

The performance of doctoral research

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Abstract: This paper highlights the similarities between doctoral research and a theatre performance, showing how both processes involve exploration, interpretation, and communication. Just like a theatre production needs rigorous preparation, collaboration, and a clear message sent to the audience, the doctoral research involves a structured endeavour, interaction with the academic community, and a coherent presentation of results. The narrative, performative, and relational dimensions common to the two fields are analysed, underlining the importance of creativity, of the discovery process and of the impact on receivers, be they viewers or researchers. By means of this interdisciplinary approach, the article aims for a deeper understanding of doctoral research as a dynamic process, in which doctoral candidates, just like actors, play an active part regarding the topic they are studying.

Keywords: research, theatre, semiotics, collaborative.

Introduction

Semiotics is the study of the mechanisms of communication and of the signification process. According to the Hungarian-American researcher Thomas Sebeok, semiotics can be defined as the process of exchanging various kinds of signs, a process supported by the systems of signs and the codes on which they are based. The meaning of a message can be interpreted only to the extent to which the receiver has all the necessary knowledge to decipher its code. Therefore, semiotics studies the theory of meaning, trying to explain how it is built by means of signs and codes.

Each field of activity has its own specific code system and the professionals in that particular field are those who know the codes and use them efficiently in order to reach their professional goals. Culture, and theatre in particular, are no exception from that necessity. Umberto Eco underlined the importance of language and signs in creating culture, saying that “human identity is defined by language, since culture is a complex system of interconnected signs, (...) the whole culture is a phenomenon of signification and communication and (...) humanity and society only exist when

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signification rapports and communication processes are established”¹. Even when the individual believes that he is freely expressing his thoughts, he is actually influenced and shaped by the rules of sign-usage. Understanding these rules means not only deeper knowledge of society, but also an exploration of semiotic structures which determine that which, in the past, was called *res cogitans*, namely the ensemble of factors forming, organising and shaping our thinking². In this context, the theatre actor needs to master various communication systems and conventions in order to send a clear, coherent message to the viewer.

Theatre needs to be conceived as a dynamic system able to generate content continuously and to adapt its messages, thus being both a system of organised theories and an expression of the living system theory. The essence of theatre lies in the creation of a dialogue between the director, actor and viewer, which is why using a system of codes and symbols is fundamental for ensuring efficient communication. Within a theatre performance or event, each element present on stage becomes a sign with a clear signifier, meant to send a message to the audience. “Theatre techniques are actually communication techniques.”³

Russian director Lev Dodin points out this relational dimension of theatre, stating that the theatre he is trying to create is one which brings people together, facilitating the connection and dialogue between them; that he is not an extremist or fanatic who demands extreme sacrifices in the name of art. He believes that there is something way more valuable than success, fame, or applause, namely the process of collective exploration and learning. These moments of searching are the ones giving us true satisfaction. The joy is not in finding a final solution, but in the continuous deepening of the search. For us, theatre is not just a form of art, but an extension of life and even something bigger than life itself⁴. His perspective underlines the role of theatre not only as an artistic form, but also as a process of collective knowledge and continuous exploration of humanity.

The connection between this perspective on theatre and doctoral research lies in their common nature as a continuous process of exploration, learning and discovery. Just like theatre is not only an artistic form, but also a means of collective knowledge and investigation of humanity, doctoral research is not

¹ Umberto Eco (1982). *Tratat de semiotică generală* [Treatise of General Semiotics], Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, București, p. 36.

² Umberto Eco (1996). *Limitele interpretării* [Limits of Interpretation], translated by Ștefan Mincu și Daniela Bucșă, Editura Pontica, Constanța.

³ Viola Spolin (2008). *Improvizație pentru teatru* [Improvisation for Theatre], UNATC Press, București, p. 24.

⁴ Lev Dodin (2008). *Călătorie fără sfârșit. Reflecții și memorii* [Journey without End, Reflections and Memoirs], traducere de Cătălina Panaitescu, Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, București.

limited to accumulating information, but involves rigorously seeking the truth, critically going deeper into the studied topic, and significantly contributing to that particular field.

In both contexts, success does not reside only in the final result, be it a performance or a doctoral paper, but is found especially in the exploration process, in the continuous learning and the discovery of new perspectives. Also, both theatre and doctoral research involve a permanent interaction between various actors in the field: between the director, actors, and viewers, in the theatre, and between the doctoral candidate, the coordinator, and the academic community, in research.

Doctoral research can be symbolically understood as a cultural act in theatre, by the fact that the research process can be likened to an artistic performance. This analogy can be explored from several angles, starting from the dynamics and structure of a theatrical act.

Within the doctoral research, the process of discovering, bringing arguments, and communicating the results can be seen as a performance. Just like an actor assuming a role on stage, the researcher takes on an active role with regard to the studied topic. Thus, the whole research experience can take place in a dramatic framework, with tense moments, inner conflicts (methodological dilemmas), but also with moments of enlightenment (significant discoveries).

The involvement of the audience

The same way that a theatre performance involves an audience receiving, interpreting and reacting to the message sent by the stage, the doctoral research is destined for an audience made of specialists, academicians, and other researchers in the field. Both processes are built for communicating ideas, causing reflection, and generating new perspectives on reality.

When it comes to theatre, a show's success depends not only on the actors' performances, but also on their ability to send a clear, coherent message to the audience, so that the viewers could understand it and integrate it in their own systems of thoughts and emotions. Similarly, a doctoral thesis is not only the result of an individual research effort, but an intellectual process which should be clearly formulated, well argued, and relevant for the scientific community. The readers of the thesis should be able to understand and capitalise on the results of the study in order to integrate them in their own academic endeavours.

There is also an element of interpretation in both theatre and research: just like every viewer can have a different perspective of a performance, each reader of a thesis can understand and analyse the conclusions according to their own frame of reference. Therefore, both the director and actors and the

doctoral candidate need to be aware of the importance of the clarity, coherence, and impact of the message they send.

Moreover, the audience's feedback plays an essential role in both fields. In theatre, the viewers' reactions can influence the performance and evolution of a production, while in research, the questions, comments, and criticism of colleagues and professors can contribute to the improvement and refinement of the arguments in a thesis. Both processes involve an exchange of ideas leading to increasingly deeper knowledge.

A research paper, just like the text of a play, has a clear narrative structure: there is an introduction (establishing the context and objectives), a development (presenting the methodology and analyses in detail), and a conclusion (to synthesise the discoveries and open new directions of research). Each act has a precise purpose and contributes to the evolution of the whole narrative. "The hunger for structure expresses the need to avoid boredom, and Kierkegaard⁵ underlined the evil caused by unstructured time – boredom becomes synonymous with emotional malnutrition and can have the same consequences."⁶ Humans need structure, rules, codes, they feel the need to organise their lives and use hierarchies in order to function optimally. This structure provides peace, clarity and a possible bird's eye view needed to project an idea of the future, and all these offer safeties.

However, research is not a completely rigid process, but rather one which also entails great flexibility and adaptability, just like in the case of an actor who is always ready to react and improvise. "Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality which we see and explore and according to which we act; in this reality, the fragments of our self-function as one whole. It is the moment of discovery, of experimenting, of creative expression"⁷. Although the researcher follows a well-defined research plan, in the process of exploring a topic, new questions, ideas, or directions of study may arise which had not been initially planned, and the researcher needs to be able to react and adjust quickly.

A dialogue with tradition and innovation

Just like a director who relates to theatre traditions, but also to contemporary innovation, the researcher is in a continuous dialogue with papers that have already been written in the field and with the new challenges and questions that the research is addressing. To that effect, research is a continuous act of interpretation of tradition and innovation, just like a theatre production can readapt or reinvent a classical play. "Theatre techniques are by

⁵ S. Kierkegaard (1947). *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, Princeton University Press, p. 22.

⁶ Eric Berne (2020). *Jocurile noastre de toate zilele* [Games People Play], Editura Trei, București, p. 38.

⁷ Viola Spolin, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

no means sacred. Style in theatre changes radically with the passage of years (...). Using current communication is much more important than the method used. Methods change according to the needs of time and space”⁸.

A group of researchers⁹ from the University of British Columbia published an article in 2021 describing an innovative concept of blending together the doctoral research and the practices of theatre. Research-based Theatre – RbT is an innovative methodology integrating theatre practices and conventions in the process of scientific research with the goal of facilitating and promoting research. This approach is fundamentally collaborative and relational, actively involving the participants in the research and also involving the artists and researchers in practical activities such as generating data, analysing and exchanging information. This methodology includes stages such as writing, rehearsing and performing monologues, scenes or plays based on research data.

In this article, the authors present three recent examples of interdisciplinary projects in which researchers and artists collaborated with various communities in order to dramatize the data by the RbT methodological approach. In order to contribute to the literature of the field, they analyse their experiences in coordinating RbT projects in three distinct fields: theatre, sociology, and therapy. The authors also examine the way RbT reconfigures the relationships between participants and, at the same time, the way these relationships influence and transform the methodology itself.

By means of methods such as practice-as-research, doctoral candidates experiment with new techniques in acting, directing, playwriting, and stage design, analysing their impact both on the creative process and on the audience’s reception. For example, this research can explore the integration of digital technologies in the production (augmented reality, video projection, artificial intelligence used in stage design), the use of non-conventional movement and body expression techniques (physical theatre, Meyerhold’s biomechanics, Viewpoints), or new forms of collaborative and interactive playwriting.

Doctoral studies also allow for the testing of innovative directorial approaches, such as immersion theatre, which dissolves the boundary between actors and viewers, or documentary theatre, which capitalises on real testimonies in order to build productions with a strong social impact. At the same time, doctoral research provides a framework for the critical reinterpretation of theatre traditions, revisiting and adapting well-established techniques in a contemporary context.

In doctoral research, just like in theatre, a creative act is essential. Although research is based on methodological and theoretical rigour, in many

⁸ Viola Spolin, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁹ Tetsuro Shigematsu, Chris Cook, George Belliveau and Graham W. Lea.

cases, the researcher needs to be an innovator, to have the courage to ask unconventional questions and to discover new connections between concepts or ideas. This creative side is essential for the progress of the research and can also be compared with the direction and performance process in a show.

The relationship between the creator and the audience

Just like in theatre, in the doctoral research there is a complex relationship between the author of the paper (the researcher) and the audience of the thesis (the evaluation commission and the academic audience). This relationship is not purely unilateral, but involves a continuous exchange of ideas and interpretations. Just like actors can allow themselves to be influenced by the audience's energy, researchers are influenced by the feedback received during the research and evaluation process.

The audience is the most honoured element of theatre. Without an audience, there is no theatre."¹⁰ The audience is the essential element, the catalyst turning a simple performance in a living artistic act. Without viewers, theatre loses its purpose, remaining just a series of gestures and lines with no impact. Each technique assimilated by the actor, each stage design detail, each carefully placed light or detailed directorial analysis are conceived not only to impress, but also to create an authentic, captivating experience for the audience.

Just like there is a memorable last scene with which an actor ends a performance, the doctoral thesis is the researcher's final performance, a synthesis of all the efforts, ideas, and discoveries accumulated throughout the research. It is presented in a formal, finalised form, but it is also a living document, which can continue to influence and to open new discussions and directions of research. Thus, doctoral research can be seen not only as an academic activity, but also as a profound act of culture, in which the researcher expresses ideas and contributions to knowledge in an artistic, innovative way.

Conclusions

We need symbols and codes to be able to communicate, evolve and develop in society, while in theatre, in order to harmonise the messages we express, theatrical symbols are like gifts with an emotional value – that is why we look for them everywhere in art. The secret in art is to find a way to suggest, allowing the viewer's imagination to work and to notice what you wanted to say – it is a field in which imagination dictates to reason, while reason enjoys it and plays in the imaginary space that has been created. Although Lucian Blaga claims that a symbol has its own evidence and that a symbol which needs arguments is not valid, in the case of doctoral research, we

¹⁰ Viola Spolin, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

need arguments and explanations for them, as research itself is a series of explanations and arguments.

Research in the field of theatre plays an essential part in the profound understanding and development of the theatre phenomenon, contributing to advancements in the theory, practice, and teaching specific to this field. Theatre, as a living artistic form, is continuously transforming, adapting to social, technological, and aesthetic changes specific to each epoch. In this context, doctoral research plays a fundamental part in investigating and developing new artistic directions, contributing to the diversification of the stage language and to innovation in the art of stage performance. By case studies, and artistic experiments, doctoral candidates contribute to defining emerging tendencies in contemporary theatre, influencing not only the academic scene, but the professional one, as well. Thus doctoral research becomes a driver of innovation in performance arts, ensuring a continuous development and a permanent connection of theatre to the realities and challenges of the modern world.

The scientific endeavour plays an essential part in preserving and reinterpreting the theatre patrimony, providing a deeper understanding of stage traditions and of the way they can be brought up to date and integrated in contemporary theatre practices. Historical and analytical studies allow for an investigation of the aesthetic, technical, and ideological evolution of theatre, from its archaic and ritualistic forms, all the way to the avant-garde experiments of the 21st century.

More than simple documentation, doctoral research stimulates a reinterpretation of these traditions according to contemporary sensibilities and challenges. For instance, traditional acting techniques can be revitalised and adapted to new forms of stage expression, while older stage design aesthetics can inspire modern theatre productions. Thus, doctoral candidates do more than just preserve the memory of theatre – they facilitate a dynamic dialogue between the past and the present, contributing to the training of new generations of artists and viewers who understand and use the heritage of theatre in an innovative, relevant way.

The synthesis of the comparison presented in this paper is that doctoral research in the field of theatre is not just an academic endeavour, but also a creative, innovative process, essential for the understanding, developing, and continuous transformation of the art of theatre. It does not only go deeper into the theoretical knowledge, but it also influences the way theatre is practiced, taught, and perceived in contemporary society.

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