

2. MEDEA. A MOTHER – CREATION LABORATORY³⁰

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Abstract: *One of the challenges which an arts' professor faces in the XXIth century is "the need to refresh". Therefore, it is essential to find out efficient teaching-learning methods which imply the creative involvement of the students, in order to get an organic learning as a result, but also in order to provoke a superior degree of responsibility towards the process itself and, last but not least, towards their future profession. That's why we chose to work with a group of students based on the theatre-laboratory system, they getting involved in every step, from the choice of the text to the improvisation, until the making of the final show.*

Key words: *laboratory, workshop, Ancient Greek Theater, mask, marionette*

1. Introduction

What is Theatre? This is the question Peter Brook proposed his collaborators to ask themselves before every rehearsal. And he obviously began this "exercise" with himself. Was it an overstatement? Or was it more like a spiritual yet pragmatic technique? To know WHAT you do and WHY you do it. Do musicians and painters have to ask themselves daily (or as often as they can) the same question? They might have to. But as for Theatre this question is a must. Because Theatre "is not" something. Theatre is always changing; it is reinventing, constructing and revealing itself only through direct personal experience. Consequently the education theories that place the student in the middle of the learning process can be successfully applied in the theatre field.

Students are taught certain techniques, elements etc. that they adjust to their own personalities and physical skills, but they must be led to discover the things they have to acquire during this process of learning by themselves. It is now time to introduce the notion of "workshop" or "laboratory". The workshop implies and provides several learning conditions. It is based on total trust: the word "mistake" doesn't have its place here; creativity will then freely develop. In the creation process on given themes the teacher points out certain theoretical aspects, when they come out. These will subsequently be easier and solidly assimilated. In the teaching process of drama students a basic question arises from the very first year of studies: how long does the creative workshop process have to last and when does it have to "end" in a performance? Students usually have an "illustrative" collective performance at the end of their 3rd year of

³⁰ Considerations on the laboratory-show *medea. a mother*, 2nd year of studies students, Drama-Puppeteering section, PhD. lecturer Aurelian Bălăiță, George Enescu national University of Arts, Iași, Drama Department, coordinators PhD. Assist. Dumitriana Condurache – drama concept, PhD. lecturer Anca Ciofu – animation techniques, masks, marionettes, PhD. prof. Alexandru Petrescu – musical training, PhD. candidate Beatrice Volbea – stage movement

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drama studies that is the model for their future work as actors, actor-puppeteers or directors in terms of stages, conditions and form of the creation process.

2. Discussions

Both terms: “workshop” and “laboratory” can be successfully used in the present situation. According to its definition a workshop is that particular place where one learns how to work in a job or an art in a practical way. In addition, the laboratory has a research and experimental side, a creative “working ground”; in terms of theatre, the dictionary contains nowadays the explanation for the **theatre-laboratory** term that has been adopted from Grotowski's “theatre-laboratory”. Theme is essential in the evolution for a workshop. It helps acquire new technical means, discover new important meanings for the present day human being manifestations. We chose practising on Ancient Greek themes and texts to explore vocal, sounds, movement, mask/ marionette means. Using multiple techniques within the same creative workshop allows the future actor-puppeteer to experience a unity of expression; working with them separately may not allow him to integrate them in the process in an appropriate way. Our students were involved in both choosing the texts and proposing scenic elements while making a lot of improvisation exercises.

They were first asked to advance proposals with monologues from Ancient Greek theatre that they would find relevant for both the messages they conveyed and the characters the students could physically and mentally embody. This stage was followed by a longer stage of improvisation (individual or collective) on certain themes based on or taken from a number of texts in specific situations with combined means: text-marionette, situation-marionette, text-marionette-mask, marionette-mask etc. The aim was to solve specific problems, to select specific means and actions and to communicate within the group to offer solutions for collective themes. The improvisation exercises with marionettes were based on previous studies on actor-puppet relationship starting from *Man and Divinity* theme while the mask exercises originated in *Me and the Other* theme, where white masks were the reflections of students' faces. There were also new themes inspired from the chosen monologues and their characters: *Birth, Abortion, Infanticide, Matricide*. The students were asked to improvise on the essential themes of monologues by means of movement and/ or sound or text using their acting skills, the mask or marionette, in groups or individually. Juxtaposing the text/ Ancient Greek theatre themes and mask/ marionette presence means uniting essences of humanity. The Ancient Greek tragedy advances limit situations that, after plunging the human being into their abysses, make him transcend to a superior conscience. In this particular sense Medea is a crucial character, a paradoxical, scandal-like spirit.

No matter how rationally we approach this theme, we may be mistaken. We may take sides with Anger, Hatred, Murder. We cannot cut this parable into pieces; we can do nothing but take it as it is yet try to understand its meanings just as in a Japanese koan. How else can we approach the mystery of a mother's love for her children that eventually turns into hatred that makes her kill them

with a force and anger that equal her desire to punish her betraying husband? Or that she and her dead children are finally carried to Heaven in a chariot sent by gods? Medea was obviously not a random title given to the play. But as present day times are no longer heroic we chose our workshop to be entitled after her but using a small *m* as a symbol of the anonymous character of the grieving mother. It is about “a” *medea* that is actually the mother who out of too much grief becomes extremely violent towards those she loves most; she becomes inhuman. “People spend most of their lives «wearing masks» to hide their weaknesses, fears, uncertainties, shame” (Jackson, 2016, p. 114).

We consequently used the mask, this lifeless yet sacred and meaningful *object* to suggest in a most appropriate manner the idea of motherhood that goes far beyond negative limits. The student-actors wore the mask on their face, on their neck or on the top of their head in a most unusual way that kept them bent down in such a way as to physically suggest dehumanization, on their belly (standing for the mother-unborn child relationship); they animated the mask or they used the mask-object as such or to suggest other objects. As a stage means, the mask can do what the actor alone cannot: it can embody two things at a time. The white mask that resembles the face of its wearer is a symbol of the other “self”, but also of the Stranger that we see reflected in the Other, a moment of metaphysical bewilderment: it is I and yet it is Another. Therefore the relation between the two is sometimes harmonious, sometimes violent.

Technically speaking, a mask does not alter only the actor's image, it involves changes in his whole body: arms, back, legs, breathing, voice/ speech, all converging towards an unrealistic character. This is an important aspect when playing Ancient Greek texts that are imbued with poetry and require stage means that render critical situations by means of essentialized physical and vocal actions that intensify movement, situations, emotions. It was not an easy process to get the students (while working on their own) to overcome their limits in order to obtain a specific body expressivity to help intensify the impact of the mask on the audience. It became very clear to us that a tight relationship among the three elements, human being-mask-marionette would make the performance more coherent in the end, all guided by the same directing idea: mothers that give birth in vain to children in a world that keeps declining and looks more like a shipwreck sinking to the bottom of an ocean of despair, hatred, terror and violence.

For this stage representation made of text/ movement parts, movement parts or sound/ movement/ rhythm parts, we opted for the classic short string marionette. Its tragic characteristic is due to its being under a permanent control and “dominated” by another presence such as in destiny (gods, passions, mothers); its fragility³³ and “nakedness” with no face or clothes or any other “accessory” were of great help in representing the born/ unborn children doomed to death/ nothingness. The marionette is an extremely sensitive stage

³³ “The movements made by a marionette are the result of its reactions to gravity. The marionette can fall down on stage lifeless at any moment and the image it creates is tragic”, Cristian Pepino, *Modalitatea estetică a teatrului de păpuși*, București, U.N.A.T.C., 1993, p. 38 (trad. n.)

means, very complicated in terms of manipulation, but very impressive in the sense that its mere presence on stage can convey the idea of human being's solitary existence. It is an almost mythical symbol of human being with no cultural or civilisation external form, alone with himself, with his fellow people or God. It stands for the human being as he was represented in Ancient Greek theatre.

On the other hand, the marionette is considered one of the most “realistic” puppets as it is capable of making human movements it renders in a very appropriate manner. It was very challenging for students to succeed in mastering the marionette and work with it in a different, more metaphorical, poetical key. They discovered that marionette does not rely on palpable things, it reveals the truth of inner feelings by making gestures and movements “similar” to ours, yet conveying “different” meanings. On her debate over the actor-puppeteer's *double* that is also man's *double*, Annie Gilles claimed that: “At a close look the 'realistic' marionette looks more like a big fake. Its naturalistic effects play an important role in the way it is received by the audience. But as opposed to the actor-human being that embodies human beings, the marionette is anti-naturalistic as a sign in the same manner as it is inert as an object” (Leahu, 2008, p. 71).

We mentioned in the first lines of the present article that during this Ancient Greek theatre workshop students became our creative partners; very important in its progress were the preliminary stages: mask and marionette building, choosing scenery and costumes, musical pieces, choreography of the live rhythms etc. The whole process was guided and supervised by us, the professors, especially when it came to organizing all the ideas and the moments we had proposed up to then. This was one of the first “total” experiences the students had gone through when they were offered the chance to experiment all the stages of making a performance. As teaching method we used both experiential learning and learning through practice.

Learning through practice allowed them to organically acquire certain means that would not have been as useful as that if learned in separate contexts for future performances as they worked only in a complementary way. Furthermore, learning speech, movement and manipulation techniques separately does not allow appropriate accumulation as the process is fundamented on parallel learning. Also, learning by problem solving, basically workshop themes, shortens somehow the learning process of certain techniques, “we truly learn only what we are interested in” (Heron, 1992 *cit in* Illeris, 2014, p. 262-263). Practical learning also has a research side, at the end of which new forms and means are born: “If learning implies acquiring only given cultural knowledge, it is mere learning. But if it involves knowledge no other person has, it becomes research. Learning as a research method overlaps with learning what we already know, but also extends beyond that [...]” (*idem*, p. 259). Experiential learning does not involve only acquiring new acting techniques; it also refers to the future actor's acquiring new skills: understanding inner changes that contribute to improving acting knowledge and establishing human relationships

that are basic in practising this job which relies very much on team work. As Robin Usher put it: “Experiential learning may be developed [...] as a pedagogic strategy in [university, a. n.] curricula based on courses or on skill-based programs” (Usher, 1997 *cit in* Illeris, 2014, p. 262-263).

3. Conclusions

Our goal was to have our students acquire new means of expression in the art they were studying to be used in future culturally and spiritually relevant situations. They were “confronted” with what is basic in the learning process and creative work as future actors-puppeteers (or any other actor), the audience. They performed in two debate-shows during the Open Doors Week within the “George Enescu” University and the International Education Festival in Iasi. In the open talks with high school students that followed it was obvious that the symbolic language used in the performance based on ideas that were common to all present there despite age as well as its message had reached each of them.

Last but not least, workshop activities aim at guiding the students on the way to acquire a personal perspective on the acting they wish to promote on stage as well as a certain autonomy in planning their future careers (as freelancers or private theatre employees with abilities to organize their own performances and tours). Such working method is obviously very challenging for the professors involved in the workshop; they have to be very careful in choosing the student group that can fulfil such workshop requirements. A clear answer is that they should adapt the level and the objectives of the workshop to each group according to the students' power of understanding, artistic skills and cultural knowledge which are to be estimated in accordance with their informational background (this one going to be enlarged, but still keeping balance with the present level).

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