

Will we meet in the theatre¹?

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Abstract: *Do the actor and the spectator meet? The acting student and the teacher by any chance? Of course, they meet, because they are in the same space or if they are limited to online courses due to the pandemic, they are participants in the same event, be it a lecture or a teaching process. But I am not talking about this meeting, I am not intrigued by this superficial contact.*

For me, the meeting is a conscious, obviously essential connection of the participants. We do not push the image of ourselves forward, but we relate honestly, simply, openly, curiously to each other, to our environment, to the events.

Something that hardly happens in the current theatre. And it is simply impossible in the online space.

So now I refrain from exploring the latter option and only consider the “traditional”, face-to-face, real, physical encounters. More specifically, its shortcomings.

Key words: *meeting; fourth wall; reality; man; training.*

I could also write that I do not think so, and then I would cut this writing short. But perhaps, in order to reach this conclusion, I also need to think through why I don't believe in the reality of our current theatrical encounters.

I first ignored the request of the conference of the University of Arts in Târgu Mureş³, in which they propose to write down texts and thoughts examining the impact

¹ My findings apply primarily to state-subsidized Hungarian theatres in Romania but can largely be applied to a very large part of Romanian theatres (in Romanian and other languages) as well as to the vast majority of Hungarian theatres. At the same time, I would like to make it clear here, at the beginning, that I am trying to examine the problem raised primarily from an actor's point of view. But I also do not rule out that this is at least as much a pedagogical and/ or directing issue.

² Translated from Hungarian by Eszter Bodor.

³ “Unexpectedly emerging in everyday life, the pandemic has dramatically changed our social lives. The condition of survival has become the renunciation of such natural forms of human interaction that we sometimes fear that in order to preserve our existence, we risk losing our



of the pandemic on music and art. What can I have to do with music? Although I received a very serious vocal music education for five years (thanks to Mr. Zsolt Szilágyi, a teacher in Sfântu Gheorghe within the framework of the then School of Folk Art), my acting, directing and teaching activities are still mainly related to prose performances. Yet I, too, believe that music and theatre (as the field of the living human presence) are closely intertwined. To the same extent as text and theatre, movement and theatre, spectacle and theatre – ultimately all the elements that are meant to create the spectacle: equally by the actor. (Yes, I may be biased about the actor’s presence, but I think you can create a performance without a special spectacle – see the concept of empty space –, you can create a performance without musical elements or special movement elements – see most prose performances, you can create a performance without a pre-written literary text – see the genre of commedia dell’arte –, you can create a performance without a director in the modern sense – as the director is a fairly modern invention, the theatre existed for a few thousand years before –, but not really without an actor. His absence resulted in performance art, various musical and fine art works, genres, all of which fit into the set of spectacles, but hardly a theatrical performance. At least – I repeat – hardly a repeatable and repetitive event with a lively human presence.)

Then, after reading the text of the above-mentioned invitation several times, something caught my attention, something other than the suggested topics to be researched (online art versus live art, live performance versus recording, online courses versus classroom teaching). The highlighted word *meeting* in the third sentence.

Because that is what I am concerned about right now. Do the actor and the spectator meet? The acting student and the teacher by any chance? Of course, they meet, because they are in the same space or if they are limited to online courses due to the pandemic, they are participants in the same event, be it a lecture or a teaching process. But I am not talking about this meeting, I am not intrigued by this superficial contact.

humanity. The arts that existed and manifested in the context of the *meeting* – performance, concert, recital, one-man show, but also exhibitions or installations – became septic, and artists were deprived of their audience. Art education was exiled online. But artistic creation could not be hindered. Seeking to survive and express themselves, the artists followed their spectators to the online media adapting existing forms and looking for new formulas that would bring them closer to the audience. Also, pandemic and isolation became inspiration itself.

Music and Art in Pandemic, a conference targeting the art of music, and the arts that connected with music, wants to record the artistic, social, managerial and educational experience of this pandemic year, as well of the similar situations in the history of epidemics. We invite you to participate, answering current questions about the condition of the visual artist, choreographer, director, critic, musician, composer, performer, teacher – How is the *spirit of these times* reflected in contemporary art? Online versus “real” art, live performance versus recording, online courses versus classroom teaching? *Quo vadis* music? *Quo vadis* art? Are the options, the choices, the attitudes limited? Forbidden art or arrested art? Acceptance or protest?”



For me, the meeting is a conscious, obviously essential connection of the participants. We do not push the image of ourselves forward, but we relate honestly, simply, openly, curiously to each other, to our environment, to the events. When we do not justify or refute the preconceived notion, but push our knowledge into the background and accept, in fact we encourage the possibility of discovery. When we do not insist. When we have no expectations.

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So now I refrain from exploring the latter option and only consider the “traditional”, face-to-face, real, physical encounters. More specifically, its shortcomings.

At this moment, I see two reasons why we cannot meet: the fourth wall and the acting training itself⁴. (Although it would be unfair to blame exclusively the latter for the immeasurable pedagogical deficiency that characterizes the most part of education in our country.)

I think that the fact that the fourth wall is hindering the meeting I have described and claimed earlier is obvious. Moreover, it not only hinders, but does not make it at all possible.

Since the spectator is not present in this situation for the actor, we cannot talk about a meeting. The relationship is one-sided, and the reality of the theatre exists only for the viewer. Only the reality portrayed in the performance exists for the actor. The actor is in Verona and in a different time period⁵.

The need for a fourth wall was certainly due to a theatrical situation that also led to an improvement in acting. But more than a century passed since then. Today we see it differently, we live in different social conditions, we interpret situations and relationships – man and the world itself differently. And we will certainly think completely differently about it again in a few years. And just as Zoltán Nédá, a professor of physics stated⁶ that it would be time to apply not only the Newtonian worldview to the world, but also the discoveries of quantum physics should be valid and existing, I too think that it would be time to look at acting differently, not only as described by

⁴ More precisely, the training of actors in Romania (in Romanian and Hungarian). But – in my experience – the following statements are equally valid for acting training in Hungary.

⁵ Of course, this is not the case. Only the actor tries to convince himself and his surroundings. In fact, he knows very well where he is, what he is doing, it is enough to think that he has repeated this situation several times and will probably repeat it quite a few more times.

⁶ During a personal conversation. He later repeated it at a conference I did not attend, I only found out about it from the press. And since I did not think I was going to write this line of thought at the time, I did not save the reference. So, the present text is quite unscientific in this respect as well.



Stanislavski and according to the methods of training and creating actors that derive from it (or are formulated against it)⁷.

Because can it in acting, too, be stated beyond any doubt where the reality is? As well as what we consider it to be at all? For we cannot say that what we are incapable of perceiving with our senses does not exist. Just as Newtonian mechanics (and the resulting set of physical laws) is not only incapable of explaining, but is not suitable at all for describing phenomena in the microworld of matter, the current general approach to acting cannot adequately answer questions such as: who is present on stage? At all: what is presence? How can we be surprised by what we have imagined, discussed and perfected during long rehearsals? How is it possible to be more than one person⁸ at a time? Not to mention Diderot's paradox of the actor...

Let us make no mistake, Stanislavski is very important, unavoidable, and the laws described by Newton are all valid – but only in their own world. They are simplified parts of a much more complex whole, in which, for example, the uncertainty principle⁹ is as much a part of reality as the precisely definable acceleration of a body rolling down a slope of a given angle¹⁰.

The fourth wall, it seems, results in a binary relation: either I am outside or inside. But based on my acting experience, I cannot just be in these two places. I am simultaneously in the performance, in the theatre, and in countless other places and situations that appear in my thoughts independent of my will. I am at the same time an actor, a character, András Hatházi and the countless possibilities of the person called András

⁷ Certainly, a more complete mapping and processing of Stanislavski's work will change this approach a lot. Because let us not forget that the methods inspired by his theory were all born out of Stanislavski's officially authorized views.

⁸ Identity. Personality. Someone. Anyone – because in the end, we could be anyone.

⁹ "The Heisenberg uncertainty principle states that there is no state in which all physical quantities simultaneously assume an exact value. There are quantities in pairs (these can be described by non-interchangeable operators) the values of which are blurred in all states, that is, the accuracy of the simultaneous measurement of the two quantities cannot theoretically be of any size. Examples of such quantities are space and momentum." (Nagy 2013, 131).

¹⁰ And to give the example of an actor problem corresponding to the footnote above: there is no state in human existence in which all identities can be precisely defined. There are states (occurring simultaneously and even in pairs with each other) when not only their values, but also their qualities are blurred in all states, that is, their exact definition is not even theoretically possible. That is, it cannot be clearly stated about a person what happens to him, despite the common (human) experience that preceded the situation that currently defines the person. Antigone cannot be said to be driven only by an emotion towards her brother. Nor is she determined by her relationship with Ismene, Creon or Haemon. We can say practically nothing concrete about Antigone because no matter how much we know about her and mankind, there will always be the moment the actor experiences when she plays Antigone according to the convention. That is why I also think that the "character", the "figure", the "dramatic hero" – are dead, do not exist, are useless to the actor.



Hatházi, who appear and disappear unexpectedly. (And this is just my experience, where is the point of view of the spectator, who puts me who knows where and in what situation, what he associates with me and in what perceived realities he puts me?)¹¹.

The fourth wall is about cognizability, describability, and while it aims for viability, let us not forget: it is never alive. What is viable cannot live because it only seems like it does. But then we cannot talk about presence either! However, this seems to have gained in importance recently. As if it had become a requirement.

And if we are already at the presence: the presence of the actor alone does not result in a meeting if the spectator is not part of that presence.

And I stop here for a moment (I hope not for more!). Because it suddenly dawned on me: but do we even need this meeting at all? Isn't this just living in my imagination? Isn't this just my expectation, and is that why I am trying – quite in vain – to introduce a different approach to acting and training? Wouldn't it be better to stay with the traditional conditions separately for the actor and separately for the spectator, separately for the teacher and separately for the student? What is this whim for? This obstinate, stubborn insistence on honesty, not to put on an act¹²...

In the end, isn't it just my own failure, in which acting has proven to be unknowable, untold, undeliverable to me, something that can only be experienced and requires a lot of time, consciously spent time? I do not know. But then why are we going to the theatre?

Okay, let us say in the theatre, in a very large number of cases, you do not need the kind of meeting I am looking for. You do not need the meeting at all. But there are some creators (individual or group)¹³ who still want to create this togetherness. But can they make this idea a reality? Is there an actor who can make such a connection with the audience? Or perhaps more precisely, is there an actor who is able to open the viewer with the fullest possible openness and simplicity in order to create a human connection?

¹¹ Not to mention that every time I think about myself, I am always outside. (And that is not just in my case. Anyone who thinks of himself is outside of himself.) So, this whole problem of "role identification" is bogus, false, sought-after. Maybe the question is, who am I outside of? Who is this myself I am thinking of, who thinks?

¹² Yes, exactly like this: let us drop the act. Let us just play and not lie! Let us stay in the theatre.

¹³ The Reactor, Waitingroom Project groups in Cluj-Napoca or directors like Matthias Langhoff, Tom Dugdale, Vladimir Anton, Cosmin Matei. And there are certainly more, I personally had the opportunity to get in touch with the ones mentioned above. And yes, it is also true that we do not fully agree either, but we both fundamentally recognize the importance of the relationship. I hope we only use different words sometimes for ways of implementation.



Not sure. I do not think so. If so, it is almost certain that he did not acquire this kind of behavior during his training as an actor, but – perhaps – his life experience (and, of course, his theatrical experience to some extent) and the authors of books other than the compulsory (fashionable, canonized, considered unavoidable) theatrical readings¹⁴ led him to this recognition, demand. (I write in conditional mode because in my case these led me here, but in the case of others do I know what might be behind it? It was by no means the school, at best, it was the system of relationships within the family, the resulting emotional background – although in many cases this is also doubtful¹⁵...)

But couldn't this openness, simplicity, way of thinking, approach – ultimately non-acting – be applied in the training of actors as well?

I am just wondering if acting is about the man, then why don't we deal with the man?

The harassment scandals that have surfaced in recent years have revealed a practice that was tacitly accepted in the training of actors: it is not a loving process¹⁶. This is tacitly called tradition. They did the same with us, yet we did pretty well in this field. Ergo we do the same. The rest is not our business. Unfortunately. But couldn't it be otherwise?

Yet what can a drama school offer? More precisely: what is the extra that this kind of school can give, which cannot be obtained in other workshops, summer schools, camps, and can be learned in fast-paced courses organized for enthusiastic amateurs? The acting itself? But what is that? What is acting like? Is it the individual experience of the acting coach? But that is just a very tiny slice of the profession! Moreover, due to its subjectivity, it is completely unreliable, as its statements are only thought by the teacher, and they are often not even close to the situation the student is experiencing! And rightly so: I am talking now only and exclusively about my own experience, and my only argument can be at most the direction we can go between traditional acting and the acting I am looking for. There is a way from here to there. But it does not work the other way around. But is that really so? I think so. Because in the theatre I see, we train actors to:

1. **be original.** We just forget that there is nothing more original than their own being. Instead, we steer them toward curiosity. But those who want to be interesting become mannered, sought-after. And since it is not true that imagination is endless, the candidate will only cling desperately to the things he knows, and which

¹⁴ In my case (non-exhaustive list): Ouspensky, Csíkszentmihályi, Gurdjieff, Máté, Braden, Krishnamurti, Harari, Mérő, Barabási, Tolle, Hayes...

¹⁵ Perhaps more the recognition that I am not responsible for what I have become, but I am answerable exclusively for what I will be from now on.

¹⁶ And not only in drama schools, but also in the daily routine of professional athletes, the humiliation, breaking in and inhuman treatment of the novice, apprentice, future master is equally present. And I deliberately put it very mildly here!



are considered bizarre for this. He becomes tense, self-conscious, and everyone feels bad: both performer and spectator. Of course, we can lie to ourselves that art comes with this.

2. **be liberated.** But aren't we helping them from what they should get freed? Could it be because we don't know? Do we call freedom the routine with which we have managed to arm ourselves during our years on stage? But are we, the acting coaches free?
3. **be creative.** But what is creativity? If we know, then why are we satisfied with the accumulation of clichés, with calculated and predictable situations, reactions, over-complicated assumptions, far-fetched thought processes? Lovers always laugh and spin, the wicked always roll their eyes, those who lose their lives by the end of the play are dying from the first act on, from the moment they come on stage, the sufferers are always in agony, the heroes always have shining eyes... There is no surprise, no unpredictability, there is no possibility that it could all happen differently. The "characters" can be recognized and delimited from the moment they step on stage, the "figures" behave as expected, there is a story that can only follow a certain lukewarm course – the theatre has become a place of comfortable consumption, where the *épater le bourgeois* attitude of a few pranksters will offend the noble hearted. Acting has become a routine job just like for a construction laborer.

Why do we believe that creativity is based on knowledge? I think that is one of the biggest problems: knowledge. Knowledge keeps you safe. And obviously, safety is essential to survival. But it is about creativity now! How can I create something different, new, if I put the existing one back together with the same view? And even if I manage to accidentally deviate from the path one day and look with a different eye at what I sort of know: what will happen when I repeat it? After all, after this discovery, I must do the same thing over and over again at the next rehearsal, then at the next rehearsal, and then during the longer or shorter series of performances, each time...

4. **be playful.** And instead, we lead them to pretend. Toward a lie, toward dishonesty. We tell them to be here and now like children, but in the meantime, we encourage them to be elsewhere and in other times. Like adults. We talk to them about the role completely forgetting about the man who can't even play the role of an actor. We force them into multiple cover-ups, hiding, and only increase their fears, not their self-confidence. And in many cases, our self-confidence is just aggression, keeping others away, fleeing into an established ego.



We tell them: energy – and we have no clue what it is?

We tell them: emotion – and we do not care at all what they feel?¹⁷

I do not know. We drive them farther and farther away from themselves. We want to train actors instead of establishing a person from whom you can become an actor someday. Maybe. If he finds himself. The acting in himself.

The acting is much less. It is much simpler. Much more human. There is nothing mystical about acting. In acting, there is only the man, the way he exists, the way he plays, the way he looks, the way he thinks, the way he just sits, breathes and as elusive as he is.

And that is all.

And then maybe we can talk about a *meeting*.

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¹⁷ Isn't it true, because current acting does not care what we feel now, but what we should feel then? It is not about what is going on right now, it is about what it was and then what it should be? What should it be like then? It seeks presence and is not present in what is, but continually measures itself against either a past success or a future quality.