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Bogdana Darie

**A COURSE ON THE ART
OF THE ACTOR.
IMPROVISATION**

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Bogdana Darie

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*In memory of my Professor
Ion Cojar*

FOREWORD

The present course on the art of the actor is intended for students who aspire to pursue a professional path in stage creation. Given that an actor—unlike any other creator of beauty—is both the instrument and the object of their own creation, the process of training an actor has always been challenging. First and foremost, because the actor must begin by knowing themselves—as a bio-psycho-social entity capable of performance, and then because they must acquire a substantive knowledge of the surrounding reality in its most varied aspects. Only in this way is it possible to recompose reality within the universe of the stage. For an actor cannot “mirror” Life for the benefit of his fellow men if they do not know it. Another reason why the process of forming an actor is so demanding is that it involves unique personalities (in the midst of their formative journey), creative beings (just beginning to discover their own potential), with unexpected depths (who are just getting to know the world and themselves with the excitement of a new beginning). Any outside “imposition” which lacks justification, explanation, or a credible motivational foundation can become a source of significant blockages. But perhaps the most challenging aspect is the fact that the young student must understand that the art of acting involves strict rules and demands—worthy of a true mathematical science. An actor must not imitate the art of their great predecessors through mimicry, or pick up the craft through guesswork, or undergo “on-the-job training” on the boards. No. The art of theatre demands far more from its practitioners. It demands Truth and Sincerity, Commitment, Ownership, and Organicity. The art of the actor is not the ability to lie convincingly and gracefully, but the power to authentically embody a wide range of life situations—to truly live... other lives.

The course on the art of the actor therefore has two absolutely essential components: theoretical and practical. From the theoretical perspective, it addresses key questions concerning: systems and methods of teaching the art of acting, trends in creative approaches throughout the history of the theatrical phenomenon, aesthetic perspectives related to global performance art, critical reflections on directorial approaches, and analyses of major stage creations by

renowned Romanian and international actors. Our exploration is supported by a comprehensive bibliography.

The practical approach will follow the basic pedagogical principle of progression from the simple to the complex, and will follow the path of knowledge and self-discovery through the system of Play. By distinguishing between “play” and “playing around”—and establishing that “play” involves very strict rules, the student is invited to discover, with the aid of healthy competition, that each game, regardless of its level of difficulty, holds significant relevance for the art and act of stage creation. Therefore, no game will conclude without a thorough and precise analysis, both deep and bold, of everything that has occurred.

Divided over three years of study and six semesters, the Course on the Art of the Actor plays an highly significant role in the actor’s training, but must be complemented by courses which are necessary for the acquisition of the means of expression (stage movement and verbal-vocal education), as well as valuable theoretical subjects (history of Romanian and universal theatre, history of culture and civilization, philosophy, aesthetics, and analysis of the the actor’s creative process on stage). Only through this integrated approach can the university’s output be of the highest level.

The present material, which I have titled *Course on the Art of the Actor*, is divided into two books which outline two fundamental directions in the actor’s training: *Improvisation* and *Creative freedom in relation to aesthetic rigour*. The first volume traces the path of the human-actor at the beginning of their formative journey, where the primary focus is a reconsideration of the natural component through the discovery and enhancement of abilities specific to the Actor’s Art. The second volume centers on the complex process of discovering the degree of creative freedom available to the actor-as-creator in relation to the limitations imposed by the dramatic situation and the director’s vision.

The two volumes thus serve as a theoretical foundation for the practical courses taken by students in the Actor’s Art program. Therefore, the structure of both books follows the analytical curriculum applied in the courses taught at I.L. Caragiale UNATC of Bucharest.

INTRODUCTION

Theatre – a collective art and an art of communication

Theatre, a social and cultural phenomenon of great aesthetic and moral magnitude, has been undergoing a vast process of evolution over many centuries, in close connection to the complex educational system that aims to ennoble the human being. There have been certain periods in human history when the theatre, like other forms of culture, suffered due to very harsh social realities; but there have also been times when state rulers, enlightened monarchs, felt the need to foster the arts, with theatre in particular attracting major investments. This fuelled a spectacular development with long-lasting effects on the cultural evolution of humanity. If we think of the Age of Pericles in Athens, the era of Octavian Augustus in Rome, or the Paris of the Sun King, we cannot fail to notice that the changes in the life of the theatre were not limited to the provision of generous spaces for performances, but also comprised the stratification and development of the component arts that contribute to a theatrical performance (playwriting, aesthetics, the art of the actor, costume and set design, music, direction, choreography, etc.). Thus there emerged the widely accepted idea that theatre is a collective rather than an individual form of art. In practice, all the different artistic layers involved in the theatrical phenomenon are critical.

The actors—those who “face” the audience alone—find it easy to imagine that they are the main characters in this convention called performance. Nothing could be further from the truth. Without a well-structured and thematically rich dramatic text that can help educate and refine the human being; without carefully chosen costumes and sets that work to serve and complement the concept of the performance; without the music that enhances the audience’s emotional experience; without the choreography which manages to harmonize the actors’ movements depending on the theme; and without the support of the director, whose main role is to bring this large-scale “orchestra” together, the actor would be a mere sketch—not an element of the complex cultural ensemble that a theatrical performance aspires to be.

And the analysis does not stop there. Even when it comes to the group of actors involved in creating of a performance, if the one who has... more words to say imagines that he is the most important and that his colleagues should serve should him, he is mistaken. Hamlet cannot “solve his problems” without the help of the other characters. In fact, if we were to engage in a simple imaginative exercise whereby—miraculously—Hamlet returns to his city only to find the palace... empty, we would naturally ask: what would be the point of staging the play? We would be left only with monologues (brilliant ones, admittedly), but devoid of context and meaning, the expression solely of thoughts and not driven by concrete, real actions that both he and we would witness... live; and he, the hero, would immediately come off as ridiculous.

In this way, the first lesson that the acting teacher imparts to the young who seek the glory of the stage is this: theatre is a collective art—the art of a group that adheres to noble principles of artistry and creation.

Viewed from a sociological perspective, the group—as a psychosocial reality—has long preoccupied social theorists, and their theories appear to be quite diverse¹. What these theories have in common is, if one may put it that way, the fact that each emphasizes one of the basic coordinates, considering them to be defining. Thus, Gabriel Tarde emphasizes the psychological side: “What cannot be disputed is that by saying, doing, thinking anything, as soon as we enter social life, we imitate our neighbour at every moment”²; Herbert Spencer³ emphasizes the biological side, speaking of a superorganic existence and considering that society is not merely a collective name given to a sum of individuals but a distinct living entity which, although it may be evident in other living beings, reaches its most perfect form in humans. In other living creatures, social life is almost exclusively limited to connections between adults and their offspring, whereas in humans it is much more complex. Human social life, arising from communal living in shared environmental conditions, generates common representations, emotional states, and attitudes; this accounts for the emergence and organisation of new, specifically human functions (such as political or ecclesiastical), which all members of the group are required to adopt. Society is a uniquely human entity and shares common traits with biological life, which can be summed up as differentiation, cooperation, and solidarity. Under the influence of intrinsic factors (biological and psychological), extrinsic factors (climate, flora, fauna), and secondary factors derived from these (cultural, professional, religious activity),

¹ Apud Darie, Bogdana, *Personajul extins [The Extended Character]*, Ed. EstFalia, Buc., 2011, p. 13-40

² Tarde, Gabriel, *Legile sociale [Social Laws]*, Ed. Națională, Buc., 1924, p. 53

³ Andrei, Petre, *Sociologia cunoașterii și a valorii [The Sociology of Knowledge and Value]*, Ed. Virtual, Buc., 2010, p. 6-13

social life has evolved continuously—from primitive man with his rudimentary domestic institutions, who lived his life surrounded by the unknown, to modern society; from fear of the dead to fear of the living, and so on.

In reference to the very broad notion of “human groups”, Didier Anzieu and J.Y. Martin⁴ identify the following realities: the crowd (meaning a voluntary gathering of individuals: it is conditioned by dominant concerns); the group (meaning a collection of individualities where the goals are, generally speaking, shared by all members); *the primary group* (denoting a communion of goals, emotional relations and group solidarity); the secondary group (denoting a formal organisation, an externally regulated hierarchy, etc.). It should be noted that certain traits are shared by the above-mentioned social realities, while other traits serve to differentiate them (for example, structure, duration, relationships between individuals, goals, common actions, etc.). Attempting a definition, G. Gurvitch states: “A grouping is a real but partial collective unit, which is directly observable and based on collective, continuous and active attitudes toward a common task to be accomplished; it evinces unity at the level of attitude, achievements, and conduct, which gives rise to a structural social framework, moving in the direction of a relative cohesion of forms of sociability.”⁵ Regarding small groupings, G. Gurvitch asserts that they arise in response to specifically human dimensions (the need for relationships, self-knowledge, self-appreciation) and that they persist in numerous different forms as society undergoes various changes. Such groups best demonstrate the notions of closeness, solidarity, and cognitive and emotional balance.

Also in connection to small groupings (the small group), C.N. Cooley, after drawing a distinction between the primary group (direct relationships among group members) and the secondary group (indirect, mediated relationships), states that primary groups are “face-to-face” associations, with a limited number of members and relative intimacy, while G.C. Homans is of the opinion that such a group consists of a small number of people in which “*each can communicate with the others, not through an intermediary, but face-to-face.*”⁶

Mutual knowledge, communication, and intimacy among individuals inherently contain a certain state of interaction between group members; that is why Kurt Lewin stated that: “*the essence of a group is not the similarity or dissimilarity of its members, but their interdependence.*”⁷ A group can be considered as a dynamic whole; this means that a change in the state of any subdivision alters the state

⁴ Apud *La dynamique des groupes restreints*, Paris, PUF, 1969

⁵ Gurvitch, G., *La vocation actuelle de la sociologie*, PUF, Paris, 1957, p. 506

⁶ Apud, *The Human Group*, Harper&Brothers, New York, 1950

⁷ Lewin, Kurt, *Resolving Social Conflicts*, Harper&Brothers, New York, 1948

of another subdivision. Jean Maisonneuve points out that “groups constitute the cradles of social control, the concrete environments where models are learned or born; the defined fields where statuses and roles are articulated and where individuals who assume them interact.”⁸ The French sociologist further explains that interaction among the members of a group does not occur in the absence of an objective, a specific task; the motivation-goal axis, along a pathway marked by means, techniques, interindividual behaviors, etc., is vital for small groups. Expanding on this idea, Jean Maisonneuve asserts that the determining factor for a small group. This structure consists of a system of interlinked statuses and roles which can be rudimentary or complex, latent or explicit—a system that gives the group consistency and allows it to sustain itself and function.”⁹ The focus is therefore on the system of interactions, a system which has subsumed within it the existence and functionality of the statuses and roles of the group members.

The factors that act upon a group can have two origins: external or internal. External factors may represent the will and influence of individuals outside the group who exert pressure on it. Internal factors, on the other hand, refer to the group’s structure, leadership, and the interpersonal relationships established within it. It is the internal factors, or *group factors* for short, which really energize the group’s activity and determine a certain behavioral pattern for the entire group. These can act either spontaneously or in a directed manner. The structure of the group is shaped by the differences in the positions of the group members—that is, by the status and role of each member at a given moment.

Relationships between one person and another (interpersonal relationships) are one of the most frequently addressed areas in social psychology studies. But the large number of studies has yielded a great diversity of opinion. Thus, when it comes to defining them, the views we encounter are quite different: some call them intersychic relationships (though such relationships are also found in animal psychology), *intermental relationships* (which emphasizes the rational aspect of human relations, at the expense of the emotional dimension), *interaffective relationships* (accepting this concept narrows interpersonal relationships down to emotions, affective states, and feelings, while avoiding the social and rational aspects), interhuman relationships (all relationships in society are “human” because they involve ...humans; unfortunately, inhuman or even anti-human actions can be undertaken by humans).

Assuming that interpersonal relationships have subsumed the act of consciousness, we can identify certain characteristics: they are unmediated and

⁸ Maisonneuve, Jean, *La psychologie sociale*, PUF, Paris, 1969, p. 55

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 56

possess a high emotional-affective charge; they involve *knowledge and communication*, defining the position of each individual in relation to others, the position of all in relation to the group, and the position of the whole group in relation to the individual; they imply the existence of a certain scale of values within the parameters of each individual; they also imply (in certain respects) the subordination of the private, personal life of the individual to the tasks of the group.

It is thought that interpersonal psychic relationships do not have an independent existence; they only arise between people—that is, between beings that are social by their very existential structure. For this reason, interpersonal relationships are both psychic and social at the same time, that is to say, psychosocial—not only in the sense that they are influenced by society, but in a deeper, more organic sense: they are actually psychic modalities of social life, integral parts of social life which enable the psyche to participate in it, while social life is psychologically realized in and through individuals.

Therefore, interpersonal relationships appear to us as a particular kind of living, unmediated, psychosocial connection between people; they reflect, most often in predominantly emotional-affective forms, particular aspects of social life.

Attempts to more accurately define what we can call interpersonal relationships have often started with their classification. Thus, using the nature of the relationship as a criterion, interpersonal relationships have been called interaffective relationships (by Jacob Levi Moreno), with three main types distinguished: *relationships of sympathy*, relationships of antipathy, and relationships of indifference. They have also been referred to as interindividual relationships (formal or informal relationships, according to Kurt Lewin); they have also been viewed as relations with another (by G. Gurwitsch), and in this case they can be close relationships, distant relationships, mixed relations; and finally, they have been called elective relationships (or affinity by selection), relationships of ascendancy-dependency, and contractual relationships (Jean Maisonneuve). In a classification based on their orientation, interpersonal relationships can be categorized as: *horizontal* (on the same level of social life) and *vertical* (on a hierarchical scale); and in a classification based on the domain in which they operate, we can distinguish between consanguineous relationships (within the family), work relationships, and relations of coexistence within the social structure.

We note that in institutions devoted to cultural creation (such as theatres, philharmonic orchestras, artistic ensembles of various kinds, artistic groups, etc.), the density, variety, and scope of interpersonal relationships are conditioned by the direct and immediate membership in a specific professional-occupational group within the institution.

The Faculty of Theatre holds so-called *Workshops*. These are, in fact, *small groups* in which, as sociology has shown us, *complex interhuman relationships* are established. The way in which a workshop is set up clearly depends on each instructor individually—on their experience and their approach to the educational process. Despite the inevitable differences, however, the Actor’s Art Workshops are spaces where young aspirants are invited to learn a craft that cannot be approached in an... ordinary fashion. The Art of the Actor is “a specific way of living and thinking” (as Professor Ion Cojar used to say), it is a way of learning through the technique of knowledge and self-knowledge. And this can only be achieved in an environment where each member feels protected, encouraged, nurtured, accepted, supported and above all, valued. In the Actor’s Art Workshop, both *intermental* and *interaffective* relationships are formed. From the outset, these relationships must be *on the same level*, and if tendencies toward verticalization appear—the emergence of a hierarchy—, the teacher must check such tendencies from the start. This is because, in an artistic group, the notion of equal opportunities for everyone should not be utopic.

In the foregoing sociological analysis, we mentioned the observation of the great psychoanalyst, J.L. Moreno, who said that group relationships can be based on sympathy, antipathy, and indifference. In an acting class, it is recommended that *sympathy* become the watchword; and even if this attitude is difficult for everyone to achieve, but given that group members who were randomly selected (following an entrance exam in which specific abilities were “detected”) must work, for a period of time, at the peak of their creative capacity, the path of “sympathizing” with one’s partner and their actions can lead to collective success. Of course, there is no suggestion whatsoever that one should lie, i.e. pretend and dare not say what one does not like. No. No one should lie! Instead, one must offer correction without reproach, intelligently and out of a desire “to act right,” that is, to help set right an erroneous state of fact or thought.

Sociology highlights another crucial aspect: within a group, it is the internal *group factors* that shape its dynamics—and they exist within the group, not outside of it. And for the trajectory to be ascendant it is essential for *mutual knowledge* and *communication* to become priorities, because they will engender what is called *interdependence* among group members. And since, in an Actor’s Art Workshop, members are dependent on each other—precisely because, as stated from the very beginning, theatre is a group-based art—we can confidently assert that theatre also belongs to the *arts of communication*. It is also essential to specify that when we speak about theatre, we are referring to two dimensions of communication: between the members of the artists’ working group, but also between the sender and the receiver—or more precisely, between the creator and the spectator.

As for the first aspect, sociological studies clearly show that effective and beneficial communication cannot be established among individuals without them first getting to know each other. That's why all members of the Workshop are encouraged to discover and learn as much as possible about the personal traits of their peers. At the same time, the way each person presents themselves to the group—without concealment, without lies, without distorting reality in an effort to make oneself out to be more attractive, more intelligent, or somehow more special than the others—could pave the way toward honest, “noise”-free communication. All these aspects will be analysed at length in the present work.

As for the second aspect, dealt with by aesthetics—namely the communication between the two poles of the theatrical phenomenon: creation and reception—since ancient times, theatre theorists and practitioners have understood that their work is essentially intended to be appreciated by the audience. It is nonsensical to imagine a performance... without spectators. Some creators have even focused on the “conscious manipulation of the spectator,”¹⁰ concluding that audience reactions fall into two categories: affective-emotional and cerebral. The topic of reception and its governing principles will be explored in detail in the second volume of the Course.

However, the most important point is that, during the Actor's Art Workshops, the issue of reception must be entirely excluded. The interpersonal relationships that will develop, as well as the fulfillment of the need for communication, will be circumscribed exclusively by the artistic working group. The actors will engage with the specific issues of the craft, working together with their colleagues, discovering the beauty and fascination of our art.

¹⁰ Apud, Grotowski, Jerzy, *Dialogul neîntrerupt al teatrului în secolul XX [The Uninterrupted Dialogue of the Theatre in the 20th Century]*, Vol. II, Ed. Minerva, Buc., 1973, p. 332