good person. Shui Ta, the male alter-ego, represents the negative side of the character, the shadow aspect of Shen Te's psyche, which she is unable to accept, torn between the need to be good with herself and gods' command to be good with others. The spirit world is here projected towards the exterior; the gods appear in physical form and demand for the righteous action to be fulfilled. The gods are associated with the covenant of redemption through suffering. Everything that is above is righteous and everything that is below, life on earth with all its hardships, as Shen Te is experiencing it, is doomed, dark and evil.

Life reveals itself as not being only good, but also bad and asks to be experienced in all its dimensions. Life must also be experienced in anger, fear, helplessness, judgement or anguish. We need to be able to mindfully observe the implications of hard emotions in our mental and emotional structures, detach ourselves from experiencing them as a hardship, simply observe them unopposed and then the insights will undoubtedly appear.

The hardships I encountered while building Shui Ta's character came along with deep insights regarding the conceptualization of evil and how it influenced my own existence. I started to understand the stories I was told in my childhood, stories which created my limited reaction patterns. I started noticing my fear of making mistakes, letting people down, being different from other people, and the inability to cultivate certain unique aspects in my

own life. I started noticing the fear that the individual feels in the moment of detachment from the comfortable routine of the group to which he belongs. In this moment fear also erupts in others because their comfort is endangered, the world in which they live is suddenly threatened. Something unknown is about to happen. Without this detachment from the group, however, the process of individualization is not possible and the unique forces, specific to the individual, spontaneously erupting from the inner depth of one's being, are suppressed.

The actor uses his own uniqueness as nourishment. This becomes his advantage, his source of creativity. The sooner the actor understands what inner forces guide him through life and learns to use them in a conscious way, the faster his creative process will become more precise, hazard will appear with lesser frequency in his performance and his ability to create will develop constantly. Obviously, everything being in constant motion, the path the actor follows once will not be the same in the days to come. Thus, the actor needs to stay alert and continuously balance his attention by focusing inwardly as much as outwardly.

Everything moves outside of us and every outward movement has an inner equivalent and vice versa. The ability to observe inner dynamics and understand what happens with the physical body in relation to thoughts and emotions becomes essential for the one that wants to maintain the aliveness of his being on stage. The one who constantly responds to the ever-changing stimuli that come from partners and spectators has to train his attention in a specific way. The actor has multiple circles of attention. The small circle is represented by his own being with all its components: body – mind – emotions. A larger circle encloses the whole stage. An actor's purpose is to broaden the boundaries and to reach beyond the limited space of the stage, encompassing each character. The ability to become one with his acting partner will trigger the *loss of self* in favour of the character.

The third circle of attention is the one that integrates the whole audience. Just like a musician, the actor must be able to tune the instrument, his own body, to the audience he comes in contact with and then, move the spectators from the comfort zone, from the warm point of perfect balance, to the discomfort of asking themselves challenging questions. Krzysztof Warlikowski says that a successful performance is the one that makes the audience vibrate. “It is a triumph when we plant a lot of seeds in the audience. And when the audience starts to respond, to be present, to build up a true inner attention”⁴¹.

The actor works with his inner and outer aliveness. A state of continuous vigilance is necessary. I strive to understand how an actor can improve his/her inner life, how an actor can train himself to release the burden of fear so that he can reach the empty vessel stage, the *point zero*. This state of mind will enable the actor to react instantly to the stimuli coming at him on the stage. In this state, the actor is present in the *here* and *now*, a continuous state of self-awareness, conscious of his own choices. I hypothesize that practicing techniques such as controlled breathing, mindfulness, and contemplation is valuable for an actor because the practitioner becomes aware of the thoughts, emotions and sensations that arise in his body. Furthermore, these techniques are associated with low brain activity, favouring relaxation and creativity. When the actor becomes self-aware he understands the process happening inside, nothing in his work will be random, reaching an understanding of deeper aspects of his being and thus, arousing profound insights for those in the audience.

What working tools are available to the one who really wants to become a channel for the energy that flows between audience and fellow stage colleagues? How could an actor take one step back to let

⁴¹ Warlikowski, Krzysztof, *Teatrul ca o rană vie – Lucrare concepută și realizată de Piotr Gruszczyński*, Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu”, Cheiron, București, 2010, p. 59.

the character appear? How can the actor stay connected to human suffering, major events he feels the need to express without lying? All these questions will expand in the years to come and will bring forth even more questions to be answered. A rejoicing moment, for it is self-questioning that favours the evolution of self-knowledge that we all need to better ourselves and our acting.

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Alexandra Fasolă graduated acting in 2008 at the “I.L. Caragiale” National University of Theatre and Film. She can be seen in plays in “Bulandra” Theatre, Jewish Theatre or National Theatre of Bucharest. Over the years her main interest was to understand more about the ‘game of illusion’, about the art of mirroring to the ones in the audience deeper facets of their being. Her main question became: why do we suffer? What is the cause of

these suffering we are all experiencing and how can theatre help people become more aware of what lies inside of them. Currently she is a PhD student in the first year and she wants to research about the necessity of the actor to understand his/her own conditionings in order to become a cleaner mirror for the ones in the audience.