"BABEȘ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY OF CLUJ-NAPOCA

Theatre and Film Faculty

Theatre Doctoral School

Thesis Summary

Therapy through art and in art

Psychological and artistic creation strategies in support of the theatre actor

PhD candidate:

Sofonea Alexandra

PhD advisor:

Prof. Univ. Dr. Laura Teutișan

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Contents

Key-words

Actor's psychology, expressive therapies, state of flow, occupational stress, creative block, support through psychotherapy , theatre-psychology relationship.

Argument

Art and science both stem from the innocent and inquisitive gesture of carefully observing one's environment – be it outside or inside oneself. Both fields formulate questions and answers of universal relevance, using information for knowledge and creation, relying heavily on creativity and innovation. Art and science intersect in multiple points, sketching through these overlaps a map of human depth.

Theatre and Psychology form a particularly interesting relationship regarding the study of human behaviour. The stage – and the rehearsal studio – is a real exploration field of the psyche, a place where both the actor and the psychologist can collect precious data. In the current paper I have focused on two main, interconnected ideas: the usefulness of a close, practical and mutually beneficial collaboration between Psychology and Performing Arts, and the need to pay more attention to the physical, mental and emotional health of the performing artist.

Decades ago, psychology embarked on the search for answers to questions related to the process of artistic creation and the act of performing. Theories and tools in this field have been and continue to be used to better understand the psychological mechanisms active in actors and spectators, in the context of building, performing or viewing a performance. Stanislavski,

Delsarte, Meyerhold are just a few of the artists and theorists who have explicitly used the resources of Psychology in stage practice and actor training. Discoveries and ongoing research in the fields of Psychology and Neurosciences inspire dramatic texts, create new interpretations of classical texts, help artists formulate and adapt working methods, seek solutions to creative blocks. Psychology also serves in managing social tensions inside work teams and psychological and emotional tensions that frequently occur in the professional artistic activity.

The acting profession comes with a number of challenges, some being obvious to the general public – such as exposure to a crowd that expects to be entertained and/or moved, or the requirement to be creative and spontaneous under pressure – , others being invisible to those outside the artistic field and left behind curtains in order to maintain the idealized image of this profession. A series of relatively recent actor studies have revealed important information about their physical and mental health, noting the clear presence of occupational stress in this field and a high rate of depression amongst its representatives (Maxwell, Seton, & Szabó, 2015; Prior, Maxwell, Szabó, & Seton, 2015; Robb, Due, & Venning, 2018). I tried to enumerate and discuss the difficulties faced by performing artists and also underline the needs and challenges of their profession, also noting aspects of performers` mentality and psychological profile, which make them both vulnerable and skilled in dealing with these problematic situations.

I think performing artists have the capacity to be their own life-coaches and therapists, given the proper space, time and information. The forms of support proposed in the paper wish to meet the artist along his/her process of self-development, while also providing help in situations of high tension, to avoid excessive distress and burnout. In this context, I consider the collaboration between performers and psychologists important. The information and support brought by the psychologist present in the rehearsal room can support the actor in his/her work, either in managing external factors that may become sources of distress (difficult relationships with team members or personal problems that affect work), or in addressing inner problems, such as performance anxiety, psychological and creative blocks, or emotional imbalance. Similarly, the information and example of the actor's own creative process can serve psychologists in understanding the mechanism by which the artistic act, through its transformative force, can move an individual, change perspectives, and serve as a therapeutic agent.

Mainly using current literature to outline the main assumptions, I also relied on personal observations, correlated with information collected from professional actors through interviews. I

also had an extensive collaboration with one of the participating actors, which involved informative and practical sessions and an autobiographical performance, all included in the case study.

Summary of each chapter

The paper is structured in 6 chapters. The first chapter focuses on the link between Psychology and Art, on how the collaboration between the two fields began and how it continues to grow. It underlines the depth of this link, based on both of the fields` main preoccupation with the mind and the human emotions – the in-depth study of art, in any form, gives rise to questions related to human psychology, while many theories in psychology use the artistic process and the creative personality as subjects in the study of human behaviour.

The second chapter is a closer look at the actor's working and training environments. In a structured manner, it aims to present a series of information that justifies the need to pay more attention to the psychological and emotional life of performing artists. The focus rests on the particular challenges that arise in an artist's life, starting with his/her years of training. The paper targets the aspects of managing external and internal conflicts within the creative process, and not the acting method and role-playing process in itself – there are no definitive conclusions regarding the actual and quantifiable effects of certain methods of interpretation in professional actors, and the opinions differ strongly, ranging from signalling the danger of emotional implication in role-play to stating that acting supports empathy and mind theory. Although I believe that there undoubtedly are *some* psychological risks related to the acting process in particular cases and contexts, I tend to think that they are insignificant compared to the risks stemming from the environment, perception and mentality in the profession and are intuitively solved by artists during practice, in a personal manner.

Chapter 3 tackles the subject of the psychological profile of the actor. Without suggesting that the psychological diversity of individual actors can be reduced to a profile formulated via psychological tests and questionnaires, noting the similarities present in many actors can provide answers – and raise many other questions – about their inner life and mental processes.

Attention and care for the psycho-emotional wellbeing of performing artists is the main subject introduced in Chapter 4. Approaches that take into account the psychological needs of artists are very important in the professional and training stages of actors. In this part of the paper

I include suggestions for structuring rehearsals and for training both acting teachers and students, and I talk about the need to openly approach issues that arise on stage, in the rehearsal studio or outside the workplace that may affect an actor`s activity. Integrating into the routine of actors certain exercises and gestures – containing important elements from the field of psychotherapy – that increase psychological resilience and reduce stress and internal tension may be very useful. In addition, Chapter 5 provides some definitions and information about psychotherapy and its applicability in different work environments. This information is intended to be a familiarization with the therapeutic techniques based on the creative act of art making. Starting from practices used in expressive therapies, artists can develop useful training exercises for personal development and their creative work. Although each form of expressive art therapy has its benefits and can be successfully integrated into the routine of professional artists, I consider Dance/Movement Therapy to be particularly beneficial to the actor.

The last chapter presents some data from the interviews conducted with actors and from the case study, addressing subjects such as emotional involvement, artistic blocks, criticism, the relationship with acting. In 2015 I interviewed 7 Romanian actors aged 27 to 44, all employees or collaborators of national or private theatre institutions around the country. I was interested in getting more in depth regarding the aforementioned subjects with the actors, to find different perspectives and concrete examples of situations in the artistic work environment. Following the observations and conclusions drawn from the interviews, I support the idea of the need to introduce an updated theatrical training model, according to the new results in the field of psychology, attentive to both the needs of the artists and their specific abilities. Practical work and extensive discussions with the collaborating actor have revealed that providing the artist with the right context to self-observe and ask questions without the pressure of (self)critical voices can generate a continuous process of self-analysis and development in him/her. I believe that most artists have such an "instinct" from the get-go, that also gets developed in the training phase, which can be inhibited, however, when the pressure of the professional environment no longer allows them to deal with this aspect. That is why a framework that would allow such routine work sessions, be they individual or group sessions, facilitated by an expert, would be beneficial to artists. Moreover, support from a trainer interested in the psychological and emotional state of the performer, not just his/her productivity, might offer a sense of comfort and stability that can be extremely useful in the long run.

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