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***The Role of the Gender – The Gender of the Role***

***(A szerep neme – a Nem szerepe)***

**THESIS ABSTRACT**

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# CONTENTS OF THE THESIS

INTRODUCTION -----	6
Motivation and Problem Statement -----	6
Structure -----	11
1. INITIAL APPROACH -----	16
1.1. The Difficulties of Definition -----	16
2. BILATERAL APPROACH – ”FEMININITY” AND ”MASCULINITY” -----	20
2.1. Change of Focus -----	20
2.2. Femininities and Masculinities -----	21
3. QUEER APPROACHES -----	32
3.1. About the Queer Ideology -----	32
3.2. The Drag -----	41
3.3. Three Examples: Izzard, Dunca and Vanessa van Durme -----	50
4. THE ANDROGYNOUS APPROACH – WHICH IS THE REAL ONE? -----	56
4.1. About the Term -----	56
4.2. The Cross-Dressing, as Objectivation of Androgyny -----	63
4.3. Androgyny In Popular Culture -----	66
4.4. Androgyny: Shakespeare -----	69
4.5. Androgyny: Oriental Theatre-----	72
5. APPROACH AND TRANSGRESSION – <i>CASTRATI</i> -----	76
5.1. The <i>Castrato</i> as A Temporary Phenomenon -----	76
5.2. The Physical Ambiguity of the <i>Castrato</i> . The Operation -----	78
5.3. The Voice of the <i>Castrato</i> -----	81
5.4. Basic Principles of the <i>Castrato</i> ’s Vocal Technique -----	85
5.5. The <i>Castrato</i> as Expression of A Paradigm Shift -----	87
5.6. Crisis Category and Postmodern Reflection -----	92
5.6. Digital “Survival” -----	94
6. APPROACH THROUGH DANCE: „STAYING ON POINTE DOESN’T HAVE GENDER” -----	97
6.1. Contemporary Deconstruction of Gender Roles of Classical Ballet -----	97
6.2. Dance-masculinities and Choreophobia -----	101
6.3. The <i>Trockadero</i> -----	107

7. THE VIEWER’S EYE AND THE ACTOR’S GENDER (APPROACH TO THE GAME OF GENDERS) -----	117
7.1. The Actor’s Sex – As the Viewer Sees It -----	117
7.2. On Cross-dressing: Examples of Shows -----	122
7.3. Camp and Theatricality -----	138
7.4. Overlappings: Bausch, Lear, Hamlet -----	142
7.5. Cross-dressing, as A Means of Destabilization of the Spectator -----	147
8. THE GENDER OF THE ROLE AND THE SEX OF THE ACTOR (QUESTIONNAIRE) -----	153
8.1. Problems and Designing the Questionnaire -----	153
8.2. The Structure of the Questionnaire -----	158
8.3. Breakdown of the Received Responses -----	161
8.3.1. Introductory and Identification Questions -----	161
8.3.2. The Institution and the Director -----	162
8.3.3. The Play -----	167
8.3.4. Preliminary Preparation for the Role -----	168
8.3.5. The Casting -----	171
8.3.6. Rehearsals -----	173
8.3.7. The Own Inner Journey In Researching the Role -----	183
8.3.8. The Subjective Interest -----	194
8.3.9. Subjective Feeling – Objective Play -----	204
8.3.10 Other Observations -----	217
CONCLUSIONS AND ADDITIONAL WAYS OF APPROACH -----	219
APPENDIX I. -----	226
APPENDIX II. -----	229
BIBLIOGRAPHY -----	239

## MOTIVATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The European (and not only European) theatre was for centuries *male-centered*: roughly speaking, the majority of the plays were written by men, men played in them, and men formed the main group of the theoreticians of stage art. Women „conquered" the stage much later (the opera stages even later).

This fact greatly influenced the development of European drama. It is well known that in the absolute majority of theatrical works there are notoriously more *male roles for male actors than female roles*.

A difference can be made between male and female *roles* and male/female *actors* who impersonated these roles. The relevance of the difference between these two categories must be stressed upon: first, it can be distinctly separated the group of the stage roles (*men's roles and women's roles*); on the other hand one could focus on *the attitude of the actors themselves towards the gender of the roles they are playing*. The thesis focuses on the second problem: *the actor's action and inner process through which he or she should display on stage the opposite sex of their biological role*. There is a basic concept which states that if one uses the requisites contrary to his/her biological sex, this makes his/her ridiculous to the outside world. On stage, this problem is much more complicated.

The *biological sex and social gender system* does not always overlap completely, so the study of the contradictions and differences between them in terms of the stage can be very productive, and could open up new perspectives. In the case of biological/social gender roles we are actually talking about *roles*, and where is there a greater justification for a research related to the role, than in the theater?

Since their appearance the *gender studies* radically reinterpreted different aspects of human culture. The central idea in the concept of the gender is that gender roles are to a very small extent determined by the biological features (which are indicated by the sex concept), and that in fact the gender discrimination is of a social nature. The "femininity" and "masculinity" concept is nothing else than a construction – i.e. *artificially created structure*. The concept of gender also points out to the *power relations* that are intended to be legitimized by biological differences.

The cultural research relevant to the thesis' topic is primarily an interdisciplinary way to evaluate the relationship between the performance of gender, sexual identity, the arts and dressing. Towards a more pragmatic point of view, the research analyses *what is the effect of these constructs of roles* (or inseparably the characteristics of the psychological income) *on the final performance and, more importantly, on acting?*

Contemporary theater traditions are characterized by *the rediscovery and revival of ancient forms of theatre*, scenical and casting solutions which remind us of older forms from theater history. But in the same time we can observe a re-conceptualization of these forms, a newer, more contemporary approach: newer content in older forms. (Especially in musical theater and *opera*.)

Another direction is the analysis of *the construction of the gender of theatrical roles and actors* (and the interactions of these) from the standpoint of social and gender paradigms, especially *the works showcasing sexually ambiguous or problematic roles*. The performances often have substantial *esthetic increment* by shifts of emphasis, opening up new dimensions of roles - so they can lead to a re-evaluation of the canon.

Being a practicing acting teacher here at the Faculty of Theatre and Television (Cluj), I had to face a fact that is probably not unknown to other teaching fellows working in the same field. In recent years, there is a *statistically significant increase in the number of female students at the acting department, and a significantly reduced proportion of male students*. The question is in what way affects the students, during their years of acting studies, the fact that in many instances women have to play men, and men should be women on stage (though the latter case is much rarer).

The stage presence of an actor is enriched thus with a dimension that - in most cases - is not owned by him/her *physically*. I consider this *a very empowering dimension of the actor*. There are several possibilities for achieving this: imitation and identification with the gender, or reflecting the diversity and alienation of it. This process inevitably leads to the actor/actress facing different taboos: taboos created by him/her and others (colleagues, family, public etc.) So in the second Appendix I describe a series of exercises and experiments that aim at these strategies, solving methods, tactics and tools that actors could use in these situations.

## **STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS AND THE IDEAS EXPRESSED IN THE CHAPTERS**

The thesis is divided in two major parts. In the first part of the research I tried to collect and group some of the results encountered during the study of the performativity of the gender. I tried a formulation of the ideas listed in thematic chapters ("approaches"), these chapters are mainly organized around a theme. The performativity of the gender was analyzed in recent decades in many books, essays, studies and other scientific products, to which references are made in the thesis. In the research I addressed topics and themes that have influenced and inspired me in drafting the questionnaire (that represents the second part of the thesis).

The first part of this thesis deals with various approaches to the problem, broken down in the following chapters:

- 1. Initial approach.** In the cultural research, art is interpreted as a social category, and cultural codes depend on gender and sex. Thus, the first ideas that I present show different models across the world, through which these codes operate. Gender studies deals with the performing body, therefore I considered it necessary the introduction and discussion of key concepts, the distinction between biological sex and social gender. In this regard, I am dealing with the difficulties of defining, but particularly attract attention to the fact that the relationship between biological sex and stage role of an actor is, in fact, very ambiguous.
- 2. Bilateral approach – „femininity” and „masculinity”.** These categories are considered as traditional base of operations related to the performativity of the gender, so it is necessary to clarify the concept behind them. One of the pioneers of research on masculinity is R. W. Connell; based on his research, formulated at the end of the last century (published in *Masculinities*), I try to

provide a brief history of the development and meanings of various types of masculinity. Also I give a brief overview of some ideas and categories related to masculinity (hegemony, subordination, complicity and marginalization). I describe the study of Nancy Chodorow, showing the importance of the social division of labor between the two genders. In this sense, I write about the process of formation of the gender ("doing gender"). Finally I get to Judith Butler, who established the social theory of the performativity of the gender. Conclusion of the chapter is that one cannot talk specifically about masculinity or femininity; instead, today we talk about the desirability and possibility of powers and male/female behavior. These conclusions, in fact, predict the very essence of my interrogation in the questionnaire.

3. **Queer approaches.** I start this chapter with the introduction of the *queer* concept. Following this, I present Butler's ideas on the construction of identity, and the performativity of the gender. Presenting the concepts of *drag* and cross-dressing, I refer at the same time to the two basic versions: drag queen and drag king. After briefly mentioning the "higher camp", I compare this category with the taste of "camp". The chapter ends with Eddie Izzard, British stand-up comedian with an ambivalent sexuality, and with the analysis of a contemporary Romanian performance (*Institute of Change*) by Paul Dunca.
4. **The androgynous approach.** After the presentation of the queer phenomenon, typical for our time, I jump back in time and culture to a category that is formed by the union of the various forces of opposite genders: the concept of androgyny. After explaining the term's etymology, I try to point out the wide availability of the term through a few cultural and historical references (the analyses made by Hamvas, Eliade; examples from Ovid, Plemos, French literature, culture of India, the *hijrsa*, pop culture etc.). In the last part of this chapter I deal with the androgyny concepts that relate to the theatre: after a detailed reference on some characteristics of Elizabethan theatre, I present two major studies of Jan Kott (about the sexuality of Rosalind from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and about the *onnagata* in Japanese Noh Theatre). I conclude the

chapter with a brief treatment of a contemporary phenomenon: the performances of the Takarazuka Revue.

- 5. Approach and transgression – *castrati*.** Two "musical" chapters follow, of which the first deals with the androgynous figure of the *castrato* from Baroque opera. Through his transgression the castrato is situated between the two systems of categorization of the gender. Although the Catholic Church had a pretty controversial position in relation to them, these singers were stars of the era. After analyzing the body of the castrated singer, I discuss different aesthetic issues related to it. Follow the details of their everyday professional training. The chapter briefly recalls the basic technical principles of the textbooks by famous castrated singers. I refer to the unisexuality theory of Laqueur, and finally I discuss possibilities of survival of the legacy left by the castrati, and I make references to descriptions of the postmodern position in relation to that.
- 6. Approach through dance.** In the second "musical" chapter I write about the performativity of the gender itself in dance. For a start, I am referring to the hierarchy of male and female in classical ballet (Burt). I drive the attention to the dance theatre (*Tanztheater*) of Pina Bausch, the choreographer that - through her subversive performances – achieves an effective transgression of the sexuality of the dancer-actor. I make references to feminist aesthetics that discuss the role of the male gaze. I describe a study done about the dancing of men (Bench), which concludes with the idea that for the interpretation of masculinity (for men), it is not necessarily required to get rid of one's femininity. I make reference to the concept of choreophobia (dancing as a destructive force, and the fear of dancing). After specifying some other phenomena and personalities related to problematic, I conclude the chapter with a case study (the *Ballet Trockadero* performances).
- 7. The viewer's eye and the actor's gender.** This chapter examines the cross-dressing in theatre. At the beginning of the chapter I draw attention to the hardships of the clarification of gender studies in relation to these issues in the theater. For a contemporary actress, it can represent a problem the fact that certain female roles were originally written for men (e.g. in the Elizabethan

theatre). The re-articulation of the way in which an actress is playing the female roles is immanent to the image of femininity. I quote at length a study examining these issues in three of the most famous plays of Shakespeare. Then I detail some examples of shows and stage directors who implement these mechanisms in general (e.g., Sándor Zsótér). As a conclusion, I affirm that the cross-dressing on stage has a powerful destabilising effect for the audience (and also for the actors). In this idea, I relate to the idea of camp.

The second part of my thesis is a questionnaire that examines what processes take place around creating a role, i.e. what happens when the actor has to play a role, the gender of which is contrary to the actor's biological sex?

In the first chapter of this, I talk about the issues and the development of the questionnaire. I tried to find answers to the question: what is happening when the actor is playing the role of the opposite sex? I've compiled a questionnaire to explore how my fellow actors "survive" in such situations: what are their reflections and issues. The survey attempts to describe and define the problems arising in such situations. The questions contained in the questionnaire cannot lead to wrong or misleading answers, but merely to personal ones. Certain questions already formulate some pre-determined response options, but the actors were free to reflect with their own thoughts. The size of the responses received shows a particular variety. The questions refer mainly to these problems:

- General information on the role of the actor in question (played in the theater, or any other medium),
- the text of the play (classic or contemporary),
- if there were any preliminary studies in relation to the role,
- to what extent has reflected the casting of the actors their gender (that is, if the casting of an actor in a role whose gender differed from the actor's sex was based on a predetermined, directorial conception, or if it was a necessity in other cases),
- what comments does the actor have about the rehearsal,
- if portraying the opposite sex represented a professional challenge for the actor,
- the critical reception that the portrayal received after the play's opening etc.

Based on the answers the following conclusions can be drawn: for the composition of such a role, it has no relevance if the actor in question is a member of a repertory theatre or an alternative one. But the actors do feel a greater degree of comfort when the interpretation of those types of roles is required by great directors or masters of the theatre (in the answers very often appeared the name of Silviu Purcarete, as one of the most influential directors currently in Romania) Most of the shows mentioned in the questionnaire are based on classical plays (Shakespeare, Goldoni, ancient Greeks, or the Romanian Caragiale); in this sense, there is a surprising lack of contemporary pieces.

In connection with the processes of preparation for the role, it cannot be said with absolute certainty, that these processes differ largely from the traditional type of repetitions. It has been noted, however, that the interchanges of the gendered cross-dressing role position it as an integral part of the directorial vision. The proper interpretation of the role represents for the majority of actors a positive thing, they consider it a challenge and a good experience. In the opinion of the actors who responded, the challenge lies in the different aspects of their artistic work. One of the most progressive research findings is that the ambivalence of the gender may prove very productive for an actor: it facilitates the identification of certain structural features with attributes of the opposite sex, thereby giving him multiple identifying paths.

In the end, the answers shape up another idea that refers to the actors' motivation: the performativity of the gender as a form of survival of the children's game. Because the children's game doesn't know this differentiation of the gender. It is later acquired through socialization. Playing, you can attempt to deconstruct the gender: the success of it depends on the individual will.

The work ends with two appendices. In the first, I do a quick review of shows played in the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj Napoca, between 1992 and 2007. These performances highlighted the problems contained in my research.

During the preparation of the thesis and the research for it, I have conducted, together with my acting students, several exercises that link to the subject of investigation. These indicate a possible practical approach to the issues discussed. The experiments still continue, however, in the Appendix 2, I give a brief description of the main areas of it. The

performed tasks, the pedagogical and artistic performance of the different exercises, the enthusiasm of students motivates me to continue the examination of these directions.

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## **KEY-WORDS**

actor (actress), androgyny, classical ballet,

castrato, identity construction,

dance, female, femininity,

gender, camp taste,

male, masculinity,

queer, performativity,

social gender role, gender role,

theatrical role, biological gender (sex),

Elizabethan theater, oriental Theatre

transgression, cross-dressing