

Research and culture. The Middle Way

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Abstract: The interest of the young generation in something that brings a lot of money safely and quickly at the expense of something that would contribute to their personal training in the longer term, can generate frustrations. It is normal for frustrations to arise for the young actor trying to find his way in life and theatre today, but for those who have a richer intellectual life, the damage is less. In acting talent matters a lot, but if this talent is not honed through work, through a personal effort of self-knowledge and cultivation of one's own virtues, then this talent cannot shine to its true value. Because the most successful actors are those who are able to devote more time to the important things that really give life meaning. We live in a historical period marked by crises, plagues, calamities, wars. All these leave their mark on our life, on our becoming. We are still trying to find a way to move forward. The way I propose through my article is *the middle way*. Between impulsiveness and cowardice, I propose a middle way: *the courage*. The courage that is based on our reason to fit our actions to the circumstances and to respond intelligently to the different facets of the situation. I propose to young people to find a spiritual freedom that gives meaning to their lives. I propose ways and exercises through which they can choose and build their own system of moral values that will allow them to aspire to a supreme goal: *love*.

Keywords: research, culture, middle way.

Introduction

In order to function coherently, any community needs to be based on a value system approved by most members. It's just that value is not the “good” in itself, but a means to get to what is good. Or at least it should be, as there are also values that lead to evil. Non-values. We can easily observe them, because they are built on lies and generate meanness. Those who decide how these values are used (for good or for evil) are those who form a community – in our case, the community of theatre people.

“In the language of modern civilisation – the way we live today – MORALITY is an objective measure allowing us to attribute a value to the individual character or behaviour. It is intellectually connected to the social categories of good and evil and represents the relationship of the social

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individual with an objective duty, with an “as it should be” which is compartmentalised in partial “virtues.” Each person’s MORAL character attributes an objective value to that person, based on the scale of virtues approved by the whole society.”¹

How are theatre productions born today? How are young actors trained today? Is there a need for continuity in young actors’ training? Does tradition mean anything to that end? Is there any connection between the actor’s personal character and the depth of the dramatic characters that actor plays? If theatre schools placed no emphasis on tradition, how could the young actor’s spiritual enrichment be achieved? Can an actor’s training be thought out and appreciated taking into account only the spirit of those particular times and the social circumstances in which the actor grew? These are some answers that this article aims to answer.

Older actors feel an organic need to get close to younger actors and interact with them. What both sides gain from this interaction is a dose of spontaneity, of getting out of a rut for the older ones and a bit more experience for the younger ones. This might be the secret of the perpetuation of values. Of course, the older ones need to take initiative and choose their apprentices, as those who are in caught up in the ardour of youth do not necessarily wish to receive advice or to recognize old values. However, this interconnection is the sure way for the whole group to evolve. Although, when we think about it, actors are ageless.

C. I. Nottara, actor of the National Theatre of Bucharest and professor at the Dramatic Conservatory of Bucharest, one of the most important figures of Romanian theatre (1859-1935), believed that, regardless of age, actors should be constantly seeking, continuously aiming to improve themselves, permanently analysing the vices and preferences (pleasures) of the society in which they lived, carefully observing reality in order to be able to create fiction on stage as believably as possible. Nottara believed that actors were creators, not interpreters, claiming that they (actors) were the only ones able to fill the holes in a play with psychological details that the playwright never even thought about. “A craft which is very hard to do, but also often easy, is that of the actor, since anyone can assimilate it, although not everyone has certain qualities, and, since this craft is considered among the liberal careers, without being controlled in the same way as others, the number of worthless actors increases by the day, seriously damaging both talented actors and the audience, whose artistic sense should be carefully developed and led on the cultural path only by those actors who have acquired a vast experience and solid knowledge due to long, serious studies of human mores and passions.”² As a professor in a theatre school, Nottara recommended students to study not

¹ Christos Yannaras (2002). *Libertatea moralei* [The Freedom of Morality], Editura Anastasia, p. 7.

² C.I. Nottara (1960). *Amintiri* [Memories], Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, București, p. 84.

only beauty in art, but also the habits and customs of our people, together with our moral conduct. He basically proposed to them to study ethics and mores.

I believe that the first question we need to ask ourselves about the actions of our character is whether they are moral or immoral, just or unjust, sincere or insincere. And, since we are doing that, why would we not ask the same questions about our own actions, in all the aspects of our lives? Whatever we do, we need to make decisions, and, in order to make the right ones, we need to take into account a set of logical rules, based on a value system, guided by our own conscience, both personally and professionally, because, just like there are rules for ethical conduct in our lives, there are rules of ethical conduct for the theatre.

The topic of my doctoral research is *Virtue – the moral quality of the fulfilled actor*. Virtue is defined as behaviour demonstrating high moral standards, “doing what is right and avoiding what is wrong.” A fulfilled person is not one who promotes happiness, but one who offers happiness to people, and that person could be (why not?) *The Actor*. The actor promotes happiness, offers it, and, to paraphrase Grotowski, researches it: “He must learn to use his role as if it were a surgeon’s scalpel, to dissect himself (...) to use the role as (...) an instrument with which to study what is hidden behind our everyday mask (...) in order to sacrifice it, expose it.”³

Taking all this into account, the name of this article could be something like this: *Virtue, the moral quality of the fulfilled actor, the one who offers people happiness, not the one who promotes it, the one who avoids what is wrong and does what is right*. Would that be of interest to anyone? To young people? We live in a paradox – although the younger generation seems to take an interest in theatre, their interest in actors appears in inverse proportion to it. Is the younger generation of viewers’ lack of interest in theatre actors wrong? What is theatre like today? Director Andrei Șerban analyses today’s Romanian theatre: “...I can say there are two trends now – one is the young theatre trend, engaging in strongly political and social theatre. It’s good that this is happening. The danger there is that there is a lot of propaganda in the theatre and theatre which is infiltrated by ideology and propaganda of any kind is not a convincing one. This is not what theatre is for. Ideology and propaganda have another place – in social struggle. Theatre for me is a field where the heart is touched, the soul is touched.”⁴ This is a creed to which Andrei Șerban has remained faithful all his life. Even now, at 81, the production *Mary Stuart* by F. Schiller, directed by him, is played at the National Theatre of Bucharest with standing room only.

³ Jerzy Grotowski (1998). *Spre un teatru sărac* [Towards a Poor Theatre], Editura Unitext, București, p. 58.

⁴ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-andrei-serban/32190115.html>

“Socrates warns us that there is something among ephemeral things which is not perishable – what we manage to make of ourselves. What I have done disappears, but what I have made of myself remains. I will forever be what I have made of myself. Where are the norms for these deeds? In my soul. The traces will be impossible to erase. For eternity – as death will not change anything – I will be that beautiful or hideous soul. That is why it is important to watch over the quality of our soul, to not make it ugly by doing something unjust and, if, sadly, we have had the misfortune to do that, to erase the defilement by accepting to do penance for it.”⁵

Antonin Artaud said that “the actor is an athlete of the heart, he needs to use his emotions the way an athlete uses his muscles.”⁶

Sadly, many of today’s productions emanate a sort of coldness, a soulless, cerebral nature. It seems that, nowadays, performance art has stooped to an inferior, dark, gloomy, and artificial level. The spirit of today’s viewer rarely finds joy in these productions. Things are presented on stage only on their exterior, corporeal level. A show which presents a world not taken through the filter of the soul lacks the idea of good.

This type of show has formed an audience seemingly avid for theatre, desperately consuming the production of the moment, but, not finding what they are looking for, these viewers are already poised for the next *very successful* production, while the one they have just watched disappears from memory the moment the final applause ends. These viewers are permanently seeking, due to the permanent deception which is afflicting them while they are seeking – it is a never-ending problem, as a soul that lacks something can do nothing other than yearn. We, actors, even if we realise this and even if we understand that we cannot offer viewers the good they are looking for, without being too able to explain why, can only be glad that they continue to come to the theatre.

The fact that these contemporary shows lack the good does not mean that this happens because their creators do not know “good”. They can very well know the right path to follow – the middle way – and yet they choose an extreme, allowing themselves to be convinced by trends and political correctness.

“Moreover, the good that we need to assimilate is not a general good, it is the good of the human being, more precisely the good of this or that human being; since virtue consists of a moderate *middle way*, it will be different according to each person’s aptitudes. Within the unique limits of my own

⁵ Hubert Grenier (1995). *Marile doctrine morale* [The Great Moral Doctrines], Editura Humanitas, București, p. 18.

⁶ Antonin Artaud (2024). *The Theatre and Its Double*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London, p. 159.

development, I need to become myself. I carry my own model within myself.”⁷

Physical pleasure, which comes from nowhere other than the belly, is the one ruling the art of contemporary performances. But the troubles and pleasures of the soul are much stronger than those of the body. An art that expresses only the pleasures of the body is an art without fulfilment, almost reduced to an animalistic dimension. And, just like the body cannot keep the pleasure, the viewer does not keep it, either, after the end of the show.

For the viewer to keep something, for something to remain after the show, the production needs to access the soul, because the soul is the only one which, through thoughts, is able to remind the viewers of what they felt a while ago, when they saw the show.

Theatre culture, which we actors love to talk about, is, for the viewers, the totality of the moments when they felt happy in their souls at the theatre and which they can remember at any time, all the moments about which they can say *now* that it was worth it for them to be *there then*, during that show, all the moments that they felt joy.

“We need to make a bridge between the universal human and today’s human,” Andrei Şerban says. “My dilemmas as a human are ever-living, just like they were in *Oedipus* 2,500 years ago, such as *who am I? what is my purpose in life? what is my potential? what is my responsibility as a human being?* not as a political or social being. The fundamental question is about the *Human* with a capital *H*. This is a category”⁸. The role of theatre school and teachers is to exercise and develop the young actors’ character and human quality. If actors knew themselves, they would know which roles are fitting for them to play successfully. By refusing introspection exercises, by not knowing themselves, actors could be convinced that all roles fit them and that they could play anything at any time. Sadly, we, Romanian actors, have formed this reflex, this professional fault that we hold onto so desperately until we retire and beyond: *we do not want to know who we are!* Because we think that, if we find out, our aura disappears and we fall from our superhuman position that we have been holding ever since we got into theatre school. We do not want to know who we are. However, we want as many people as possible to know *what we are*, namely actors, and we want things to stop there and to remain like this, if possible, for eternity. We believe that what we are, not what we create on stage, is a value in itself. I will now get back to Andrei Şerban and the two trends splitting the contemporary movement in theatre:

“The second category is that of ‘popular’ theatre, of the huge shows that are made this way, which bring tremendous money. These shows are

⁷ Antonin Artaud, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁸ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-andrei-serban/32190115.html>

boulevard theatre. There are some good boulevard theatre texts out there, comedies which touch on social topics, and they are needed. But this is not Theatre with a capital T.”⁹ As an aside, let me ask this: if this “popular” theatre brings, I quote, *tremendous money*, and we all know it does, why do we not study it in theatre schools? Do students and teachers of artistic higher education not need money? What would it be like if one of the graduation productions were one of “popular” theatre? It would, of course, be done professionally and it could then be played for *tremendous money* for years to come by that generation of students after graduation, as follow-up for what they have learnt in school. Of course, these shows which bring tremendous money and are played in their “spare time” by actors of state theatres also come with significant costs. They are performed outside of the rehearsal schedule of that theatre and obviously require time (which always seems to be insufficient) and energy (which usually is not inexhaustible, even if that is what we believe about ourselves or what our viewers believe about us). This habit of working overtime and more than we really can is not recent – it has always been there, as we can see from the words of the great Petre Sturdza (1869-1933), actor of the Bucharest National Theatre: “I have noticed, in the case of some of the great artists we have had in the theatre, who were gone after a brief career, that nearly all of them seemed to have a premonition of their short passage through this world. Subconsciously ruled by this feeling, they were in a constant frenzy of consuming activity, which left them no time to rest. They played during the season, and when they did not play in their theatre, they would keep organising productions in whatever other town they could, wherever they found anything, wherever any manager would take them.”¹⁰ This artistic dissipation is called *aesthetic delight* by Kierkegaard: “As soon as it arises, the moment must be sipped. It is drunk in one gulp. But the moment disappears as quickly as it appeared. It melts as we taste it. Another moment follows, then another. Each time the aesthete who lives in infidelity and renunciation will know, throughout his motley wasted existence, nothing but the monotony of the same brief pleasure followed by the same disappointment, in a time that is composed only of moments and decomposes only into moments.”¹¹ And this happens because, many times, this type of show – the “popular” theatre production – lacks its essence: a soul.

The dizzying changes that are now happening in the world can produce an incoherent, confused vision in certain areas, such as theatre, and not only in certain areas but even in our lives in general. The changes that are

⁹ <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-andrei-serban/32190115.html>

¹⁰ Petre Sturdza (1966). *Amintiri. 40 de ani de teatru* [Memories. 40 years of theatre], Editura Meridiane, București, p. 126.

¹¹ Hubert Grenier, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

occurring require new approaches. But the human being in general resists change. When these changes are multiple, as they are happening now, the human being becomes disoriented and confused. In contemporary society, everything seems to be falling apart and decomposing. And people have to deal

I with this decomposition that seems to create an ever-increasing void in their souls.

“In every theatre production I put on,” says Andrei Șerban, “I try to see what the essence of the play is, how I can touch the essence of life and convey it to the audience, so that they can feel it too. There is something that we all have within us, but we fail to connect, our souls are not open. We are far too frustrated by the problems of life, we are afraid, we do not have the openness and freedom to live our lives. And theatre must give you the desire to live your life.”¹²

During the years of training, actors need to understand that the fundamental feature of their existence is a deep awareness of responsibility, and that, once acquired, this will determine their personal style, the characteristic of their artistic uniqueness, and the set of values that they will later impose through their art and lives. The awareness of personal responsibility and the personal set of values will precisely determine the place of these young actors and their mission in that place. “From the vague awareness of responsibility, the specific awareness of a mission will develop, the experience of being meant to have a place in the world, with an extremely precise personal mission. However, nothing makes man surpass himself more, nothing can activate him more, nothing allows him to overcome unpleasantness and difficulties more than the awareness of his own responsibility, the awareness of his special mission.”¹³

One of the concerns of the theatre school, perhaps the most important one, should be the type of people it wants to form. The type of human beings we, as actors, should be. The moral principles discovered in school and the rules of conduct that would result from these principles should be found in the work and the general activity of the young actors, as well as in their statements and interviews. The question that should concern students (future actors) and their teachers equally is the same one that concerned the great Greek philosophers thousands of years ago, namely: “What is the best way to live?” More precisely: “What is the best way to live in the theatre?” We find the answer in the same great philosophers of ancient times. As Aristotle said about 350 years b. C.: “The best way is *the middle way*.”

¹² <https://romania.europalibera.org/a/interviu-andrei-serban/32190115.html>

¹³ Viktor E. Frankl (2005). *Omul în căutarea sensului vieții* [Man's Search for Meaning], Meteor Press, p. 20.

“The middle way is central to the Aristotelian doctrine of virtue. It is sometimes misinterpreted as a call for moderation, in the sense of finding an equidistant path between things, but this is hardly its real meaning. As the following quotation will make clear, the ‘middle way’ must be defined only in relation to reason. For example, the virtue that stands in the middle between cowardice and impulsiveness is courage. Courage is based on the individual's reason, not on his rational instincts: the central idea is that actions must be appropriate to the circumstances, determined by practical wisdom, and capable of intelligently responding to the different facets of the situation.

Virtue is then a state of the character concerned with choice, which dwells on the middle way, being, certainly, related to reason. It is a middle way between two vices, one of which is excess, and the other, deficiency, and also lies in the middle, because vices are either an insufficient or an excessive amount of what is good, both in the realm of passions and in that of actions, while virtue always finds and chooses the middle way.”¹⁴

Of course, for any young person trying to find a middle ground in the theatre today, all kinds of frustrations arise. But for those who have a richer intellectual life, the damage is less serious. In fact, all these smaller or greater frustrations only deepen the young person's spiritual life, thus creating a place for them to retreat in order to be able to return more enriched and freer from a spiritual point of view. If we look more closely, we can realize that young people with a richer spiritual life cope more easily with the frustrations that arise in the acting profession.

The middle way that I propose in becoming artists does not refer to their creation, to their work, but to themselves, as a result of their own intentions, thoughts, actions, creations.

“Once asked what the virtue of a young man consisted of, Socrates replied: ‘Not exceeding the good measure in anything.’ [...] Which amounts to stating something very commonplace: that nothing is good beyond its proper measure. You will rightly exclaim: modernity and measure! Let modernity not exceed the proper measure! Haven't we – modern people exhausted by the increasingly relentless demands of an inexhaustible modernity – long ago exceeded all measures, deceiving the expectations of the best and completely fulfilling only those of people who would have been content with anything anyway? Modernity itself is already the excess of a lack – of the lack of the unseen. In order to no longer be an excess, modernity should be counterbalanced with something, as it was with the texts of mediaeval manuscripts... In the Middle Ages, people still had the strength to accept both life and God as

¹⁴ *** (2017). *50 de idei pe care trebuie să le cunoști. Filosofie* [50 Ideas You Need to Know. Philosophy], Editura Litera, București, p. 98.

they were, according to a good separation of powers in the cosmos – of the Creator transcendental to the world and of the creature connected to its Creator by an infinite proximate distance”¹⁵.

Conclusions

We, actors, are taught that the reward for our art at the end of the performance is applause. And so it is. But after the applause, is there anything else? Is there anything left? Some would answer: the actor's fame, celebrity. Others say that there is nothing left. The artist's true reward is not money and fame, but the recognition of eternity in his work. An artist is fulfilled not when the audience recognizes him, but when the audience recognizes eternity in his work. The recognition of eternity in an artist's work produces that spiritual health that humanity has and will always need. That is why culture is important, because it maintains the spiritual health of a nation. Of course, political decision-makers are very important in this sense, but those who produce culture, those responsible for it, are the artists.

Original sin pushes us to extremes, to an aggressive or cowardly approach to life. The point of culture is to distract us from the extremes and lead us to the middle way – the depiction in art of the beauty of life – something that comes from the depths of the artist's soul in an attempt to connect with the soul of the audience.

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¹⁵ Horia Roman Patapievici, *Om recent* [The Recent Man], Editura Humanitas, București, 2001, p. 11.

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