Psychological Moving Forces in Unleashing Interpretative Mechanisms within the Musical Theatre Show

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Abstract: The study herein submits an approach of limit, specific to interdisciplinarity, starting from settling coherent relations among music, text, situation, fundamental attribution error, in order to build stage dynamics in accordance with the musical development and in order to elaborate new symbiotic modalities of vocal, orchestral and scenic performance.

Keywords: actor, stage manager, conductor, character, personality, part, acting action, dramatic tension, semantic tension

1 Actor–functional mechanism

Knowing the actor as functional mechanism within the formation process of the theatrical terminus is distinguished as a necessity, without which the coagulation in a common idea is practically doomed to fail. If, during the first stages of the theatrical construction, the stage manager has to relate with a matter deprived of certain personality components; and here we make reference to the “written datum” (text, libretto, score), once with passing to the stage, to working with the actor, with the performer, things substantially modify. Here, the stage manager no longer disposes of an amorphous mass, of a clay that he may model according to his own ideas; the only modality left is to determine the “individual” in front of him to acquire a structure – at least behavioural-artistic – as close to his vision as possible, in line with the written datum, the score.

In the beginning, the actor has nothing. Only a text and himself. He, the actor, is one of the possibilities for one of the characters to exist, to come to light, in the three perceptible dimensions of our immediate reality. He is the one who will “help” the text to find its true dimension, by performing it, by “playing” it, in other words, by theatricalizing it. The text itself contains an infinity of existence possibilities, due to the element that may give it life, the actor, the one in which “the rhythm of the words and of the verse lives [...] even when he does not speak” [1]. What the actor decodes is an interpretation of the internal mechanics of the text, mechanics visible with one’s eyes of the mind, ever since the first reading; the characters, the situations already acquiring a palpable form, for the time being only at sensory level, arousing emotions on cerebral level, on the basis of the “researcher’s” experiences so far, who is disposed to find another “somewhere”, another “somehow” and “somebody else”. The actor must reveal – through his play – also the subtext (in the stanislavskian signification of the term) that makes the implicit moving force of the text “unveil” itself. Although, apparently, both actor and text may be envisaged as two distinct entities, in order to “survive”, they need each other, being in a relation of scenic reciprocal determination. The actor exists in the physical, material plane, without the metaphorical charge that he receives from the text, which is materialized through scenic, plastic performance [2].

1.1 Character vs. personality

Defining the character supposes first and foremost determining the direction whence we wend our way towards him, as the word has become increasingly poly-semantic. From the perspective of the dramatic art, we propose the character’s definition as a construction of a human representation from the dramatic literature, a textual notion whose function is to be an element out of a narrative sequence [...]

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[3]. Being about an ideographic construction – in the sense of its representation through letters, words, placed so as to make sense in conveying an idea – among the book pages, it cannot manifest its behaviours and attitudes towards the other ideographic constructions it also relates to.

From psychological perspective, we define the character through the intermediary of a theoretical construction, an operative notion and therefore, perhaps, less configurative. We retain as an essential characteristic, the idea of depiction, being consequently in front of an image, of a draft, of a sketch, less elaborate under the aspect of the detail, but configured under the aspect of the defining elements within a given context. The one who will “draw” the character and will give it the shape that he deems authentic, from his standpoint, is the actor, who appeals to a pattern that he will attribute to his character, as the character is, in fact, a mental, virtual construction, who needs a physical form (vehicle) through whom it should manifest. Generally, people define characters, not personalities, making a certain synthesis and retaining, much as the actors, the elements that they deem important, determinant, characteristic (personality indices), which they attribute to the characters.

The dramatic author/composer and afterwards the actor, led by the stage manager and conductor, construct their character on the basis of a limited number of dimensions, whereof the types of languages, the types of behaviour, the inter-relations. In all character-elaboration labour, from the psychological standpoint, the process is based on the fundamental attribution error. As the character must be constructed an existence, be it virtual, there is necessary that, beside a “portrait”, a series of actions and behaviours should be attributed to it, which naturally have certain causes. “Attribution is the process through whose intermediary human being perceives reality and may predict or master it; it allows the individual to explain his and others’ behaviours, to interpret what befalls on him, to search for the causes of an event or behaviour” [4]. The theories of attribution [5] – which generally submit the hypothesis that clear frames exist, which define a genuine psychology of the common sense, with whose help the regular person understands and gives sense to the psychic reality, consequently explains the manner in which the regular person, through a comprehension effort, attempts to separate an effect from the cause or from the complex of causal factors having brought it about – find their applicability in the context wherein an understanding is required upon the character in its wholeness.

The entire construction of the character is in antithesis with the concept of the personality: if the character is the draft, the drawing, then the personality is the photograph, the radiography; if the character is a virtual construction, then the personality is a scientifically elaborated theoretical construction, however real; if the character is described through relating it to a model, the personality has a structure, has moving forces, reaching up to quantifiable values.

Personality stands for the synthesis of the psycho-individual particularities, enhanced by a series of characteristics [6] on whose basis the individuals specifically manifest, distinguishing one from another. In restrictive sense, the concept describes affective aspects (motivations and emotions) and social aspects (the temperament and the character). In a broad sense, the assembly includes the sensory and motor actuating characteristics (artistic aptitudes), beside the cognitive ones (intelligence, abilities, skills, knowledge), pertaining to the individual [7].

Out of the “personality architecture” we will bring up for discussion, the elements we deem the most useful for the actor in his relation with the character. This way, out of the three categories of personality features, we mention the temperament [8], whose types may be called by the actor upon the gallery of characters, the character [9], which is expressed through an assembly of attitudes and the aptitudes [10], whereto there are associated the knowledge, the skills, the interests, the attitudes and the motivation. The talent, deemed a superior form for the manifestation of the aptitudes, is associated to success, performance, originality in the creative activity. Regardless if it pertains to the inborn or acquired endowment, their external, behavioural manifestation is part of an entire assembly, which was defined as representing every one’s ego.

1.2 Actor, character, part
The actor’s work may be deemed a plunge amidst his multitude of inner super-egos. Through exploring the character’s truths, motivations (his ego, I myself and self) and through representing them, in fact, the actor emphasizes features that are common to him, even familiar, but which have a smaller weight within his own manifested personality. The actor builds new facets of
personality, according to the requirements of the score. Every actor is in fact an enigma, even for himself, on the path of searching his own selves, making use of different “tasks”. The actor plays both for the spectator [11], and for the joy of retrieving other facets of his own personality [12]. Both he and the character (mental construction) come with a luggage wherein the very same elements are found, but in different proportion. The research(actor), the cre(actor), only modifies the weight of the elements he possesses in his own luggage, so that they should be as equal with those of the “task” as possible. Through modifying the “luggage”, he discovers another reality, seen through the character’s eyes.

Much may be said about an actor, but if there is attempted to characterize one, the actor X, in a word that should greatly define him, there might be said about him that he is intelligent, or creative, or that he is endowed with imagination, or that he is analytical. For every actor X, a prevailing characteristic may be found. That “definition”, that word expresses in fact a concept, which enhances the pre-eminient side, facet within his personality. If we go in parallelism with a character, the character Y, we may find also for this one an equally simple “definition”. Maybe hence the necessity, emerged in time, to separate the characters in good or negative ones. A simple, reductionist division, as a matter of fact, already proving that any character is the owner of an ego, of a personality and consequently has a more or less complex psycho-behavioural structure, and this if we only think at an analysis from the motivational standpoint. Out of this behavioural summum, based on intuition, imagination, analysis, intelligence, inspiration, comparison, attention, creativity, motivation, performance, the actor achieves first an imaginative representation, on the sensory level, of the character under his magnifying glass, a representation which, on the basis of selecting the defining elements of the task, he obtains on a real plane.

From the standpoint of the psychology, the character is altered, because of the interaction between the actor’s personality and the character that he plays. Every actor builds his character, during the rehearsals, imposing him every time a fundamental attribution error. Once the result is enhanced, unless it submits to the whole, to the vision of the stage manager, of the conductor, and to the situational context, the character is successively imposed other errors (therefore through elimination), till the moment in which the “particular” turns into an expression of a common situational individuality. It is what happens when we have to relate every alterity in part to a common alterity, which represents the show undergoing a singular/unique vision. In fact, in a tacit complicity, the actor accepts to be “remodelled”, through the character, by the stage manager. We deem necessary to enhance the concept of common alterity, due to the fact that its resultant determines the line of the show (in theatrical language, meaning the modality of dynamics, of image, of sense, of rhythm etc.).

1.3 Triangle of acting action
The actor is a multidimensional being. His multidimensionality resides in the very superposition of two tri-dimensionalities, his and the character’s. Each one, both actor and character, inscribe in an individual triangle. Let us imagine the triangle as possessing in its corners, a determinative functional range: one which pertains to the motivational area, one to the sensory area and one to the rational area (Fig. 1).

If we considered every fragment of an individual’s life to be subjected to this rule, then every fragment might be delimited depending on these levels. Whatesoever the direction whence we would leave, the existence of the three levels engenders actions that may have repercussions in every individual’s behavioural-situational evolution (A). If we deemed the individual to be perfect (situation only hypothetical, as a matter of fact, and also absurd), that he possessed in perfect quantities all the three levels, then his evolution in time would look like an unidirectional central axis. In fact, this does not happen, due to the subjectivity and to the situational conjuncture, which brings about new re-evaluations and, implicitly, new behavioural manners. A multitude of reference points appear this way (A₁, A₂ … Aₙ), which modify the character’s
evolution, despite the motivation which, in fact, remains the same.

If we consider that the placement of the point within the triangle determines different behavioural actions/attitudes (from the standpoint of the stage dynamics), a presumptive trajectory of the scenic evolution may be elaborated, which should consider the musical-dramatic pressure of every moment.

2 Applicative model starting from the „musical datum”

Starting from the model of semantic analysis submitted by professor Dinu Ciocan, in the study Principii de semiotică muzicală [Principles of Musical Semiotics] [13], we remind a few principles which underlie such an analytical approach:

- Beside phonetics (correct execution of the sounds within the score, under acoustic and physiological aspect) and grammar (vocabulary and syntax), the semantics completes the sum of objectives that a performer should envisage, whilst approaching and dealing with a score.
- A musical work consists in significant sequences under structural aspect, organized on different levels: from the maximal level of the opera (first level, corresponding to the overall opera) up to the minimal significant level (last level – of the sequences that can be no longer decomposed)
- In every opera, at least a curve exists that describes the evolution of its semantic tension.
- Semantic tensions may be differently achieved, according to a few particularities of the type of language, of the style, or depending on the correlation of the tensions of melodic, harmonic, rhythmic, formal order etc.
- The semantic tension curve of an opera is a binder between the maxim and minim points; they form together a collection whose elements must be arranged depending on their importance, value, in the context wherein they appear.

Based on the importance of knowing and manoeuvring the previously enunciated theoretical concepts, we propose enhancing their applicability on a fragment from the opera Suor Angelica by G. Puccini (scene Suor Angelica – Zia Principessa).

The scene is divided in 281 bars, respectively 20 musical milestones (R43-R62).

Following the analysis of the musical score, of the “written datum” (musical dramaturgy and libretto), we submit structuring the dramatic tensions on ten degrees, shared on two attitudinal levels, underlain by the passive-active binominal. Every character’s separate analysis led to a panorama view upon the entire situational, behavioural, attitudinal spectrum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Suor Angelica</th>
<th>Zia Principessa</th>
<th>Level</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Calm</td>
<td>Carelessness</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Melancholy</td>
<td>Ignorance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Nostalgia</td>
<td>Indifference</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>Disgust</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Disquietude</td>
<td>Superiority</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Self-assurance</td>
<td>Active</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Fury</td>
<td>Indignation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Begging</td>
<td>Arrogance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>Nervousness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Despair</td>
<td>Disdain</td>
<td></td>
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Table 1. Level of dramatic tensions

Settling the coherent relations among music, text, situation, fundamental attribution error, offers the possibility of constructing a stage dynamics on the trajectory according to the musical development.

Every character’s evolution may be thereby emphasized, between a behavioural maxim and minim.
Superposing the two trajectories leads to achieving a dynamic situational context, based on contrasts and/or similarities. The resultant of the interactions considers the melodic, rhythmic, harmonic and orchestral (timbre) nature of the semantic tensions.

The coincidence or the lack of coincidence of the profiles of the two curves, consequently of their maximums and minimums, reflects on one hand every character’s particular evolutionary trajectory and corresponds on the other hand to the more or less univocal character of the referent [14] of the musical work.

For instance, between the score milestones 55-56 the evolution of Suor Angelica character’s semantic tension (see the blue-colour curve in the graph above) is marked by specific elements to the score, such as: the melodic formula inscribed in the grave register (string and wind), the fluctuating dynamics which prepares the tensional climax in \( \text{ff and marcato} \) from milestone 56, Puccini’s chosen instrumentation for this milestone (we refer to the interventions of the brass instruments), the soloist’s dramatic lament.

We encounter another relevant example at milestone 43. The orchestral writing (and not the configuration of the vocal line!) is the one that reveals the tensional curve of the mentioned sequence. Zia Principessa character’s stage entering, a character with an attitude of severity and superiority, in tensional counter-weight with Suor Angelica, characterized by quietude: on one hand, the evolution in octaves/unison of the string compartment (sustained legato, melodic ascensio, dynamic crescendo), which brings a dramatic contribution to the “principessa’ motive”, on the other hand the quiet answer in \( \text{pizzicatto and pp} \) of the same string compartment (melodic descensio).

3 Conclusions

The construction of the musical theatre show needs an equilibrium between the content and the form wherewith it is expressed; this may be achieved starting first and foremost from the observance of the “dramatic musical datum”, wherein all value resources are found, which have been confirmed in time.

A more in-depth analysis of the “science of music” may keep us, in the future, from a series of excesses, which may lead to „parasitizing” the lyrical theatrical space. First and foremost, we might emphasize the necessity of changing the optics of approaching the “acting art”, to the purpose of relieving it from the standardized patterns whereof there is unfortunately frequently resorted.

Not lastly, we deem necessary an in-depth study of the psycho-social sciences and of their “discoveries” during the last half-century, the comprehension and taking over of “formulas” proved as efficacious for the social area, in the theatrical area, which may lead towards newer, more authentic, more veracious and more justified stage managing visions, as regards the relations among the characters or their behavioural determinants.

Having a traditionalist, conservatory character, tributary to the routine as working manner, the lyrical show might modernize through giving up the pre-learnt patterns, taken “by tradition” from the forerunners. Starting from the retrieval of the internal senses of both musical and dramatic text and from their enhancement in accordance with the entire sonorous spectrum (vocal and orchestral), the conductor, the stage manager and the lyrical actor may submit new symbiotic modalities of vocal, orchestral and scenic performance.

References:


[2] George Banu, Peter Brook. De”Timon d’Athènes” à „La tempête” ou Le metteur en scène et le cercle, Paris, Flammarion, 1991, pp.72-73: “Brook’s planetary distributions adopt the norms of the cinema, perhaps also because the shows are conceived in the terms of a future international career, for whom the relations with the language, reduced to a mere communication vehicle, count less than the
corporeal expressivity in its integrity. Because, much as in the cinema, while the languages change, the bodies remain the same whatsoever the country.”


[5] Subsequently to Heider, deemed the founder of the modern theory of attribution (1958), Jones and Davis (1965) formulated the *Correspondent Inference Theory*, according to which an observer will infer the correspondence of a behaviour with a certain stable feature, depending on the correspondence of an intention. Kelley developed a theoretical model (*covariance model*), which brings up for attention, the principle stating that a phenomenon may be deemed cause of a behaviour, only under the conditions wherein its presence is accompanied by the presence of the behaviour; in default, the same behaviour never appears. Three types of information lead to internal attribution (dispositions) or to external causal attribution (situations). The *multidimensional theory* elaborated by Wiener (1986) submits a tri-dimensional model; introduces a new dimension, the stability or the instability of the causal factors, the acts of behaviour being explainable to the human being not only in the terms of the stable dispositions, but also in the terms of the transitory states.

[6] *Globality and individuality* – the personality consists in an assembly of characteristics that allow its description and identification among the others. Human being is unique in its individual expression, consequently the individual’s uniqueness stands out in a unique personality, alike as a function of certain criteria with other individuals’ personalities. *Coherence* – the idea is admitted of the existence of a certain organization and interdependence of the personality’s component elements (we do not include here the unusual acts); the personality is a functional system consisting in interdependent elements, not in an assembly of juxtaposed elements. *Permanence* – a person transforms and develops, consequently self-defines as keeping one’s psychic identity; the human being is aware of his existence, the feeling of the continuity and identity along his entire existence. See Adrian Neculau (coord.), *Manual de psihologie socială*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2004.


[9] Through character we understand an invariant of the conduct, through whose intermediary the latter orient towards certain values; implies affective, cognitive and behavioural reactions.

[10] Assembly of physical and psychic features that ensure the success in an activity.

[11] George Banu, *Peter Brook. De „Timon d’Athènes” à „La Tempête” ou Le metteur en scène et le cercle*, ed.cit., p.65: “However, there is no reciprocal resemblance (between the actor and the audience – our note). As a circular, mouldable line is drawn anyhow: the audience and the actors are not apt to be confused, they recognise ones in the others”.

[12] Dan Pița, *Confectiuni cinematografice*, București, Fundația PRO Press, 2005, p. 38: “All great artists have always looked within, as in a mirror, they started through studying themselves and they continued this great road of the initiation till death. [...] What can be more enticing, more debasing, more shameful, more arrogant than the lucid, merciless look of the ego upon oneself?”


[14] According to prof. Dinu Ciocan’s theory, through *referent* we understand the totality of the music-specific psycho-physiological states (SPFSM), which are the musical feelings and experiences situated at the intersection of the individual states.