

**From the Archaic Ceremony to the New Ritual Theater**  
**- Summary -**

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The aim of this dissertation is to explore the metamorphoses of theatrical ritual, traced in a diachronic journey, from the initial moment to the present day. This interdisciplinary scholarly approach also aims to identify, define and analyze the concept of ritual. Although the paradigm of this notion is strongly rooted in the history of theatre and has been approached from numerous perspectives, the present work tries to nuance and synthesize a period from a theatrical point of view and proposes a way of understanding and practicing exercises taken from the sphere of contemporary ritual theatre, valuable for both the didactic and the artistic discourses.

The topic of the dissertation was chosen because of multiple motivations – axiological and philosophical, professional and personal.

The axiological and philosophical perspective derives from the fundamental premise that ritual represents the only possible and intelligible transition between the meanings of different periods in the evolution of theatre history, forming a link between them. Understanding and assimilating the past is essential for developing the ability to project perspectives, thus the paper offers an argument for integrating and recognizing the value of contemporary ritual theatre within the ensemble of other forms of theatre.

Conceptions of faith, as an ontological foundation, and of ritual, understood as a modality of communication between the individual and the self, and then between the individual and the community, are frequently viewed with indifference in contemporary times. In this context, from a professional point of view, the paper seeks answers to fundamental questions about connecting with the audience, the formula for participation in a performance, and the psycho-physical preparation of actors. These essential questions, accompanied by others, have guided the creative and interpretive process, generating the need to identify appropriate solutions.

From a personal point of view, my African paternal origins have deeply shaped my stage experiences, both as an actress and as a dancer and choreographer, generating many feelings and strong connections with ancestral rituals. A concise assessment of the current context reveals a significant decrease in the presence of the concept of ritual. In the face of this phenomenon, we are faced with a growing unease as to why the emotional purport and role of ritual, which have been valued throughout the history of mankind, seem to be waning in contemporary times. Moreover, the need to recognize the importance of ritual learning in the present should not be overlooked.

The research methodology was based on documentation, analysis, comparative study and case study. Thus, the dissertation includes a theoretical part, based on documentation, and a practical part, a result of the discovery of specialists in the sphere of contemporary theatrical ritual, as well as personal reflections arising from professional experience.

The theoretical part is organized in two sections: one analytical and one comparative. The first is concerned with investigating the evolution of the history of universal theatre, focusing on the transformations of the concept of ritual, while the second follows the studies of scholars who have analyzed the works of some of the leading creators of contemporary ritual theatre, namely: Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook. In the practical part, I have advocated for the revitalization of contemporary ritual theatre through a description of the research and contemporary theatre performances of the renowned Greek theatre director Theodoros Terzopoulos. At the same time, I also presented a case study from my personal artistic experience, with the aim of identifying the ritualistic valences of the character *Elizabeth* in William Shakespeare's *Richard III*, a post-dramatic adaptation.

The first chapter, *Theatre and Ritual. Origins, Understanding, Transition and the "Eternal Return"*, explores the earliest forms of theatrical manifestation in ancient times and investigates the concept of ritual from a philosophical perspective. I have thus highlighted the epistemological dimensions of theatre, paying particular attention to the analysis of the sacred and the profane as fundamental elements of ritual. Taboos are also examined as ritual prohibitions that regulate the relationships between supernatural, legendary, divine and mortal beings. This analysis has clarified the distinctions between what is considered "sacred" and "profane", establishing the boundaries between the permitted and the forbidden. The complexity of the concept of ritual has led to the extension of research into a sphere other than that of the theatrical arts, namely *psychology*. In this context, I have found that the message conveyed by ritual derives from the psychological action of the participants or officiants, who thus contribute to deepening the mystery of the phenomenon. In order to explain this interaction, a subchapter dedicated to psychodrama and its connection with dramatic ritual was necessary, aiming to identify mutual influences. The chapter addresses, from an aesthetic point of view, the notion of *mimesis*, concluding that the mimetic action used by the ancestors in the context of rituals is significantly different from the framework of dramatic ritual. Thus, *mimesis* does not mean a mere replication, but rather consists in reflecting on reality and its transformation, sublimating it and representing it in a distinct way.

The next chapter, *Ritual and Metamorphoses in the Theatre of Antiquity*, while maintaining the spatio-temporal landmarks, investigates the roots of dramatic forms up to the medieval period and insists on the analysis of the space in which dramatic ritual takes place. In terms of content, I have chosen to focus on two significant aspects: the objective and the subjective ritual space. The former contains the elements present on stage, namely the set, props and costumes, while the latter is represented by the performers/officiants who perform physical actions, such as dancing, singing and psychic actions, and by spiritual messages conveyed through text and dramaturgy. The analysis also investigates the sacred and profane dimensions of ritual. From the study of African, Amerindian dramatic ritual and that of ancient Greek theatre, I have found that ritual contains the same component elements, differing only in geo-political and social context. Significant differences in the structure of the ritual stem from the content of spiritual and religious messages. The role played by the transition from theatre conceived as a spiritual, purifying necessity in ancient Greece to theatre configured as a form of entertainment in ancient Rome was also highlighted.

The third chapter, *The Atemporality of Theatre*, traces, diachronically, significant moments in universal theatre from the Middle Ages to the period of modernism, interpreted through the prism of ritual mechanisms. The medieval era is marked by an alternation of sacred and profane extremes of ritual, while the Renaissance brings a solid link between theatre and ritual, marking a revival of theatre through important innovations. The two dimensions of ritual, the sacred and the profane, coexist harmoniously, and the subjective and objective messages undergo multiple metamorphoses. William Shakespeare's work is rich in ritual themes, ranging from social ceremonies (weddings, funerals) or those of succession to power, to magical and occult rituals. Classicism has been explored through the analogy between the French classical theatre and the structure of ritual ceremonies. As far as the Enlightenment is concerned, there is a profound dynamic of the subjective space of ritual, with intense specific messages, which leads theatrical performances to actively involve the audience. Memorable actors, such as David Garrick, achieved true performances, the term "star" or "theatre-maker" being attributed to them for the first time in history. In the objective ritual space of theatre, particular attention was paid to visual and symbolic aspects. The Italian playwright Carlo Gozzi reintroduced the ancient ritual element of the mask, contributing to the creation of an atmosphere charged with mysticism and magic, while the German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing addressed issues of theatrical aesthetics, gathering them in

*The Hamburg Dramaturgy*. In this period, the modern concept of theatre director appeared, and the German playwright Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was the first to receive this title. All these aspects contributed to the evolution of theatre in that century, bringing new ritualistic and aesthetic elements to the fore. Romanticism also focused its attention on elements in the objective space of ritual, aimed at creating an atmosphere suitable for the expression of messages from the subjective ritual realm. The French playwright Victor Hugo adopted an approach involving the fusion of tragic and comic elements, wishing to transform theatre into a syncretic art form. Thus, in the period of Romanticism, there was a deep concern for creating a theatrical experience that embraced both aesthetic and symbolic aspects in order to communicate in a more intense and complex manner with the audience. Social, political and cultural rituals become essential tools through which playwrights make the transition from Romanticism to Realism. Modernism as a theatrical movement reconfigures and accentuates the spectacular dimension of ritual, bringing innovations in its representation and perception; Surrealists explore the oneiric and irrational parts of the human psyche, often integrating ritualistic or symbolic elements. It has to be reiterated how ritualistic elements and traditions in the context of Japanese theatre highlight how it goes beyond the role of mere entertainment, becoming a cultural and spiritual experience. The conclusion reveals that theatrical ritual functions as a complex process of balancing, getting into rhythm and adopting a specific conduct; the transformations observed in dramatic ritual from the Middle Ages to the period of modernism reflect the cultural, social and artistic changes of different cultural spaces. The secularization of religious nature, the changes in social function, the evolution of narrative structure, formal and technical innovations as well as the emphasis on individualism and subjectivism are just some of the aspects that illustrate the diversification and continuous evolution of theatre and, consequently, ritual.

The second part of the dissertation, remaining within the scope of the theoretical approach, develops a comparative study of three precursors of contemporary theatre: Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook, who understood the importance of returning theatre to its ritual origins. These theorists and practitioners initiated and developed research that investigated ritual traditions starting from the contemporary times and returning to their origins. The fourth chapter, *Antonin Artaud, Ritual and Cruelty*, contains a comparative analysis of scholars' and aestheticians' perspectives on his quests exploring the importance of returning to ritual roots to access the collective unconscious. Artaud develops the concept of the "Theatre of Cruelty" and highlights the

magical means of art as “renewed exorcisms”. He also advocates the need for an “encounter with the other”, a concept that refers to the exploration of other cultures, perceived as repositories of lost primeval energy. The next chapter, *The Need for Ritual at Jerzy Grotowski*, meditates on how, through his experiments in an effort to revitalize theatre, the Polish theatre director emphasized the need to integrate ritual into the creative process. For him, ritual is an essential element in achieving authenticity or conveying a sincere experience for both actors and audience. Ritual was a necessary way to achieve truth in a world dominated by information, contributing to the creation of a deep connection among the participants in the artistic act. This is followed by a sequence entitled *Sacred Theatre in Peter Brook’s Vision*, which traces how the English theatre director argues that sacred theatre must offer a live, provoking and transformative experience, capable of reaching spiritual dimensions and creating deep connections between actors and audience. Initially influenced by Artaud, Grotowski and Vsevolod Meyerhold, Brook explored human creativity and discovered innovative artistic forms through his theatrical experiments, firmly believing that returning to the roots is the key to renewing theatre. The chapter includes testimonies of actors that attest to the decisive influence of the theatrical director’s experiments in the development of their means of expression and authentic communication with the audience.

In the practical part of the thesis, *A Plea for a Ritual Theatre*, I have inserted, in addition to the reflections of the predecessors of contemporary ritual theatre, a series of personal views on the dangers associated with the digital sphere and communication platforms in the contemporary world. I highlight the tendency of these media platforms to overlap with art, to the extent of confusion, various forms of expression. Writer and theatre critic Octavian Saiu, in his book entitled *Durerea. Dincolo de teatru* [Pain. Beyond Theatre], warns of the danger of man turning into a *homoselfius*, or an enthusiast of self-exposure, whose instincts are only guided by the need to “make a spectacle of himself”. The mentioned book thus highlights the risk of confusing personal expression with a performance, a reality that is almost ubiquitous in contemporary digital society. These observations align with the three precursors of contemporary ritual theatre, Artaud, Grotowski and Brook, who were aware of the imminent danger threatening theatrical representations in their age. The great theatre directors constantly sought new ways of getting as close as possible to the origins of theatrical art, with the aim of rediscovering the archetypal gestures inscribed in the collective unconscious. After investigating the significant steps of the three renowned predecessors, as a necessary conclusion, I also identified contemporary artists

directly involved in the research and exploration of ritual theatre. I had, therefore, the privilege of discovering the remarkable contribution of the Greek theatre director Theodoros Terzopoulos, who has dedicated a significant part of his career to ritual theatre. Extensive research, conducted over a period of almost half a century, explores the unlimited capacities of the actor in an effort to rediscover the roots of theatrical art. Terzopoulos identifies the actor as a “Dionysian man”; his training methods aim to bring new vitality to the landscape of contemporary theatre. A subchapter describes in detail some representative exercises proposed by the renowned director. Terzopoulos provides exercises in acting training for both experienced actors and acting students all over the world. These have been presented in international workshops to which he has been invited, or which he has integrated into his artistic creations. Detailed information on the mentioned exercises can be found in his work entitled *The Return of Dionysus*. These psycho-physical exercises develop the actor’s ability to concentrate, the team spirit, ensuring a very good warm-up of the body and voice and an optimal training of breathing and diaphragm. All of them prepare actors for performing roles in performances with ritual themes, as shown in the subchapter *Psycho-physical Exercises for the “Dionysian Actor” as Conceived by Theodoros Terzopoulos*. I have also concluded that the exercises proposed by Terzopoulos are prerequisites for theoretical and practical research for both students in specialized faculties and professional actors, constituting an alternative to psycho-physical training for any type of performance.

Through *Elizabeth and the Ritual of Virtue in Richard III. A Case Study*, I have developed a study which includes an in-depth analysis of how I have constructed and interpreted the character of Elizabeth from a ritual perspective. Although I initially approached the character instinctively, I subsequently highlighted the ritualistic valences that enhanced the quality of the stage performance. For example, scene four in Act Four, in which Queen Elizabeth (together with the Duchess of York) visits the priestess Margaret, has a strong magical ritualistic character. The act of initiation into a curse ritual revealed the character’s vulnerability to me, helping me to accept it and try to overcome it. Consequently, I recognize the need for specific psycho-physical training in the preparation for the role that would enhance the quality of the acting performance, and that of the performance.

I consider that this interdisciplinary scientific approach, which has incorporated anthropological, historical, cultural, semiotic, theatrical, literary and empirical, professional perspectives in order to identify, define and analyse the concept of ritual, largely achieves the

proposed objectives. Through the process of documentation, analysis and understanding of bibliographical materials, I have presented different types of rituals and subgenres associated to them in the context of universal theatre. The comparative analysis of the three creators of ritual theatre – Antonin Artaud, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook – revealed that Artaud was the provocateur of change, Grotowski was the theorist and philosopher, while Brook functioned as practitioner and experimenter. Exploring the contribution of the Greek theatre director Theodoros Terzopoulos, theorist and creator of ritual theatre, highlights the persistence of the theme of returning to the pristine moment as a permanent subject for revitalizing theatre.

From the professional actor's perspective, I have found that, in the preparation work for the role and, implicitly, for the performance, it would be appropriate to put more emphasis on the psycho-physical training of the actors. Putting into practice the exercises proposed by the Greek theatre director could be an option in developing the artistic skills of both the actors and those who intend to embrace this vocation. This could be achieved by organizing workshops or, from a pedagogical point of view, by introducing these exercises into the courses of specialized disciplines. In this way, there could be an opportunity to experiment with ritual elements and modalities through psycho-physical exercises taken from both the precursors of ritual theatre and contemporaries.

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that a theatre with well-trained actors, with subjects carrying deep messages, would become a viable alternative against the superficiality of some theatrical productions, whether they are presented in the classical format, in the theatre, or online. The integration and recognition of the value of contemporary ritual theatre in all other theatrical forms, by taking over and practicing the psycho-physical exercises from this sphere, could be yet another solution in the future development of theatre, a major contribution to its evolution.