

General Considerations on Performing Poetry in the Current Performing Arts Context

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Abstract: The contemporary theatre landscape seems to have strayed away from the feelings specific to poetry and to reciting it in front of an audience. The topics preferred by theatrical productions now, at the beginning of the XXIst Century, are strongly connected to the social realities one encounters on a daily basis. Certainly, it is reasonable for things to be this way, as theatre depends on firmly anchoring itself in reality, and the means of expression and of conveying emotion have, now, particularities that no one would have thought of fifty years ago. The present study intends to bring performance poetry back into discussion, as a type of artistic expression that has very well contoured specific elements, but that does not benefit from addressing broad audiences anymore, unfortunately.

Keywords: poetry; recital; Purcărete; Pitiș; Botta.

As we all very well know, the current context of performing arts bears all the marks of the times we live in. Without any doubt, this statement may seem completely prosaic, but I consider important to start with this not so spectacular premise. Of course, beyond all this, one may need the work and the achievements of a well-established institute or center for research in performing arts just to map and to establish the norms and the characteristics of what is commonly known as ‘current context of the performing arts’. This is a consequence of borders between the arts being more and more fragile, of more and more frequently looked for confluences and of overlapping and intersecting trends in arts that are rapidly moving. All these are connected to a global audience that is more diverse, more informed and “stronger” than ever before, as everybody can now *like* or *comment*, so there is constant, rapid and transparent feedback. It looks like, in this direction, the whole concept of ‘broad audience’ can be reevaluated, as it is a very fertile ground to do so.

Going further on with all these general considerations, I am getting closer to the present time’s specific frame: we are living the final days of a pandemic, after two years of isolation that created strong repercussions in all the areas of the field we are dealing with. This particular canvas is quite

large: the most dramatic effect was that of isolation and alienation in a field which, on the contrary, would bring people together, would bring communities together by making them stronger and more diverse and would also contribute to form a new audience. We also were the witnesses of a process of refurbishing the performing arts through tech: this was the result of the need to identify new ways of artistic expression. These searches for 'new forms' may seem similar to Anton Chekhov's Treplev's passion and naivety as he was also haunted by his personal quests for new artistic means of expression, adapted to his dramatic universe. Of course, now, almost three years later, it may seem easy and comfortable to talk about and to analyze all the positive outputs, but we need to never lose the memory of that dramatic spring of 2020, when the theatres were closed worldwide.

Keeping in mind all this framework of references and the overview of the current landscape of performing arts, I will try to bring us closer to the topic of performing poetry. In this way, the first step is to try to explain and define it through its importance. First, performing poetry is a concept that is unfortunately too rarely analyzed. Romanian research in this field is not preoccupied by it and there is a certain fear in handling it even among the academia. Here we must keep in mind the particularities of the Romanian theatre environment: of course, people of certain age all keep strong memories (often traumatizing memories) since before 1990, when public reading versified texts was part of the duties of any actor with a certain visibility. The patriotic poetry that was preferred by the communist regime was, in fact, a rudimentary and forced versification of certain slogans and commitments the working-class people would take and assume in front of the state and its leaders. The social realism managed something incredible: it created 'patriotic poetry', as this was the official term for it. The versified text, once it was publicly performed, had three major directions: the two state leaders and the communist party, as they were perceived as supreme, functional spheres of influence. Also, the frame of ideas contained by the verses performed was very narrow: gratitude for the presidential couple, for the communist party and for the forefathers, as well as strong urges to work combined with commitments that industrial and agricultural production will go off the charts. Of course, this was an instrument for the propaganda that had its purposes and its effects and there was no place for emotions: these texts were not meant to create emotions in the audience, but a certain state of mind, a certain energy that would be useful for the major targets of the official communist agenda. In short, through the public reading of the text in verses, the propaganda aimed for the large audience to gain an attitude of gratitude for the state, to wish to work more, to produce more, NOT to show and deal with feelings.

Together with all these versified texts (the so-called patriotic poetry), another widely spread practice before 1990 was the “re-reading” of certain established poets, but in a specific key that will be of great use for the official propaganda. There is a lot of literature about these re-readings of important poets – Mihai Eminescu (the last major European romantic) is a great piece of example, with his *Emperor and Proletarian*. Not least, I need to emphasize the re-reading of some “minor” poets, of local and regional importance, again, in the sense of adapting the artistic content to the propaganda. The effect and the result for these practices was unhappy, as we all know and, maybe remember, there was a certain outdated “festivism”, that had nothing to do with poetry and with emotion and with art in general.

On the other hand, there were some notable exceptions of poetry performers before 1990 (and also after), that we need to point out and to emphasize. Emil Botta was one of the most important ones: having graduated the Royal Academy of Arts in Bucharest in 1932 he made use of a special technique in performing poetry, using his stage speech to create emotion by almost enchanting the poetry. Botta used some specific stage speech techniques that were part of the norm between the two world wars, only to change decades later. Of course, this was the “old” way of performing poetry on stage. Botta used to lengthen the vowels, to exaggerate the rhythm of the verses and he managed to identify an internal music of the poetry that he delivered to the audience. It would be a major error to consider his approach as outdated. His performance was solidly enclosed into the expectations of his time and into the audience’s spiritual universe. Today, watching Emil Botta performing poetry is quite similar to performing arts archaeology because we discover a unique and expressive stage speech that is very demanding for the artist, but for the contemporary audience it may seem time specific.

Georghe Cozorici was another remarkable example of performing poetry before 1990: he used a similar technique, but he adapted his expression to a more contemporary audience. Graduating the academy twenty years later than Botta, Cozorici started and developed his artistic career during the cruel and harsh Romanian 1950s, when social realism was more than ever the official channel in art. Still, his way of expressing poetry kept him at a safe distance from the re-reading of classical Romanian poetry. In performing poetry, Cozorici focused on the situation he imagined, on the emotional context in the text and on the specific features in certain character’s voices.

Lucia Mureșan (graduated in 1958) made herself well known before (and after) 1990, as being one of the few women that engaged into the challenging field of performing poetry. With an exquisite vocal timbre and using a vocal diction that tangented perfection, Lucia Mureșan focused

especially on performing Lucian Blaga and Tudor Arghezi. It is important to emphasize this professional and personal preference for at least two reasons: the two poets' lyrics are difficult and problematic to perform, their verses being abundant in specific particularities. Also, as she preferred mainly Blaga and Arghezi, she had the perfect opportunity to study their poetry (in order to perform it), which implies she had a method, she had a coherent approach, and she developed a research plan.

The 'star' of Romanian poetry performance, Ion Caramitru (graduated in 1964) and made his entrance into the artistic establishment at a very young age, when he quickly became one of the most visible voices of his generation. His way of performing poetry was a profoundly emotional and participative endeavor: his genuineness was mixed with a very elaborate spontaneity. The audience perceived Caramitru performing poetry as delivering poems that were unpremeditated and naturally distributed towards their targets. The performer made use of a very interesting technique: he contemporized his approach towards poetry while using his voice and his breathing to cleverly emphasize the verbs, therefore creating powerful images.

More than that, it is of crucial importance that Ion Caramitru was followed by his disciple. During his short academic career, one of his most important offspring was Constantin Chiriac (graduated in 1980), an actor that makes use of the same elaborate spontaneity and of the same emphasis of the verb that becomes an engine which will keep together all the ensemble of the unique expressive feelings in the poetry that is being performed. In the same aspect, it is important to stress that Constantin Chiriac is the author of several studies on performing poetry and his concern and focus on this subject is a unique direction in the Romanian artistic education and performing arts. Constantin Chiriac's books do not teach students and audiences *how* to perform poetry, as this is a practical issue, but they analyze and disseminate the research method needed for creating a poetry recital and they represent an essential bibliographic resource on this subject. Not coincidentally, Constantin Chiriac starred in Silviu Purcărete's production at Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu - *Games, Words, Crickets*, in which he performs poetry on stage, alongside a group of actors that are interacting with the lyrics through a wonderful set of acting improvisations. The production opened in September 2022 and the audience responded to it as to a very non festive and natural approach to poetry.

It is clear we now face a crisis in the current Romanian performing arts: most actors will keep themselves at a very comfortable distance from performing poetry. The exceptions briefly presented above (and also Ovidiu Iuliu Moldovan, Florian Pittiș and a few others) are just a drop in an ocean of half of century of mediocre poetry performance. More than that, even the

audience (especially the educated audience) will regard performing poetry with a certain suspicion and will connect this artistic endeavor with minor, local, “festive” events.

Meanwhile, in other artistic environments, the situation is quite different: concepts as “slam poetry”, “rap poems”, “performance poetry”, “festivals of spoken words” are part of the cultural and artistic establishment for many decades now. The reason for this is quite simple: other cultures will assume the exhibition of the emotions for the performers. Romanian performing arts, on the other hand, is caught in a posttraumatic stress symptom generated by the 45 years of communism and by the unhappy inertia after 1990, when the public manifestation of emotions still bears the signs of association with a local, provincial festivism. This posttraumatic stress we are facing is only a partial explanation, that is adapted to Romanian realities after the second World War. Further on, I strongly believe we need to pull out a certain distancing effect and make use of one of Hans-Thies Lehmann’s ideas from his famous *Postdramatic Theatre*:

Rather the new theatre has to be understood in the context of the comprehensive virtualization of reality and the widespread penetration of all perception by the grid of the media. In the face of the formative power and hardly avoidable mass dissemination of mediatized reality, most artists see no way out other than to ‘graft’ their own work onto the existing models, rather than to undertake the seemingly hopeless attempt of finding entirely divergent ‘personal’ artistic formulations in a mediatized world. But as the mediatized clichés creep into any representation, seriousness is on its last legs, too. Cool is the name for emotionality that has lost its ‘personal’ expression to such an extent that all feelings can be expressed only in quotation marks, and all emotions that drama was once able to show must now pass through the ‘irony filter’ of a film and media aesthetic.¹

In simpler words, Lehmann talks about a new performing art that is strongly connected to media and about being ‘cool’, as about the loss of the personal expression of emotionality. There is a certain connection between the loss of emotionality and being cool, as they are coined by the German critic, with the current Romanian context of performing poetry, as the latter is also running away from showing emotionality and tries to be as cool as possible.

Here we may have a paradox as, of course, all directors will fight to get to emotions, they will strive and they will concentrate all their artistic

¹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated and with an *Introduction* by Karen Jürst-Munby, London & New York, Routledge, 2006.

energies towards this complex notion, as they very well know that this way, they will touch their audience. Also, we talk very often about poetry in the performances of a certain director, but this idea is now extrapolated to a conglomerate of visual and audio effects and, of course, to acting. Delivering emotions to the audience through poetry seems unsafe and ‘uncool’ and it seems that the performing arts industry prefers to achieve this prospect through other means than poetic text.

We need to be honest: Romanian performing arts keeps a certain safe distance from performing poetry, mainly because of the reasons I have presented before. Is there nothing to be done? Well, not to sound like Beckett, with his famous opening line in *Waiting for Godot* (“Nothing to be done”...), there are people who do. And there is a great deal of things that still need to be done. Students in Romanian theatre universities deal with poetry when it comes to their stage speech classes. So there is an ongoing start, there are seeds that are planted for the future actors during the school years. So why is there no future concern for performing poetry? My personal answer is because the Romanian theatre university system is training the future actors for working in relation with directors and with a certain type of performance, that absolutely excludes performing poetry. Performing poetry entails the actor to be somehow alone, in front of the audience, with his most inner and intimate thoughts and feelings. The stage director the school is preparing the future actor to work with will be a cover-up for his feelings, will guide the actor’s emotions and it seems that this is more comfortable for the performer, unfortunately. On the other hand, I strongly believe in the need to teach poetry in Romanian theatre universities. We all know the harsh and difficult aspects of curricula and how complicated it is to mix the needs of the students with the requirements of the regulations in the higher education, but creating a course for introduction in poetry (BA or MA level), would be useful and would adjust and maybe compensate the huge voids the students bring with them from high school. So, to conclude, there is this specific fear on behalf of the actor to expose feelings through such intimate texts as poetry and she or he prefers to “hide” behind the stage director.

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