"BABEŞ-BOLYAI" UNIVERSITY CLUJ-NAPOCA THEATRE AND FILM FACULTY

THESIS SUMMARY

The Director's Notebook, the Only Instrument of an Artless Artist

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Key Words: director's notebook; preparing the performance; director; performance author; director's craft

Thesis Summary

We cannot imagine theater without an actor. We cannot imagine painting without a painter. We cannot imagine music without a composer or instrumentalist. However, theater could quietly exist without a director. Moreover, the director's status as an artist is contested by Romanian legislation itself. According to Law No. 8/1996 on copyright and related rights in Romania, the director does not have copyright over a performance, only related rights. The theater director is listed among interpreting artists. He has the right to claim recognition of the authorship of his interpretation or performance, to oppose any substantial distortion or modification of his interpretation, and to oppose any use of his performance. In contrast, the film director is recognized as the author of the audiovisual work because "he assumes the leadership of creating and realizing the audiovisual work, as the principal author."¹

The thesis coordinator pointed out that this legislative discrepancy is often argued by the fact that the film director's work, for which he has copyright, is fixed through recording and storage on film/memory support. The recording of a theater performance, however, constitutes only evidence of the performance, not an artistic work in itself, being eminently linked to the live presence of the work on stage. Director and educator Leslie Ferriera described the director's notebook as follows: "A director's prompt-book is a coordinating and organizing tool for the theater director."² Through the director's notebook, the director goes through a systematic and creative process of analyzing and interpreting the play. At the same time, through this tool, the director coordinates all tasks within his responsibility, including in relation to production activities, by integrating them into a unified, self-contained interpretive and organizational system.³

In this sense, although the theater director can never be the holder of copyright concerning the performance as a whole in Romania, he remains the indisputable author of the performance project. Just as the architect fixes his project in a pre-elaborated material, even though his work is fulfilled only through the act of construction (in which the architect, unlike

¹ Legea 8 din 14 martie 1996, emisă de Parlamentul României și publicată în monitorul oficial nr. 60, din data de 26 Martie 1996.

² Leslie Ferreira, *The stage director's prompt book. A guide to creating and using the Stage Director's most powerful rehearsal and production tool*, New York: Routledge, 2022, p. I.

³ Idem.

the director, does not participate), the director necessarily fixes the imaginary projection of the future performance in a set of materials. Of course, this set of materials, which we will call the director's notebook, will never be as systematized as in the case of the architect. Nevertheless, we strongly believe that there are a series of common guidelines that make the director's notebook a customizable yet universal tool.

Invoking the legal status of the theater director in Romania is relevant because it sharply puts the director's status as an artist into question. Among all those who contribute to the creation of a performance, the director has the most control over the final significance of the performance, but the creation of meaning is not an artistic act in itself. Bringing to the forefront the issue of power relations in theater, where it is debatable to which member of the creative team a certain moment in the performance, a certain detail of the role, or a certain element creating meaning belongs, the entire status of the director becomes ambiguous.

It is extremely clear what the actor does on stage: he performs a role. His tools are his own voice, diction, bodily expressiveness, the ability to act on stage, and the ability to emotionally relate to the dramatic material. There are numerous reference books regarding these tools, among which we mention those by Konstantin S. Stanislavski, Peter Brook, Anne Bogart, Michael Chekhov, Zeami, etc. The playwright is the one who creates the story of the future performance and decides the words that will be spoken on stage. His tools are narrative and the use of language (in dialogue, situation, monologue, etc.). There is a whole array of instructional materials concerning the playwright, from "Poetics" to contemporary creative writing treatises, such as Stephen King's "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft."

Even the set designer's concrete activity in the realization of the performance is very easy to attribute: he conceives and coordinates the physical creation of costume, props, and set elements. His tools consist of the use of three-dimensional shapes, colors and lines, proportions, and textures. There are many books to guide the set designer concretely in this activity, from treatises on the history of costume and visual art norms to manuals such as "The Potentials of Spaces: The Theory and Practice of Scenography and Performance," coordinated by Alison Oddey and Christine White.

The theater director, however, has a much more ambiguous position. Beyond the fact that he is the coordinator of the entire theatrical creation act, it is difficult to delineate exactly where his work and authority end and where that of his collaborators begin. It is even more difficult to delineate exactly what his concrete working tools are. There are, at the same time, multiple books related to the director's poetics, from those by Edward Gordon Craig or Antonin Artaud to Eugenio Barba and Thomas Ostermeier. However, few of these books, in contrast to those dedicated to the actor or set designer, present concrete working procedures and clear techniques. Notable exceptions in this regard are Francis Hodge's "Play Directing" or Katie Mitchell's "The Director's Craft."

Herein lies the innovative aspect of this thesis: it starts from the premise that the director's primary activity is to create meaning in the theatrical act. He is the one who has control over the final meaning of each moment and the overall performance. In this activity of the director-as-creator-of-meaning, his only real tool is the director's notebook, which this thesis will attempt to delineate and define as a versatile instrument that stimulates the director's creativity and enables the production of the performance.

Using this tool, the director can carefully track the most important signs, the most relevant contents, discover the points of ambiguity in the text and performance, and even conceive the way he will work on the future performance. This becomes even more relevant for the young director, for whom the production of the performance is overwhelming, and each day brings new difficulties, new unforeseen events, both in the development of the performance and in the organizational aspect. Leslie Ferreira, drawing from the words of Zen master Ikkyu, claims that directing theater is a form of meditation, where the key is paying attention.⁴ The director's notebook directs the director's attention to a clear set of objectives and theses that need to be checked on stage. Moreover, part of the future performance is already made, constructed, and fixed in the preparatory material. Thus, the director will be able to cope with the related needs of the performance, the production needs, which often have little to do with his artistic work, his art of rehearsing.

In this way, the director's notebook becomes the safety belt, the red thread to which the young director can return at any time. It contains the key elements of the performance, which must not be overlooked in favor of the details that emerge during the rehearsal process. The director's notebook allows its author to handle the tumult of creative voices in the rehearsal room and to coordinate them efficiently. Designed according to certain rigor, it is the only tool that reduces the pressure of the director's responsibility during rehearsals.

From our point of view, the director's responsibility is enormous. He is responsible for the well-being and safety of the team he works with. He is responsible for how the funds allocated to the performance are spent. This responsibility is doubled if we are talking about funds coming from the state treasury. If the government allows that, instead of allocating that money to hospitals or schools or elderly care centers, the money goes to creating a theater

⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 4.

performance, we believe it is our responsibility as directors to ensure that the legislators' choice was a wise one.

Moreover, the director bears the responsibility for the public's time and the spectators' money. A spectator spends two hours on the performance, one hour to get there, and one hour to return home. They spend thirty lei on a theater ticket, five lei for a bottle of water that they could have drunk from the tap at home, and possibly money for coffee, food, and/or transportation. Let's say that five hundred spectators attend each performance and that a show is played twenty times.

Thus, the director bears the responsibility for twenty thousand hours spent in the theater, twenty thousand hours in traffic, three hundred thousand lei spent (or not!) on theater tickets, and at least one hundred thousand lei spent on other related expenses by the spectators. How, then, can a director cope with and assume so much responsibility without any shield, without any tool other than their "creativity"?

The academic study of this tool is born out of a significant gap in theatrical research, which this thesis aims to address, representing another innovative element. We consider this thesis relevant for both practitioners and the academic environment, as it aims to study the historical context of the director's notebook while also proposing an innovative structure aligned with contemporary production conditions and aesthetics.

The director's notebook is, therefore, a complex sum of materials that not only records the production of the performance but also fulfills a set of concrete functions: documentary function, creativity stimulation, facilitation of production, pedagogical function, enhancement of the quality and depth of the director's creative act, and replication of the performance.

The director's notebook acquires a series of different connotations depending on the period and cultural space we are in. For Meyerhold, the director's notebook takes on various forms of manifestation:

"Meyerhold also evokes different director's notebooks: the bound volume placed on the director's desk, where each page of the play's text has another page in front of it with notes and plans; the work notes booklet, attachable to the belt, where each page, divided lengthwise, follows the text and remarks made in rehearsal; the assistant director's notebook, which records the overall performance."⁵

To simplify the issue of the director's notebook, we have defined it as the sum of written materials or those placed on a support (paper, sketches on various materials, electronic

⁵ Beatrice Picon-Vallin. Repetiții în Rusia – URSS cu Meyerhold: repetiția ca spațiu vital și de libertate

[&]quot;Trebuie să lucrăm cu bucurie", în Banu, George (ed.), op.cit., p. 70.

documents, links, etc.), which the director drafts to fix the performance before the actual rehearsals begin. Thus, the director's notebook as we have defined it is distinguished from the performance file, which includes a series of documentary materials such as rehearsal notes, production journal, performance recording, photos, and reviews, etc.

At the same time, our definition excludes the use of the director's notebook as a formula for documenting the performance for its realization. This is a formula used in France, for example, for replicating performances created by troupes from the capital to be replicated in the provinces. It is also a type of thinking applied by Bertolt Brecht:

"The existence of a bound volume of selective notes and photographs of the staging suggests that [Brecht] wanted to publish his practical experiments in an instructive format similar to the so-called Model Books. It is a practice initiated by Berlau, where each Model Book contained a sequence of annotated photographs, detailing significant gestures, positions, groupings, and turning points in a particular production. One of their functions was to inform future theater practitioners about Brecht's Marxist art of 'scenic writing,' a form of storytelling typified by relevant social behavior, arrangements, and tableaux."⁶

A notable fact we discovered as part of our concrete research is the importance of materials such as director's notebooks in documenting the history of theater. Unfortunately, theatrical criticism can render subjective aspects of the production, centered around the reception of the performance, filtered through the aesthetic values of the time. Theatrical criticism, however, does not record the creative intent of the director and the production team, nor practical details related to the staging itself. At most, certain achievements of the scenography are mentioned, along with some praises or criticisms of the acting performances.

A notable example in this regard was Ion Sava's "Macbeth with Masks," where theatrical criticism, although ample, does not sufficiently inform the reader about the spectacular formula Sava used. Beyond the great artifice with masks, theatrical criticism does not offer relevant information for the practitioner who would like to learn or develop elements from the production. In stark contrast is the director's notebook published by Virgil Petrovici for the same performance, where details ranging from stage directions, scenographic solutions, and action cues are in the foreground. We finally have before us a history of the theatrical act, not its reception.

This revelation was also true for the performances of Dinu Cernescu or Lucian Giurchescu, whose director's notebooks I came into contact with. Using the research of director's notebooks as an act of cultural recovery and examination of individual working

⁶ Meg Mumford, op.cit., 2009, p. 44.

processes represents a way of safeguarding against the tendency of labeling and organizing inherent in any theoretical discourse about art:

"But if this remains distinct from aphanasis and other effects of subjective degradation, it is because the work of art begins with an intentional act of crossing the additional workflow of creative poesis. In artistic disciplines, searching for a consensual discourse or a constant production of meanings among practitioners is in vain, a discourse that guides the production processes of art. Art flourishes through the diversification of its ideal perspectives, in the intentional dissonance among its sensitive agents. In contrast, subjects of artistic disciplines achieve synthetic unifications and build an inner resonance where ideas and theoretical constructs are progressively rationalized together. This process aims to overcome differences in perspective, language, terminology, and personal differences into a collective and clear statement; it aims to manage differences through structure and representative ideas."⁷

Theatrical criticism will always try to find certain correspondences, which will often be valid and relevant for those studying the issue of theater from a theoretical perspective. Personally, however, we have often found ourselves faced with historical documentary materials and critical texts that do not answer the basic questions of the practitioner, centered around a key problem: what did the performance in question actually look like? It is a question that awaits an objective answer, beyond the qualitative evaluations of the critic, because the director is always in search of means, in search of working techniques. Unfortunately, it is precisely these that are lost, in favor of anecdotes and interpretations. Therefore, it almost becomes an act of duty today for the director to document their work, creating director's notebooks and performance files so that their work can be inventoried and researched. It remains the duty of practitioners to document their work, as Dinu Cernescu also believed.⁸

At the same time, we consider that articulating a minimal set of unified techniques for preparing a theater performance within the theatrical system will be an act of professionalization. Today, a century after Appia and Stanislavski, we seem to agree that the actor must warm up before rehearsal, must learn their text, must not declaim, must embody their role, etc., depending on the type of performance they are playing in. At the same time, we

⁷ Jason Tuckwell. *Creation and function of art. Techne, Poiesis and the problem of aesthetics*. Londra: Bloomsbury, 2018, p. 137.

⁸ Interviu cu regizorul Dinu Cernescu, 31.03.2022, arhiva personală.

agree that the set of the performance must be unique, developed for each production, and must be created as quickly as possible in production to allow rehearsals to proceed smoothly.

However, we do not seem to agree that the director must prepare their performance before rehearsals begin, what such preparation means, or at least what position the director holds in the construction of the performance. And this is not a situation found only in the Romanian context: "It is still the case in British theater that most directors become directors by saying 'I am a director!' and hoping that someone will believe them."⁹ Creating and accepting a concrete toolkit for the director becomes essential in the condition where in the overwhelming majority of theaters in Romania, actors without directing studies are staging performances (usually for practical and financial reasons) and in the conditions where critical discourse is oriented against the director. Creating director's notebooks, in a situation where we do not see the possibility of cohesion in the press among Romanian directors, as was the case in the context of the re-theatricalization of theater, can become a concrete means by which we can avoid the 'death of directing.'

Eugenio Barba discusses how he developed his concept of director's dramaturgy: "The active participation of the director conferred another meaning to the word 'dramaturgy.' It pointed towards that aspect of my work centered on relationships. Dramaturgy then referred to my decisions to reforge and amalgamate the relationships arising from organic dramaturgy and narrative dramaturgy. The object of this mixture or montage was the distillation of complex relationships capable of overturning evident relationships."¹⁰

The fact that Barba constructs his system of signs through the staging of actor improvisations is an aesthetic decision. It is a personal decision of the director. However, it is not an aesthetic decision that the director organizes systems of signs, that he operates dramaturgically on the performance. It is a universal situation that concerns the position of the director in theater and the techniques he uses. We again express our doubt that a person can carry out dramaturgical operations, partially manage the visual construction of the performance, instruct the actors, innovate, and create quality performances, all under the spectrum of personal improvisation, inspiration, and collaboration with the actors. Given that theatrical demands impose an ever-increasing complexity on the theater performance, which includes more and more languages (consider the evolution of interaction with the audience, the importance of lighting, innovations regarding sound design, and the use of projection, all seen in the last 20-

⁹ Nicholas Hytner in Katie Mitchell, op.cit., p 11.

¹⁰ Eugenio Barba, op.cit., p. 39

30 years in Romania), the need for the director's preparation and, implicitly, the preparation of the performance becomes increasingly urgent.

Eugenio Barba also says: "I believe we need to delineate aesthetic methods very precisely."¹¹ By accepting that there is a toolkit, we accept the existence of a director. The techniques of theatrical creation, which intervene from the moment rehearsals begin, vary radically from one aesthetic to another, but the preparation techniques do not. We have demonstrated in this paper that there is an objective structure to the director's notebook, which can be followed regardless of the work process. Each work process involves a reconfiguration of the toolkit for preparing the performance, but within a set of limits much easier to define than in the case of creating the performance on stage. The toolkit is a formula of theatrical thinking that excludes the method:

"Although it is perfectly possible to work productively with actors just by remembering the above, it is important for any director to have what many directors call a toolkit. The toolkit may contain individual games or exercises and may include entire models of structuring rehearsals, based on readings of the work of directors such as Mike Alfreds or Katie Mitchell [...], but the idea of a toolkit implies that no single methodology can be used exclusively, to the exclusion of all others, and that using Anne-Bogart's viewpoint method, or the method of actions, are strategies we can resort to for solving certain problems, only to return them to the toolkit after they have fulfilled their task."¹²

Leslie Ferreira views the director's toolkit not as something limited to the rehearsal process, but as something that extends over the entire creative process, including preparation. By admitting the existence of this common toolkit, we hope to move beyond the century-old discussions about the distribution of power among the various authors in theater: the playwright, the dramaturg, the director, and the actors. If another member of the work team uses a director's tool, it does not mean that the director ceases to exist, but that this person has also become a director. Just as if the director writes the text of the performance, he also becomes a playwright, without meaning that the playwright no longer has any role in the theater. However, for this to happen, we need to recognize what the tools and functions of the playwright are.

Literary works that advocate for the actor's independence from the "dictatorship" of the director and for collaborative productions over directorial creation come from English-speaking spaces (USA and England) and from France. These are commendable literary works that will undoubtedly continue to massively influence contemporary global theatrical creation, including

¹¹ Jerzy Grotowski. *Teatru și ritual. Scrieri esențiale*, trad. Vasile Moga, pref. George Banu, București: Nemira Publishing House, 2014, p. 116.

¹² Rob Swain, *op.cit.*, p. 58.

in Romania. However, the Romanian director who reads them should take them with a grain of salt, as they come from theatrical systems radically different from ours. We do not advocate for a separation of the Romanian system from international practices, but a number of factors must be considered when importing work systems for practices that are not purely experimental, such as the level of cultural consumption, the institutional structure of the cultural system, or the training methods within the system.

At the same time, although we speak of countries with a strong directorial tradition, especially in England and France, we are also speaking of countries without a culture of director training. It is clear that a cultural system based on market competitiveness will generate stars, including among directors. However, there can be no unity at the market level. In the absence of uniform training, we can only talk about flashes, not working methods. Exceptions will exist everywhere and do not concern the study of theater art, precisely because they are marginal phenomena.¹³ These are cultural spaces with theatrical aesthetics often built around a simplified realism in most productions, without, of course, omitting exceptions, such as the great production centers in capitals or large cities (e.g., Broadway). France does not have undergraduate theater directing programs. The English university system is also centered on training actors, not directors. Thus, it is no wonder that such cultural spaces produce discourses that place the theatrical act in contrast with directorial practice. This does not mean that these discourses are less valuable than those centered on the director, it just means that it is difficult, if not impossible, to implement them in the current Romanian system. It is also debatable whether these systems should be implemented here just because they are implemented elsewhere, even if that elsewhere produces the most widely read texts about theater, being "elsewheres" where writing is done in internationally circulated languages.

In conclusion, the prompt emphasizes that the director's notebook should not be a uniform instrument across theatrical practice. However, it remains a necessary tool. The theatrical practice and aesthetics embraced by each director dictate its form, which evolves, expands, and reconfigures for each individual production. Contemporary theater lacks a well-defined aesthetic direction; it is a synthetic practice that amalgamates over 100 years of theatrical formulas centered around the director and blends them with various aesthetics from related arts, akin to the model of postmodern art. To enable this synthesis, the repertoire of techniques available to the director in creating a spectacle, including those documented in the director's notebook, must be numerous and diverse.

¹³ Marius-Alexandru Teodorescu "Emerging Theatre Practices – The Golden Myth of European Theatrical Thought", *Theatrical Colloquia*, vol.12, no.1, 2022, pp.177-185. <u>https://doi.org/10.35218/tco.2022.12.1.16</u>

The aim of this work was to inventory a small portion of these techniques, examining both from the perspective of Romanian historical practice and that of contemporary theatrical practice, tailored to the needs of today's spectacular creation. We conclude this work with a quote from Leslie Ferreira's book, encapsulating our perspective on the importance and necessity of employing a director's notebook in the production process: "A well-conceived and well-constructed director's notebook is the best guarantee of production success. It is the force that guides the spectacle and unites the director with the play, the director with the dramaturge, the director with the actors, the director with the designers, and ultimately, the director with the audience."¹⁴

¹⁴ Leslie Ferreira, *The stage director's prompt book. A guide to creating and using the Stage Director's most powerful rehearsal and production tool*, New York: Routledge, 2022, p. 2.

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