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The Theatre Vanguard as Multimedia Perfection

Reference to Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* performance in the Craiova Theatre – Rumania under the direction of the American director Robert Wilson, by Vesselin Mezekliev, PhD student at the Art Faculty of *N. Rilski* South-West University



On the actor's *rhino* skin

From my experience to participate in making performances, which aims to meet the requirements of the contemporary stage, I have always felt an inner resistance to the *director's dictate*, to the interference in the *inviolable* actor's creativity. Of course, there is another, more spread option, in which not always the director, ready to propose a monolithic aesthetic and artistic form, relies on randomness and in order to please the spectator, the audience, often from helplessness, admits manifestations of vain, egocentric actor's whims.

In such cases, the actor saves his reputation, depending on the experience, piled in this familiar practice and takes from his store the *arsenal of clichés*.

The search of vanguard is in other areas, outside the rough *rhino* skin of the actor, who wishes to be liked by the audience. The tasks and questions are somewhere else: Is there a place for a direct, live, open and authentic actor's reaction in the contemporary theatre innovation? On what territory the meeting with the audience is to happen? How the mutual exchange of reactions is realized on the territory of the specific theatre language and is it possible this convention to be authentic? In what does the spectator's calling consist? Is it possible for him to be taken out of the convenient position of only observer and be turned into *active witness*, as Grotovski says, and the image of events remains permanently in him?

During the *Rhinoeros* performance by Ionesco, in the Craiova theatre, a child at the age of about 12 was sitting next to me. He was laughing loudly, enjoying what he was watching. The characters of the play, moving on the stage were toppling, stumbling or ran onto each other, gesturing one to another, startling from coming from outside stylized, tearing, threatening roar of a rhinoceros. The theatre form, in which Robert Wilson presents the Ionesco's play, seemed to be quite close and familiar to him from the TV screen and evidently it resembled to the young spectator an animation film. The actors retell the story, as if they tell it to a child. There is not even a trait of everyday or behavioral life reality. Everything was submitted to a specific author's code, something like: life in a dream.

Robert Wilson, having cut Ionesco's dialogues, builds in an exquisite in its perfection beautiful visual environment. With the time, the total influence of the performance slowly, but surely puts us in the press of the depressing feeling, that Rhinoceros – the most socially committed play of Ionesco – today, 56 years after it was written, the director Robert Wilson reads it as a play of loneliness. In this way the performance acknowledges laconically the author's genius, or it is Ionesco's skill to peep as a prophet in our 21st century world. It is this prophecy that the performance has recreated as an animated, joyfully dancing rhino in a dead, stoned forest – a character of the mutation, happened long time ago. The director's approach accounts the time from the appearance of the play and its multiple interpretations, examining Beranger as an image of the modern person, who, according to Ionesco's words in an interview of Sussha Gupi in Paris Review of 1984 is: *"...a victim of totalitarianism – of both types totalitarianism: the right and left oriented. We have lost our feeling for supreme order and things will become worse and worse, finishing maybe with some atomic holocaust – the destruction, predicted by apocalyptic texts. Only that our Apocalypses will be absurd and funny, because it will not have connection with any transcendentalism. The modern person is a marionette, jack in a box. What we, absurdists are trying to do, was to place the person on the stage so that he stands tall before himself. That is why our theatre was named metaphysic."*

Today, in fact absurd in irony, the unified left and right totalitarianism according to some reason, has concurred. The apocalypses have happened and people have accepted the terrible metamorphosis. The right to everyone to be an animal has been acknowledged. Human morality has been lost forever. We are submitted to animal, crude, cruel nature and its law, and that limit, which separated us from it – the human morality, has become completely unnecessary and is only one ante-natural additive. Thick-skin, horned creatures have concurred the whole world. Human nature has become used to it, has adapted itself to most insane things. Modern world has been recognizing the *black* as *white* for a long time. Ionesco's hero, Beranger is the last survived lonely creature and in this lonely creature the spectator – participant has identified himself.

The performance offers a real aesthetic feast with architectural greatness and simplicity, which slowly and systematically smashes you with its scale, taken as arms of the whole arsenal of the theatre components – space – visual environment, light, sound and actors' acting.

The image and the words are not connected literally. One has the feeling, if closes his eyes, that he is listening to a radio-theatre, or if he opens them – that he watches a silent movie and in parallel with it. Everything, as if in an amazing synchrony, dances in lightness. Everything happens in coordination with the time, promptly, as in masterpieces of the silent movie of Charley Chaplin or Buster Keaton.

Nobody moves daily, naturally. All of them are clowns. In most of the cases the gesture is accompanied with sound and is signal for lighted change, which will not happen, if the actor has diverted even a centimeter from the place at which he must be. The connections between elements seem deceptively random. But evidently they are not, which inevitably strains the viewer, strengthen his attention and involves him thoroughly into the action. Nothing, happening on the stage is unrealistic, naturalistic. All the elements (scenery, sound, acting, video projections) are piled, affect multi-functionally. The movement and the text are completely separated but moving in the time, the heroes start to build in their sense.

In reality, this is theatre, in which all the elements are equally important, all the components are equal, have weight of their own and do not try to dominate one over another. There are no shadows and semi-shadows. The mere counters of different in height chairs are seen, which lighted, magically change their color, and all of a sudden they acquire the quality not to submit to gravitation. On a gigantic screen through a dead forest a huge rhino passes, and after it creepily slowly, the cut trees fall one by one. In front of them a narrator reads with melodic voice remarks and sparse lines of the play, amid tense in deceptive statics, as in a separate shot-cell bodies, faces, silhouettes. The spaces change, pictures follow one after another and fade away behind inter-media curtain, before which from the floor come out as cut heads with wide eyes, muddy speaking faces.

Everything on the stage of the Rhinoceros performance: scenery, costumes are white, black or grey, spotted or striped. Only colored hairs add colored spots in the vision of the heroes. The pictures seem to be only static images, video projections but also they are a source of light and color.

At first glance, the actor in Robert Wilson's performance is a marionette. This type of a theatre requires repeating the same movements, to be mastered strictly fixed movement scores. The endless repeating has reformed the actors' bodies and a remarkable ensemble has been reached, radiating behavior, liberated from tension. In the rehearsals diary, published in the Rumanian magazine *Yorick* of 1 July 2014, the director says to the actors: *"Learn the technical form. For 45 years I have not said to anyone what he should feel. You receive a form, master it and after you master it, what you feel is important. But firstly you have to learn the form and technique."*

The categorical result of the evolutionary method of the various actor's training strikes on the eyes, which may turn regular provincial actors in real co-thinkers, partners and aesthetic agents of the director, in whom one will not find suppressed actor's individuality. On the contrary, everyone as if performs a ritual structure with articulated signs, repeated in one and the same way in every performance, using a type of a language, which we may relate to the notion "ideogram of behavior" of Grotovski and notice a real penetration and competence in

the area of technique, the body and sensual side, related to the reactions of living human beings, filling in the specific pulsation of the performance.

All the director's requirements have been reached. Every character, entering the stage, fits into the space and relates to it as in a mathematical graphics, to the previously existing before that situation. The most important thing, which every actor makes, is: to participate in the acting with the exclusive requirement: acting in a condition of continuity".

Submitted to the whole, the actor is calm to listen. His training has happened perfectly. He listens with the body, with his whole nature, as an animal. If one listens only with his ear, the body will remain dead. The actors listen to the silence before speaking and after they speak, they participate in the building up of a continuous sound-movement score. Evidently the whole actors' ensemble experiences joy, all enjoy themselves. They evidently listen to the silence and achieve synchrony in perfectly organized acting. The heroes have sound speaking masque, filled with respectable precision, and their bodies are tense, expect in upward direction in one fixed point, from which comes the light. They do not communicate directly with a glance towards the partner's face. The actor speaks with his eyes and the glance is frontal to the audience. The faces are white, enforced by characteristic for their character make up and artificial lashes. The hands gesticulate in dancing positions, highlighted with gloves. Everything is like a sculpture. In a change of the weight center, the hand position changes too in direction of the vertical and precisely, as if in a ballet, every gesture is connected with the center. The fingers are a little stretched. The body is spatially directed, twisted at the basic diagonals, where the arms are parallel to the stage only in special cases. The tempo of movement is either slightly slow or fast, but it surely contradicts to gravitation and turns into a large stage gesture, which prints itself in order to fill in the stage, but also possesses energy to exceed its frames. Nothing is naturalistic. The bodies hold the point of pressure in the small phases of muscle effort and as if they extend in this way the movement, understood as a gesture, or movement, hides its formal beginning and end, i.e. never remains static. The actors on the stage move only in direct line, and when changing the direction of movement – they turn in a right angle. The movements begin and finish, surprising us and we do not guess how they will continue. Mixing their lines, correlated to the general continuous graphics of the sound, build in the general style of the performance. Everything is in a regime of synchrony. The interrelation of the components, building the thoroughness before and behind the scenes is unthinkable for our images.

Mastering this score, as if he solves the problem for the actor – creator. One fair and concretely marked space for creativity. It is with this, the architect – director Robert Wilson seems to us as a stranger from another planet, arrived with it his entourage, with prepared to the very details scores, which he synchronizes during a week before the premiere.

With all this, the Rhinoceros performance of the Craiova Theater is simply a standard for achieved theatrical perfection in the 21st century.

Craiova, 2015

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