

Doctoral research in theatre and the requirement to have a PhD diploma for tenure in higher education: development or regression?

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Abstract: Tenure in higher education can only be done after acquiring the doctoral degree. I will analyze the suitability of this system to the theatrical vocational system, as well as academic ethics, a pivotal element at the intersection of the two areas – scientific and artistic – in this context, the benefits or damages brought to the specific professional system. I will analyze the risks, as well as the changes in professional ethics arising from this model.

Keywords: research, PhD, tenure, theatre.

1. Introduction

Tenure in higher education can only be granted after obtaining a doctoral degree. In the following I will analyze the appropriateness of this articulation to the theatrical vocational system, as well as academic ethics, a pivotal element at the intersection of the two areas - scientific and artistic. I will also analyze in this context the benefits or harms and limitations brought to the specific professional system by the particularities of vocational higher education in theatre. I will analyze the risks, as well as the changes in professional ethics resulting from this model.

2. The two types of PhD

To begin with, I will analyze the two types of PhD practiced in the Romanian academic system, namely the scientific PhD and the professional doctorate, evoking the definition given by the Education Law to each of them. Thus, Article 158, paragraph (6), point a) of Law 1/2011², as updated, stipulates

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² https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/legea-educatiei_actualizata%20august%202018.pdf

that the scientific doctorate *aims to produce original scientific knowledge, internationally relevant, based on scientific methods, organized only for full-time education. The scientific doctorate is a prerequisite for a professional career in higher education and research*, while the professional doctorate, applied to the fields of arts and sport, *aims at the production of original knowledge based on the application of the scientific method and systematic reflection on artistic creations or on high-level national and international sports performances, which may constitute a basis for a professional career in higher education and research in the fields of arts and sport*, as the definition in the same Law, Article 158, paragraph 6, point b), states. At the same time, Law 199/2023³, the Law on University Education, in Article 61(a) and (b), retains the concept of the two distinct categories of doctoral degree.

Therefore, as the law further defines in Article 159(1)(b), the doctoral study program involves an *individual program of scientific research or artistic creation*. In other words, the *sine qua non* condition for doctoral studies implies the existence of a valuable work, based on a creative path whose value is confirmed and validated by specialists in the field.

The university is a competitive system, with doctoral studies being a fundamental requirement. Law 1/2011 lists the conditions for holding university teaching positions, specifying that it is compulsory to hold a doctoral degree. Thus, Article 301(3)(a) of the Law on Education stipulates that a PhD degree is a minimum requirement for the teaching position of university lecturer; Article 301(4)(a) of the Law stipulates that a PhD diploma is a prerequisite for the position of associate professor, just as a PhD diploma is also required for the position of university professor, as stipulated in Article 301(5)(a).

Therefore, in order to be tenured, future university teaching staff must hold a doctoral degree. But, in vocational fields, holding a doctoral degree is not a *sine qua non* for a professional who achieves outstanding performance recognized by specialists; he or she does not qualify, by this argument alone⁴, for the title of doctor. Law 199 of July 4th, 2023, the new law on higher education, stipulates in Article 87 that *in arts and sports higher education, a scientific or professional doctorate is a condition for a teaching career*. In fact, the new law continues the concept proposed in the 2011 law and makes a university teaching career conditional on the prior acquisition of a scientific or professional doctorate.

Vocational university education in the arts, i.e. in Theatre, aims at increasing the student's ability to build his/her own artistic system expressed

³ <https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliuDocumentAfis/271898>

⁴ Is this a strong condition to become a "good teacher", in the sense of the expression used by Andrew Peterson and James Arthur? (See Peterson, Andrew, Arthur, James (2021). *Ethics and the Good Teacher*, Routledge, London).

through the acquisition and development of stage technique, acquired during the academic studies and during practice, thus defining his/her own professional background.

Differently categorized in the nomenclature of teaching and research positions in higher education, teachers who train actors should include an important mentoring dimension in their teaching system⁵. The mentor – the master/maestro, as he or she was called in previous generations – is the role model who becomes a point of reference for the student through his or her own achievements in the field – theatre, stage art, the art of theatrical performance, the art of directing, the art of acting – and who also provides the student with his or her own reference system, from which the student will, in turn, build up an individual reference system throughout the course of university studies.

Therefore, by theoretically grounding the stage discoveries, the student's own experience represents a basis for research and development for both the student and the teacher, respectively mentor or master; it constitutes an array of operational tools, used individually, whose applicability is personalized during the scenic metamorphosis.

Consequently, we consider training for and in theatre as an initiatory journey, full of unknown paths⁶, heading towards inner and technical horizons, a journey full of its own meanings and individualities that only the one in action perceives, assimilates and can use creatively further on, towards new horizons; this is, in fact, an individual experience, the creative process stimulating and appreciating the individualities that personalize their stage technique until the definition of great creative personalities.

In this context, vocational training, in this case the process of educating students from theatre faculties, requires the presence of a professor who is a builder of new systems, a teacher who, having real and recognized artistic values in the art of theatre, in the professional performing arts, becomes a model of research, originality, individuality and applicability for the students. The teacher's guarantee of value, of his or her artistic qualities recognized by specialists in the field, is an imperative of vocational education. The professor is a model, a master, and the students are formed in the theatrical process and develop, taking it as a point of reference, understanding at a deep level the features that define it, relating to them and forming their own system of values, technical elements, creation. In this way, future professionals will learn the ability to build their own models of technique, approach and scenic construction,

⁵ See also Koki, Stan (1997), *The Role of Teacher Mentoring in Educational Reform*, available on <https://nmu.edu/Webb/ArchivedHTML/UPCED/mentoring/docs/Role-mentor.pdf>

⁶ Including here ethical paths (see Ridout, Nicholas (2021). *Theatre & Ethics*, Methuen Drama and Cahn, M. Steven (2022). *Academic Ethics Today. Poblems, Polcies and Prospects for University Life*, Rowman & Littlefield.

to use the information and techniques assimilated in the process of artistic education within their own system in a conscious and assumed way.

It is a fact that in the last thirteen years, fewer and fewer artistic personalities with renowned and award-winning careers have been teaching in universities and theatre faculties. The main reason is the absence of doctoral studies in their biographies. But the fact that these personalities have not pursued doctoral studies is clearly not due to their lack of professional worth, nor even to a lack of interest in doctoral studies.

Numerous professionals whose careers fully recommend them for higher education in theatre are acting, staging and building stage sets across Romania. They represent real centers of interest for the theatrical world, as confirmed by the specialized analysis, but, nevertheless, they do not hold the title of doctor of theatre. It is a fact that carrying out research and writing a thesis as part of doctoral studies, in accordance with the regulated academic framework, represents a massive investment of time and energy, which makes this a difficult option for an artist with a first-rate artistic agenda.

With certain notable exceptions, the holders of posts in theatre higher education are graduates of specialized studies, who, for one reason or another, have opted to embrace a strictly or predominantly teaching career, rather than a stage career, following all the steps of promotion in academic structures. Their doctoral research potentially enjoys the exclusive time and dedication of its authors and, although potentially theoretically well-documented and also potentially complying with academic rigor to the letter, their use carries a number of risks.

Specifically, the tenure of teachers who hold doctoral degrees as an end-goal but have no continuing experience in the field of theatre has real repercussions for the preparation of students in theatre education. When a university degree tutor – lecturer, associate professor or professor – is not familiar, accustomed and eager to practice the unforeseen in the field he or she teaches and researches alongside the tutee, when his or her own artistic journey is insufficient and halted at an earlier point in time, his or her professional discourse and behavior become incompatible with that of the mentee, the mentor is unable to develop an interesting didactic structure congruent with that of the mentee, to integrate specific terms and use them in the ownership of the meanings they contain, and, last but not least, being unable to evaluate and develop students' artistic development.

This lack of stability, stemming from the absence of stage practice in any specialty – acting, directing, stage design, etc. – disorients students, leads to disappointment and distrust, and, moreover, leads to the formation of a flawed professional value system with long-term impact on the professional community in the field. Thus set, they vitiate future stage practice, reducing the chances of

young actors – even those with great talent – to build a career on a sound, professionally successful foundation.

This imbalance between the general academic strictness and the particular openness of theatrical practice is becoming more and more pronounced in drama faculties and therefore creates the space for an in-depth analysis of the specific profile of drama education and a legislative reconfiguration, taking into account the specific dimension of the performing arts field. Thus, a study of this kind should question the creation of specific tenure formulas in theatre higher education, based on successful work in the theatre, prioritizing the value of the theatrical arts, the practical experience validated by specialists in the field, the ability to propose and support functional educational systems with valuable stage application.

In addition to the above, it is important to note that changes in professional ethics are quantified on both sides, students and academic staff.

Although the idea that a brilliant professional is not necessarily a brilliant teacher, as well, has traveled around the world too easily, time has proven that a very good actor, a very good director or a very good scenographer will discover his or her own way of communicating his or her way of working, as well as the path of his or her artistic development. The individual system of the recognized, appreciated, valuable theatre professional can be defined in front of any kind of audience, including the audience of students, and in relation to the active audience, they – that is the actor, the director or the set designer, without limiting myself to these stage professions – will find their communication paths with the new audience, that is the students, an audience that becomes more and more active in the course accumulating specific knowledge and professional technique. We thus discover that the theatre professional gradually builds his/her own method of working with students. As such, I believe that great theatre professionals should be encouraged to work in universities or vocational faculties, under rewarding conditions of professional and monetary recognition, including tenure track, similar to PhD holders. As we know, professionals in the field are currently collaborating with the university system exclusively as associate professors, without the academic recognition of tenured professors.

Of course, this intervention does not aim to question the need for theatre professionals to pursue doctoral studies. The systematization of information, the establishment of stage experience and techniques, a system of theatrical training are essential. But to the same extent, a law adapted to theatre education should enable the integration of these professionals into the educational system, recognize their position in both the cultural and educational spheres, as well as their value, and place them in academic structures as full professors.

For most of the teaching staff, those who have pursued doctoral studies, but have not received recognition of their artistic value in theatre, a discomfort in communicating and relating with students in the field of art is noticeable. This

is a situation that the law does not prevent, as our core profession is a vocational one, based on a courageous, positive type of communication, in which there is no room for frustrations, vanities. Frustration, ego, offenses are the prerogative of those who are unfulfilled in their stage career.

3. Conclusions

The change of professional ethics resides in the consequences of the above and refers to the modification of the professional system by changing its components. Studying, analyzing, researching, self-discovery through workshops, courses and seminars together with tutors, teachers, mentors who understand, who identify the necessary resources, who intervene towards the student's development, all these give important value to professional ethics. Professional ethics is imposed on professional value, and the direction of development will interweave the two components so that the future beneficiary of the academic system will be an exceptional result: professional and original.

Taking as a reference point the fact that the new law on higher education, Law 199/2023, retains the two doctoral formulas – scientific doctorate and professional doctorate – and, at the same time, considering the opportunity for correction that this separation allows from the perspective analyzed above, I consider that it is imperative to launch a process of legislative optimization based on a solid study of this subject. Theatrical education is based on value, having as a common denominator the professionalism acquired from the theatrical techniques learned in trainable, functional exercises, applicable to the variables of the artistic systems, in particular, the individual artistic systems of future actors, directors, set designers, light or sound designers who will further build the miraculous theatrical space of the next generation.

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