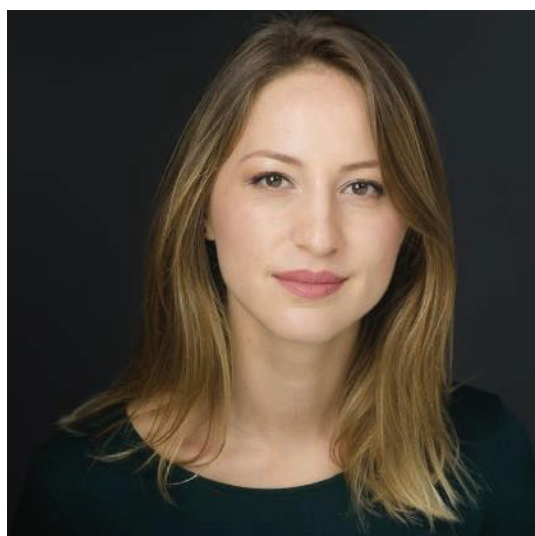


Artistic Pedagogy Studies

Improvisation – Freedom and Rigour in Theatre Pedagogy

Andreea HRISTU

UNATC “I.L. Caragiale” Bucharest,
Romania
andreeahristu@yahoo.com



Abstract: *Despite its generic meaning, improvisation has profound roots in theatre development. From the birth of performance to 20th century aesthetic refinement and contemporary artistic experiments, it has become both an intriguing working process and a valuable training tool for future professionals. However light and playful it may seem, improvisation has to be based on rigour and study in order to achieve a true and authentic creative value. Theatrical education aims not only to become a space for developing one's area of expertise, in accordance with the current rigors of the profession, but also to provide a suitable framework for experimentation and reflection, as the skills that an actor uses in an improvisation are the same skills we need to live authentically.*

Keywords: *history, culture, creativity, rigour, training, method, theatre pedagogy, abilities development, authenticity.*

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The concept of improvisation is essential to culture and art, especially to theatrical practice, but rather simplistically defined from a linguistic point of view. The term refers directly to the verb "to improvise" which is the act of composing, quickly putting together (occasionally), in an unprepared way, a poem, a speech, a musical composition, etc.; to make, to manufacture, to build something in a hurry (and temporarily), from what is at hand (DEX,

2016, *improviza* entry). Despite the immediate meanings comprised in the definition, it is easy to notice its limiting nature, especially from the perspective of the present analysis, as well as the pejorative nuance associated with the action. The terms "occasionally", "in a hurry", "unprepared", "temporary" suggest not only a questionable quality and value of the product resulting from improvisation, but also limit the creative dimension of the process. A poem or a musical composition, although improvised, requires previous study and rigorous training of the skills specific to the respective art, the result having the potential to be a proof of virtuosity. This also applies to theatre, as can be noted since ancient times.

One of the most important playwrights of the 20th century, Peter Brook, conducted an empirical research on undeveloped art during his trip to Africa in 1972. The project aimed to present the poem "The Conference of Birds" (later transformed into a performance) in villages, schools and remote areas of Nigeria, while also seeking the necessity and creative essence in theatrical art (Croyden, 1973). During the visit to a community of pygmies, keepers of ancient and unique traditions, the director noticed that every night, under the watchful eye of the healer, they gathered for dinner and attended a children's role play in which the mistakes or the clumsiness of adults were amended, to the horror of those targeted and the delight of those present. The purpose of these impromptu dramatizations of the day's events was not the performance itself (besides, the locals were not even aware of the fact that they were doing theatre), but maintaining a "vital energy" of the community that would ensure good communication between group members while correcting inappropriate behaviour. From this point of view, the phenomenon is therefore a dialogue, a communication between the individual and the community, with a social and educational purpose.

Theatre was born and has always operated as a result of this premise, regardless of the dramatic genre through which it manifested itself. But, "in order for the improvisation show to have a beneficial impact on the audience, from ancient times it has been observed that the artistic form that it should take must be, eminently, the comedy" (Muscalu, 2019, p. 20). In ancient Greece, comedy appeared during the Dionysian Celebrations, developing from phallic songs. As in tragedy, comic characters "portray people in action" (Aristotle, 1957, p. 14), but "with an inferior morality, not an imitation of any kind of vice, nonetheless of those in the realm of ridicule, which is part of the ugly. Indeed, ridicule is a flaw and an abomination without pain or injury; thus, for example, the comic mask is ugly and crooked, with no expression of suffering" (Aristotle, 1957, p. 22). While tragedy was considered the superior dramatic form, with a "chosen" subject in which human sufferings are judged by the gods and aimed to produce a cathartic effect through pity and fear, comedy was the expression of the common man.

Comedy actors were agile, they had to know how to sing, to have the strength to speak the lyrics while doing all kinds of movements, tumbles, jumps. [...] The comedian had to move from one stage situation to another in a very short time,

change the timbre of his voice depending on the character he was playing and, sometimes, play several characters (Muscalu, 2019, p. 56).

The actors' play did not remain exclusively under the sign of improvisation for a long time, soon enjoying the contribution of the written texts by Sophocles, Aristophanes (known for the social criticism of his plays) and Menander. The latter introduced the intrigue of love in the action plot and laid the foundations of character typology (the hero, the flatterer, the peasant etc.), thus becoming a source of inspiration not only for Latin authors like Plautus and Terence, but also for playwrights of later times. In the Roman Empire, there were several forms of comedy based on improvisation, such as the *palliata*, the *togata*, the *atellanas* or the *mimes*. The Latin range proved to be a favourable environment for the development of theatrical art: we encounter actresses (given that women were not accepted in tragedy shows), actors begin to specialize in a certain human character, developing its expressivity, and the first theatre companies emerge, led by a *Dominus*. However, "the actors initially had a pariah status; free people were not allowed to go on stage. Only *histrions* were allowed here and were viewed by society with contempt because what they were doing was not considered work" (Muscalu, 2019, p. 58). Latin comedy continued during the Middle Ages with the *farce* that enjoyed public success throughout Europe, despite outdated topics.

It was performed by actors who had special artistic abilities; they were mimes, jugglers, they sang and spoke in lyrics, of course using double meanings; they made jokes about people known to the community, they constantly improvised, even if their lyrics were not always the most inspired (Muscalu, 2019, p. 59).

The continuity of improvised theatrical manifestations, despite the questionable aesthetic quality, was essential for shaping a unique phenomenon in the 16th century: Commedia dell'Arte. The freedom of expression and experimentation specific to this period led to an organic secularization of the ancient dramatic heritage. The actors not only organized themselves into strong companies but had professional status and were paid for their work. The performances of Commedia dell'Arte are based on the *canovaccio*, a schematic script that mentions only the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. Furthermore,

the actors always knew how to improvise, how to address everyone, and not only the intellect, but also the hearing and the sight, that is to the immediate perception, as entertainment. Extraordinary jugglers and mimes, virtuoso singers from the mouth or on very different instruments, exceptional dancers and acrobats, the actors mastered their soul and body, their voice, their face, revealing the wonders of the performances (Mărculescu, 1984, p. 7).

The Commedia actor would learn the art from his predecessors, since each mask's specific features were well-kept secrets within the company¹. Although the acting performances were born out of improvisation, these spectacular effects were long studied and trained: "The mastery of the actors was measured in the amplitude of the expressive register, so that the latter reached true virtuositities. Forced to take special care of their appearance (it was mandatory for actors to be supple, mobile, athletic), they had to do, in addition to proving their talent, prove their fantasy, humour, ingenuity, spontaneity and, not the least, their intelligence. These stage professionals had to possess a trained sense of observation, as extensive knowledge as possible about human behaviour and a high dose of audacity" (Mihăilescu, 2016, p. 139). Therefore, behind the spontaneous, free, creative artistic manifestation of the actor, there is rigor that ensures the success and high value of the performance.

Due to favourable socio-political and economic contexts, theatre developed in the rest of Europe as well, under the powerful influence of the Commedia dell'Arte. In France, along with the establishment of the Academy in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu and the construction of the Palais-Royal auditorium, the acting profession was rehabilitated and a code of morality was set. Inspired by the ancient model, French classicism imposed some aesthetic rigors on theatrical art: plausibility, propriety, a certain cleansing and ennobling of the language, the rule of the three units, the purity of genres. These regulations may seem restrictive, but they had the refining effect of creating and discovering new forms of artistic manifestation. Considered to be the founder of modern acting, Molière was one of the most important playwrights at the time (Boileau, 1957) due to the deep analysis of human nature he encouraged within his company. Such detailed study wasn't aimed at stage reproduction *per se*, but at discovering and assimilating archetypal characters:

when you paint people, you have to paint them according to nature. You are required to make the portraits look like their living models, and you have done nothing if you have not painted your contemporaries in such a way that they can be recognized (Molière, 1955, p. 145).

In the play *Improvisation at Versailles* (1663), Molière makes some remarks on the art of acting, using the technique of theatre-in-the-theatre²:

¹ The publishing in 1699 of the work *A Treatise on Acting, from Memory and by Improvisation* brought Andrea Perrucci deep antipathy from the theatre companies, who interpreted his approach as a betrayal of the principles and the traditional ways of passing over the techniques specific to the art of the Commedia dell'Arte actor. However, in the context of a clear evolution towards cult theatre, the publication of the treatise aimed at "theoretical rationalization and methodical normalization of the actor's creative process" (Bețiu, 2018, p. 8), at the same time proving to be essential in documenting the Italian theatrical phenomenon.

² The same technique is used by Shakespeare in Hamlet's famous advice to the actors, proof that the new theatrical art principles had already spread across Europe:

You play the role of the poet and you have to enter the skin of the character, to highlight the pedantic air of those who are in touch with the upper-class. [...] Try to assimilate as much as possible the nature of your roles and imagine that you are what you represent. [...] Didn't I tell you that you have to play a role naturally? (Molière, 1955, pp. 175-176)

Although the expression might seem obsolete, these principles can be identified in the foundational outlook on modern acting: the study of life and people, the training of means of expression and their use in rendering human characters as true as possible. Despite the imposed rigors, Molière used improvisation as an exploratory means of creative freedom, following a well-known Perruccian principle: "sometimes going out of the rule is the best rule to be found" (Perrucci, 1982, p. 59).

Such a detailed chronological presentation of the theatrical phenomenon, its development through improvisation and describing the evolution of various aspects related to the actor and his art may seem inappropriate in the economics of the present analysis, but it is relevant. "A nation that does not know its history is like a child that does not know its parents" wrote the historian Nicolae Iorga. On the same note, one could say that an artist who does not know his cultural origins cannot fully understand the layers of his art, nor can he fully practice it. It is therefore essential that theatre professionals be aware, on the one hand, of the difficult path that actors have taken over the centuries for their creative manifestation to be recognized and respected, and on the other, of the rigor, discipline and training on which improvisation is based. There is a duty and a responsibility to study and pass on the specifics of the actor's art, which, despite its playful appearance, demands seriousness and respect.

Once liberated from the rigors of classicism and along with the aesthetic diversification of the twentieth century, the function of improvisation in theatrical art acquired new meanings, depending on the perspective from which it is analysed:

Stage practitioners (actors or directors), for example, treat it as a working method, either as a performative mechanism or as a simple trick to overcome stage accidents. Theorists most often perceive it as a stylistic process, playwrights consider it a potentially threatening dilution to the rigors imposed by the text (whatever it might be), and most viewers retain it as a blamed (but intimate-captivating) voyeuristic experience, almost always of a comic nature (Mihăilescu, 2016, p. 29).

The present analysis will continue to focus on the specificity of improvisation from the perspective of the actor's art, which includes the pedagogical process. This process, in turn divided into subsequent stages, analysed, theorized, methodized and assisted,

o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. (Shakespeare, 1955, p. 105)

designates what today is called theatrical education and which began, without a doubt, with the Konstantin Sergheevici Stanislavsky's "system".

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of theatrical exercise was introduced in acting training, which aimed to create a favourable ground for the emergence of the unexpected and the suppression of routine. After years of research and experiments in search of "the moments of truth"³, the famous pedagogue formulated the method of physical actions as a way of organic "releasing" the affective component:

The secret of the Stanislavskian process is to not force your feelings at all, to let them freely take control of yourself, not to think about the truth of the passions, for these passions are not up to you, but come naturally (Gilea, 2018, p. 92).

The "magic if", the "given circumstances", the overarching theme or the affective memory are just some of the concepts that Stanislavski integrated through theatrical exercise in the process of methodical systematization of the actor's creativity. Therefore, we could say that "Stanislavski was the inventor of the modern use of improvisation, at least seen as a device for rehearsals and training" (Frost, Yarrow, 2007, quoted in Mihăilescu, 2016, pp. 40-41).

This is the system that lays at the heart of the pedagogical practice in the Bucharest theatre school. Established in 1954 by merging two forms of higher education, the „I.L. Caragiale” Institute of Theatre and Cinema followed from the beginning the direction of a “scientific rationalism based on cognitive processing and grafted on a methodical intellectual study” (Mihăilescu, 2016, p. 101), present in all areas of Romanian education (even nowadays), be it artistic, philological or technical. The organization of the educational act in the teaching-learning-evaluation stages, doubled by the structuring of the subject in analytical programs with clear objectives, supports the Stanislavskian pedagogical desideratum. But the Russian model was soon adapted and reinterpreted giving rise to Professor Ion Cojar's method, a defining development for the school's didactic concept. The practice of creative exercises starting from the "magic if" naturally leads to the emergence of improvisation. The methodical study of the "unforeseen" within the university begins in the 1960s, with the infiltration of a technical translation, in typewritten form, of several chapters from Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater*. The influence of this event is decisive. On the one hand, there is an assimilation of modern pedagogical concepts, such as learning through play, giving up the teacher-disciple relationship in favour of a prejudice-free search – “we learn from experience and experimentation and no one teaches anyone anything” (Spolin, 2008, p. 49), or the emphasis on the work process – “the process comes before the final result” (Spolin, 2008, p. 59), a principle famously formulated by Ion Cojar as “the process, not the success!”. From a practical point of view, the improvisation exercises

³ "Before, I used to prepare everything - the atmosphere, the setting, the staging and then I told the actor Here you have to play. But now I don't prepare anything else for the actor, except for what I saw that he needs and his heart demands." (Stanislavski, 1950)

underwent multiple adaptations, and the “folklore” thus formed acquired the quality of tradition in the Bucharest school⁴.

Nowadays, improvisation continues to be an essential training method for actors at UNATC, based on the principles formulated by Professor Ion Cojar (1988, p. 88) at the centre of which there is the “MAN, in his irreducible totality, and his dynamic behaviour”. The first semester within the first year of undergraduate studies is dedicated to activities that prepare the student for the rigors and demands of working in this particular education system, but also for the specific requirements of theatrical education. Also, this first year is essential in developing the main skills underlying theatrical education, as stated by Professor Adrian Titieni, PhD:

Improvisation is a concept that we use in the idea of improving the actor's skills and expertise; [it] is a complementary study, which comes in a natural symbiosis with the actor's art, in the idea of being able to develop imagination under the sign of spontaneity, solving obstacles or a problem, develop creativity and last but not least, find the solution during rehearsals, during the performances, in order to reach a goal on a different path that the novelty of the moment describes. [...] In fact, improvisation accompanies the actor all his life (Mihăilescu, 2016, pp. 117-118).

The analytical program for the discipline entitled “Actor's Art” includes an extensive description of objectives set for the training based on improvisation. The practical approach is faithful to the pedagogical principle “from simple to complex”, following the path of knowledge and self-knowledge through the Game system:

Clarifying the difference between *game* and *play* and establishing that *the game* involves very strict rules, the student will be invited to discover, in an atmosphere of beneficial competition, the fact that each game, regardless of the difficulty it presents, has a very great representation in the art and stage creation (*Programa analitică a Cursului de Arta Actorului*, 2020, p. 2)

This phase aims primarily at training and developing *specific skills*, the importance of which is given by the fact that, through them, “relationships are established with all other components of the personality, contributing to the effective behaviour of the individual, to his performance” (Popa, 2017, p. 64). On the premise of reconsidering “talent” (Spolin, 2008, p. 49) in favour of creativity, the training aims to regain the natural component through games that develop observation skills, attention, memory, imagination, spontaneity, intuition and group work. It is important to note that training these specific skills must be a continuous process, as they can regress and even disappear. The second work stage introduces the concept of *dramatic conflict* in order to stimulate “acceptance of diversity in thinking, differentiation of justifications, discovery that the possibilities of

⁴ Victor Mihăilescu (2016, p. 107) mentions another document about improvisational training for student actors entitled “Improvisation as a Means of Developing the Physical and Mental Skills of the Actor”, dated “April 1964”, a kind of program for an improvisation course.

interpersonal relationships are multiple, which leads to gaining individual freedom in relation to the dramatic circumstance." (*Programa analitică a Cursului de Arta Actorului*, 2020, p. 4) Accepting that "all the characters are within us", what follows is:

the *ascent* from myself to the character [which] has three crucial moments: 1) Myself in a given circumstances; 2) the discovery, purpose, my role in the stage convention; 3) Assuming the concept, the logical mechanism of the character, the substitution, Myself, the role, the character (Cojar, 1998, p. 79).

This process is done in stages, through "selective use of certain work tools acquired in the study of Improvisation" (*Programa analitică a Cursului de Arta Actorului*, 2020, p. 5). Particularly useful is clarifying the concept of *theatrical parameters* that will become a basic tool in the actor's practice:

If in dramatic writing there is still the rule of the three unities regarding action, time and space, in the creative process of the actor, the stage situation is guided by a number of theatrical parameters: Where? Where from? When? Since when? What? Why? (Darie, 2015, p. 132).

As a culmination of the skills thus acquired, at the end of the semester the students work on short of improvisation sketches based on dramatizations, using the written text *in extenso* as support for generating dramatic situations.

Once detailed, it is impressive how rigorous and structured the training in acting is, whose purpose is not to improve "a working model, a technique, but the training of all cognitive, affective and psychomotor sub-processes that define personal experience. In fact, this training (and, especially, its self-regulatory, self-taught and self-applicable character) is *the technique*" (Mihăilescu, 2016, p. 117). The exercises used by UNATC teachers are extremely diverse, given the tradition of this type of pedagogical approach. However, there are two main sources: the combination of their own versions (adapted, invented or "inherited" from the school's "folklore") and the methodical documentation. In this regard, the observation of conf. univ. dr. Mircea Gheorghiu is particularly relevant:

All good schools try to structure their methods on what is extraordinary and efficient. [...] Stanislavski is present, Augusto Boal less, Meisner is present, Strasberg is present, Viola Spolin is present, Ion Cojar is present (obviously, through what they wrote), Michael Chekhov is present. From each we have taken things that, in one way or another, we consider necessary in order for the student to be informed or trained. Each teacher, during his experience, empathized with one author or another, but it is certain that Viola Spolin's games and her principles of theatre and improvisation are, in one way or another, conveyed (Mihăilescu, 2016, p. 119).

In recent years, the Actor's Art Department has published through UNATC Press works of major interest that update concepts, visions and principles, both of the Faculty's professors and of some prominent personalities in the theatre field, as well as collections of games and improvisation exercises. These efforts facilitate both the specific study of

practical, pedagogical and research aspects, as well as the access to theatrical education in general.⁵

In the 2020/21 academic year, the educational process was significantly hampered by the global pandemic generated by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2, therefore the conduct of live courses became uncertain. After a first semester of hybrid education, with over 6 weeks of online courses (out of 14 weeks of course and 3 of academic session), it is to be expected that specific topics will require further study. Despite the efforts of teachers and students alike, it cannot be denied that the educational process specific to the Actor's Art was corrupted by the limitation of physical contact, given the strong sensory and kinaesthetic component of improvisation. With the start of the campaign to immunize the population and the rolling back of distancing rules, there is a prospect of returning to a framework of workshops that would take place in favourable conditions and even conducive to the development and training of future actors. Therefore, this analysis continues with the suggestion of a workshop that would meet the students' current needs, focused on the technique of improvisation.

As usual, students start by setting the rules: the workshop will last 2 hours without break, the training clothing is mandatory, the acting notebook and a writing tool are to be kept at hand, the phones are switched off⁶ and each participant places an object of personal significance on the coordinator's table. These notes are necessary not only to clearly establish the framework, but especially due to the fact that the last rule is that, during the workshop, no one is allowed to speak (except for the coordinator). The aim is, on the one hand, to restrict communication to the non-verbal level and to explore alternative means of expression, and on the other hand, to understand the organic path that leads to the need to use words. Through this limitation, students are encouraged to discover the freedom to act autonomously, to make decisions, to answer for themselves any questions or concerns related to the following exercises.

Once these aspects are clarified, a Brownian movement starts⁷, during which the participants focus their attention on the activity they are about to take part in, on their body posture (which must be relaxed but active), on their working partners. Following the coordinator's instructions, they organize in two parallel lines across from each other, one of girls and one of boys. They are encouraged to look, to observe carefully the person in front

⁵ Most of the works are available in digital form on the UNATC website:

<https://www.unatc.ro/cercetare/carti-unatc.php>

<https://www.unatc.ro/cercetare/carti-unatc-junior.php>

⁶ Unfortunately, this is a reminder that must be constantly repeated to younger generations.

⁷ In regard to this well-known term in theatrical pedagogy in Romania, conf. univ. dr. Mihaela Sirbu (2020) notes:

[...] it is, obviously, improperly used. In the Brownian motion, as is well known, the particles collide with each other, this collision having the gift to change their trajectory. When we say Brownian movement in theatre, we mean random movement through the workspace, so that the participants do not collide! (p. 11)

of them. In turn, they will take a step towards each other, experiencing the change of perspective given by the physical closeness. Students are informed that the person in front of them will become their working partner for the rest of the workshop and are invited to focus on the connection to be developed in relation to them, isolating themselves from the rest of the group⁸. When possible, they experience the physical touch of the hands, after which they receive the suggestion to find, by mutual agreement, a place within the space. This is followed by a theme that, on the one hand, is an exercise in deep relaxation and confidence, and on the other hand, a body research approach. One of the participants sits on the floor with his eyes closed⁹ keeping active his attention focused on the kinaesthetic experience, and the partner embarks on an exploration of the colleague's body, following one or more planes: the deep level, skeletal assembly, the average level of muscle composition and the superficial, tactile level. Once the whole body is thus observed, the point of concentration becomes the work with the weight, so the active student must lift and support the upper body of his partner in a hug, while the latter is completely relaxed and "allows" to be maneuvered by his colleague. Then the partners exchange places and the exercise resumes, this time without the coordinator's guidance. At the end, the two open their eyes, position themselves face to face, observe themselves and their partner, as well as the quality of the connection between them. A reciprocal body exploration follows, this time consciously performed, which will be doubled at some point by the coordinator's indication: "What if you were a couple?". Students are encouraged to explore this situation by "act"-ing together with their partner in the workspace. In turn, each pair is invited to choose, by mutual agreement and without speaking (or mimicking unnaturally), an object (except the personal one), then return to the chosen place.

After a while, the students are instructed to put down the object, move away from their partner and find a new place in the workspace. During this moment of detachment, of returning to the condition of a participant to the workshop, each of them receives a copy of a short text, in the simple form of AB, which he/she will actualize¹⁰ later. Students are encouraged to study the given part, to analyse the dramatic situation, to assume the specific logical mechanism of the role as resulted from the text, and, when they are ready, to return to the "acting" space, where they left the object chosen by the couple. The coordinator allows some time for the re-harmonization of the partners to the new context, after which he enables the development of the scene by using the given words, insisting that the lines must become necessary. Once the scene is over, the students are encouraged to leave the acting space, return the object, choose another place in the room and write in their notebook, in the form of free-thought, personal impressions of the workshop experience. Finally, everyone chooses just one sentence to share with the group, as part of the evaluation.

⁸ The ideal version involves an equal number of girls and boys in the group, but alternatives can be found if this is not possible. However, the even number of participants is mandatory.

⁹ Can be explained as the "0" position in the horizontal or *savasana* in Yoga

¹⁰ In the sense defined by Prof. Ion Cojar (1998, p. 69)

Such an improvisation workshop is based on learning through experimenting, discovery and communication, with respect to the pedagogical principles previously analysed. The suggested exercises and games develop all cognitive, affective and psycho-motor skills (attention, observation, memory, imagination, intuition, spontaneity, working with a partner), which are then transferred to "an actor's work on the role" as Stanislavski called it. Despite the imposed limitations, the student will discover a vast freedom of expression and creativity, which is based in skills that are trained in a rigorous and steadfast manner.

In order to understand it in all its complexity, this theatrical phenomenon called improvisation must be seen as part of the performative act. From the birth of theatre in ancient Greece and the *mimesis* as a way of understanding human nature, the elements of popular theatre of the Commedia dell'Arte and the aesthetic refinement generated by the rigors of French classicism, to the spectacular experimental forms of the twentieth century and its integration as a pedagogical method, improvisation has always accompanied theatre, as a revelation of playfulness and freedom of creative expression, based on study and continuous training. Theatrical education aims not only to become a space for developing one's area of expertise, in accordance with the current rigors of the profession, but also to provide a suitable framework for experimentation and reflection, as

the skills that an actor uses in an improvisation, to be authentic and to establish a connection with the audience, are the same skills we need to live authentically. Honesty, introspection, taking risks bring us into the position of being truly ourselves, of living authentically (Goodman, 2008, quoted in Mihăilescu, 2016, pp. 35-36).

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Andreea Hristu is an actress and a contemporary dance performer. She studied Acting at the Faculty of Theatre and Television within UBB, Cluj-Napoca, and later graduated with a Master's degree in Acting at UNATC, Bucharest. In 2013, through an Erasmus scholarship, she took part in Prof. David Esrig's acting classes at Athanor Akademie in Germany. Some of the directors and choreographers she has collaborated with over the years are Mihai Măniuțiu, Alexandru Dabija, Răzvan Mazilu, Catinca Drăgănescu, András Lóránt, Elena Anghel, Vava Ștefănescu, Arcadie Rusu. She has been part of the Excelsior Theatre team in Bucharest since 2017 and is currently studying for a Masters in Theatre Pedagogy at UNATC.