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**The Use of The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola in Theatrical
Creative Processes**

Summary

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Contents

The Thesis of the Research 6

1. The Church Fathers' Accusations Against the Theatre. The Dawn of a New Theatre. 18

1.1. Introduction 18

1.2. The Opinions of the Church Fathers on Theatre 20

1.3. Theatre on the Periphery? 28

1.3.1. Martyr Actors as Parts of Religious Propaganda 30

1.3.2. Dramatic Elements in the Church. First Examples 32

1.4. The First Christian Interpretations of Pagan Theatre 36

2. The History of Jesuit School Drama 41

2.1. Introduction 41

2.2. A Brief History of Jesuit Theatre 42

2.3. The Influence of the *Ratio Studiorum* on Jesuit School Theatre 56

2.4. The Aims of Jesuit Theatre 59

2.4.1. Didactic and Rhetorical Aims 60

2.4.2. Moral and Religious Education 60

2.4.3. The Defence of the Catholic Faith Against Protestant Religions 61

2.4.4. Aesthetic and Entertaining Function 61

2.4.5. Creating a Quality Dramatic Literature 62

2.5. The Main Genres of Jesuit Drama 63

2.6. Occasions for Performing Jesuit School Plays 68

2.7. Source Material 69

2.8. Stage, Scenery, Costume and Props 74

2.9. The Amateur Actors 78

2.10. The Playwrights 80

2.11. The Audience 82

2.12. Music and Dance 83

2.13. Jesuit School Drama in Hungary 86

2.14. Polemical Plays 88

3. Spiritual Exercises 91

3.1. Historical Context and the Formation of the Text 93

3.2. Structure 95

3.2.1. First Week – Recognizing Sin and Experiencing Mercy 95

3.2.2. Second Week – The Path of Decision and Following 97

3.2.3. Third Week – The Contemplation of the Suffering Christ 98

3.2.4. Fourth Week – The Joy of Resurrection and the Fullness of Divine Love 99

3.2.5. The Inner Dramaturgy and System of Practices of the Ignatian Way of Prayer 100

3.3. The Discernment of Spirits 108

3.4. Ignatian Pedagogy 110

3.5. The Ignatian Spiritual Exercises Today 114

3.5.1. The Spiritual Exercises of Everyday Life 115

3.5.2. The Spiritual Exercises of Weekdays 116

3.6. Roland Barthes and the Logothesis 118

3.6.1. Images 123

3.6.2. Text Structure 124

3.6.3. Segmentation 127

3.6.4. The Void 128

4. Theatrical Creation and Ignatian Spiritual Exercises: Parallels of Self-Surrender, Attention, and Meaning-Making 130

4.1. The Actor's Work with Himself 130

4.1.1. Attention and Presence 131

4.1.2. Emotional Memory 132

4.1.3. Meaning-Making in Creation 133

4.1.4. Alienation or Deepening 134

4.1.5. The Meeting of the Actor's and the Role's Goals 140

4.1.6. Actor and Meditation 143

4.1.7. Imagination 146

4.1.8. Incarnation 148

4.1.9. Denudation 149

4.1.10. The Prayer of Form and the Theatre of Form 151

4.1.11. Text and Stage	152
4.1.12. The Actor's Work with Fellow Creators	153
4.1.13. The Actor's Work with the Audience	154
4.1.14. Contemporary Tendencies and Trends	155
4.1.15. <i>Contemplatio in actione</i>	156
4.1.16. The Personal Voice	157
4.1.17. Concentration	158
4.1.18. Spiritual Director or Director	159
4.2. Theatre as Ritual Action	161
4.2.1. Richard Schechner's Concept of Ritual	164
4.2.2. Rasabox – Visceral and Medieval	166
4.2.3. Jerzy Grotowski's Concept of Ritual	167
4.2.4. The Aesthetics and Ethics of Poverty	169
4.2.5. Theatre as Liturgical Play	171
4.2.6. Non-Tragic Drama	172
4.2.7. Mystical Conception	173
4.2.8. The Motionless Stage	174
4.2.9. Conversations with Sheryl Sutton	175
4.2.10. Pilinszky's Transcendent Vision	175
4.2.11. What Does the Actor Believe In?	178
4.2.12. The Mysticism of Misfortune	180
4.2.13. In the Open Field of Literature	183
5. Creation as the Spiritual Exercises of Everyday Life	186
5.1. The Spiritual Exercises as a Handbook for Actor Guidance?	187
5.2. When the Day Is Permeated by the Aura of the Character	188
5.2.1. Opening the Magical World of the Rehearsal Room	189
5.2.2. Passage Between the Conscious and the Subconscious	196
5.2.3. The Director's Responsibility	197
5.2.4. Embedding the Actor's Experiences into the Directorial Concept	200
5.2.5. Standing Up from Meditation	201
5.2.6. Learning to Decide Alongside the Rehearsal Process	202

5.2.7. Crisis Management	202
5.2.8. The Relationship Between the Individual and the Group	203
5.2.9. The <i>Examen</i> as Reflection on the Rehearsal Process	204
5.3. Experiences So Far	205
5.4. The Goal Is a New Beginning	211
Bibliography	213

Introduction

The profession of theater director involves a complex combination of artistic creativity, communication skills, leadership, and psychological sensitivity. The director coordinates the entire theatrical process, being responsible not only for the final product but also for the dynamics of the team. The success of a performance depends on their decisions, which influence both the cast and the audience. This research explores the possibility of integrating the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola into theatrical practice as a method of deepening the creative process and cultivating artistic and human awareness.

Historical and theoretical context

The relationship between the Church and theater has long been marked by tension. The Church Fathers criticized ancient theater for its potential to stimulate passions and immoral behavior. However, in the 16th century, with the development of Jesuit pedagogy and the Ratio Studiorum, school theater was recognized as an educational and rhetorical tool. Jesuit dramas quickly became popular and contributed to the evolution of European theater. In this context, a parallel emerges between spiritual experience and theatrical creation.

Ignatian Spiritual Exercises

Ignatius of Loyola's seminal work, *Spiritual Exercises*, offers a structured method for focusing attention, using imagination, and reflecting on one's life. The practitioner is invited to contemplate scenes from the Gospels, to actively engage with them, and to experience them through the senses and inner images. The basic principles, *consolatio* and *desolatio*, describe the inner movements that can guide discernment. Daily repetition and the introspective exercise of examination consolidate the process of self-knowledge and transformation.

Beyond its religious purpose, the Ignatian method represents a flexible and profound framework with potential for application in creative artistic processes. With their emphasis on personal freedom, attention to emotional reactions, and activation of the imagination, the exercises can be reinterpreted as theatrical tools.

Parallels between spirituality and theater

Numerous theater theorists and practitioners have pursued goals similar to those of the Ignatian exercises. Stanislavski explored emotional memory and the actor's identification with the role; Grotowski developed "poor theater," centered on the spiritual transformation of the actor; Brecht proposed critical distancing; Perceval sought a form of meditative theatricality. All these directions reflect a concern for the actor's interiority and for the potential of theater to become an existential experience. Thus, Ignatian exercises can be brought into dialogue with modern theatrical methods, not to replace them, but to complement and nuance them.

Research methodology

The analysis was based on the following line of thinking:

- Analysis and understanding of the Spiritual Exercises. Since the work is fundamentally religious and serves spiritual purposes, theological analysis was inevitable. This was followed by a broader understanding of the work from psychological, philosophical, historical, and literary perspectives, so that this knowledge could form the basis for further practical work when taken out of its theological context. Trying out the method in accordance with its original purpose also served to understand the Spiritual Exercises and to experience how they work.
- Studying the life and work of St. Ignatius of Loyola, researching his other writings (e.g., *The Pilgrim*, *The Diary*, correspondence, the *Constitutions and Supplementary Rules of the Society of Jesus*, *Ratio Studiorum*). The thoughts of his contemporaries and colleagues in the order about St. Ignatius. Analysis of the era by historians and theologians. History of the Jesuit order. These helped me understand the period, atmosphere, and political and religious situation in which the Spiritual Exercises were written.
- Jesuit school dramas appeared at practically the same time as the Spiritual Exercises. Saint Ignatius himself suggested that the scenes be performed in Jesuit schools. It is true that at that time the aim was only to practice eloquence in Latin, but soon the plays of the Jesuit schools became so popular that they gained importance in the history of theater. I considered it very important to analyze the *Ratio Studiorum*, which laid the foundations for Jesuit school theater.
- In the 16th century, ancient (pagan) authors were still considered undesirable works by the Catholic

Church. However, the Jesuits studied them and incorporated their conclusions into their theories of drama. Since the early Christian Church was the strongest opponent of ancient theater, I was interested in how they interpreted it and what their objections were. But analyzing the discourses of the Church Fathers became more than just literary research; it shed light on the many ways in which theater was interpreted, and some of their comments are still inspiring today. The two historical presentations greatly helped me understand the relationship between the Church and theater, as well as the context of the emergence of Jesuit school theater and how it became an important cultural product of the entire Catholic Church.

- Searching for connections between the Spiritual Exercises and theater (e.g., creation, spiritual journey, imagination as an inner stage, spiritual reactions, use of the senses during the discovery of the text). It was important to identify and analyze those areas that are not specifically part of St. Ignatius' spiritual exercises, but which are nevertheless imbued with the spirit of the Spiritual Exercises.

- St. Ignatius offers a solution for emptying oneself during prayer, for advancing toward inner purification, and for finding spiritual peace and tranquility. Very similar ideas are found in the writings of János Pilinszky and Simone Weil. Their analysis was important because they reflected the same thing: silence, suffering, and vulnerability are the spaces where God can speak to us. Pilinszky and Weil's ideas contributed greatly to proving the thesis and confirmed that the 500-year-old Ignatian idea can be transposed into other contexts.

- Since Spiritual Exercises uses a personal, non-rational approach, I was interested in how theater professionals with the same mindset saw and experienced this. This led to the study of 20th-century directors. St. Ignatius and certain figures in modern theater theory—using different language—seek the same thing: how to bring people into an intense, reflective, transformative state. The goal is not only aesthetic or religious, but existential: people should be present, sensitive, and capable of transcending themselves, either in a role or before God. The fact that not only theoretical experts but also theater directors have conducted similar research confirms that the methods of the Spiritual Exercises can be used in the theatrical creative process. At the same time, I was interested in how the Spiritual Exercises differ from these 20th-century theories.

- I considered it important to present my ideas to my colleagues and fellow creators and receive feedback from them. I analyzed how receptive they were to a method different from what they were used to, how much they resonated with a more spiritual approach, and what type of personality would reject the method and could only work in a familiar trial process. These conversations were not

specifically included in the doctoral thesis because they were not structured and consistent occasions. At the beginning of the research, the goal was to create a practical phase, but during the process, I realized that this did not fit into the structure of the thesis. Thus, the practical sessions were not systematically evaluated, but they greatly helped in refining the method and formulating conclusions. The last point on the list is how I consider the integration of the Spiritual Exercises into the theatrical creative process to be feasible, but this was parallel to the other research throughout the thesis. There was a specific method that I was able to try in my productions or in rehearsal preparation, and I believe that the spirit of the Spiritual Exercises has permeated my working methods.

Practical Applications in the Rehearsal Room

The essence of spiritual exercises, focusing attention, activating the imagination, and deep work on self-awareness fit perfectly with a directorial attitude that raises not only aesthetic but also existential questions during the creative process. It is not my goal to directly incorporate spiritual content into the work process, but I am convinced that these layers are present during the creative process. If we manage to work with them in the rehearsal room, this will be reflected in the power of the performance and will also be perceptible to the audience. However, since theater is an extremely subjective field, the use of spiritual exercises is not a method whose effect or power can be measured by the audience. As a director, my goal is to examine whether parallels can be drawn between the way the spiritual exercise leader accompanies the spiritual practitioner and the way the director leads the rehearsal process and directs the work of the actor or other creative partners. Since I work within the traditional framework of a stone theater, the exercises must function within an existing system. I believe it is possible to conduct rehearsals in a traditional theater that is not based on the classic director-actor hierarchy, where the director's concept gives the actor space to find their own voice, and the work process does not consist of assigning tasks to be completed.

Once we have precisely defined our common goal, I believe that my task as a director is first and foremost to inspire the creative team, to synthesize the creative ideas that arise in the rehearsal room, and to incorporate the actors' ideas into the performance.

One of the central methods of the Spiritual Exercises is for the person praying to imagine scenes from the Gospel and actively participate in them. This type of imaginative exercise can be compared to a fundamental technique of acting: the method of putting yourself in someone else's shoes, identifying

with them, and experiencing things as if they were real. The goal of the Ignatian method is to learn and execute the technique correctly and to use it regularly during rehearsals. During the exercise, the participant not only observes the scene from the outside, but also experiences it with their body, soul, and imagination, just like an actor. I believe it is possible to conduct rehearsals in a traditional theater that is not based on the classic director-actor hierarchy, where the director's concept gives the actor space to find their own voice, and the work process does not consist of assigning tasks to be completed.

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This method can work in text-centered performances, where the text must be understood and mastered as deeply as possible. In performances where a particular text is adapted for the stage, the text used as a starting point can be developed and expanded upon.

Saint Ignatius pays special attention to the emotional and spiritual reactions of the person praying, the motives that animate them, and the place where inner change takes place. This is known as discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*), an internal compass that helps us navigate the decisions in our faith and daily life. St. Ignatius believed that two types of spiritual movements constantly alternate in the soul: consolation (*consolatio*) and desolation (*desolatio*). Using this internal compass, the creator can constantly sense what state they are in during their theatrical work. Simply being aware of these movements can influence creative behavior and performance. For example, an actor may become aware of how a particular rehearsal, text, partner's performance, or director's instructions have affected them. This reflection allows the actor to focus not only on the external modeling of the role, but also to monitor the role and their own internal movements.

Imagination exercises can be useful not only in character development, but also in creating the visual and auditory universe of a performance. Visualizing or imagining a scene can open up new perspectives in creative work. In this case, theatrical images are not born from what we want to see, but from what we feel inside when we imagine a particular scene. This sensitive, introspective work is very similar to the meditative approach used in spiritual exercises.

The most important aspects of spiritual exercises include calming down, focusing attention, emptying the mind, and self-reflection. All of these are factors that become crucial during the rehearsal process. The pressure that the premiere date exerts on the creative team is a complicated factor. As a director, my goal is to distract the actors from the (sometimes overwhelming) premiere date and the problems raised by institutional constraints. I want to guide them to discover and experience the joy of creation.

When creating a performance, the energy in the rehearsal room is constantly changing; here it is particularly important for the team to be able to move in one direction and focus on a single goal. Conscious control of attention, shared reflection, and the inclusion of daily moments of silence can even become the basis of the desired rehearsal method. The practice of reviewing the day at the end of the day (examination), recommended by St. Ignatius, when the practitioner reflects on what has happened within them, can be a useful tool in rehearsals.

In this way, the actor or creator not only evaluates the rehearsal on a technical level, but can also observe more deeply what moved them, what caused resistance, and where their connection to the stage material lies. This enhances presence, creative self-awareness, and emotional intelligence. It supports not only the director's intention but also the actors' inner journey.

From a research perspective, it was important for me to discover that the Jesuits did not use the Spiritual Exercises in preparing their performances. They treated the teaching and administration of spiritual exercises separately. I found no mention of them using any method of prayer from the spiritual exercises to arrive at certain images or staging solutions. For students, writing and learning the text, or even appearing on stage, were just a means of learning.

In conclusion, theatrical work is for me both a practical and a spiritual activity. My goal is not to develop a new pre-performative working method, but rather to cultivate a new type of directorial and creative attitude in which the methodological elements of St. Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises are naturally incorporated into the rehearsal process. I am convinced that if the creative team immerses itself in subconscious practices, then becomes aware of its experiences and incorporates them into the performance, the audience will also feel the effect.

In this way, theater can become not only an aesthetic event, but also a psychological and communal one, capable of moving, provoking thought, and transforming.

Over the past five hundred years, many have recognized the theatrical nature of the Spiritual Exercises and have used them as inspiration in developing their own working methods. In this research, I have undertaken to examine Ignatian methods of prayer and basic spiritual concepts and transfer them into the theatrical creative process. I am doing this primarily with the aim of developing my own creative method.

Structure of the Thesis

The first pages of the thesis present the basic questions and hypotheses of the doctoral research and explain why these topics were included in the thesis. The first two chapters discuss the relationship between the Church and theater, while the third and fourth chapters analyze the method of the Spiritual Exercises and compare it to similar theatrical theories.

The first chapter examines the anti-theatrical manifestations of early Christian thought, with special reference to the criticisms of the Church Fathers, such as Tertullian, Hippolytus, Clement of Alexandria, and later authors. Theater, as an artistic and communal form, played a central role in ancient culture, but in Christian thought it was described as a moral danger, an institution that tempted people to sin and was pagan. The text focuses on Christian interpretations that accuse theater of arousing physical desires, promoting immorality, and being a form of idolatry. The analysis highlights how St. Augustine of Hippo departed from the largely similar line of argumentation of the Church Fathers, managing to examine the experience of catharsis in depth. In his book *De doctrina Christiana*, St. Augustine contrasts the Holy Scriptures and theater from a semiotic perspective.

The concept of theater is transformed in the works of Rabanus Maurus, Amalarius of Metz, and Remigius Altissiodorensis: instead of a physical performance, it takes on a symbolic, allegorical meaning. Based on the source material, it is clear that the Church Fathers' criticisms reflected deeper theological and anthropological principles, as the images, passions, and experiences conveyed by theater carried with them the possibility of corrupting the human soul. The chapter also discusses how the connection between theater and liturgy can be found in the early Church and how it developed later.

The second chapter presents a comprehensive and detailed, but not chronological, account of the development and heyday of Jesuit school theater. The text reviews the pedagogical, religious, and

rhetorical objectives of Jesuit school theater. Although not in a separate section, the text refers several times to the broader impact of Jesuit theater. The basic document of Jesuit pedagogy, *Ratio Studiorum* (1599), which allows the performance of plays but also sets restrictions, plays an important role. The other book analyzed at length is an interesting but lesser-known work of theatrical literature, *Dissertatio de actione scaenica*, written by Jesuit professor Franz Lang. The book, published in 1727, describes the correct posture chapter by chapter. From this, it can be seen that Jesuit school theater had moved beyond the simple halls of educational institutions and a text-centered approach. For this reason, a separate section deals with stage technology and visual elements. There are numerous 17th-century records of how many hundreds of actors participated in a public performance and how the triple series of requirements of the Baroque era (delight, instruction, inspiration) left its mark on the 18th century. Although not in a separate chapter, the text refers in several places to the broader impact of Jesuit theater. These references provide a broader and valuable context, showing that Jesuit school theater was not an isolated phenomenon but influenced certain directions in the development of European theater.

The third chapter presents the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola (1524) and their significance. Based on the experiences of the founder of the Jesuit order, the work aims to achieve inner freedom and to recognize and follow the divine will. This section presents the structure of the four-week spiritual exercises. In terms of theatrical methodology, the analysis of the use of the five senses, imagination exercises, instructions for directing attention, and body awareness was particularly important. The text explains why repetition is one of the central elements of the method (each day a prayer is repeated, summarizing the prayer experiences of the day). During the examination, or daily recollection, the individual reviews events outside of prayer in a fifteen-minute prayer exercise. This is where the discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*) mentioned earlier is analyzed. Ignatian pedagogy is presented through a study of how the order has put Ignatian traditions into practice in education and group activities. The conclusion of the first part of the chapter is that the Spiritual Exercises are not only a religious practice but also a universal inner journey that serves to deepen self-knowledge and one's relationship with God.

The second part of the chapter discusses Roland Barthes' theories on textual interpretation, particularly the concepts of *tnesis* and *logotesis*. Barthes' theory is presented, which discusses the relationship between text and reader, emphasizing the idea that the process of meaning formation is dynamic and subjective. This personal creation of meaning is important from a research perspective. Barthes takes the Spiritual Exercises out of their theological context and creates *logotesis*. In his

interpretation, the Spiritual Exercises are not just a religious practice, but a universal model for organizing and interpreting text, in which language, body, and perception together shape human experience. Based on this theory, the chapter concludes that St. Ignatius' method is relevant not only from a theological point of view, but also from a theatrical and creative point of view. Barthes emphasizes that aphasia occurs during spiritual exercises, and the supportive power of structure helps to overcome this condition. Here, too, the positive effect of space and time of retreat on spiritual and creative processes becomes evident. Comparing Barthes' reading with Ignatian practices allows us to rethink the internal structure of creation, self-knowledge, and mediation. All of this is relevant not only on a theoretical level but also from a practical point of view, in terms of creative processes and theatrical rehearsals.

The fourth chapter examines how the theatrical creative process can be linked to spiritual practices and what parallels and differences can be found between spiritual and artistic activities. It is noted that both spiritual practitioners and actors and directors exert significant inner effort on themselves, reflecting on their own lives, and through this they approach their creative task or turn toward God. This chapter analyzes theatrical methods similar to the contemplation of St. Ignatius. The theorists and practitioners examined include Konstantin Sergeyevich Stanislavsky, Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht, E. Meyerhold, Richard Schechner, Luk Percefal, János Pilinszky, and Simone Weil. The research focuses on actor training and creative methods that emphasize empirical, sensory discovery rather than rational, analytical thinking. Brecht's effect of rational alienation (*Verfremdungseffekt*) is presented as a counterpoint to the research. The text compares the methods of Declan Donnellan and Ivana Chubbuck. Since meditation will be part of the practical work, Kevin Page's 2018 research, which examined the extent to which meditation is used in actor training, will be presented.

The central point of the chapter is the juxtaposition of Stanislavski's ideas with those of St. Ignatius. An important aspect is the issue of emotional memory, which appears in both Stanislavski's method and that of St. Ignatius. The research also examines the possibilities of a profound and personal encounter with the text, in which, with the help of Ignatian imagination exercises, the actor works with his inner world and emotional memories, which can lead to new and fresh meanings in the encounter between the actor and the text. This opens up the possibility of applying elements of post-dramatic theater, where the emphasis is not on classical narratives, but on images and inner states.

The next topic of the study is the analysis of the concept of ritual in a theatrical and cultural context. This subchapter examines the nature and function of rituals from the perspective of several

disciplines (psychology, anthropology, ethnography, religious studies, theater studies). The ritual theories of Wolfgang Braungart, Arnold van Gennep, Victor Turner, Richard Schechner, and Jerzy Grotowski are analyzed. The main feature of Schechner's rasabox is visceral expression and the exclusion of thought, the essence of which can be compared to the theatrical use of the Ignatian method.

The last part of the chapter deals with János Pilinszky's creative imagination and the concept of evangelical aesthetics, which interprets the creative process not as a self-contained self-expression, but as a connection with transcendent reality. According to Pilinszky and Simone Weil, artistic creation is an act of returning to God, in which imagination plays a passive, receptive role rather than an active, creative one, opening up to higher truths.

The fifth chapter explores how the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola can be applied to the work of actors and directors. It is important to note that this chapter does not have a scientific tone, as it is based on rich experience, observations, and personal ideas. As such, it is often written in the first person singular. The text explores how Ignatian techniques help actors develop characters, deepen their stage presence, and navigate between the conscious and the subconscious. Topics such as the beginning of rehearsals, the use of imagination exercises, meditation on text and image, and reflection on the rehearsal process are analyzed. The rehearsal room is highlighted as a space for spiritual experiences. An important part of the chapter is the presentation of Luc Perceval's work, as the objectives of this research are very similar to Perceval's working methods.

Through meditation and mindfulness exercises, creators can deepen their inner peace and concentration. Some of the ideas covered in this section include: the Ignatian method can help manage various creative crises or conflicts that arise during the rehearsal process; the Ignatian approach and examination can help make conscious decisions and emphasize the importance of commitment. This chapter also illustrates that the use of Ignatian prayer methods is a possible theatrical method, in which, as a result of complete emptying, the content that emerges from emotional memory or the subconscious can provide the actor with form, direction, and ideas related to the role to be shaped.

The chapter illustrates how the personalized structure of the Spiritual Exercises helps the creator, as this is where the greatest similarity between directing and leading the Spiritual Exercises is found. For example, the director can precisely determine the course of the performance through the interpretation of the text, the portrayal of the characters, the set design, and the structure of the stage situations and sequences of stage actions. However, the director plays only a secondary role in how the

actor navigates this precisely paved path. The text explains why this can be considered personal freedom and how the actor has freedom of personal movement.

Conclusions

Theater and spiritual exercises share a common goal: the transformation of the human being through encountering one's own limits and opening up to the transcendent. Incorporating Ignatian principles into theater rehearsals is not a fixed method, but rather a creative attitude oriented toward reflection, freedom, and depth.

Thus, theater becomes more than an artistic act: it constitutes an existential and communal event, capable of inspiring inner change and provoking thought. The research demonstrates that the spiritual legacy of Ignatius of Loyola is relevant not only religiously, but also artistically and pedagogically, providing a fertile framework for contemporary theatrical creation. Its conclusion is that if the director has carefully charted the path as described above, then the actor can bring their character to life with confidence and freedom.

This doctoral thesis does not aim to develop another pre-performative acting technique. It seeks a practical way to respond to the creative difficulties of contemporary actors. The goal is to use Ignatian practices in a useful way in the creation of a performance. The Ignatian path can be viable in directing actors, even if they are not familiar with it. If the director prepares the task properly, the actor can easily learn and use it. Therefore, in this thesis, I not only explore a spiritual heritage, but also seek contemporary answers to some questions relevant to me regarding human freedom, faith, decision-making, and community responsibility.

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