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FACULTATEA DE TEATRU ȘI FILM  
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## DOCTORAL THESIS

### THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK AS A SOURCE FOR RECONSTRUCTION. THE CHEKHOV-NOTEBOOKS OF VLAD MUGUR

#### Summary

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1. THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK IN THE DIRECTOR'S THEATRE

- 1.1. The evolution of the aesthetic and legal role of the director's notebook
- 1.2. Models of the director's notebook
  - 1.2.1. Konstantin Stanislavski's notebook
  - 1.2.2. Max Reinhardt's notebook
  - 1.2.3. Erwin Piscator's notebook
  - 1.2.4. Bertolt Brecht's notebook

#### 2. VLAD MUGUR'S CAREER IN THE CONTEXT OF RETHEATRICALIZATION

- 2.1. Background: theatricalization in Romania
- 2.2 "Dare to be yourself" - retheatricalization in Romania
- 2.3. Vlad Mugur and the "golden generation" - team theatre aspirations
- 2.4. Vlad Mugur in exile
- 2.5. Return to Romania

#### 3. VLAD MUGUR'S DIRECTORIAL NOTEBOOKS

- 3.1. Directing Chekhov
- 3.2. Attempting to reconstruct the director's notebooks
- 3.3 "Let's eat fragments" - absence and presence in reconstruction
- 3.4. The problem of reading
- 3.5. Description of the notebook: characteristics of form and content
- 3.6. Use of signs in the notebooks

#### 4. ASPECTS OF APPROACHING THE METHOD OUTLINED IN THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK

- 4.1. Preparing for action
- 4.2. The text and the story
  - 4.2.1. Mugur and multilingualism
  - 4.2.2. Dramaturgy of the text in service of the action.
- 4.3. Acting - the action
  - 4.3.1. The dialogue between external and internal action, the actor as metaphor
  - 4.3.2. The inner life of the actor and the role
  - 4.3.3. Action turned against the text
- 4.4. Instructions on the use of space and objects
  - 4.4.1. "How many trees does a forest need?" - linking the interior and exterior
- 4.5. The sound

## **5. THE IMAGE OF THE PERFORMANCE THAT EMERGES FROM THE DIRECTOR'S NOTEBOOK**

- 5.1. The problem of describing notebooks
- 5.2. Three Sisters in Konstanz
- 5.3. The Seagull in Konstanz (and Bern)
- 5.4. The Cherry Orchard in Würzburg and Cluj

## **SUMMARY**

The experience gained from examining the director's notebook, the importance of analysis  
The afterlife of the director's notebooks

## **SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Original sources, manuscripts, manuscript copies
- Volumes, studies
- Press sources

## **APPENDIX**

- 1. Model examples of the director's theatre
- 2. Excerpts from Mugur's legacy that I have processed
- 3. Director's notes for The Cherry Orchard in Cluj
- 4. Manual and electronic copies made for the reconstruction of the director's notebooks

## ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** retheatralization, history of theatre, theatre archives, Vlad Mugur, director's notebook, Modellbuch, palimpsest, reconstruction, projective reading, aesthetic reading, critique génétique, storytelling, director's theatre, methodology

The birth of the director's theatre coincides with a desire to record its methodologies and realisations across Europe. The surviving textual legacies and fragments from earlier periods in the history of theatre are replaced by consciously compiled director's notebooks. The twentieth-century directors who dreamed up these notebooks and their recorded works will be exemplary in Romania in the years when, under the pressure of socialism, theatre is forced to renew itself in different ways: on the one hand, to submit to the intellectual and cultural demands of the socialist dictatorship, and on the other, to escape from this system of demands which ignores the true characteristics of not only Romanian and Hungarian, but any culture. The greatest masters are victims of these divisive forces. Romania is abandoned by almost an entire generation of directors, including Vlad Mugur. Their written legacies, their director's notebooks, their performances recorded on film and in photographs, or fragments of them, are traces of a struggle that has led to the creation of theatrical genres and creative trends that are still unsurpassed and irrefutable.

In the 1990s, Vlad Mugur's productions in Cluj were not only outstanding performances, but pointed beyond themselves, contributing significantly to a paradigm shift in the Hungarian theatre of Transylvania. It is indisputable that these productions played a major role in replacing traditionalism on their stages with a new theatricality, where theatre was no longer seen as an illustration and a means of ethnic survival, but as a fully-fledged artform.

In my doctoral thesis, I examine and analyse different aspects of Vlad Mugur's work in the light of the director's notebooks he had written for Chekhov's texts, which are part of his private estate, and through them I also attempt to formulate a possible directorial method, proving the legitimacy and professional relevance of these documents. At the same time, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the director's notebooks, as forgotten artefacts, must be restored through reconstruction to their proper place in theatrical memory. In my paper I will also point out that this kind of research is important not only for the general professional value of the documents: it is linked to the development of the personality, to the pushing of the limits of individual intellectual and emotional reception, and its extremely rich ideological and aesthetic content makes its pedagogical importance irrefutable.

Today, however, director's notebooks are obscure documents, in place of which we get to watch on our devices multi-camera shots of the premier-ready performance. These recordings, however, do not contain the real "secrets" that provide answers to the hows and whys of the artist's artistic choices. These secrets are by no means prescriptions, but merely ignition points for the actor's future possibilities of self-expression.

The first two chapters of the thesis (*The Director's Notebook in the Director's Theatre; Vlad Mugur's Career in Context of Retheatricalization*) contextualize my research from a historical and theatre-theoretical point of view, and at the same time identify the director's notebook as a source material itself, as an artistic document, sometimes a model exemplar, existing in itself and/or dependent on the host theatre, the theatre production, and the director (see Brecht's *Modellbuch*). Theatrical studies have mostly focused on notebooks by German and Russian directors, in-depth historical research on notebooks having begun in the German-speaking environment. Based on the notebooks that have already been studied, the paper identifies *as exemplary* all those director's notebooks which, going beyond a general, technical system of notes defining and recording the structure of the theatrical performance, reflect the director's way of thinking, and in which certain details of the director's practice, the interpretation of the text, and the shared thinking with the actor and co-creators can be recognised. The creators of such notebooks are for example Konstantin Stanislavsky, Max Reinhardt, Erwin Piscator, Bertolt Brecht.

I also try to contextualise my thesis in the light of international research trends (see Gumbrecht, Schneider, Matzke, Pavis, Shevtsova, Imre, Regéczi, Runcan, etc.). The historical-theoretical apparatus remains closely related to the research, which brings the theoretical statements, the director's notebook taken as a historical material, the directorial trends and working methods into dialogue with Vlad Mugur's direct statements in various interviews and the methodological similarities discovered in the director's notebooks. Since very little is known about Mugur's time in Germany, and theatrographic writings on this period are very scarce and imprecise, I thought it important to describe through the sources I have found a slice of it, his time in Konstanz, which was the first and one of the most important stages of his career abroad.

Vlad Mugur is a director of European renown who made his mark in three cultures. Before his emigration, his work in Craiova and Cluj was considered to be the most important of the innovative generation of Romanian theatre. His theatrical poetry was strongly actor-centred, an idea he called "teatru echipă" ("team theatre"). The dictatorship of the 1970s and its pressures, however, prevented the director from working in Romania, striking the Master with a series of bans on major performances and the prohibition of Hamlet-rehearsals. Mugur was forced to leave and emigrated to

Italy in July 1971, disappearing from the sight of the Romanian scene. Politics did not allow the artist to work in Italy either. Despite this, Mugur went to West Germany (at the time) instead of returning home, where he worked for a year and a half at the Free Europe radio and then directed again. Over the years he worked in all parts of the country, in Bochum, Hannover, Münster, Munich, Konstanz and Würzburg. Meanwhile, he lectured at the Drama Institute of the University of Munich and held summer courses in Stockholm. The realisation of the "teatru echipă" in Germany, which he had dreamed up in Romania, proved unsuccessful for him at first, as the mentality of the two nations was radically different, and he had to develop other strategies to guide the actor's work as a director. All these experiences were filtered through the nearly seven years he spent in Konstanz. During this time, he directed a total of twenty performances, including the Chekhov plays discussed in this thesis. It is during this period that he experiments with the idea of the stripped-down stage, staging performances that will be the precursors of the great successes of the later 1990s in Cluj.

Analysing the exemplary director's notebooks of the director's theatre, it turned out that Mugur's notebooks, unlike those of the 19th and 20th centuries, are not suitable for any kind of stage reproduction, though they are ideal for a detailed aesthetic analysis of the performance and for a deeper understanding of the director's personality. During my research, taking into account the temporal distances and their effects, I have given the functionally transformed director's notebook various names: *model*, *director's notebook*, *written document*, *relic*, *artefact*, *material document*, *medium*, *palimpsest*, *map*.

The director's notebook is a medium through which not only a vision of the finished work is revealed, through which we can reconstruct not only the director's concept, the most important act of theatre-making, not only the possible course of the rehearsal process can be traced, but also the events preceding the creation of the notebook itself, the birth of the idea of the performance as a work of art, and the lengthy analysis and unfolding of this idea. Thus, the director's notebook, thematizing the process of work, condenses several different timelines, combining them all with a written structure bearing the director's signature, a system of signs composed of drawings and various letter signs, thus creating a specific imagistic record of the written idea, which is inseparable from the written literary text itself and the director's thoughts and instructions contained therein. In Schneider's study, we read a suggestion by Katrin Henzel that "in the case of director's notebooks, one must appeal to the insights and methods of the *critique génétique*. As is well known, the *critique génétique* aims to include in the philological analysis not only the published text but

also the sources that testify to its creation."<sup>1</sup> The discourse of textual genetics, however, starts from "authorial gestures" that examine not only the finished literary work but also its paratext, i.e. all manuscripts and documents that help the reader to interpret the work in a broader context. This is the problem addressed in the chapter titled *Vlad Mugur's notebooks*. The chapter also provides an insight into the theory of reconstruction, and then presents Mugur's notebooks from the perspective of form and content.

Gumbrecht writes about the interaction of subject and object/text regarding the reconstruction of materials and the restitution of fragmentary texts as a very important stage of philological work. The primary connection with the text in this phase is sensory. In our case, during the 'tasting' of the director's notebook, we are placed in a (cultural) context that is created through interaction with the object, in which the imagination can become freer step by step, and in this safe environment can lead us to a multilevel understanding of the reconstructed object, i.e. the texts of the notebook (the dramatic text and the director's instructions). The understanding of the objective and sensorial aspects of the director's notebook is thus followed by knowledge through reading. It is in the intersection of layers of meaning that emerge through the repeated reading of the notebook's content, and through projective reading, that interpretation is born and the series of directorial visions slowly become visible, just as the researcher, through reconstruction/restitution of the material fragments, drifts in a kind of visionary state towards a deeper knowledge of the physical aspects of the object.

In order to understand the content of the director's notebook, it was also necessary to decode its signs. The text of the drama and the author's comments that interrupt the dialogue are only part of Mugur's notebook. Mugur wrote his stage directions in his own handwriting on the blank, unnumbered notepads that appear on the numbered pages of the printed text. These instructions are almost equal in volume to the dialogues, with one or more directorial instructions accompanying almost every dialogue or auctorial instruction. Handwritten instructions can also be found in the printed text. The director's notebooks are generally written in Romanian and German, and the German dramatic text is supplemented by instructions in Romanian and German. Sometimes in the same instruction Mugur combines the two languages. In his instructions, he develops his own use of symbols, using numbering, asterisks, sometimes underlining and arrows to indicate the place of an instruction in the printed text, and then drawing the same symbols on the notepads, with the

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<sup>1</sup> Katrin Henzel's description is paraphrased by Schneider, i.m., 18.

instruction text and other notes written next to them. In the notebooks, one can usually observe instructions written in layers, which this research has compared to palimpsests.

The fourth chapter (*Aspects of Approaching the Method Outlined in the Director's Notebook*) outlines the phases of the director's work. Using Patrice Pavis's questionnaire, I have identified those analytical aspects that are Mugur's notebooks' most important features and which at the same time help to excavate and unify the details of his creative work. In addition to attempting to formulate the image of the performance, it is the description of this methodology and, within it, the examination of the director-actor interaction that has become significant. The order of the aspects is conscious, considering all the circumstances that may have served as a starting point for the performances. These factors, although they build upon each other, form a final layer of meaning which, in each case, analyses the work of art and the humanistic and material reality that gets expressed in a poetic manner.

In this chapter, Mugur's methodology is outlined in five aspects, focusing on Stanislavsky's "acting behaviour" as a creative attitude from both the actor's and the director's point of view: *Preparation for Action; The Author's Text and the Stage Story; The Actor's Work; Spatial Instructions; Sound*. These aspects all appear in some form in the instructions of the notebooks, and it is with these in mind that I will develop the motifs of Vlad Mugur's staging of Chekhov in Romania and Germany, sometimes making excursions into the use of a unified and specific system of signs in the notebooks. It is through examining the combination of these sign systems, the description of gestures, spatial movements, the actor's relationship with the stage and the scenery, and the discovery of the progressivity of the work that Vlad Mugur's methodology can become interpretable. Even if the performance always be easily described, the notes on gestures, mimicry and movements carry tangible information and, taken as a whole, form a web of meaning that ultimately becomes a unified web of meaning that reveals much about the performance and the complex work of the director: interpretation of the text, dramaturgical tasks, psychology, acting, playing, use of space, use of objects, rhythm, visual concepts. It is in this context that the most important organising element of his performances emerges: contradictoriness, which is based on the genre principles of Brechtian alienating theatre. Through the instructions, which stand juxtaposed with the text, the scenes structured in this manner can expand the theatrical performance across several genres at the same time and are able to awaken empathy in the audience though in a set of contradictory feelings. Mugur employs contradiction in a myriad of forms. Although he himself speaks only of the instruction that opposes the text, this aspect is much more layered in the notebooks. Thus, in most cases, the structure/design of the space itself is in opposition to the text,

the way of utilising space can be in contrast with the scenery, the costume can be in juxtaposition with the inner constitution of the character, even the actor gets to play against the spectator, and the director gets to direct a scene against the spectator (e.g. the actor may turn his back on the spectator, or the director may remove stage lighting for an entire scene), the tone of voice, the emphasis of the text, the rhythm of the text, even sound effects may interfere with the function of the text's primary meaning. Not only through the staging and the moderation of the acting can a director influence the play, but also through the use of space, which reflects the ideology of the performance, the direction of the messages', the artistic thinking of the creators, provoking at the same time their creativity. However, it is through the highly detailed description of the use of space that Mugur's notebooks fully and deeply exploit the actor's work, it being the most important aspect of Mugur's oeuvre. The way he works with the actor, his pedagogical approach is still deemed as exemplary in contemporary theatre. The details of this approach can also be seen in the director's notebooks.

By reconstructing Mugur's notebooks, we can move on to the next step in the exploration of his oeuvre, the description of the performance that emerges from the reconstruction (*The Image of the Performance that Emerges from the Director's Notebook*). In this chapter I analyse the *Three Sisters* and *The Seagull*, staged in Konstanz, as well as *The Cherry Orchard* staged in Würzburg, which is presented in comparison with the *Cherry Orchard* of Cluj. The chapter points out that in the reconstruction of the director's notebooks, the researcher is not merely performing a dry systematization, but is an external observer of a fictitious rehearsal process, guided by the director himself through a commentary nearly identical in volume to the dramatic text. Through this work, in addition to filling in the gaps in the history of theatre, the director's creative methods and way of thinking are also revealed. I consider an important finding the fact that Mugur's notebooks on Chekhov's plays (and later stagings) reveal a deep sense of creative self-reflection (see the excerpts from *The Seagull* notebook), and his notes confirm many claims he makes in his interviews. Trepliov's "no scenery" theory is only a part of the method – creative loneliness and the inner struggle inherent in Mugur's individuality is equally important. These are present in Nina's monologue (adapted by Mugur), which results in "the unification of matter and spirit in the harmony of beauty, in the realm of freedom". Mugur's life's work is the realisation of this aspiration, and the maps of this life's work are the director's notebooks. Having studied these, it is clear that it is in the staging of *The Seagull* that the dialectical creative dialogue in his theatrical experiment, which he spoke of while summarising his work in the early 1970s in Romania, is most clearly discernible. Starting from the naturalists, experimenting with the realists, he reached the avant-garde. Mugur staged *The Cherry Orchard* twice during his lifetime. The first time was in 1988 in

Würzburg, but our knowledge of this performance is very poor, and as a consequence of the isolation before the revolution in Romania, there is no mention of it or of his subsequent productions abroad in the (domestic) theatrographic writings that we know of (indeed, Florica Ichim's discussion book indirectly indicates that Mugur did not direct *The Cherry Orchard* before 1998). A comparison of the existing documents of the two productions reveals the difference between the productions and the resulting dialectic dialogue that bridges the ten years between the two performances. The *Three Sisters* is spatially poorer, but it is richer in its use of acting, objects, situations and dramatic conflicts.

After grappling with the above-mentioned vproblems of reconstruction and interpretation, these descriptions can be considered as complete and incomplete as any material, visual or written document, be it a critique, essay, study, that captures and describes the performance as a work of art in its own space and time, in its own moment on stage.

The paper summarises the experience of working with director's notebooks and the options for further research. The study of a hitherto unknown phase of Mugur's directorial career has led to a much more comprehensive and complete exploration of the unique directorial oeuvre that encompassed three essentially different theatrical cultures. Moreover, my research shows that in reconstructing the director's notebooks, the researcher is not merely the performer of a dry process of systematisation, but an external observer of a fictitious rehearsal process, guided by the director himself through a commentary almost identical in volume to the text of the play. In this work, in addition to filling in the gaps in the history of theatre, I tried to reveal Mugur's creative working method and way of thinking. Through the analysis of the notebooks, my thesis demonstrates that reconstruction work can be a viable paradigm for theatre research in the case of performances that for some objective reason have not been recorded.

Besides its significance in the history of theatre, another important aspect of this research is its value in pedagogy. Knowing the rich historical and hermeneutical background of the director's notebook, and the numerous possibilities of aesthetic reception and self-expression provoked by it, the director's notebook can be turned into an excellent workshop material for students of dramaturgy or directing, as an authentic theatrical documentation of the working process. By learning about the aesthetic and practical creative approaches found in the director's notebooks, the student is confronted with the true value of projective reading, which is of primary importance in theatre: the drama chosen must not remain a paper repository of abstract ideas, but has to become a real open work, a living medium that through the director's notebook proposes a possible practical solution, the disclosure of which happens in the context of the rehearsals and the performance.

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