#### MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION

"LUCIAN BLAGA" UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU

INTERDISCIPLINARY DOCTORAL SCHOOL

## **DOCTORAL THESIS**

SUBJECT: THEATRE AND PERFORMING ARTS

## THE ACTOR'S PSYCHIC BALANCE DURING THE ACT OF CREATION

**Summing-up** 

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Sibiu

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#### **ABSTRACT**

What is the significance of being psychologically balanced in an occupation that requires you to question the inmost back of your mind daily, or even each and every minute; an occupation that asks you to abandon your own self and let the persona take over you completely? Where is the line between balance, eloquence and inspiration, craziness and creative ebullition? How can one control and challenge one's inspiration? How can you accept your fear and use it creatively on stage? How can you overcome the blockage that appears while working or during the performance? These are some aspects that deserve our attention.

The PhD thesis entitled "The actor's psychic balance during the act of creation" sprang from the intimate need to understand and deepen the psychic mechanism implied by the actor's efforts, as well as from a purely pedagogical reason, meant to help my working with the students, but also to help anyone interest in this fascinating domain. In what follows, I will present the major points of this paper.

In the first chapter, "The actor's self-esteem in the fight against fear and blockage", I analyzed the importance of a balanced self-esteem in the creative process, the way in which it can help the actor overcome certain blockages. I decomposed the elements that lead to fear and blockage, and I started certain exercises that help with strengthening self-esteem. What is more, I highlighted the ways in which fear can become useful on stage, by transforming the actor's disadvantages into advantages.

The artist works non-stop, is permanently inspired, the ordeal that comes with losing one's self in the artistic act does not disappear during the lunch break or when he has left the building where the rehearsals take place. Inspiration does not know rest. The path towards artistic inspiration implies understanding the persona, cohabitation with it and like it, its behavior in situations that might not appear in the final production, but which are necessary in order to make the persona come to life, embodying it. Indirectly confronting himself, by the medium of the persona, with its weaknesses and unhappiness, the actor is able to analyze, understand and accept them. Thus, the stage not only becomes a place of self-confrontation, but also of healing, of agreeing to the past, of understanding and accepting oneself.

The actors' methods are diverse and very personal; the ways in which they discover the characters and embody them are unique as well. No matter what path they choose, the emotional input is considerable. Psychological imbalance? Yes. Psychical and physical tiredness? Yes. The question is: in what way can the actor protect himself from exhaustion, from consuming more energy than he can handle? What can be done for the actor to be able to come back to his own self, to objectivity and to regain control at the end of the day?

There is need of a theater in which the artists give their all; a great, apocalyptical theater, played with flesh and blood. But at the same time, the artist needs to know how to do this without committing psychic suicide. This type of theater requires strong actors, who are in charge of their psyche, as well as capable of knowing the amount of "torture" that they comply with. There is no such thing as a self-secure artist, one who does not feel fearful, vulnerable, small, incapable, full of flaws, incompetent. How can the actor strengthen his psyche in such situations?

To start with, he must separate the situations that can be altered, from those which he cannot influence. What can be changed is the manner in which he or she relates to such situations, as well as the orientation of thought towards the way in which useful things can be drawn from challenging situations; in other words, how an apparent disadvantage can be transformed into an advantage.

It has been experimentally proven that one should rather opt for distracting oneself from negative thoughts, which is more efficient than trying to suppress them. Forcing oneself not to think about a certain issue can cause you to focus solely on it. The affective memory of an actor is very important. To improve this ability lies within the occupation of the actor, the affective memory of experience. Which means that the mental encounter with unpleasant memories or emotional hardships that the actor has been confronted with can never be effortless. Like any open wound, a rememorized and reanalyzed experience becomes more acute! It is the responsibility of the director to anticipate and see the difficult situations and to decide upon the correct moment to intervene subtly.

What is a blockage? It is a reflex of the body that appears together with fear once we are in danger. What happens in case of an unforeseen event on stage? The lack of trust in one's own capacity to cope with the event, to rise up to the expectations (my own and the audience's), the long-felt responsibility, etc., are disturbing and shift the attention from the persona and situation proposed by the performance to my own self. In fact, if I focused on playing, the

persona would solve the incident, but personal anguishes make the situation more complicated, and thus a blocking fear of failure appears.

There is a certain type of fear, a blockage felt precisely before beginning the performance in front of the audience, stage fright. It is now that the actor feels as though his own creation does not belong to him anymore. Each and every spectator is entitled to it, perceives it in a personal manner, can express personal opinions based on value criteria and personal taste, and so the actor feels aggressed, abandoned, dispossessed of the right to protect his "child".

Can the actor take over stage fright? Fear of the public can be translated positively into a source of energy. If used and conducted correctly, this energy can be transformed into stage ecstasy and creative force. There is a line of undertaking the feeling of fear, where the actor passes from blockage to source of energy, and it coincides with the moment the actor accepts the creator's vulnerability.

While on stage, a blockage might appear in case of an accident. Something unexpected happens and the actor is abandoned to panic. Even after the unpleasant moment has passed, the actor is obsessed by it and as such he is kept from being fully present in the actions on stage. The actors have to understand that any accident on stage (of course, I am referring to situations that do not involve physical harm), can be a lucky one, can help with accumulating energy through a more thorough focusing of the participants in the play. This leads to creating interesting details that the actor would not have otherwise considered, having the capacity to "resuscitate" a "limp" performance.

But happens if stage fright is that intense that it does not subside once the performance begins? The actor has a third critical eye all of the time, that leads his artistic play, an observing "I" that comments upon the artistic act. In this case, as soon as the "mischievous" "judging" eye appears, one has to focus intensely both on the situation and on the partner. One should treat it just as one would a child who has just made a blunder: ignore it.

Fear also gives birth to the feeling of being insufficient. It is fear who determines the actor not to look for new paths, to suffice with repeating discoveries from the past that have worked. At times, fear goes hand in hand with its little brother, mannerism. With each and every studied role, our personality is enriched by accumulating new ways of understanding, by widening the personal horizon, thus generating new possibilities and depths. But if this kind of "wealth" boils down to gestures, a certain kind of speech, gaze, pausing, etc., then we speak of

mannerism. The fear of being a poor actor or of not being able to surpass one's former level of aptitudes, might make the actor not repeat himself, but repeat some results that he obtained while studying other personae, when his work was appreciated. It is a matter of the actor's courage to risk taking a new path. Fear, being a reaction linked to conservation instincts, having its origins in the fear of the unknown, is a natural response to an act of creation happening in real time, when one does not know how the act of creation will undulate. The only thing to do is be as well prepared as possible for this moment when success is not guaranteed. Fear is not significant here, but rather the way in which you overcome it. Consequently, using the energy that springs from fear, you can step from your own image, where you are the main subject, to the artistic act. You can lose yourself in fictional situations that become real throughout the length of the performance. The entire phase of rehearsals prepares the moment of concealing your own personality. In fact, from this point of view, we are entitled to say that acting is a dance of the self from consciousness to complete loss or hiding, on the steady background of self-esteem.

The understanding and assumption of a psychological life foreign of our own self, cannot be achieved devoid of empathy. Empathy brings us closer to the others and helps us transform something exterior into something that is our own. It offers the feeling of familiarity, it is the bridge that we need to walk on, in order to undertake sensations and assimilating the persona's data. By way of his imagination, the actor is able to add the necessary elements for bringing everything closer to what is real, thus transforming his own imagination into a new reality. That which is known at an imaginary level, can be a type of knowledge close enough to reality, at times, even more complete than real knowledge and it can be representative for the depth of the self.

Observing and studying life can be undertaken permanently. One must always be aware of what is going on outside you and with your own self, one must be present in one's own life, an active observer. In the art of acting, no matter the style of the performance, the actor's main source of inspiration will always be life.

We must not judge a work of art from a moral perspective. An artistic creation does not accept being labeled good or bad. It should only be analyzed from an aesthetic point of view. My goal, by means of manipulating Faust, is God, the Father who neither loves, nor accepts me (it is from here that a series of frustrations arise, which, in their turn, spring from the desire to prove that I am indeed capable, that I can be loved, etc.). If I would morally judge Mephisto, the character, I would get caught up in a web of good and bad. What is more, if I were a

religious person, I could end up thinking that by impersonating this character I get carried off from the light, and, naturally, I would be scared. In addition to that, I would run the risk of playing, in general, the part of the Evil, and Evil is a conclusion that comes with action. Evil is subjective. Humanizing the devil, on the other hand, is intriguing and brings the persona closer to the public's understanding, which can have its own interior images about the multiple facets that Evil may have in our society. When analyzing a persona, it is of utmost importance to begin from a fair starting point, that can open creative doors and that does not allow fear to be felt. Every actor, knowing himself or herself, knows what exactly triggers artistic possibilities for him or her.

The actor must pay attention both to the outside world and his inner self. Hereby he will seize upon his partner's and the director's suggestions, but also upon his finest inner urges, the most discrete boosts send by body and spirit.

Costumes and décor can be reasons of blockage. If you feel that a costume is unfamiliar to you, does not represent you, try considering it more, try spending more time with it, as to make it your own, imagine the specific situation in which your persona wears this costume, or the other way around, dressed in that unspecific costume, what could the persona feel as he or she is forced to wear it? Try to envision the possible scenic situations, so that you can win the battle with an inappropriate costume. Try to be as flexible as possible while working, allow yourself to continue studying the persona.

The second chapter of my thesis, "The creative process – a complex psychological process", is a study of the human psyche, where my main goal was to discover the psychological processes happening inside an actor's brain. The aim was to extract useful observations in triggering and stimulating inspiration, the playful spirit, in order to enhance his or her expressiveness. I tried to create certain exercises to stimulate the actor's strategic way of thinking while working with a persona.

Psychic phenomena analyze the way in which thought is constructed in the central nervous system. There are two ways of observing, the sensory worldly, one and self-observation which may be subjective. Any type of creation, including the artistic one, is the result of the subconscious activity. The incubation period is part of the creation stage. During this time work seemingly seizes but, in fact, information *fermentfs*, germinates in a way that offers uniqueness to any artistic creation, so that it may be expressed externally later. The conscience presupposes consciously made actions, in other words, when we realize certain

actions of ours. These events are directed towards a goal, having an aim and triggered by a personal and lucid reason. **Instincts** encompass all the reflexes we are born with, and that we have inherited. They are the genetic baggage of our species. In theater, histrionic instinct means an innate ability, based on intuition, to find organic scenic solutions, without using your intelligence or logical rationality. **Emotions** are the result of the poignant psychological life. All the feelings that we encounter in a lifetime spring from the basic emotions, which are innate and deeply connected to instincts. Several types of emotions interweave in a theater performance: the emotions pertaining to the creators of the performance (actors, directors, stage designers, choreographers, composers, etc.), the thrill of the performance, of the real-time creation of the scenic act and that are felt individually by the spectators, as a result of their personal sensibility, education, life experience, cultural baggage, etc. **Sensations** are pieces of information received by the brain from what is within or outside us.

It may happen on stage that normal functions of the brain be blocked because of tension, flutters, fear or stage fright. Flutters, fear can surpass normal values that may cause adrenaline release (adrenaline has to do with self-defence, which means that, in normal limits, it should provoke an exacerbation of the senses). Thus, certain sensations might be *amputated* and a paralysis, similar to that of attacked animals, may arise.

**Perceptions** are the processes by which people observe the peculiarities that form an object. Personal experience and culture help the description process so that the object may be perceived in in-depth details. Usually, an artist is bestowed with an extraordinary sense of observation, he can see beyond the power of observation of an ordinary human being, because he finds inspiration in small details of life. The capacity of perceiving objects that are out of sight, of creating intuitive images, is the capacity to represent. Representation is vital for the artist. Representations are those elements of memory that constitute the primordial material of the imagination; they are subconscious elements that feed the imagination when new images are created, when the artist is creating his original work. Symbols are abstract forms that are an aid to knowledge with no need of mentally or physically visualizing the object. They may be based on an indirect, logical knowledge. In their work and in the creative process, artists often make use of symbols in order to translate sensations and in feelings into new forms, that are still close to the interior sensation that they have felt. **Thinking** contains several functions: analysis – here the object is decomposed into elements for the sake of being unified again into a whole; comparison – where similarities and dissimilarities are established; abstracting – by means of which the general and generalizing notes are extracted, in the case in which similar

notes extend towards all forms of objects and are then expressed through words, notions, ideas, concepts. A superior form of thinking is represented by judgment, that contains affirmative and negative elements. Language is a psychic phenomenon, typical to the human being, through which thought is expressed. It is composed of signs, signals and symbols; it can remain unexpressed, in other words, an internal language or it can be expressed, thus becoming external. The human capacity of collecting knowledge experience, willingly or not, is called memory. An information accompanied by a positive feeling remains in one's mind alongside the memory of that feeling. This has encouraged psychologists to speak of affective memory, that is to say, the preservation in memory of certain experiences accompanied by sensations and feelings. The actor relies a lot on affective memory. Imagination is the process through which new images are created – an act analogous with the act of thinking. Reality is the main inspirational source of imagination. Imagination determines and influences the creative capacity of the human being.

The only scope of imagination is creativity. Emotions also play a significant role in the creative act, as the reasoning of imagination implies an emotional reaction. Imagination plays a defining role in any creative act, including the dramatic artistic one. During rehearsals, actors try to obtain the creative lightness, to hark back to that playful wit that is characteristic of child's play. Feelings are superior forms of the human sentimental life, because they also encompass rational elements, which rely on reasons longing to be fulfilled. Through his work, the artist transfers interior sentimental conditions into the external world. Motivation represents a powerful from of energy for obtaining a desired result. Reasons are transformed into deeds by means of will. Attention is a psychic process that can be developed through exercise. Attention relies on a positive and stable attitude, triggered by need. As opposed to natural attention, voluntary attention relies on natural attention via exercise and education. Its motivation is imagination, idea. The artist dominated by an interior vision or the mathematician interested in solving a math problem, feel intense emotions during this process, which helps them improve the quality of their attention. Thereby attention will last as long as the excitement. Individuals capable of great attention can isolate themselves from the external world having a superior internal life. When passion sustains attention, great creations are born.

The fact that emotion and attention are interconnected is exploited by the dramatic artists. Thus, in order to catch the public's attention, the actor addresses the public's feelings.

**Skills** are the traits that support an activity and determine its success. When an individual is endowed with certain skills, he or she unfolds within that profession with greater

ease, joy and interest. If an easy and rapid actuation is important for skills, talent is characterized by novelty, originality, uniqueness. Intelligence is the intellect's capacity to solve problems and new situations without needing instincts, knowledge, but solely by using intellectual resources. In theater we come across a scenic, artistic intelligence, which helps the actor solve unforeseen situations but also understand, in a profound manner, the situation, the connection between the personae, the role, etc. Will is a psychic process by means of which we carry out a conscious action in order to obtain a scope for which we brush aside any given obstacle. Will is a profoundly human peculiarity. It is a complex process that calls up physical and psychological capacities. In theater, creativity relies a lot on will. In this case, will manifests itself in two ways: the will to create, to express oneself via something new and unique, and the will of self-denial, which consists of the artist putting his entire life in service of the creative act. The inbred factor plays a decisive role in developing the creative personality. Instincts, feelings, and even certain behavioral predispositions, intelligence – that is to say all these elements that determine the individual's personality, are transmitted genetically, just as physical traits are. They stem from both parents and the way in which this mixture takes place is unique to every individual, creating disparity between individuals' talent and different characters.

Creation is not born out of nothing, it needs substance to develop from, and the substance is **information**. Information is the result of curiosity, the need to know more, observation and an energetic mind that helps with processing information. It is stocked in the brain via the memory, and, when necessary, it is processed by thought and imagination adding up to new structures. A creative character is flexible, it can find several solutions to one problem, it is clear-headed, which means it has the ability to detach emotionally and to analyze objectively, it is original in that it combines information in an exclusive way, creating a new product.

Play is somewhat of a guarantee for the sensation of freedom, a sort of necessary exercise for preparing the spirit. In order for this world to become visible, the artists needs a safe means of transport towards the outside, a way to protect his inner universe, his sensitivity, and the solution is to be found in the very idea of play. In order to transform his play into art, the artist needs ideas. The idea is what channels his energy towards a goal, it limits the angle from which he observes the world, so that all thoughts and actions gravitate around it, and often it determines the manner in which he will carry out his idea.

It is important for the actor to develop his ability to construct his own personae also following their strategies. Both in his personal life and in the roles that he plays, actors make use of strategies to obtain their objectives; certain manipulation techniques can be used when applying these strategies.

It is extremely important to be fair on stage. Energy void of a goal, is useless and may become a setback when not used properly, and, in my opinion, it can even be a reason of the performance's failure.

Theater is able to open up new personal horizons, which transforms it into a way of self-cognition and knowledge, where the path becomes interesting, similar, in this respect, to a scientific endeavor, as it brings up problems, questions and combines realities. A work of art is created within, like a growing entity, like a living being feeding from your psyche, but also with flesh and blood, which is visible especially in the case of the actor, who lends his own body to the persona – entity envelops you from within, fills you up and may also devour you. Freeing yourself from the persona is difficult, you can feel the forsaking, the abandonment, because every character dies after each and every performance and the actor's soul comprises thousands and millions of deaths and births. The artist gives birth to the work of art through his role and is born again having a new personality which will affect his own, because this expulsion labor which takes place every evening implies the trauma of breaking up with your own self.

The third chapter, "Personal experience and indicating a working method", is an analysis of the two great working methods (the one starting from within and moving towards the outside, and the one that starts with the study of the body and moves towards the interior), of the important elements in the art of the actor. I also demonstrated how during the study of the persona Mephisto, from "Faust", performance directed by Silviu Purcărete, I summed up all of these elements, managing to overcome all fears and blockages. My objective was to structure my artistic path into a method meant to inspire actors and students.

Two great paths can be followed when building a persona: one where the construction starts from the interior data of the persona and leads up to its physical from, and a second one that starts from the exterior physical data of the persona and leads to the creation of his inner world. Documentation has to be part of the actor's life. He has to be a fine observer of life, but for a good understanding of the phenomena, the actor needs knowledge in many areas, in order to improve his creative capacity. A physical and vocal training are necessary. These relax the

muscles and warm them up. Any kind of tension can be harmful to the creative process. As a thought or emotion gives birth to an inner or outer movement, it goes the other way around. Any movement or action awakens a thought or an emotion. In order to make the interior projection of the persona come to life, the actor resorts to a carnal embodiment of this vision, exposing himself or herself to the associated risks. Metamorphosis, together with his or her playful spirit, result in a new desire to lose oneself and find oneself again. These getaways reveal new limits and the search continues endlessly. The actor's mask, embodied by the role, like an exterior protective form that discloses the actor, is in fact a distancing from the self, but, at the same time, the center of the actor's being is in focus.

It is a requirement to abandon one's body to the character so one can cross from the I to it. If the actor is not well familiarized with his own body, he will not be able to replace his personal movements with the one's of the other entity which haunts him. The body needs to be resistant and flexible at the same time, powerful as well as vulnerable. During rehearsals the persona and the actor fight for the territory of the body. The new physicality appears, not without a degree of aggressiveness.

When the individual unclothes himself, when he discards all the roles that he identified with, when he understands that none of these images represent him, neither his social status, name or the physical appearance that he worked on, he is left with the human essence, and this essence is love.

Mephisto falls short of that grain of light. He is the void. Nothingness. The black hole that absorbs everything and cannot be filled, nor lit. It offers nothing. Love gives and, at the same time, it offers. Love can know itself and can be fulfilled. Mephisto cannot rediscover himself in otherness; he cannot know love. His masks hide the void. Masks can be extraordinary and bright, as long as there is nothing beneath them.

Mephisto is a fascinating character, frightening because of his complexity, as well as a challenge that can ruin you. I was lucky enough to benefit from a longer period of documentation that usual, which represented a great advantage.

Have I encountered blockages when faces with this great role? Certainly, since it is a huge, difficult role, which comes along with a multitude of opinions based off of reading texts and viewing different performances and films. Having a rehearsal schedule and a clear-cut strategy is truly helpful in controlling fear. Thus, fear becomes an integral part of courage. Fear comes with the decision to embark on the project and to work on the persona. It appears as a

reaction to a personal inner action born out of desire. It is not a surprising fear, it is born from a personal, lucid and logical gesture. It is part of the upcoming path. A theatrical project implies risking to fail, which means that the appearance of fear is natural. It is only those who do not risk that do not know fear. Courage can only exist in the presence of fear, because a lucid decision, knowing all the risks, is an act of courage. I believe that fear defines a person just as much as courage does. One cannot long for freedom lacking fear. Fear is what binds success and failure.

For me, theater is the chance to react against a fugacious life. I feel as though only such a gesture, filled with my insurgence and lacking usefulness at the same time, can make me come to terms with death.

Some performances have been dangerous and painful and as I came back to myself I found a different person. I was unable to be the one I was before, because the experience had come along with great, profound changes within me. I do believe that it is benefic to deepen and search oneself in as many ways as possible. This can only change you. Suddenly, you have a new outlook on life. But this is exactly what you are looking for: a search that will change you. Nevertheless, these changes within, this psychic imbalance that you face during rehearsals and during the performance, need to be controlled. The actor must always find his way back to equilibrium. Being acquainted with the functions of the human psyche and knowing oneself becomes essential in the risky process of self-abandonment that is the art of acting.

If executed on a balanced territory of self-esteem, this label may not leave to deep of a mark, not nearly as deep as those appearing within a disturbed psyche, that can weaken self-esteem and the belief in one's own abilities. A person devoid of self-esteem works chaotically, makes much more effort, and loses additional energy. This happens both when working at one's persona and when trying to overcome the blockages that appear much more powerfully in the presence of insecurity. It is important for the artist, who knows himself too well, to make use of exercises through which he can rebalance his self-esteem, to strengthen the belief in his creative force, as well as in his ability to overcome pressure. Consequently, he can transform the natural fear that appears while working into a source of creative energy and he will not allow it to become a blockage. On the other hand, blockages are natural, and can, in their turn, be overcome. I have tried to describe a few psychic mechanism of positive reaction to blockage. I have tried them personally and I believe that studying them could also be helpful to other actors who are working on a persona.

Intuition is strongly connected to faith. It does not need proof. It exists. Explaining it can be difficult. It stems from something inherited and something forgotten. You need to believe in your intuition as an artist, but afterwards, you have to be able to question it, using your eloquence.

Somehow, the belief in your own art, as an actor, is similar to the belief in God. While playing you do not have palpable, clear proof, but you believe in the situation and in your condition, and thus, the situation becomes real to you and to the others. And this is a type of faith that is close to the religious one. To believe profoundly, to believe because you have given it thought, in a very unfathomable and comprised manner.

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