Commedia dell’arte in the Contemporary World – Challenge, Performance, Practice

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Abstract: Influenced by the components of everyday life, contemporary theatre is undoubtedly subject to multiple transformations. Theatre needs a new lease on life, new subject matters. Without minimizing the importance of modern theatre, but out of sheer fondness of Commedia dell’arte, we have tried to outline certain characteristics, traits that impart colour to this provocative genre, regardless of space and time. Of course, only time will verify its future dual value as spectacle, as spectacle – performance and practice. Considering all these aspects from a musician’s perspective, it was only natural to emphasize the important position music occupies in Commedia dell’arte and its role as binding agent that in this way creates a balance between modernity and tradition.

Key words: contemporary reality, theatrical communication, Commedia dell'arte, music as binding agent, remodelling.

Globalization, digitalization, advanced technology, the Internet revolution, multiculturalism, consumerism, reconfiguration, transformation, reinvention, are prevalent attributes\(^1\) that define contemporary reality and have covered the whole range of social and economic life and cultural issues the impact of which will foreshadow the course of the future and its new dimensions. Naturally, these forces that cause mutations and transformations throughout the entire artistic and cultural sphere are at play within the theatrical perimeter as well. And one may be rightfully inclined to wonder how all these cohabit with emotion, grace and majesty, with tenderness, lyricism, the narrative, and with beauty.

\(^1\) There certainly are other aspects to be taken into consideration when performing a complex analysis of the contemporary reality and of future perspectives.
Caught in the machinery of time, in an age when reality reconstructs itself, theatre, regarded as a form of communication “that assumes and reclaims theatre’s instruments”\(^2\), identifies these transformations according to the entire echelon of fundamental sensitivities specific to theatrical communication that engage the author, the director, the actor and the spectator. In a period when knowledge and freedom of expression, emancipation, and technological progress are in full swing, the theatrical act exceeds through its creative power the conventional patterns, by adopting new dramaturgic, directing and acting strategies. And everything focuses on the spectator, who is also subject to some rapid transformations with a future line of evolution that is difficult to anticipate.

The playwright, through the “poetic ineffable of the stage word”\(^3\) and a clear vision of the audience, masterfully brings to the fore new texts on current topics, texts that are remodelled texts, rewritten and adapted to the new context, structures that are unconventional and experimental. The text as product of the playwright’s creative activity and as pillar of communication creates an emotional environment which subsequently, due to the director’s creativity, the actor’s skill and talent, raises the spectators’ awareness and fascinates them.

In permanent search of ideas, effects and new solutions, the director, through ingenuity and innovation, brings his artistic vision in the theatre. Understanding the new trends “in an era open to all possibilities in which they confront themselves with ‘the confidence of the masters’, ‘the audacity of the youth’”\(^4\), today, more than ever before, the director has the opportunity to employ tools that serve the text, ones with which they can juggle, amplifying emotion, and create new forms of communication with the audience. The diversity of performance spaces, the networking with other arts or the adoption

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of new technologies meant to generate images and create effects, gives the director the opportunity to bring into the spotlight “today’s spectaculum mundi by employing in an innovative and poetic way the props that animate the theatre ranging from video gadgets to the ordinary language violence.” The director has therefore the opportunity to “play” by moving between what is simple and what is grandiose, between old and new, to “exploit” various spaces and forms. The actor, as the agent who builds bridges with the audience through their performance nuances and, at the same time, recreates the spectacle. Actually, their artistic future depends on their professional training, and, later, on their ability to overcome barriers of time and to make use of every opportunity. In Romania, we are now witnessing an exchange of generations of actors, when the modern actor, in an attempt to meet the challenges of the moment, aims more and more to the condition of “complete actor”. In the light of the psychological and behavioral dimension, the new actor, as early as his studentship, stands out as someone who is keen on innovation, who is self-taught, uninhibited and with a great capacity for work. The cohabitation between theatre and other arts, the freedom to travel, to participate in experience-sharing activities, in casting sessions and the chance to get involved in various projects, as well as the more than generous and ever-renewing offer of information on the Internet are but few of the examples of benenfici influences that are at play during the formation period of each actor. The spectator, the receiver of the stage message is bombarded in their day-to-day life with an amalgam of non-value products coming rather from the subculture zone and often with invented forms of expression. Permanently in a rush, with a lot of problems and an overcrowded agenda, the spectator of today and of tomorrow enjoys the benefits of the Internet, the online space providing them with the chance to inform themselves, to make selections and to book show tickets. In terms of education, in the future there will be both educated and knowledgeable spectators along with inexperienced viewers. Sociological analyses of consumption trends of the X, Y or Z generations reveal certain features that are highly comparable to theatre performance.

5 Ibidem, p. 45.
6 National or border projects.
analyses. Splendid performances, street and public square montages will continue to attract a heterogeneous public, while in theatres, at underground or apartment shows, we will often meet mostly the informed category of the public. What truly matters, however, is the public who are being addressed.

Most certainly, scholars, actors, directors, playwrights, and art critics have examined and continue to look for answers to questions about the future of theatre in an era when transformations are taking place almost at light speed and at all levels. Much has been written and numerous assumptions have been made, but apart from it all, while we look ahead, fearful and curious, we automatically ask new questions and seek to find answers to them.

A possible answer could be provided by Commedia dell’arte, the Italian theatrical phenomenon, which, unlike other forms of drama, is rarely found today in national repertoires but which, provided that it is revitalised and by experimenting with different formulas, is still attracting audiences and represents a great challenge to any actor. A constant presence in acting schools, it has become a spectacle – a form of practice for budding actors. The studentship performances or the alumni’s galas combine elements specific to several arts valuing the actor’s art, their ability to convey emotion. Through the richness of tones and voice representations, the enthusiasm with which each actor moves from speech to singing while the body is engaged in a frenzied game, the show becomes a challenge, a real drama school, therefore enjoying both artistic and educational value. Actually, Commedia dell’arte represents an important chapter in the history of theatre, “a new theatrical formula, a true school of comedy and of masterful acting, which inspired to a large extent playwrights such as Lope de Vega, Shakespeare, Molière or Carlo Goldoni.” In the light of this dimension, Ovidiu Drimba refers to it as being a tremendously successful theatrical formula of tremendous success the subject matters of which, approached and staged, meant “not only a glorification of the natural, invigorating, clean, and strong feeling of love, but also a tribute to intelligence and wit which helped the commonplace person triumph over wickedness, avarice and vanity.”

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8 *Ibidem*, p. 57.
Notes on the texts and scripts of Commedia dell’arte performances

Although it is a concept which is not associated with the emotional beauty and the propensity of the literary text, in Commedia dell’arte as well as, indeed, in the case of modern and contemporary theatre, the vocal discourse, the spoken and sung sound effects reunite with movement and dance, revealing an excellent model of confluence of arts, where theatre cohabits with music, dance and acrobatics. The story is told through words, music and dance, each art bringing to the forefront specific means of expression. Ultimately, the emotion elicited by the text is amplified due to the interweaving of the articulated or sung sound with the sight of the human body dancing or doing acrobatics. Music and singing prolong the word because, according to Lev Dodin, in theatre performances, when “speaking is absent, something else emerges instead: a moan is heard, a scream, a tune, a sob.”

Thus, “music and theatre remain inseparable.”

Considered to be a “singular phenomenon in the history of the theatre [...] a presence that has so far been moving and unrepeatable, and most certainly will continue to be so for a long time”11, this form of theatre of improvisation that appeared in Italy in the middle of the sixteenth century is considered “a most faithful fresco of an era which is suddenly revealed under all its aspects: social, political, moral, cultural.”12 This phenomenon, deeply rooted in the social and political environment of the epoch, describes, renders the world in all its authenticity and complexity, through the play of

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10 Ibidem, p. 115.
11 Olga Mărculescu, Commedia dell’Arte, București, Univers Publishing House, 1984, p.5. “It is not known how and why it appeared precisely during the first half of the 6th century, what was or wasn’t improvisation in the text and in the acting of the dell’arte actors, why this phenomenon no longer occurred” is the assertion made by Vito Pandolfi in The History of Universal Theatre, cited by the authors.
professional actors highlighting the negative stances in an attempt to meet the demands of an increasingly diversified public.

A variety of the theatre of improvisation, adopting in an artistic manner some of the comedian’s arsenal employed in Italian public square representations, Commedia dell’arte comes with an explosion of life, sound and color in support of the central element, the mask. In a period of prosperity and freedom of expression, giving up the paradigms of classical theatre, in the absence of certain texts with literary value, the roles are created by actors ad-hoc through improvisation, and the script, known as “canovaccio”, has a simple scheme with numerous variations on the same theme. The actors, in full control of their body, voice and facial expression, possessors of a higher artistic and vocational education, in the absence of complex scripts, contributed with the novelty and unpredictability of their art because they “always knew how to improvise, how to reach out to everybody and not to address merely the mind, hearing and sight exclusively, that is to say, to immediate perception as form of entertainment.”\textsuperscript{13}

In terms of the written text, most of those who have studied and analyzed the phenomenon known as Commedia dell’arte, think that these texts have no artistic value when they are isolated from and examined apart from the performance.\textsuperscript{14} Rather, the actors resorted to some rough copy, some kind of rudimentary script which contained details of the characters, their psychological traits, regarding the subject, the key moments, the mise-en-scène and the props. The source of the texts is considered to be the erudite theatre. In the preface to the anthology Commedia dell’Arte, Olga Mărculescu restates this idea by citing the views of various theatre historians\textsuperscript{15}, reunited around the idea according to which “the general purpose of the text was to ‘popularise’ the erudite text […] although at times it does resort to short stories and pastoral stories.”\textsuperscript{16} This theory regarding the reiteration of erudite theatre themes, yet under a different form, is supported, incidentally, by most theatre historians.

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\textsuperscript{13}Ibidem, p.11.
\textsuperscript{14} Which does not, however, coincide with the opinion of the connoisseurs.
\textsuperscript{15} Toschi, Pandolfi, Sanesi.
\textsuperscript{16} Olga Mărculescu, in op. cit. p.10.
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While the scripts known as canavalos or canovaccios initially had no definite form, they became more and more accurate, so much so that by the end of the period they contained text references and, sometimes, stage directions. This, however, was not detrimental to the actors’ performance, in that it did not affect their power of improvisation and their resourcefulness. In terms of dramatic literature, Vito Pandolfi thinks that they are superficial summaries meant to refresh the memory and give the actor reasons to become more creative, more knowledgeable and competent.

Built around a nucleus of life events, the subject matters were most often repeated. The simplicity of the texts made them highly accessible to anyone. The general layout of the script consists of a story woven around a love story. Love, the great subject matter in theatre, is brought to the fore by the young lover as well as by the doting senior, by the honest servant, and, no less, by the deceitful, but highly inventive one. The story is influenced by the context, the actor’s state of mind, and by the relationship with the spectator, often becoming rather bawdy due to the presence of hilarious characters and whacky situations, exposing human natures and the conflicts that arise between them. The decoy is basically the fundamental theme and the ending is always happy. Hunger, another theme that completes the picture, is the mainstay in Commedia dell’arte performances. The two themes of love and hunger form the “miraculous substance of what once used to be ‘Commedia literature’ where there was no room for wishful thinking that did not trip over literary ambitions, otherwise futile, which merely established the frame for a crucial relationship between actor and audience and which, through its lack of literary expressiveness, offered free passing before absurd and often malevolent authorities.”

A number of variations have appeared on this theme, which have sourced over a thousand scripts that brought to the fore commonplace characters and ordinary events, social and political issues. The plot, often considered absurd and illogical, gained value through acting, through the

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actors’ talent to improvise, their intelligence and availability for teamwork. The team’s unity and cohesion were absolutely necessary prerequisites in the joint effort for the success of the show. Improvisation required perfect timing in action, dance and singing, as well as a distributive attention for good coordination. It is in this point where the two main features of the dell’arte spectacle meet: creativity and the social group.

Full of subtleties, direct and indirect references, generally written by the actors who interpreted the roles or by their contemporaries, the Commedia dell’arte scripts have started to be gradually appreciated by those who are familiar with the genre, and who “know how to read them seeing the show beyond written words and the sentences that do not seem to say very much.” There were others who minimized the Commedia dell’arte texts and scripts, considering them structures that are completely devoid of value, but as mentioned earlier, quoting the actor Mihai Mălaimare, the performing arts pros have a totally different perception. After two centuries of Commedia dell’arte, the remaining texts are extremely valuable due to their content, even if, as we have shown, they look simple when examined outside the context of the show, but they become greatly moving when they are highlighted by the actors’ performance, by music, masks or costumes. And then “the dell’arte text, inseparable from the dell’arte spectacle, instantly gets that new dimension that projects it into another world, real and wondrous, which today the theatre struggles to regain: the world in which the spectator-actor communion is perfect.”

Many authors remained at the level of giving theoretical directions on how an actor should prepare for a role, how to interpret a part, leaving behind extremely valuable theoretical works precisely due to that simplicity of expression that makes them easy to understand and to put into practice. An example in this sense are Cecchini Pier Maria’s works (1563-1645), a dell’arte

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18 Some texts were written by the actors, who often transcribed the scripts of the plays in which they performed. These texts remained anonymous or have been lost and only their subject is known today.
19 Ibidem, p.25.
20 Olga Mărculescu, op. cit., p.9.
actor himself, performer of the Pantalone mask and director of the Accesi troupe.

Apart from the two comedies Flaminia sclava\textsuperscript{21} (Flaminia enslaved) and The Betrayed Friend\textsuperscript{22}, he wrote two particularly valuable works on theatre theory: The Fruit of Modern Comedies\textsuperscript{23} and Discourse on the comic art and how to play well.\textsuperscript{24} These highly accessible texts come with a diversity of practical solutions rendered in a simple but colorful and amusing language. Upon reading and rereading them today, we could say that we discover in them a genuine arsenal of viable techniques and methods that convey to the written text the communicative attributes that are so beneficial to the Commedia dell’arte performance and which have educational value as well.

**Music and dance – bridges between word and improvisation on Commedia dell’arte performances**

Music and dance, highly entertaining by their nature, give the performance a note of freshness, dynamism and excitement. Transmitting emotions through voice, by speaking or singing, has always been the singer’s major purpose and that is why music tends to be one of the main actors of the show. In dialogue with music and the spoken word, the human body in motion amplifies the emotional experience accomplishing that “totality” which the public expects to obtain. According to Lev Dodin, “singing and dancing dilate the breathing and thus enhance the feeling that, in turn, generates energy and ends up harmonizing the whole”\textsuperscript{25}, contributing with “what is missing in theatre, namely the harmony of rules.”\textsuperscript{26} Commedia dell’arte may be regarded in this light as a barometer of communication, the simplicity of the texts and of the scripts being compensated by improvisation on the one hand, and on the other by rhythms, music and dance, which are in permanent oscillation. Thus,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} In original Flaminia schiava.
\item \textsuperscript{22} In original L’amico tradito.
\item \textsuperscript{23} In original I frutti delle modern comedie.
\item \textsuperscript{24} In original Discorso sopra l’arte comica con il modo del ben recitar.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Lev Dodin, Tineretul şi Cântecele (The Young Generation and the Songs) in op.cit., p.113.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Ibidem, p.113.
\end{itemize}
that which the text can not accomplish is taken over by the other elements of the show.

In Commedia dell’arte performances, music has benefited from the start from a series of favorable factors. First, we must remember that Commedia dell’arte and Italian folk music are closely connected. This is proved by a series of etchings and engravings, most of which reveal, alongside masks, a range of traditional musical instruments (lute, tambourine and flute). On the other hand, the cultural richness of Italian musical traditions famous and recognized worldwide is well established in all shows by performers who sing, dance and recite from the traditional Italian repertoire. In addition, the Italian language is colourful and melodious and replete with vowel sounds, which all brings charm of the show.

The true colour of the Comeddia dell’arte spectacle is rendered precisely by this symbiosis between singing, dancing, acrobatics and stage improvisation. The great themes of the genre, such as love, hunger or madness, spiced with the absurd but irresistible humor of the characters, are practically narrated by means of music, dance and vocal performance, the meeting between the arts involving the audience in a highly emotional and dynamic form of communication. This union of the arts rounds out and gives force to the performance. On the other hand, the marriage between the art of improvisation and the story told through music, dance, singing and acrobatics, has proved to be an effective formula, an actual practice tool necessary in the formation of an actor. In relation to this and without making any specific reference to the genre Commedia dell’arte, Lev Dodin deems that verbal expression, singing and dancing “are not practised by the actor in the hope of acquiring some technical skill to help them in their work on stage,” but rather because this “is part of the general training of any actor.”

If the element of community is an essential characteristic of Commedia dell’arte, of equal importance is the fact that to the ‘spicyness’ of the spectacle also contribute a full range of musical interludes sung in the group. For a successful harmonization every actor should master the art of singing, should

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27 Ibidem, p. 113.
28 Ibidem, p. 113.
have good vocal aptitudes and a well developed sense of rhythm. Even though presumably each actor has a good vocal training and has interpretative qualities too, collective singing relies on certain strict rules pertaining to voice homogenization and synchronization.

A good example is the Group of the Infatuated, who, through the power of music, ranks recitation accompanied by voice and instrumental execution among other important elements in the show and in this way bestows on the spectacle a new emotional dimension. From an educational standpoint, the group interludes in Commedia dell’arte turn into a real form of practise in synchronization, singing, dance and acrobatics. In addition to the fact that the group interludes contribute to the improvement of the actor’s distributive attention, they stimulate the actors’ involvement in teamwork (group participation) and heighten their concentration ability.

In order to intensify the beauty of the show, the actor in Commedia dell’arte representations should master the techniques of body expression, should possess the vocal abilities specific to singing and speaking, and should be able to ‘juggle’ with them and be creative. In reference to singing and dancing, Marcel Bozonnet is convinced that “the actor can find in the combinaton of these two arts the equivalent of an extension, an intensification of the dramatic art: the body is less normal than it usually is, it is more dilated, more prepared for something other than natural expression.”\(^{29}\) The actor must be able to move imperceptibly from the spoken word to singing, dancing and acrobatics, without causing any fragmentation of his message. By practicing acting in Commedia dell’arte, the student or the actor has to resort to, and learn, a number of techniques that are specific to each and every form of art, and which, once they are internalized and are rigorously practised, can open to them the way to becoming what we call a complete actor.

Conclusions

Looking ahead beyond the present, perhaps the simplest answer regarding the future of the theatrical act is found in Ovidiu Drimba’s concluding remarks at the end of the volume Istoria Teatrului Universal (The History of Universal Theatre): “The future of theatre? The answer is found in its past.”30 Indeed, the twenty-five centuries that separate us from Aeschylus convincingly demonstrate that theatre has been sought after, esteemed and always adored by its public whenever it fulfilled their needs: to recommend thinking patterns and offer firm points of moral stability. Like in the past, today theatre does not suffer from an actual ‘scarcity of audience’. By giving its audience the necessary spiritual nourishment it undertakes a noble cultural function.”31

Commedia dell’arte, spectacle or spectacle – practice, part of the historical memory of theatre, is no exception and it will always find new forms and ways to capture the interest of the audience or to serve as an indispensable teaching aid in acting schools. Considering the fact that it succeeded in satisfying the tastes of a wide range of audience for over two hundred years, the Commedia dell’arte spectacle, having revitalised all the basic concepts of theatrical communication, can bring today a breath of fresh air. The directors’ creativity that enables them to seize all the opportunities of the moment, the fact that it is a collective act of creation that reunites several arts and puts them in a perfect balance, these are strong enough reasons to make us contend that this genre will most certainly capture the viewer emotionally in the future too. On the other hand, the fact that it is often put on stage in acting schools as spectacle-practice, not only gives the actor in the making the opportunity to discover new forms of artistic expression, new techniques and training methods, but it also helps them to assess themselves.

In this way, a type of performance that does not rest on a text with artistic value can actually be a success formula, the significance of which comes exactly from the interference of various heterogeneous forms of artistic expression. “No other dramatic text except, perhaps, Commedia dell’arte, seems to make us feel so intensely the need to remember once more that the

30 Ovidiu Drimba, op.cit., p. 311.
31 Ibidem, p. 311.
dramatic text can not be isolated from the spectacle, that it was written for a certain type of lighting, for a certain kind of music, a certain variety of movement, of costumes, for a specific type of voice, etc. To fully appreciate the commedia dell’arte text, more than any other text, we need be able to see, to hear and to feel the lines. And the result will be vastly disturbing and moving.”

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32 Olga Mărculescu, in op. cit., p. 9.