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# METAPHORICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE ART OF THE ACTOR: POETRY – BEYOND SPACE AND TIME

Dana Enache
Faculty of Arts, Ovidius University of Constanța

***Abstract**: The mechanics of poetry reception beyond space and time depends on knowledge of the mechanics of stage delivery, a vocal delivery of energy-laden thoughts which replace the external impulse through recourse to affective memory. The young actor ought therefore to apply him/herself to the study and honing of thinking.*

*If the visual artist uses stone or brush and canvas, if the musician uses an instrument, with its sounds, the actor uses only the word. The actor should therefore command his/her instrument so well as to create a symphonic theatre or an imaginary aural painting.*

*This paper focuses on poetry as a piece of eternity in space and time. Poetry is the metaphor that we encounter from the outset on the difficult way of the art of the actor. Poetry is the metaphor that will hone the actor to a virtuoso of the actor's art. Poetry is the metaphor beyond space that confers immortality on the art of the actor.*

***Keywords**: poetry, art of the actor, actor, theatre*

The art of the actor, the arena where, over the centuries, everything has undergone (sometimes periodical) revision, contestation and even abolition, is the art of questions with no answers. Each and every question elicits another one. Each and every sign of wonder elicits more of them. The theatre is the space between the past and the future. The present, in the artistic act, exists only insofar as one utters it, but then it immediately lapses into the past and looks forward to the future. The love for words, the beauty of the word, the glorious adjective – as stage director Peter Brook dubbed the suitable word – can capture the spirit of a text, whether in verse or prose, and closely trace its course.

It is in the essence of poetry to require a special space where the voice and gaze of the actor to soar to heights and plunge into the depths. The breadth of space and time involves the spectators into a world which does not crush their being, but, on the contrary, invites them to feel its plenitude. Poetry, therefore, is the vertical which vaults beyond time into a space of enunciation. To recite verse is to enter a realm of vibrations which grounds the actor's inner world.

The actor – this hub of energies, this metaphor for his/her own creation which he/she identifies with, this arena of stage art and technique, whose instrument is him/herself – seems to be blessed particularly when he/she recites verse. Notwithstanding, there are fewer and fewer actors nowadays who feel like expressing themselves with the aid of poetry. At the same time, he/she who recites must be blessed with a special sensitivity and also master a flawless technique of delivery. We could say that the actor should master the science of entering eternity through verse. In effect, the earliest training stage of the student actors to learn to discover and express their feelings involves precisely the study of poetry. Both



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technically and artistically, poetry induces in the actor a sense of purging from which emotion springs. This is the essence of each and every poem: emotion. This state of emotion will circulate further through a flux of energy from the actor to the spectator and thence back. This transfer of energy (actor–public, public–actor) is vital to the art of the stage.

Only through the study of poetry can the actor move from careless everyday speaking, which often mutes the final sound of words and whose intonation does not stress the key terms – but that doesn't matter, we can figure things out from the context (?!) –, to expressivity, to conveying emotion in one's utterances, to emotional involvement, in a word, to elocution. Elocution – the interweaving of study, intelligence, determination and talent – is the first key to mastering the art of the actor, on which it bestows power and beauty. The word, the most potent means of enactment on the stage, is, as stage director and theorist Konstantin Stanislavski argues, the most concrete representation of thought.

The delivery of poetry makes the actor search for a special mode of articulation that best matches his/her character and personality. To find it, the actor ought to hone his/her vocal technique to an amply nuanced voice, with differential timbre, pitch and tone. He/she must, therefore, subtly command vocal delivery on stage.

One of the crucial elements in mastering vocal delivery on the stage is the costo-diaphragmatic breathing peculiar to actors. They ought to command and calculate their breathing such that it can sustain voice. One cannot recite poetry artistically in a bland, inexpressive voice or with a defective rendition, for the musicality of the author's text should be conveyed in all its nuances and sonorous complexity.

Poetry, this metaphorical vehicle for the actor's art, highlights the beauty of supple, nuanced delivery, with countless intonational options. When we recite verse we ought to eliminate anything that might constitute a speech defect, so much so that delivering a poem reflects our stylised artistic speech. Besides musicality, artistic delivery depends on specific breathing. Artistic breathing plays a crucial role in sustaining onstage enactment and is therefore part of the actor's work. Without ample, well calculated breathing, the actor cannot sustain the rhythm imposed by the poetic form but will rather strain his/her voice, with a negative impact on the audience. The actor uses costo-diaphragmatic breathing, and the exhaled air ought to be well distributed, especially in the case of outstanding vocal and corporeal efforts. Yet the inhaling–exhaling act should be invisible to the listener – should not become a straining experience for either the actor or the spectator –, which requires assiduous training.

One telling example of excellency in artistic performance, which illustrates the above, is the interpretation of Mihai Eminescu's poem *Scrisoarea a III-a* (*Satire III*) by the late actor Gheorghe Cozorici. Specifically, I refer here to the famous passage which describes the Rovine battle between the army led by Mircea cel Bătrân (Mircea the Eldest), the ruler of Wallachia, and Sultan Bayezid:

> No sooner had he gone than mighty the commotion!
> The forest rang with arms, and rumbled like the ocean,
> Amidst the greenwood thousand heads with long and plaited hair,
> And several thousands more besides that did bright helmets wear.
> While wave on wave of cavalry over the plain did flood
> Astride high prancing chargers, their stirrups carved of wood.
> Thundering over the battered earth an avalanche they went,
> Lances levelled to the charge and bows near double bent;
> Till like a shower of shivering light that whistled through the air,
> A storm of arrows leapt and sang and flew from everywhere,



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A din of blows on armour dealt like rattling of hail,
The noise of hoof and sword and lance, the roar of battle gale.
Unheeded was the Emperor's fury, lion-like his rage,
For hotter still about his troops the fight did deadly wage;
Unheeded did the green flame flutter o'er his stricken ranks
For mightily assailed in front, attacked on both their flanks,
The East's entire battle host was scattered in the fray
And line on line of infantry mown down like summer hay.
A steady rain of arrows fell and sword blows did resound,
While riders dropped on every hand and dead bestrewed the ground.
Till, onset from all sides at once, helpless to fight or fly,
It seemed the very earth was doomed and fallen was the sky...
Mircea himself led on his men 'midst storm of battle lust
That came, and came, and came, that trod all in the dust;
Their cavalry undaunted, a wall of lances proud
Which through that pagan army streets of daylight ploughed
And laid to earth their thousands like sheafs of ripened corn,
High in the van of conquest Wallachia's banner borne;
As deluge flung from heaven that burst upon the seas,
Till in an hour the heathen were chaff before the breeze
And from that hail of iron fast towards the Danube fled,
While gloriously behind them th'Romanian army spread.

(Eminescu 135; trans. Corneliu M. Popescu)

This fragment is a challenge to any actor. Thirty-one lines require a vocal tour de force which depends on costo-diaphragmatic breathing, the only type of breathing which can support and sustain, for a long while and with a high amplitude, a text which describes a very dynamic action like the Rovine battle in Mihai Eminescu's *Satire III*. In Cozorici's delivery, breathing is inaudible. Inhaling is short and intermittent, but effective in sustaining strong voice and clear delivery. Exhaling is evenly distributed, sustained as it is by the abdominal muscles, so that the word ending is as clearly audible as the beginning. The brilliant Gheorghe Cozorici adapts the delivery of this fragment to his personality by double recourse to the technique of vocal delivery on the stage and to mimics, gestures and intentional silence:

> … however perfect the physical endowment of the aspiring actor, it is worthless unless it is, so to speak, but the outer garment of moral qualities which make an artist complete, unless it is animated by intelligence and feeling. For as the most skilled flute-player or violinist would turn into the most saddening player should his/her instrument be out of tune or broken, or as the most perfect musical instruments would be mere wooden pieces in the hands of one with no musical knowledge or merit, so the physique and organ would be entirely worthless unless feeling and intelligence breathed life and warmth into them.
>
> (Masoff 448)

Through his voice, the actor expresses his/her personality. Inner liberty forges the personality of the artist and makes him/her charming, able to overcome his/her blockages and twitches. Vocal timbre is innate and belongs to one's personality. Not infrequently have we been able to recognise a stage or film actor by his/her vocal timbre, even before seeing his/her face. Human voices are like fingerprints: vocal timbre owes equally to the conformation of



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one's larynx and to one's temperament and interactions with the world. In the dramatic art, as in verse recitation, the actor adapts his/her vocal colour in accordance with the temperament of the character he/she plays or, in the case of poetry, with the pictorial and auditive images he/she wishes to evoke through the verse. This is, naturally, where the interplay of crucial elements becomes apparent: the thought behind the word, the means of vocal delivery on the stage, and the spatiality in which the sound will be produced and vibrate.

The actor's profession isn't for anyone who has just the right sensitivity:

> … the most brilliant text, Shakespeare's, lacks the bodiliness of gesture, eye expression, the presence of the body, physical movement, everything that is alive here and now. Gestures can be suggested, but they cannot be accurately described even in a thousand words. Therefore, a brilliant text requires brilliant interpreters, or rather congenital ones.
>
> (Petrescu 561)

Gheorghe Cozorici was one such congenitally brilliant actor who through his stage performance elevated the actor's profession to the most excellent artistic heights.

Every poem is a metaphor, which the actor attempts to decode every time he/she *unpacks* a poem. He/she unravels its imagery, sounds, feelings and states, and projects them onto his/her own personality. This explains why the same poem delivered by different actors, with their own personality and outlook, in different spaces and times, will sound dissimilar, will conjure a different image and thus create a different metaphor.

History is built on time–space coordinates. Yet the theatre boasts its own history, with many more coordinates, all of which contribute to creating generations of actors. Everything is built here both over time, with its golden or platinum generations, and across spaces, with Romanian actors being conferred on the aura of universality. And, unsurprisingly, everything starts with a poem, turned into a backdrop to project one's sensitivity, imagination, thought and sentiment – as countless generations of actors have done:

> In the study of poetry one cannot ignore tradition. Eminently useful, in this respect, is one's familiarity with the artistic skill of our great forerunners, culled from their own or their contemporaries' accounts. Theatre memoirs as well as the literature (handbooks of dramatic art, studies on the theatre, etc) treasure priceless clues. […] Alongside such readings, one should benefit from listening to recitation of verse by our great actors, a practice able to "attune" the ear of the listeners, to familiarize them with the musicality peculiar to an accomplished artistic interpretation. Aural education dramatically augments – if one shuns rote imitation – the range of an actor's delivery options.
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> (*Art of the Actor* 217)

Every generation of actors expresses itself through poetry. Poetry offers a common language over time, a language of thoughts and souls that generates emotion. Expectedly, however, each and every generation contributes its peculiar emotional baggage, its own ways of artistic expression. The study of poetry grounds the development of every actor's artistic personality, and the great actors of all times have emerged and flourished first and foremost by undertaking this practice.

Although heir to an outstanding stage tradition, the modern actor nevertheless shows a personality at odds with this tradition as regards the means of stage expression. The 21st-



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century actor necessarily evolves to reflect, in his/her creations, a peculiarity which owes to contemporaneity.

Through both their sensitivity and their power, Eminescu's lyrics have always been an actor's touchstone, eliciting an exercise in virtuosity. In keeping with our early example concerning Eminescu's *Satire III*, we will now turn to a nostalgic love poem, *Şi dacă* (*And If*):

*And If*

And if branches tap my pane
And the poplars whisper nightly,
It is to make me dream again
I hold you to me tightly.

And if the stars shine on the pond
And light its sombre shoal,
It is to quench my mind's despond
And flood with peace my soul.

And if the clouds their tresses part
And does the moon out blaze,
It is to remind my heart
I long for you always.

(Eminescu 175; trans. Corneliu M. Popescu)

An examination we conducted a while ago of several generations of actors that recited this poem over the years reveals that each generation as well as actor within his/her generation reflects differences in the delivery technique, means of interpretation, perspective of the poem, and degree of understanding of the poem's metaphor. The listening exercise involved interpretations by three actresses, Dana Maria Vieru (the 1989 generation), Valeria Seciu (the 1960s) and Leopoldina Bălănuță (the 1950s), as well as by two actors, Victor Rebengiuc (the 1950s) and George Vraca (the 1920s). With this poem, each one of them treads a different artistic path.

The youngest actress – as the closest one to contemporary trends in the theatre, a theatre ever less expressive, a theatre where actors no longer labour on the word as their predecessors used to – reads Eminescu's poem in detached, cerebral fashion. Nor does the delivery of the words seem particularly elaborated, the stress on the *work of the actor on him/herself* (in Konstantin Stanislavski's seminal phrase) being shifted to a loose delivery, which aims to transmit to the public the sense of everyday normality, yet leads rather to platitude in interpretation, to drab, impoverished tones. When applied to this poem, naturalism dulls the text.

Nothing remotely like this can be said about the other two actresses, Valeria Seciu and Leopoldina Bălănuță. Their respective approaches to the lyric genre preserve, to begin with, the musicality of Mihai Eminescu's poem; however differently, the two actresses convey the musicality of every verse in the poem. Valeria Seciu combines careful delivery with pauses therein, thus creating images through the feeling triggered by the ideas. The sad tone and suave timbre of the actress caress every word when she wishes to stress an idea. An outstanding sensitivity, originating in the personality of this great actress, makes listening to *And If* in Valeriei Seciu's delivery a delight both to the ear and to the sensitivity of the listeners.



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Leopoldina Bălănuță, unmistakeable thanks to her unique timbre, delivers the same poem lying the stress first of all on the musicality inherent in the great Romanian poet's lyric. Virtually defying time and space, Leopoldina Bălănuță seems to have sought out the specificity of the Romanian language so as to illustrate it in *And If*. She conveys the verse's beauty to the listener in clear, profound fashion, with no unwarranted exaggeration or simplification. Her timbre transports the listeners to the spheres directly touching on affectivity, with virtually no apparent cerebralized delivery.

Victor Rebengiuc, one of the two male actors chosen for the listening, delights hearers first of all through his impeccable, at times nearly contrived, diction. The clarity of his delivery leads him to adopt another rhythm than the melodious one chosen by the two great actresses: his is a somewhat intermittent rhythm, which may owe to a specifically masculine reticence. Without being cerebral, Victor Rebengiuc does not let sentiment control him, but, on the contrary, himself takes control over sentiment. It is noteworthy, though, that his delivery not only does not want in feeling, but rather enhances it through a special, masculine and protective, tone.

Last but not least, we listened, through a travel in time and space, to the interpretation of *And If* by George Vraca, one of the outstanding pillars of the art of the actor in Romania. Vraca's is an unmistakeable timbre which penetrates both mind and soul. His ample voice, his timbre, rich in tones, his calculated breathing which Vraca commands so well, his clear and accurate delivery cannot fail to impress the listener. His phrasing and nuancing bear the patina of time, and the verse delivered by George Vraca echoes across time.

The passion for poetry and truth of the forerunners of our stage is a lesson worth following beyond any space–time coordinates. In verse delivery the actor should seek to strike a balance which reflects both the artistry of our predecessors and the personality which each contemporary actor has evolved.

Besides excellent command of vocal delivery, the actor needs, at least when he/she recites verse, to detach from his/her person and from space–time, so as to enter a parallel world of metaphorical dimensions.

This is poetry – the first step to the actor's art.

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