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SUMMARY

ARTISTIC DILEMMAS, MULTIMEDIA PARADIGMS AND DIGITAL PRACTICES – EXCURSUS –

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Summary

The thesis "Artistic Dilemmas, Multimedia Paradigms and Digital Practices – Excursus" explores, using the practice-as-research method, how technology and new media give meaning to redefining theatrical identity, starting from personal creative experiences to illustrate the potential of new technologies in the field of performing arts. The purpose of this research was to question, through direct documentation of artistic experiences, but also based on relevant models of good practice from international theatre, the role of digital and multimedia practices in creating a shared emotion here and now, identifying perspectives and possible directions, as well as describing practical contexts for the relationship between theatricalization and digitalization.

I adopted a methodology that reflects a mixed approach, combining specialized literature from the field of digital performativity and multimedia integration in performing arts, using personal case studies to support the thesis, based on analyzing and evaluating the results I obtained in my own work experience in theatre, through implementing practices specific to new media. These are practices observed in work on online and offline performances, such as *Ziua Z*, *#acedesiguranță*, *Exeunt* or *O întâmplare ciudată cu un câine la miezul nopții*.

The "practice-as-research" method, defined in seminal works in this field, such as: *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts* (Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt – editors), *Blood, Sweat and Theory: Research through Practice in Performance* (John Freeman) or *Visualizing Research – A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design* (Carol Gray and Julian Malins), is one of process, not definitive conclusions – it opens perspectives, conversations, debates. This is what I proposed through this thesis – not to launch a theory about digital practices, but to facilitate an exchange of ideas, interpretations, throughout history and cultural traditions, creating a framework for artistic dialogue.

And this is because in performing arts we cannot talk about "laboratory samples", analyzed and labeled, about rigid categories and absolutizations, but we deal with a dynamic, fluid environment of transformations, questionings and searches. I consider that this technology-society-culture dynamic is extremely important in any research endeavor and that each concept addressed requires a reference to the historical moment and tableau, and this work perhaps represents a first step in this direction, one of testing and questioning.

It is a type of alternative research that allowed me to explore not only the technical and theoretical aspects of digital and multimedia practices, but also to investigate the experiences and challenges encountered in my artistic practice. Especially in the pandemic context, adapting to new digital platforms was essential for the idea of theatre as a living art, and this thesis aims to offer a (subjective) perspective on how technology has influenced and transformed the way I, as a theatre director, think and create a performance.

At the same time, I tried to highlight the importance of collaborative creation and the exchange of ideas between artists and technologies, in creating new forms of expression and exploring the potential of the online environment. I believe that such research, although not exhaustive, can serve as a starting point for future studies and conversations within the artistic and academic community – contributing, if not to a complete understanding of technology's impact on performing arts, at least to discussing some of its aspects.

Chapter I of the thesis - *Context and Technologies* - is where I explored the relationship between theatrical tradition and new technology, emphasizing how technological progress has been reflected over time in performing arts, from deus ex machina to AI systems that generate real-time scenography transformations. I wanted to emphasize the impact that new technologies have had over time on traditional forms of performance, thus bringing into discussion the ways in which digital and interactive media can be theatrically valued. I addressed, within this chapter, the evolution of the notion of "liveness", of shared emotion, here and now, on both sides of the screen and stage, but I also brought into discussion the change in reception paradigms. The intention was to identify certain important moments in the evolution of digital theatre and multimedia practices, both in the context of certain historical or societal transformations, and considering the progress of technology and the virtual environment as a performative space.

In this sense, the first chapter sought to address some essential questions for the evolution of theatre in the digital age: how does technology influence the relationship between artists and (tele)spectators, between art and society? what creative possibilities does the digital environment open when we talk about interdisciplinarity, and how fluid are its boundaries? what are the advantages and risks of using digital technologies in theatre?

These are questions that guided me in researching certain artistic currents and directions (futurism, Bauhaus etc.), some pioneers of digital art (Nam June Paik, Laurie Anderson, Merce

Cunningham, John Cage etc.), visionary artists who creatively integrated technology into their work, fundamentally transforming how we receive and create art today.

Regarding the multimedia performances and installations discussed in this chapter, technology has not only facilitated the creation of new formulas for artistic expression, but has also contributed to democratizing access to theatre, as well as other forms of performance. In this sense, I investigated how new media can contribute to creating interactive and immersive experiences, when technology is not used merely as an auxiliary instrument, as an aesthetic artifice, but as a partner/protagonist in the creative process, influencing both the artistic environment and the message. Therefore, starting from the concept of theatre as the first virtual machinery[1], developed by Professor Mark Reaney, the chapter also addresses the necessity of a constant dialogue between artists and specialists in technology and new media to harness the creative potential offered by the digital environment, but without affecting the essence of theatre in any way.

I thus discovered a rich and extremely interesting tradition of integrating technology in theatre (multimedia and digital), both at an experimental level and as an assumed artistic direction.

Chapter II – *The Performative Space. Anywhere. Here* - is where I aimed to understand, especially from my own experience and studying some examples of good practices by international artists, what "here" means in theatre, types of theatrical spaces, types of performers' relationship to these spaces: whether we're talking about virtual scenographies, holograms they interact with, video animations or their personal space, which transforms into "a set design".

In this chapter, I therefore discussed various types of performative spaces, exploring, through case studies, the (re)configuration of the playing space and modes of reception, both online and offline. By studying several examples of good practices by international artists, but also by analyzing my own projects, I aimed to understand the role of theatrical space in creating a complete and complex theatrical experience. From virtual scenographies and interactive holograms, to video animations and the use of personal space as performative décor, I used the performances I directed as case studies for how the chosen environment contributes to creating an immersive and (potentially) interactive experience.

However, as I said, what seemed most important to me was to research the role that new technologies have in redefining the concept of "here and now" when we talk about theatre. Therefore, in direct work with actors, on the physical but also virtual stage, I observed how

interaction and communication with the audience works when we change traditional platforms of reception and representation.

It is, therefore, a chapter that analyzes a certain direction in the evolution of performative space in more or less contemporary theatre, emphasizing digital and multimedia practices in scenic creation, starting from traditional models to innovative forms and interdisciplinary visions that redefine both the audience's and artists' experiences.

In the digital environment, performative space becomes fluid, in continuous change and transformation, influenced by interaction with the virtual environment and its specific processes, the constant flow between real and virtual. I brought into discussion, in this sense, a performance-installation by the company 3 Legged Dog, which explored in *Fire Island* a fluid performative space, reorganizing the space and integrating digitalized technologies.

One of the main ideas of the chapter is that interdisciplinary approaches are necessary, perhaps even essential, in developing a performative space adapted and adequate to contemporary artistic realities. To apply methods specific to practice-as-research, I used as examples case studies from my personal theatrical work, referring to performances that integrate elements of dance, theatre and new and multimedia in a fluid, immersive type space, such as *Dragoni*, an interactive and performative installation, or *Tigrul din orașul nostru*, which combines elements of classical theatre with multimedia practices and holograms to create a powerful artistic experience, in which the multidimensionality of space plays an essential role. It is about an exploration of the aesthetics of space, real and virtual, in which the image, the way it is transformed and reformulated, directly influences the spectator's perception. Another example is the performance *Pisica verde* which uses sound immersion to build an experience of collective "interiority", just as in *O întâmplare ciudată cu un câine la miezul nopții* the same experience, but of visual immersion, is created through multimedia projections and sceno-technical mechanisms. I used similar approaches in other performances analyzed at length, such as *UFO* and *IN BETWEEN*, in which new media and technologies are used to create alternative realities and perceptions.

It seems important to me to discuss how digital and multimedia practices influence performative space, having significant potential for the storytelling dimension of performance. It is a perspective from which I spoke, within this chapter, about the performances of director Erwin Piscator or those of the Builders Association company, as a way in which technology supports, defines and shapes the story, becoming a force structure of the narrative, not as an external element.

I was interested in discovering how new technologies and interdisciplinarity transform and can transform performative space into a fluid environment, opening the path to new theatrical, sensory, digital, virtual forms, an immersive and interactive artistic ecosystem.

In the next chapter I considered the restrictions that made me, on a personal level, focus on researching digital media, with the Covid-19 pandemic playing an important role in this regard. I believe that, despite the conditions and limitations imposed by the pandemic context, the fact that artists were forced to find creative, sometimes radical solutions to create an artistic context, but also a community, in which people could gather together, was essential. This is the theme I addressed in **Chapter III** – *Direction and Dramaturgy. Personal Excursus*, in which I explored more concretely how I, as a director, learned to work with the tools of the new environment, about how online rehearsals unfolded and about how many technical resources are needed to generate an emotion. I was most interested in discovering the "here and now" aspect of a (tele)present theatre performance in digital space, of platforms transformed into stages.

And I consider it a privilege that some of us had, to be able to adapt to the new environment, to discover new resources, new artistic and technical solutions, a privilege that meant not only connecting with spectators on both sides of screens, but also the possibility of continuing previously developed projects. For this incursion into the space of digital performativity, I used as a starting point for instantiating dramaturgical endeavors in digital space, the five key characteristics that Randall Parker and Kim Jordan propose for this environment: integration, interactivity, hypermedia, immersion and narrativity.[1]

In the chapter *Direction and Dramaturgy* I wanted to discuss more concretely how the implementation of new technologies and the "migration" of theatre to the digital environment transformed work on a performance. At the center of this chapter is the concept of mediaturgy, as an expression of the complex interactions between digital platforms and the narrative and visual structure of a performance. Bonnie Marranca uses the term "mediaturgy" to describe productions that encompass multiple types of (new) media in a performance. This redefines how contemporary theatre is written, played and received, integrating technology into the narrative and aesthetic

[1] Ken Jordan and Randall Packer (red.) – *Multimedia: From Wagner to Virtual Reality* 2002, WW Norton & Company, New York, p. XXXV.

structure of the performance. Therefore, digital technologies do not have merely a decorative role, but are an integral part of the theatrical creation process.

It is a testimony chapter for how I, as a theatre director, felt the need to redefine my artistic and production coordination role in the new context of virtual, "socially distanced" and fragmented interactions. The first important aspect was the connection between performative space and dramaturgy, and this is because the representation environment profoundly influences how a performance is written and received. My own artistic experience showed that the online environment is more open to experiment, so I learned to manage a new type of vocabulary and theatrical language, which included notions about hardware and software equipment, about protocols and programming languages, as essential instruments for digital theatrical productions.

The pandemic and post-pandemic context required finding alternative solutions for making theatre, which I will develop from the perspective of personal experience – rehearsals conducted on Zoom, online workshops, discovering and "taming" streaming platforms – aspects that significantly modified working relationships with actors, dramaturges, scenographers and the audience. In the new conditions, of creation and life, my role as director also became one of technology architect, coordinator of platforms and a "virtual stage", in which physical presence, of both performers and spectators, was substituted by digital "presence", and performative space became defined by interfaces, screens and more or less stable connections.

Through case studies on the performances *Ziua Z*, *#acedesiguranta*, *Exeunt* and *LIVE*, I referred to the methods and processes I used in adapting to the unknown environment of the digital stage and to the relationship between (techno)dramaturgy and the aesthetics of the new performance space. I wanted to highlight the transition from theatre direction anchored in the concrete space of the stage, to a hybrid direction, to a negotiation with the digital environment, integrating, in real time, video projections, animations, interactivity, live editing etc.

It is a chapter that emphasizes the necessity for a director to transform, in such a context, into a coordinator of digital content, of image and sound flows, of mediating relationships between the human and technological in the performative endeavor. At the same time, I was interested in how a digital theatre performance deconstructs and reconstructs itself according to the possibilities and potentialities of the platform used, but also how the concept of digital stage can be (re)defined in the context of postdramatic theatre. Therefore, theatre direction in the digital environment

becomes a form of intermediality, describing new formulas of theatrical expression in virtual space.

In **Chapter IV** – *Perspectives of Viewing and Reception. The Stage-Screen*, the emphasis falls on what we "see", what we "watch" at the theatre, on spectators' perception of what happens on stage, off or online. It is a stage of the work that analyzes recent mutations regarding how we receive theatre performances, in the context of extending performative space towards digital, hybrid or intermedial dimensions. I started in this research endeavor from the premise that the spectator's experience is profoundly influenced by the format and platform mediating the artistic act – from viewing in the theatre hall to accessing an online link, in this sense, to understand what the implications of these new performative formulas might be on the emotional, cognitive and sensory relationship between artists and spectators, as well as on the status of the "spectator-viewer" as an involved or distanced participant.

By investigating space and spectator perspectives, the chapter follows how the reception of a theatre performance is shaped and influenced not only by aesthetic content, but also by implemented technologies and the viewing context. Regarding digital theatre performances, I found that the screen is not just a broadcast channel, but a stage in itself, with its own rules, a "window" that reformulates the notion of "here", of proximity and presence. I brought into discussion, within the chapter, the screen brought onto the stage – as a performative décor object or scenographic instrument – which becomes a playing partner, dramaturgical tool or for creating a multidimensional perspective.

I was interested, in conducting this research, in spectators' reactions, both offline and online, depending on the degree of immersion of the production, its interactivity, but also the type of viewing proposed (individual, collective, in personal space or in a performance hall).

The analysis was based on relevant case studies from my own activity, such as the performative installation *INT.EXT.* or the performance *Blasted* (performances mediated by the window-screen), as well as analyses of digital archives of performances, in a broader discussion about cultural memory. In this context, the chapter proposes a reformulation of the boundaries between stage, screen and spectator, between presence "here and now" and representation.

By addressing these themes, I tried to offer an interdisciplinary perspective on the process of theatrical reception, considering the permanent negotiation in which theatre spectators find themselves with forms of representation and technological mediation of the artistic act.

In this chapter I also speak about performances I directed in the post-pandemic period, in which I tried to practically test the idea of "screen" in the space of concrete scenic reality. Because I realized that the new languages we learned, the technical challenges we faced, and a (super)reality that influenced how we (inter)relate transformed both how I see theatre today and how rehearsals and the general work process unfold. The main purpose was to understand how the digital, its processes and methodologies influence perception and viewing experience both online and offline. I found it valuable to explore how the relationship between observer and observed is modified through the screen, as well as the impact that a window-screen has on the reception experience. Therefore, the chapter emphasizes the importance of spectators' active involvement, as well as how technology and (in)direct interaction can redefine human connection and presence in a performative context.

Avatars, masks and social/cultural/technological interfaces are the themes from **Chapter V** – *Digital Performers and Avatar*, in which I discussed Gordon Craig's super-marionettes, but also about Jeremiah – the avatar, from an experimental performance, capable of responding to emotions and "expressing" loneliness, as well as about Artaud's double, a concept found in my own performances. Therefore, it is an approach that brings to the forefront the interaction between performer and (non)digital avatar, as well as how this interaction influences the spectator's experience. Through avatars, I evaluated the possibility of exploring new dimensions of theatrical identity and expressiveness, beyond the limits of corporeality and by creating a relationship of deep and immersive connection between artists and audience.

The concept of super-marionettes, introduced by Craig, and Artaud's double are found in performances that use multimedia practices and digital technologies, and in which avatars become essential instruments for artistic expression. The digital double, like Jeremiah, which I discuss in this chapter, amplifies the expressive register of performativity, but also contributes to a redefinition of theatrical tradition, combining the real and digital in a unitary and coherent performance. In case studies, such as the performances *Betrayal* and *Exeunt*, which I directed, I explored from a double perspective the concepts of mask and authenticity, in scenic space and in the digital environment. In this new framework, the screen becomes a space of doubling, but can also become an environment of unveiling, of confession, because the actor's play unfolds simultaneously on multiple planes – corporeal and virtual – and the relationship with the audience is filtered and reconfigured by new visual and theatrical signs and codes. Therefore, the concept

of authenticity is no longer exclusively associated with the physical presence of performers, but can create shared emotion even in a digitally simulated reality. Therefore, it is an ontological endeavor: the performer is, simultaneously, presence and representation, and the performance becomes a constant negotiation between real and virtual, between human and artificial, between gesture and code.

In chapter V, I documented some of the theories and studies regarding the significance of avatars and digital interfaces in contemporary theatre, from the perspective of how these transform the relationship between performer and spectator. Through new technologies, the theatrical environment becomes a fluid and dynamic space, within which performers could interact directly, both with virtual scenography elements and with the audience. This duality, between physical and digital space, between human and avatar, between real and artificial, allows redefining the concept of presence and authenticity in theatre.

In live digital theatre, one of the challenges is questioning the duality of the performer and performative space, and the performance *Exeunt* is one in which I especially addressed this dimension of research. Here the emphasis falls on the physical presence of performers in the concrete space of their rooms, but also on the digital one, because the actors interacted, in real time, with virtual elements. I was interested in investigating how the idea of the double can be reconfigured in the context of interaction between corporeality and technology, both in traditional scenic space and in digital space. And the chapter follows several important coordinates in the evolution of this paradigm of the "mask" towards contemporary theatrical formulas, in which human presence is doubled, augmented or even replaced by digital avatars.

I wanted to observe and research how these hybrid entities can coexist or substitute for each other in the context of the screen-mediated stage, redefining the idea of presence, expressiveness and artistic authenticity. The avatar is no longer just an extension of the body, but gains an important performative role. Especially in the performances *Betrayal* and *Exeunt*, directed in post-pandemic or digital contexts, I explored the relationship between identity and representation, between exposure, intimacy and distancing, through digital or real masks.

In **Chapter VI** – *The Future Begins Now. Theatre in the Digital Age* I proposed, first of all, to open an honest conversation about communication between artists and audience mediated by screen, about the value of theatrical experience, the new type of vocabulary we have at our disposal, from telepresence to cybernetic theatre and its cyborg artists, inter-, trans- and

multimedia, to what meeting with the other still means and how the exchange of energy and emotion happens when the meeting space is virtual. The chapter proposes a critical questioning of the profound transformations appearing in theatre, in the context of accelerated digitalization and emerging technologies, such as Virtual Reality, artificial intelligence systems, bio-art or cyborg performers. At the center of this research is the idea of potentialities of a theatre of the future – not as a utopian vision, but as a reality already active in the performative present.

Starting from previous examples and case studies, but also starting from other research directions, Chapter VI explores new possibilities for scenic expression, in which the fact that the relationship between artists and audience is mediated by screens, streaming platforms and various interfaces, generates a new type of theatrical language. I briefly addressed concepts such as telepresence, cybernetic theatre and digital interactivity, reconfiguring the meeting space, defined by Brook or Grotowski, as a virtual territory. We're talking about a vocabulary that includes keywords such as "network", "coding", "algorithm", "interface" etc. – terms that define the new theatrical aesthetic, not just some new instruments or technologies. In this sense, the chapter also follows some artistic practices that involve inter-, trans- and multimedia, which access a zone of theatrical, multisensory polyphony.

My research in this chapter focused on investigating the meaning that meeting with the Other has in a theatre of the future, in which the notion of theatrical "community" is in permanent reconfiguration, starting from the idea that the exchange of energy and emotion, between actors and spectators, can be possible also by accessing new types of presence. I wanted to follow interdisciplinary approaches regarding how theatre permanently adapts and evolves in relation to new technologies and cultural realities. I would like it to be a conversation open to understanding that digital and multimedia practices do not threaten theatre's identity, but represent an extension of its boundaries, its language, its forms of expression and possibilities for human, artistic and sensory encounter.

The use in performing arts of emerging technologies, such as virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR) and artificial intelligence (AI), can open new spectacular directions, it being essential that theatre remains a space of experiment, laboratory, risk and trial. I'm not referring only to integrating new technologies into theatrical productions, but especially to redefining the role and function of theatre in today's world.

In this context, I referred especially to the fact that the director's role gains new valences, and the major challenge consists in finding a balance between technological innovation and the human, emotional, profound essence of any theatre performance. Regardless of the (re)presentation environment, theatre must remain a space of encounter and authentic exchange of emotions and ideas, a space of presence, in all its forms.

The entire chapter stands, moreover, under the sign of potentiality, updating and becoming, reflecting the perpetual apprentice mode we have in relation to new technologies, as defined by Kevin Kelly in the volume *The Inevitable*: "[...] given that the obsolescence cycle accelerates (the average lifespan of an app is only 30 days!), we won't have time to master anything before it's replaced and we'll remain in novice mode forever. Perpetual Beginner is the new default state for everyone, regardless of age or experience."[2]

In **Conclusions**, I address especially the significance that this research had at a personal level, what more careful and applied documentation of these themes meant, as well as the extraordinary potential of the experience of combining the theoretical with the practical dimension, them potentiating and influencing each other reciprocally. But also the possibility that this might be the first step in documenting a world in permanent change, a world of processes, of becoming.

A very important aspect is that I was not interested in verdicts, but in directions of speculative research on the role that theatre can continue to have in a future of devices, screens and server farms, which we already inhabit. That is precisely why the approach in this thesis focuses on investigating how technology can fundamentally redefine the theatrical experience, by transcending the boundaries of the conventional stage and transforming into a fluid platform for exploring intermediality. In essence, I wanted the emphasis to fall on theatre's capacity to continuously transform itself, to integrate new media without losing its essence – one person crosses space (real or virtual), while another person watches them. Thus, through this work I hope to open a discussion about the future of theatre in the digital era and beyond, and about the ways in which it can remain relevant, in a permanently changing world.

Because we cannot imagine the future except based on things we already know, and the speed of digital transformation demonstrates how implausible any attempt to intuit changes could be, in this "Blind Present", which Kelly also talks about[4], in which the most important technologies

[2] Kevin Kelly – *The inevitable,* translated by Mihaela Sofonea, Editura Art, Bucharest, 2023, p.17;

haven't even been invented yet. That's precisely why I focused on case studies of my own performances, because the practical dimension has always represented an essential component of my work process, which is permanently one of learning, of "beginner's mind"[5], as Kevin Kelly also sees it. This is how I consider this research was, a kind of construction site of ideas, theories, concepts, tested, experimented, verified through concrete work with the proposed techniques, technologies and mechanisms. But especially of investigation and questioning, at the level of personal practice, of the idea of theatre – what does theatre mean?, what does "here and now" mean?, are there certain traceable and non-negotiable boundaries for a theatrical experience to be "valid"?, what stories can be told on the real or virtual stage?

This is not a thesis that aims to answer these questions, but to open an honest conversation about one of the most adaptable, transformable, permeable and always surprising arts: theatre.

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