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UNIVERSITY OF ARTS TÎRGU-MUREȘ  
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**LABORATORY THEATRE, A METHOD AND A WAY OF  
LIFE**

**- SUMMARY -**

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#### **Bibliography**

**Keywords, concepts:** Laboratory theatre, Jerzy Grotowski, Aureliu Manea, Muriel Manea, Carlo Boso, Elena Serra, commedia dell'arte, popular theatre, training, discipline, rigour, mission, pantomime, mask, physical, rebirth, purification, transillumination, trance, system, manifesto show, energy, sacral, dedication, sacrifice, ego, war of the self, body, spectator, impulse, psyche, foreign artistic legion, fanaticism, condition of the actor, way of life.

#### **Presentation of the work:**

The study is structured in three main chapters - A brief radiography of the history of laboratory theatre, Muriel Manea's Laboratory and the depth of a theatre with a European trends, Carlo Boso's Laboratory of Popular Theatre. The history of commedia dell'arte told in brief.

The aim of the research was to analyse the similarities and differences between these laboratory theatre systems existing to date, both in Romanian and foreign theatre, the condition of the actor in this context, the training in the two types of laboratories proposed for a detailed analysis. It seemed essential to me to record all that I was given to experience, as an artist, during the periods of work with these two phenomenal directors - Muriel Manea and Carlo Boso - strikingly similar in the greatness and impact of their creations.

Going even further, I questioned the usefulness, perhaps even the indispensability of a missionary actor and a theatre that can be called laboratory, by its essential condition of research. How healthy would it be for a society to have a theatre close to the Artaudian principle in which the notion of "theatre" is no longer prostituted? How important it would be for a sacred actor to commit the act of theatre out of love, through that self-giving that Grotowski sees as a "sacrifice" and not to "sell" his body, like a courtesan, on the evening of the performance, for fame, money, or for any other reason.

Most of the ideas that are written in the work are the product of long discussions about theatre with the two directors mentioned and of the ten years of experience I have spent in the service of the arts, on stage. They have all become strong beliefs of the actress in me,

and I hope they will remain as direct testimony from the laboratory for all those interested in this way of approaching theatre.

## **Argument**

Manifesto for a reformed theatre of the third millennium

“As an artist you are only as good as you think you are“

Aureliu Manea

In one of our countless discussions we have had about theatre, the director Muriel Manea, who was the starting point and who inspired the present study with her approach to the art of theatre, said about humanity that it is now at a crossroads and definitely needs a change. In this context, she sees theatre as the most incisive, the most appropriate and at the same time the most difficult art form that can bring change in humanity.

In such a circumstance, where the modern man, the robot man, the one who is seemingly without escape under the umbrella of the lightning evolution of technology, especially if he, in such troubled times, seeks the mirror of reality in theatre, it is certain that the mission of the performing arts becomes a clear one - the revelation of truth. This truth is one of the first steps towards a spiritual evolution.

One of the missions of a 21st century theatre is undoubtedly to respect its spectators, offering them, among other things, the opportunity to access this kind of evolution. For all this to be possible, the actor needs a special training, a complex training that allows him to develop a willingness in this direction, one that can propel him into the position of being a pathfinder or the bearer of a great message.

The actor's metamorphosis, as Muriel Manea also said, is one of the Universe's main tools of communication with human beings<sup>1</sup>. Grotowski himself said that "the magic of acting lies precisely in this metamorphosis".<sup>2</sup> It is just that in order to face this challenge of an immense nature and to be able to perform this function, he must be able to "burn" in a particular way, to be totally committed to his act, and accepting to become such a tool means renouncing the ego, an act that can be quite difficult to accomplish for a histrionic, narcissistic and exhibitionist personality, such as that of the actor in general.

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Manea, in 2019, in one of our discussions during the work on the performance "What about the cello?" by Matei Vişniec.

<sup>2</sup> v. Jerzy Grotowski, trans. Vasile Moga, Theatre and Ritual. Essential writings, ed. cit., Nemira, Bucharest, 2014, p.104.

These days there are fewer and fewer missionary artists before the public, who we can firmly say are totally dedicated to the performing arts. The facts in the field, i.e. the experiences I have had on stage, in performances or in rehearsals, during the years I have been working, lead me to tell you that I have noticed with astonishment that the number of actors who can be labelled as missionaries is inversely proportional to the number of graduates of the acting departments of the theatre faculties in the country.

At first glance, a paradoxical phenomenon seems to emerge - through this function of inverse proportionality. But, in my opinion, all this has an explanation somewhere in the system's flaws. I would even say that this degeneration has its cause in the existence, at the moment, of an overpopulated, overloaded theatre system.

Characterised by ignorance, leaving all these essential aspects to float in an air of derision, this system becomes a real executioner, a torturer ready to go all-in<sup>3</sup> at any time, as in a poker game, betting all the chips that represent, in my opinion, the sacrificed destinies of those who end up calling themselves artists. The system does this without even thinking for a second that the hand on which it bet everything was a loss from the start. What's more, it is actually just throwing some people - who end up being just a number on a chart on admission lists - into the void, without any safety net, into a job market that we have known and felt for years is already overcrowded and no longer has room to absorb the huge number of graduates who are leaving university classrooms to fight the jungle that awaits them outside.

If we allow ourselves for a moment just to think in the realm of the tangible, the concrete, I would try to go even further in supporting the above ideas and say that this decline in the number of actors who can be considered missionaries is not one for which I could give you a definite count in a statistic. Rather, in this case, it could stand as a testimony, or I could present to you as an argument, all the feelings and experiences that I had during ten years of my career in a professional environment, throughout the working processes. And all these experiences are, paradoxically, full of concreteness in their ephemerality. They represent a reality that I wish you could dispute. It is precisely this highly problematic reality, which in my opinion requires urgent solutions, that pushed me into the field of laboratory theatre research. It made me think about what kind of actor I want to become and which my path in theatre is. Subsequently, I was about to choose, without a shadow of regret.

I worked for years in the state theatre system and then took the freelancing route, because I felt it suited me better, being a freelance actor. I have always been a free artist, who

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<sup>3</sup> "All-In" is the term that is used during a poker game when a player bets all the chips he has in the pot.

fought for his art to remain free and who has always sought liberation in a Grotowskian manner.

In the period 2011-2020, during which I worked in Romania, collaborating mainly with theatrical institutions financed with gigantic budgets (some of them) by the state, I found, once again, with astonishment, that the principle of quality and of a theatre that shows through its creations, the respect for the spectator, the one that led the direction in which I wanted my art to go, was no longer found in the space where I was working. On the contrary, in most cases, theatres seemed to me to be guided by the principle of quantity, a principle that had become paramount, the aim being lost day by day. And we're not just talking about the purpose of theatre, because if we're talking about an actor for whom theatre is life, the very purpose of life disappears.

I have often wondered whether another problem of the Romanian theatre system, besides this excessive overcrowding in the theatre schools that it encourages, might not be the lack of really gifted and experienced teachers. The lack of those acting teachers who are endowed with pedagogical talent.

I have often met teachers who talk to future actors about this art without them ever having set foot on the stage, without having even once experienced the condition of an actor.

There is also the category of those who are actors, some of them very good ones, who can shine on stage, but who, unfortunately, have not received this gift of "giving it away". And then I wonder if, as I said above, the vocation has not been lost in this branch of acting teachers as well.

And furthermore, I think that if this teacher does not go beyond his condition to become a real guide, a mentor, if he is not the one who has a condition of choice in the first place, how could he produce an actor of such a chosen nature?

If, as in the case of admitted students, a system-wide intervention were made in the case of theatre pedagogy, and a reform were to take place, establishing the principle of meritocracy here too, I believe that Romanian theatre would still have a chance of renewal

Most of the time, when I walked off the stage, I wondered where the missionary actor's purpose was today, who was still doing mission theatre, why the encounter between me and my audience no longer had any magic in it. They were the kind of introspections that made it clear, by their very existence, that I was then in a place where everything was going against my principles.

The actor must regain his status, rebuild it.

My dream for our country is to build a theatre connected to Romanian realities and with European trends, a theatre based on the principle of creativity, one in which the hierarchy is based on results and which respects its audience. A theatre that brings the audience back and that does not compromise on art, no matter what the situation.

Without forcing any limits, it can be said that theatre has lost some of its former magic and mystique, and that it has gone far down the slope of shoddy entertainment. I am sorry to say that, in my opinion, today, by doing nothing more than following the trends of society, Romanian theatrical art has fallen into the trap of performing its recreational function, losing sight of the importance, the essential character of the educational one.

If we look, as I said, at the theatre as a mirror of reality, in order to better understand what a type of theatre that really satisfies society's current cultural needs means, we need to take a very close look at the environment in which today's artists work. It would be necessary to focus our attention, above all, on the particularities that define the image of a society, such as today's, to which our art is addressed.

In 2020, culture entered an extreme crisis as the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, spreading across the world and disrupting the entire socio-economic system. For almost a year, the doors of cultural institutions were locked.

The social distancing that was imposed as a protective measure against the virus meant that artists were far from their audiences, having to find all sorts of other means of expression to stay in touch with each other. The online environment became for a while the factor that kept these two categories together.

However, despite having this way of interacting, both camps brutally missed what the magic and lively spirit of these kinds of encounters between people meant. Regrettably, they had come to take place in and from behind cameras and cold computer or phone screens.

Cultural life has been deeply affected by the pandemic that the virus has generated.

The effect of the compulsory social distancing has left strong imprints on this sector, imprints that are also felt in the figures when it comes to cultural consumption in times of pandemic compared to 2019.

Of course, all this decline was no surprise, given that venues were closed for such a long period. On the bright side, Romanians started reading more, forced to stay indoors and unable to access cultural events in closed spaces.

We should pay more attention to these aspects and we should not, however, forget that we are talking about a country where the rate of functional illiteracy among pupils is one that has undergone significant increases in recent years. It is a concrete fact that all these

increases, if they are not stopped in one form or another, will have a negative impact in the years to come on what constitutes the further development of economic and social sectors.

Returning to the statistics, however, if we are talking about the creative sectors, it has already been proven that production, distribution and, above all, cultural consumption in 2020 were deeply affected, a phenomenon which, in the opinion of researchers, will probably continue in the years to come, as I have also previously complained about functional illiteracy.<sup>4</sup>

The nature of society is supposed to be evolutionary, and in this context, theatrical trends must also evolve. Or if it does involute, I believe theatre has a duty to do what it takes to stop the process and make the reverse possible.

In a year 2021 shaken by all the nefarious events that have happened globally, I believe that art needs, now more than in peacetime, to show it is brave, and the artist of our day, the one who makes it, to be a brave one.

Theatre, I think, needs to correct morals, to go further in its endeavours to put the mirror in people's faces. Beware, the mirror should not be a distorted one, but should faithfully reflect the person looking into it!

What is needed is a living theatre that makes strong impressions, that provokes the audience to think and feel, a theatre that makes the spectator ask questions when he leaves in the end of the show. A theatrical performance, I find it absolutely essential to have formative value: to mobilise and shape the mind of the spectator.

I want this study to remain in writing and to be seen as a manifesto for a reformed theatre of the third millennium, a responsible theatre that knows how to welcome its spectators with love.

## **Chapter 1. A brief radiography of the history of laboratory theatre**

In this first chapter I have tried to carefully observe and find some answers to the question - what makes laboratory theatre to be called laboratory, what would be the concepts that would define it, in its essence. I think it would be necessary to turn our attention a bit to the roots of this kind of theatre and to try to understand better, before labelling a theatrical

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<sup>4</sup> v. Carmen Croitoru and Anda Becuț Marinescu, study Trends of cultural consumption in pandemics, 1st edition, NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR CULTURAL RESEARCH AND TRAINING, p. 7.



manner as laboratory, what it meant to be in the vision of the one who laid its foundations. I also sought to see what Grotowski's theatre was before it was called laboratory theatre and how it changed over time in the environments in which he worked.<sup>5</sup>

Grotowski was not a privileged of the times. Culture in the 20th century went through complicated times in many ways - the social, political, economic, and health contexts were some of the most difficult for humanity at the time. It was a century that was dominated by an avalanche of important and highly charged events - the Spanish Flu pandemic, the First and Second World Wars, the issue of nuclear weapons and decolonisation, and so on. But perhaps this is precisely why his art was one that had a phenomenal impact on the individual, because Grotowski himself was formed as a human being out of pain, going through countless hardships and, for the most part, being outside his comfort zone, generally through the conditions that the times imposed.

Jerzy Grotowski was a powerful personality, whom we can say had a strong influence, but who was also influenced. He somehow received influences in an assumed form, even sought them out. He knew, as long as he lived, how to live by allowing himself to be influenced in a way that facilitated his evolution. He sought, because "seeking" was in his nature. He sought to find the right influences to let himself be enveloped and inspired. He didn't give in to any wave of any kind. If there is anything that can be said to have characterised him, it was this "searching, searching", which was undoubtedly part of the Grotowskian essence.

Between 1957 and 1959, Grotowski worked hard. He staged shows for the repertoires of several theatres, won prizes, taught and went to France where he had an encounter with the man who was nicknamed "the king of pantomime", the Polish-Jewish Marcel Marceau. Their meeting profoundly influenced some of Jerzy Grotowski's later work.

I imagine that this happened somewhat naturally, that his getting close to Marceau came about naturally, as long as we know about him that the aspects that would interest him most later, were those related to the physicality of the actor and the condition of a poor theatre in which the magic of the act lies in the relationship between spectator and actor.

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<sup>5</sup> All the information to be presented in this chapter, information that presents a brief review of what is, in short, the history of laboratory theatre and general information about the biography of the director under review, is based on several scholarly works including Jerzy Grotowski, *Theatre and Ritual. Essential Writings*, trans. Vasile Moga, ed. cit. Nemira, Bucharest, 2014; Diana Cozma, *Chained Theatre, essay on Jerzy Grotowski's theatre*, ed. cit. CASA CĂRȚII DE ȘTIINȚĂ, Cluj-Napoca, 2007; James Slowiak and Jairo Cuesta, *JERZY GROTOWSKI*, ed. cit. Routledge, London, New York, Canada, 2007, part of the ROUTLEDGE PERFORMANCE PRACTITIONERS series.

If we look in detail, there is a close connection between the discipline and rigour that Grotowski imposed on the actors working in his laboratory and what a mime should not miss in order to perform with precision an act that creates the illusion of magic for the spectator.

I'm thinking now of the circle that has been created, speaking of "encounters", as I was talking about them in the introduction. How fate brought me, a laboratory actor by birth (I didn't necessarily know that I was a laboratory actor until I met Muriel Manea - not so much that I didn't know, but that I felt it, I just hadn't managed to define myself in such a concrete way until I met her), to work for seven years under the stage direction of Aureliu Manea's daughter, the latter strongly influenced by Grotowski, the two sharing the same ideas in terms of theatre. Grotowski, forging the circle further, in turn shares Marcel Marceau's visions by travelling to France to see him. In France where I am now, generations away, to research their work, working directly, at Carlo Boso's academy in Versailles, with Elena Serra.<sup>6</sup> Elena Serra is the one who worked from 1985 to 2005 and who was therefore, for twenty years, the assistant of the King of Pantomime. And to close the circle, Grotowski made his debut in 1957 with Ionesco's Chairs. A fine path of influences, in the South-East and West of Europe, I would say. I must admit that as an actor, myself, as well, I have looked for influences.

The Grotowskian laboratory was defined by what amounted to more than forty years of travel and research in the field of theatrical art. Thus, five major defining periods of Jerzy Grotowski's and his collaborators' research were distinguished - the Theatre of Productions, the Theatre of Participation (or Paratheatre), the Theatre of Sources, Objective Drama and Art as Vehicle (or Ritual Arts).

In fact, after a thorough analysis of each stage of research, concepts and directions in Grotowski's laboratory theatre, I can say that I identify most strongly with the first period of his work - the Theatre of Productions. I say this in the light of the fact that the artistic creations of the casts I was part of in the Muriel Manea laboratory also sought to rid themselves, as Grotowski did in this first period, of everything that was artificial, mechanical, external, and to centre the whole working process on the actor who thus became the core of the whole performance.

I have chosen to conclude this first chapter, which is in fact a brief incursion into the dimensions of laboratory theatre, with a brief presentation of what Aureliu Manea, the great Romanian director, considered the visionary of his generation, thought about the art of

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<sup>6</sup> Elena Serra, actress, teacher, director, was born in Italy but moved to Paris, where she worked with Marcel Marceau's company from 1985 to 2005, during which time she was also his assistant.

theatre. We have shown here the differences and similarities between the Grotowskian laboratory and that of Aureliu Manea.

Aureliu Manea (1945-2014) always regarded the art of theatre as something sacred. Like Grotowski, he always approached the stage with sanctity. A common idea of these two great directors, related to the sacredness of the stage space and the attitude they both have towards the stage, has remained in my memory, impressing me in a very strong way. The Romanian director sees in the simple action that some people undertake - to wash, to clean the stage before the performance - a real ritual that takes on a dimension of magnitude:

"I think of the theatre stage made up of a few empty rows. Clean wood, purified by sanding, shines under the spotlight. The unpolished wooden stage exudes something sacred. It calls you to silence. A few people washing the stage, its floor, before the performance, compose a Ritual worthy of the most beautiful script." <sup>7</sup>

The Polish director, for his part, also demands cleanliness on all levels, given the way he works. He asks that the theatre be cleansed of artifice, that the actor meditate on the cleanliness of the spirit, and obviously, in terms of space, he asks the same thing in an imperative tone. I imagine that if Grotowski demanded that the backstage be clean too, it goes without saying that in his laboratory, as in Muriel Manea's, you couldn't enter dirty, in any sense:

- " - The backstage has to be clean, says Jerzy.
- But nobody sees what's behind the scenes, someone replies.
- God sees, Grotowski replies, smiling." <sup>8</sup>

So here's how much purity lay in these two great directors who had similar approaches. Each was concerned with what an immaculate attitude to the ceremony of the artistic act could mean.

Aureliu Manea was deeply impressed, first of all, by the courage with which the Pole took on the kind of theatre he chose to make, a theatre in which the important thing was the path he and his team walked and not the end result, placing no major emphasis on the audience's reaction, wanting to get at some essential truths rather than to make theatre that had a recreational function.

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<sup>7</sup> Aureliu Manea, *El, vizionarul*, ed. cit., "Teatrul azi" magazine (Supplement), Bucharest, 2000, p. 62.

<sup>8</sup> Jerzy Grotowski, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

After seeing the performance of *The Constant Prince*, Aureliu Manea is deeply impressed and tells how, from the first time the actors entered the stage, a special feeling came over him, as if he had been drawn into a sort of psychosis, a dream that seemed to be more like a nightmare. The Romanian director found that he was able to observe fanaticism in its purest forms, in the acting process and even in the great message that Grotowski's performance conveyed.

Both Grotowski and Manea were looking for a special kind of actor, and this was the sacred one. Aureliu Manea spoke of the ideal actor when he said: 'One of the qualities of the ideal actor is that of being unreservedly obedient to an already adopted principle. But not every actor who submits fanatically to an idea of performance can be a valued actor.'<sup>9</sup>

The director Aureliu Manea was also looking for the actor who was able to reveal himself through his art, who was also able to give up everything he knew before starting work on a project. As a director, he, in turn, opened up through actors. He was fascinated by codes that carried with them enigmas, by words that also took on a ritual dimension and which, unlike the Grotowsky laboratory, in his creations, acquired a colossal force and managed to suspend the audience's breath for a moment, to fascinate.

In my opinion, Manea was the one who came closest to Grotowski's laboratory in Romanian theatre. In his laboratory, like the Polish director, but with the differences that were given by the different artistic personalities of these two, he constantly explored the human condition.

The only one to follow in his footsteps was his daughter, who came to shape her own laboratory system, different from that of her father. Both father and daughter worked in their own distinct ways, in two very different types of laboratory, taking the actor out of his comfort zone and putting him in situations he had never experienced before.

Thus, both directors who formed the Manea dynasty bring the actor into a state where he begins to fight against what I call pre-defined programs in theatre. Let's say it's obvious that when an actor faces his audience, he undoubtedly wants to have a sense of self-confidence. He wants to be sure of his execution, his reactions during the performance. Both Aureliu Manea and Muriel Manea, look at this aspect of certainty that the actor needs, with great care. They related to it with a precision worthy of that of a surgeon operating with a scalpel, or a cosmonaut, let's say. So to create this safe working environment and to help the actor be confident in what he was doing, in his forms of expression and in his strength, these

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<sup>9</sup> Aureliu Manea, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

two colossal directors, each in his own characteristic way built for his laboratory a training system which was a collective training, and which most importantly was based on control and self-control.

Aureliu Manea, for his part, fought a battle in the name of art, having to face a totalitarian system. Unfortunately, I think he was not given the credit he deserved in accordance with the greatness of his creations. It is the theatrical system in which he was forced to perform that, in my opinion, has taken Manea down. And the system is made up of people. Those who made up the system at the time, faced with a grandiose and reforming theatrical vision, were frightened and because some were unable to understand his art, or others who understood it too well, eliminated him from the landscape, making him become like the cello player in Matei Vişniec's play - And what do we do with the cello?

Manea, unlike the other colleagues of his generation, those who made up the system at the time, was able, through his generosity, to admire the work of others. To find in it a source of inspiration, which would motivate him and not look with envy at the creations of his colleagues. He was deeply impressed by the work of directors such as Liviu Ciulei, Radu Penciulescu, Andrei Şerban, David Esrig, etc., but perhaps he felt closest to Pintilie, whom he placed somewhere near the great figures of universal theatre - Peter Brook or Giorgio Strehler.

Aureliu Manea was one of the rare artists that Romania had. He was the one who served, indeed, the art of theatre with faith and fanaticism, a characteristic that his daughter, the director Muriel Manea inherited.

## **Chapter 2. The Muriel Manea Laboratory and the depth of a theatre with European trends**

This chapter proposes a detailed analysis of the Muriel Manea laboratory, of which I was part, as an actor, for almost eight years. It aims to discuss the importance of the actor-director relationship in the economy of performance and gives an extensive account of the process of working on four of the shows we worked on together, while dealing with one of the most important aspects of the laboratory - the energy of performance.

Muriel Manea, daughter of Aureliu Manea and set designer Clara Labancz, was born in Turda on 19 November 1978. From the very first months of her life she set foot on the stage of the theatre where she is now employed as a director and which bears her father's name - the "Aureliu Manea" National Theatre Turda.

Coming from a family of artists, Muriel Manea has been in contact with the theatre since the time when a man does not yet have formed memories. As her parents were always around the stage, the child accompanied them to rehearsals, taking steps among the actors they were working with after she learned to walk, and starting to place them in an order known only by her. The child Muriel Manea was fascinated by the fact that she could, without necessarily realising it at the time, become a kind of orchestra conductor. She would change the positions of the actors on stage, unaware that this was what she would do for the rest of her life.

She attends the Faculty of Theatre and Film at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, specialising in Performing Arts - Directing, and she graduated in 2009, since when she has been directing shows at various theatres in the country.

Unfortunately, until now, Muriel Manea seems to have a path strewn with a multitude of obstacles that stand before the accomplishment of her work and even recognition, which should have already appeared in her case, taking into account that the aesthetics of her performances is unique in the Romanian theatrical landscape and that she has an exclusive way of working with the actor.

The probable cause of the unfulfillment of another artistic destiny, becomes again, the same sick system. System, which as I said before, is made up of people. In this case, we face another, which claims to be democratic, but in essence remains totalitarian. And here I point to the serious problem of the theatre system, which has also become politicised to the core.

And so theatre directors become executioners who run institutions in a dictatorial sense. This is what Muriel Manea has had to deal with throughout her career, at least until now. I hope that at some point she will succeed in defeating this gigantic monster called the system and that she will not have the fate of her father, that she will not end up in an unfulfilled destiny.

We are living an illusion of a free theatre and compromising ourselves without taking the initiative. Because yes, we need a source from which the finances that provide for our daily lives can come. But then I ask myself - if this becomes the only purpose for making art, what use is it to us, made like this? Where is the sacredness, the ritual, the ceremony, the nobility of old?

I don't think the system has misunderstood us and that's why it has pushed us aside. On the contrary, I think it is precisely because it perceived the exact force with which Muriel Manea creates that it fought so hard to swallow us. The Manea dynasty has frightened for two generations, many artists incarnate of the times.

Muriel Manea made jewel-like performances, like carefully polished diamonds before they reached buyers who could not take their eyes off those treasures.

It's just that at some point we realized that we had to make a poor theatre in which the actor is once again a central element in the ceremony of the performance. Very often, although her directorial visions were big and she always imagined great performances, she had to, because of lack of resources, reduce the grandiosity in an aesthetic sense, as an image, and concentrate the power of the performance in the actor, managing, paradoxically, with all the financial impediments, to create particularly powerful images in her performances.

What guaranteed her performances was precisely the quality, in that she respected her audience, conveying a great message each time. In her laboratory, unlike others, the result mattered. She was interested in the end about the final product that would reach the audience and about their reaction.

She watched her spectators carefully, even when they were vibrating under the impact of the energies, the emotions coming from the stage, and when they left the hall, because there were such moments, as well.

I understood after a few years what had happened, about the relationship with the system. And I understood this because I had the chance to have the doors opened so I was able to take a look, and not from a distance, at what the European theatre space meant - Muriel Manea easily related to the existing international theatre phenomenon. And then it wasn't hard for me to articulate a conclusion in her case: Romania was not ready for her, the West was!

I felt, every time I performed in her shows, that their energy was different from what I had seen or experienced before. They had, indeed, an energy that astounded you. The audience left the performance in a changed state, in any case, and I, as an actor, suddenly became endowed with powers that I felt I also had during my time in the Popular Theatre Laboratory - I could make the audience's heart beat together with my own, I felt I had come to manage my audience, to hold them in my hands, and with responsibility to take them on a journey that would enrich them emotionally, spiritually.

### **Chapter 3. Carlo Boso's Popular Theatre Laboratory. The history of commedia dell'arte in brief**

This final chapter of the paper, brings up another analysis in detail, this time of the second theatrical laboratory that was the subject of the study, called the Popular Theatre

Laboratory run by master Carlo Boso<sup>10</sup> at Versailles, a type of laboratory that I have deliberately, assertively and without exaggeration called the Foreign Artistic Legion - reading further in the study, you will understand why.

I have presented in detail how two commedia dell'arte internships led by Carlo Boso and in which I took part, the experiences I had and the miraculous encounters I had during them, and also the process of working on William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by master Boso, where I found it interesting to observe the commedia dell'arte's immixture in the Shakespearean universe.

In any case, I can say of the Italian-born director that he is a director who believes and states with conviction, whenever he has the opportunity, that the actor should maintain himself daily in the condition of a high performance athlete. In my opinion, he bases his laboratory precisely on this kind of assiduous training to which he subjects the actor and on research into the possibilities of transmitting the techniques of the commedia dell'arte style.

Carlo Boso is a living history of universal theatre, a phenomenon of it, in my opinion. He was trained at the Piccolo Teatro school in Milan, directed by Giorgio Strehler and Paolo Grassi, and in 2004, together with Danuta Zarazik,<sup>11</sup> they founded the Académie Internationale Des Arts du Spectacle - AIDAS<sup>12</sup> - in Versailles, France.

There is a lot of talk in our guild about "encounters", about the chance to meet the right people. In this respect, I dare to consider myself an extremely lucky actress. After so many years spent as an actor in a laboratory such as Muriel Manea's, and having completed a specialisation training course led by Carlo Boso at Versailles, I was given the opportunity to meet another way of doing theatre, which I could explore closely.

I was allowed to penetrate into the recesses of another type of theatre, one that I had not had much opportunity to discover before - popular theatre. I was able to find out during my work periods what skills this type of theatre, this type of address, required of an actor; to see what kind of training was involved in training in this sphere of live performance.

From the setting up and dismantling of the set, its construction, from the first nail being hammered, from the cutting of wood to make the planks to be placed next to each other to form the stage, from all of this, to the acting, the artistic impresario and the ways of relating to the audience, I experienced all of this in the laboratory held at Versailles. Working

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<sup>10</sup> Carlo Boso, Italian director, actor, playwright, teacher, one of the greatest researchers of commedia dell'arte, a scholar of style, lives in Paris, working all over the world.

<sup>11</sup> Danuta Zarazik, actress, director, trained at the Ecole Supérieure d'Art Dramatique in Strasbourg, close collaborator of Carlo Boso.

<sup>12</sup> International Academy of Performing Arts in Versailles.



techniques and mask construction, acrobatics, singing, dancing, fencing, pantomime, all these were to be part of what I would later understand to mean the training of a complete actor in the spirit of popular theatre.

More precisely, I learned with Carlo Boso what the spirit of *commedia dell'arte* meant. I learned to feel it, to live it and to enjoy it with my audience.

Certainly, the approaches are different and each requires a different analysis. If working with Muriel Manea on her shows I became totally devoted to her laboratory because she succeeded in irredeemably winning over the actor in me, the definition of fanaticism became even stronger when I met Carlo Boso at work, who literally made from theatre a way of life and who represents for me the lesson of absolute devotion to this art. About Carlo Boso I can even say that he lives every second of his life for art, and in the spirit of art.

Even if when we bring up *commedia dell'arte*, we are referring to an actor who is put in the context of creating a composition for which he mainly uses his body, the voice and the word, as in the case of Muriel Manea's work, do not lose their meaning in this context, but, on the contrary, become a vehicle of emotion.

Starting from the basis of the Grotowskian laboratory, both the directors I have chosen to discuss, each with their own laboratory, demand a certain kind of complexity in the training of the actor who undertakes to reproduce for the audience a universe as complex as Shakespeare's. Here we come to the first link between the two laboratories, namely the training, readiness, discipline and other essential characteristics of the actor who comes to perform in such a structure.

Working in the French laboratory, I have found rules of conduct as those in the Romanian one I was part of, that of Muriel Manea.

Muriel Manea comes close, when we think of the role of the director, to Grotowski who called himself, in the context of his laboratory, the spiritual mentor, the master, saying about him that what he does, in fact, is to guard the actor, to supervise him by taking care of him, assisting him in the process, not easy at all, which consists in fully accepting, in a perfect form, what the essence of humanity implies, the quintessence of human nature.

Carlo Boso, on the other hand, comes closer to the French style of Mouchkine, where the director's role changes according to the needs of the troupe and its dynamics. In another sense, Boso is close to Grotowski in that it is the experiment that counts and not so much the final result on opening night, the performance then not reaching its final form, as he often uses the work-in-progress method in his laboratory-school. A very well-developed system, moreover, in which the director Carlo Boso gives the actor, the company as a whole,

the opportunity to experiment directly on the audience, with a large number of performances, during which time the performance grows, evolves, matures, and is perfected under the energy and breath of its audience. Or, in other words, it makes the audience part of the band's experiment that happens here and now, every time.

The performances created by Muriel Manea follow more or less the pattern of the working mechanism of a Swiss watch. The road to the final result is, again, an experimental one, Muriel Manea creating in a way that pays close attention to the actor's individuality, understanding it in depth and being aware of its essential role in discovering and eliminating the blockages that might stand in the way of the process of stripping and transposition that is to take place in the laboratory.

However, the difference comes when we consider the importance given to the final result that is the opening night performance. Muriel Manea's performances are of extraordinary precision, consistency and rigour. They are performances that maintain their constancy at all times, to the millimetre, and this is what makes them artistic jewels of great significance. Like Grotowski, Muriel Manea creates for a slightly elitist audience, an audience with a special individuality, which comes to the theatre to seek a unique experience, a spiritual journey to which it has access through the actors, who are obliged by the nobility of their profession, which is, let us recall, missionary in nature, to offer it the opportunity to identify itself through mirroring, and then to reach catharsis.

What I have noticed that has constantly improved, working in this type of Carlo Boso's laboratory, since my first internship at Versailles, was my ability to control my body. I was becoming in control of my body as a whole and then, I was very much in control of separate segments of it. It was then that the mime and pantomime course came to meet my needs, which became one of the most demanding episodes of the commedia internship and beyond, because over time, I fell in love with this discipline.

Just when I thought I had things under control, I have met Elena Serra, who turned my universe upside down when she made me sweat in two minutes of walking on the spot.

Elena Serra, actress, director and teacher, was born in Italy. She moved to Paris after studying fine arts and contemporary dance in Turin. With a varied training - theatre, dance, clowning, pantomime - she is now turning to pedagogy. It is she who made me understand, to fully feel how the body becomes a vital instrument, able to interpret language in the service of the actor. How, practically speaking, it needs to be transformed, through all the exercises worked on in training, into a vehicle for emotion.

Perhaps the most important role in Elena Serra's thorough training was her long-term collaboration with Marcel Marceau, the greatest pantomime artist of the 20th century, also known as the king of pantomime. She was his assistant for twenty years, performed in his company's shows and toured the world with him. Elena Serra also gives masterclasses in various theatre schools and universities in France and other parts of Europe.

Another meeting that marked me was during my second internship in Chioggia, Italy, where I had the chance to meet Eleonora Fuser, who in my opinion is one of the greatest and most important contemporary figures of commedia dell'arte, the one who invented the mask of the witch and enriched the style with another female character.

Eleonora Fuser, a professional actress and theatre teacher, graduated from Eugenio Barba's School of Theatre Anthropology (ISTA) and is a founding member of the TAG Teatro cooperative in Venice, which was directed by Carlo Boso.

In parallel with her acting career, she carries out an important theatrical training activity for all audiences (professional and amateur) in Italy, especially in the field of masked play and the Commedia dell'arte discipline.

In the few days we trained with her, she explained how important it is to be aware of the difference between a body in tension and a rigid body in action. We did some space exploration exercises performing unnaturalistic movements, where we could closely observe how a body that is rigid looks and behaves. Here, it's all about breathing. This is an element that Elena Serra also reminds us often when we work on pantomime. Even when the movements are broken down, they must paradoxically have a special fluidity, which does not materialize if the actor remains in apnea. Thus, if you don't breathe, the brain, the muscles, stop oxygenating. If you suspend even temporarily the activity of breathing, the exchange of gases between the lungs and the external environment no longer takes place, the volume of the lungs remaining unchanged because the movement that is usually performed by the respiratory muscles no longer takes place. Thus a body can become a body in tension, a rigid one, no longer serving a fluid expressiveness. So in commedia dell'arte, we need a tense body of the actor that it can never be a still one, but one that is always ready to react.

The mask can also have the effect of putting the actor in apnea. Visibility is enormously reduced, creating a kind of anxiety that can only be overcome by correct breathing, a refilling of the diaphragm with air.

There was something special in Eleonora Fuser's pedagogy that attracted me - the fact that she never intervened until the exercise was finished, completed. Her feedback always came after execution. I think this is something to remember, because I noticed that in this

way, the actor took his time, discovered his own rhythm and did not become rigid under the force of pressure, but acted largely freely, with ease, his execution beginning to take on one of the most important aspects, in my opinion - the joy of playing. The actor was no longer demonstrating skills, abilities, but enjoying himself along with the viewer.

In any case, it was all the experience in this kind of laboratory, this Artistic Foreign Legion, that taught me to fight with myself for myself, with my own weakness, weariness, exhaustion, as in Grotowski's laboratory, or as in Muriel Manea's. At the same time, working in this context literally demonstrated Giorgio Strehler's words, which the master, Boso, kept repeating: "Theatre is made with sweat and blood! Always with sweat and blood!"

And when I think that I had the chance to be a part of all these experiences, I realize that it was not even I who went in search of commedia dell'arte, but rather that it found me, making me fall irretrievably in love with it.

Muriel Manea and Carlo Boso are two directors who made me step into their laboratories, after which they gave me the confidence to have the courage to throw myself from a height and sometimes, perhaps even to a height, without a safety net. They made me push my limits, with each performance. Playing under their stage direction allowed me to feel how my art is honed and how important it is for the actor to perform in a type of show where they directly feel how they influence the audience's breath. And for this I would like to thank them and above all, to dedicate these lines to them as a sign of gratitude and appreciation.

The findings of the study have brought me back to the point where I can only say that I can only assume this path I am now on and with it, all the responsibility that comes with it. The baggage of knowledge that I have built up during my time working in these two types of laboratory is immense. Man gathers knowledge throughout his life, but at some point, I wonder if all this effort to gather it is in vain if it is not passed on.

Watching these masters of various art forms at work, I am acutely aware that the task that falls to me, once I have taken some of their knowledge, is to make sure that it goes on.

I think this process of transmission is important in order not to lose touch with these great theatre people of the 21st century. Their life-long work will never be in vain, but on the contrary, it becomes a treasure for contemporary theatre art.

My unreserved thanks go to Muriel Manea, Carlo Boso and, last but not least, Elena Serra, who have been my strongest professional, spiritual and human influences. My thanks for allowing me to stand by them and for giving me the confidence to become their heir.

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