S K E N È

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Puppet, Death, and the Devil:
Presences of Afterlife in Puppet Theatre

Edited by Nicola Pasqualicchio

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Miscellany

Special Section

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The Actor-Author: its Presence and Absence in the Romanian Theatre

Abstract

This article tackles a debate in Romanian theatre about the term actor-author. While some theatre-makers and scholars use this concept, there is not enough research in the field to articulate a praxis discourse. The following article aims to contribute to the definition of actor-author and provide a brief history of the type of work practitioners employ when identifying as an actor-author. By conducting interviews and leading discussions with actors, the role of the actor-author within creative groups and the techniques and positions when working on an artistic project are brought into question. Furthermore, the present study is also concerned with the tools used by actor-authors to create performances while examining whether particular methodologies set this type of artist apart from other creators in the field. In conclusion, this research aims to bring some light on the definition of actor-author and clarify the positions of this type of practitioner in the Romanian theatre context.

KEYWORDS: theatre; performance; actor-author; authorship; dramaturgy; actor-director relationship

This research is concerned with understanding a new term encountered in the theatre world, especially in European theatre, namely actor-author. There are discussions about this new type of theatre-makers and its duality, however, there is little research aiming to explain what it means to be an actor-author and the duties of such an artist.

The following work is based on small-scale qualitative research conducted to enquire into the use of the term actor-author by practitioners in the Romanian theatre context. Structured interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires were used on a total of thirty randomly selected artists between twenty and thirty-five years old. Researchers chose questionnaires and interviews with open and closed questions to obtain an in-depth perspective on the personal insights of the interviewees. Using a narrative interpretation, researchers provide testimonies and narrative analysis. While using a traditional approach and literature review, there is also a practice-as-research component as this study was conducted by a researcher who identifies

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as a writer, actor, and actor-author - roles that support the theme of this study and its genuine motivation. For more significant comprehension of the phenomenon and to assess the implications of using the term actor-author, a specific quantification was used; more precisely, all the information has been interpreted for a better understanding, which will be covered in depth throughout the article.

Before defining actor-author, a look into the meaning of playwright, or dramatist, is necessary. Some suggest that there is no clear distinction between the term 'dramaturg(e)' and 'dramatist'. The *OED* defines 'dramaturge' as a "composer of a drama; a play-wright", defining dramaturgy as "dramatic composition; the dramatic art" (n. 1), or alternatively, as "dramatic or theatrical acting" (n. 2). *The Penguin Dictionary of the Theatre* is clearer, discussing the work of a dramaturg as a "literary editor", predominantly working for a permanent theatre company, whose primary responsibility is to select plays for production, work with authors, revise and adapt texts, and write reviews or notes. For example, the National Theatre in London appointed Kenneth Tynan, a British critic and playwright, to such a position in 1963, giving him the title "Literary Administrator". However, the Romanian dictionary defines dramaturg (playwriter) as an "author of plays". Patrice Pavis, professor of drama at Kent University, defines playwright as an "author of dramas" (2012, 120), pointing out that the preferred denotation today for a playwright is the dramatic author.

Two authors laid the foundation for today's concept of drama: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Bertolt Brecht. Since Lessing, German theatre has focused on dramaturgy, playwrighting, and the strategic positions, or rather the different functions of the playwright in theatre. Two of the most prominent German playwrights of the twentieth century, Bertolt Brecht and Heiner Müller, partly identified themselves with the term playwright. In Germany's major theatres, the playwright reads and writes new plays, takes an advisory role in repertory selection and ruminates about the social goals of the theatre, though not exclusively. This is what John Rouse (1989) called the "Literary Conscience" of theatre. In the Brechtian model, playwrights have a primary responsibility as researcher and philologist. Their role includes devising, researching, and contextualising the text; they are also responsible for translating, rewriting, or restructuring texts. Since ancient times the playwright has often been part of a large creative team, including the director, the set designer, the choreographer and the actors, beside being the driving force behind the artistic act. A landmark in theatre history is Lessing's appointment as a playwright at the Hamburg Theatre in 1767; he was effectively the world's first dramaturg. Although he served as playwright in Hamburg for only two years, from 1767 to 1769, his experimental work inspired generations and brought immediate reform in Germany and later

in Eastern Europe. Lessing's dramatic works include *Miss Sara Sampson*, a drama of bourgeois family life, and *Nathan the Wise*, a philosophical drama "with express atheistic tendencies, . . . a denial of the dogmatism of all religions, a plea for humanity, tolerance, and generosity" (Drîmba 2007, 128). This reform, this shift in the theatrical paradigm, did not immediately take hold in European spaces. Still, it did spread afterwards in the late nineteenth century, primarily through playwrights such as Harley Granville Barker and William Archer. Thus the twentieth century saw the first official appointments of literary managers or playwrights at theatres in England (Lessing 1935).

Iulia Popovici suggests that today's playwrights no longer look like the classical playwright, due to the fact that modern playwrights collaborate as active members of the creative team. Offering the perspective that modern playwrights directly shape the trajectory of the artistic product, Popovici explains that "playwriting is no longer seen as necessarily a literary activity, but also a kinaesthetic, scenographic and musical one". She continues that "in the 21st century, the performance script is increasingly an unstable entity, a deliberately open-ended structure, tangential to the audience's reaction, and not a blueprint for performance" (2015, 26). Most of the time, several working methods that have appeared relatively recently, in addition to those already popularised, are being addressed, such as devised theatre, known in Romanian as 'collective creation' and as 'collaborative practices'. All these working methods are based on the desire to question the existing hierarchies of power in theatre, and most artists in the 1960s and 1970s resorted to alternative auctorial forms. Alison Oddey observes that "devised theatre is concerned with the collective creation of art (not the single version of the playwright) and it is here that the emphasis has shifted from the writer to the creative artist" (1994, 4).

In her analysis of the foundations of the modern drama, Marie-Christine Autant-Mathieu affirmed that:

> after the wave and the vogue of happenings and collective creation, of document-theatre, of narrative theatre, which populated the landscape of the 70s, textless theatre, pure performance, seduced several directors. Dramatic writing was being overshadowed by stage writing. Interest in theatre text was challenged by modernity, which was essentially absorbed in a cult of the image. The artisans of this desacralisation, of this devaluation of the play, picked up, provocatively, Antoine Vitez's formula: 'I believe one can make theatre out of anything.' Epigones understood his act of faith as the need to adjust the text to fit the show's pattern. Therefore, the text is functional in the show, but it no longer directs it; it no longer informs it. The stage is no longer serving the text, but instead, the text adapts to the theatre devices. (1995, 13)

Therefore, we can perceive a distancing of artists from the old theatrical for-

ms and a new approach to the creative process.

Devised theatre can be defined as "a countercultural practice practised by iconoclastic practitioners acting against traditional forms and theatrical conventions" (Mermikides and Smart 2010, 4). As mentioned, this type of practice pursues the notion of displacing authority in theatre, but not exclusively. Here, playwrights are no longer in their classical position as the creator of text; playwrights become general authors, equal to the other team members. Playwrights are no longer playwrights - they are creators among other creators. Most of the time, they take on the tasks of the set designer, choreographer, or director, fluidly moving between the three roles; in devised theatre, nothing is set in stone.

Furthermore, Michael Zelenak, in one of his articles, "Why We Don't Need Directors: A Dramaturgical/Historical Manifesto" (2003, 105), underlines the importance of collective dramaturgy and explains the necessity of creating theatre with artists who play multiple roles, referring to the fluidity of roles in contemporary theatre and elaborating a new description of the contemporary actor, which he defines as an artist who performs the duties of actor, playwright and dramaturg altogether. Thus, discussions around the complexity and necessity of the actor-author in different cultural spaces, observe the term's definition as an artist who covers more than the duty of an actor in modern theatre.

New categories of playwrights have emerged - such as the actor-author, the director-author, or the choreographer-author - from these observed changes in their duties, ways of working, and perspectives of thinking and making theatre. An actor often constructs the text within a team and contributes direct ideas, concepts, or new images. This type of actor-author usually works from the actor's perspective who constructs the text to benefit the author in the artistic act. The director-author is also a widespread practice in European countries, one that has been flourishing since the 1920s and 1930s. In Romania, it arrived much later.

An excellent example of this is Gianina Cărbunariu:

> The reason why Gianina Cărbunariu says that she chose to write the script for her plays is due to two factors. On the one hand, the extremely precarious budget of the production, and on the other hand, much more importantly, the feeling of urgency that she and her colleagues felt to talk about the here and now. . . (Popovici 2015, 60)

Creation becomes collective and playwrights are integrated and absorbed into the heart of it; the actors, the set designers, the choreographers, and the directors are their equals. The position of the playwrights and their way of working has changed. Playwrights have become the children of the theatre and were nurtured and cared for by the vast family of the universal theatre.

In this approach, actors are no longer mere actors in performance and begin playing a very significant role in the process. Their contribution is reflected in the dramatic material that they provide throughout rehearsals.

As discussed above, creative thought - the thought that makes you want to tell a story - is essential, first and foremost, when devising a dramatic text. According to George Banu, when you write, "you write not just from yourself, but from your ego fertilized in the powers of the stage" (2007, 10). First, you have to give the stage something, and it will provide you with everything in return; it is important to believe in a close, reciprocal reality between the stage (the workspace) and the playwright (the artist). Secondly, the structure you choose - the plot, the type of ending, the character typologies, the changes is important in your work as a playwright. Most of the time these days, this process doesn't happen at home, at the playwright's table. Instead, we can observe different working practices based on a collective script, both in the more expansive European space and in Romania, in which the playwright is absent.

In contrast, others have an omnipresent playwright active in the team; good examples include Milo Rau's *La Reprise – History/ies of Theatre (I)*[1] or Cristian Ban's performance *MaMe.*[2] Both performances were collectively created, except that in the first case, we have a text written by the director and the rest of the team. Hence, the director is also a writer, and in the second example, the director is just a coordinator.

Both examples include dramaturgical thinking (Romanska 2014), which can be done by anyone, not only by the playwright but also by a team of actors; together, they can fulfill the function of the playwright. Jean-Marc Adolphe refers to dramaturgical thinking as something that can be facilitated in different ways and by different collaborators. However, in his writing, he avoids discussing the playwright as having a specialised role. Instead, Adolphe considers dramaturgical thinking as necessary in collective productions, describing it as a shared dramaturgy that belongs to the creative group (1998, 27). The texts written jointly by troupes of actors who currently practice *Commedia dell'Arte*[3] skillfully exhibit this today; the actors also create their characters according to the chosen theme and subject of the performance.

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[1] *La Reprise – History/ies of Theatre (I)*, Théâtre National Wallonie - Bruxelles, Milo Rau. Cast: Kristien de Proost, Suzy Cocco, Sébastien Foucault, Fabian Leenders, Sabri Saad El hamus, Adil Laboudi; first performance: 2018.

[2] *MaMe*, Dramatic Theatre Fani Tardini- Galaţi, Cristian Ban. Cast: Svetlana Friptu, Radu Horghidan, Ana Maria Ciucanu, Ionuţ Moldoveanu, Elena Anghel, Ştefan Forir, Oana Mogoş, Răzvan Clopoţel; first performance: 2020.

[3] In the Romanian theatre faculties, most of the acting students practice *Commedia dell'Arte* during their studies, and they acquire the ability to write a dramatic text and enhance their dramaturgical thinking.

In the case of actors who use this kind of dramaturgical thinking, the text is often based on a common goal set by the troupe. Texts are created through different forms and procedures, such as brainstorming or self-dictation. They are then collected and collated by the troupe members to finally construct a unified text.

In the case of playwrights who work on stage directly with the actors, they become observers and often draw inspiration from the world of each actor. Playwrights often understand the text's main idea from the first meeting. However, even though they know the direction and aim of the text, they do not know its development. Successful playwrights are open playwrights, open to changes and proposals. They do not write the text alone, but together with the common body of the team; playwrights gather texts, then coordinate and arrange them by choosing the structure.

So, whatever the process of devising a dramatic text - whether it is coordinated and thought out by a single person, the playwright, or a team of actors (artists) - the essential element of this process is dramaturgical thinking. Moreover, we should not forget that "the dramatic text is represented as a hypothesis whose addressee is not the reader but the spectator" (2013, 111). Theatre is action, it is change and reaction.
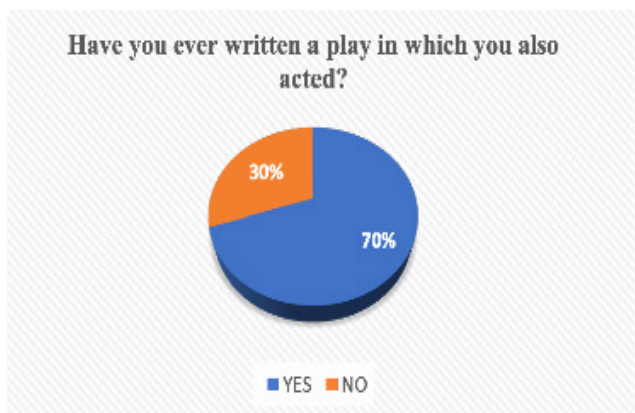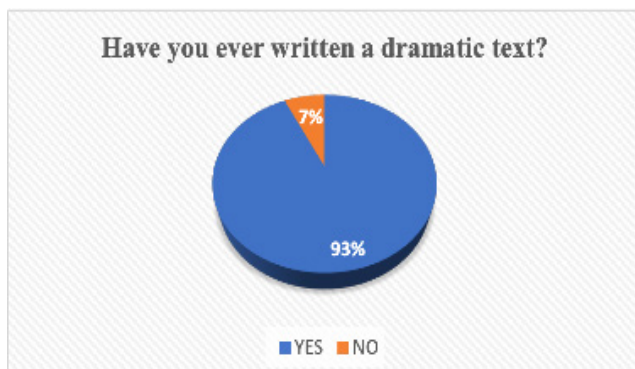
Observing these recent changes that have taken place, including the way theatre is made today, the fluidisation of roles in theatre is brought to the foreground. As a result, we can discuss a new evolutionary cycle in the universal, especially European, theatre while breaking boundaries that concern the position of artists in the working team.
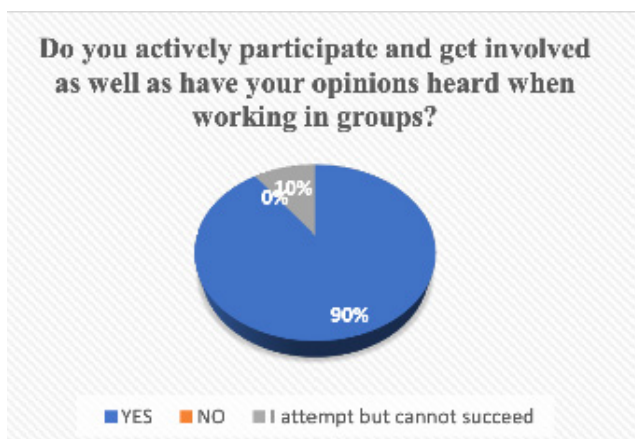
In the words of the authors Cathy Turner and Synne K. Behrndt, "dramaturgical thinking and practice are developing very quickly, overtaking research and publication" (2008, 14). We can therefore notice the interest of practitioners towards dramaturgy and towards this sort of thinking. It is evident that more and more actors started to develop this dramaturgical thinking style in European theatre schools and started to write dramatic texts, which they then performed or staged with other actors. It is likely that many actors also write, but the question that arises when they publish or perform their texts is: from what perspective do they do it?

More and more actors began to write and perform their dramatic texts, especially at the end of the last millennium, a good example being Spalding Gray (1941-2004), an American actor known for the autobiographical monologues he wrote and performed between 1980 and 1990. Also, here we can talk about actors in the Hollywood sphere who started this practice, such as Chazz Palminteri (b. 1952), who wrote and starred in his autobiographical one-man show called *A Bronx Tale*[4] on Broadway or many more.

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[4] Broadway production, co-directed by Robert De Niro, premiered in 2016.

For a better comprehension of this phenomenon, we can focus further on the questionnaires and interviews conducted to better understand the practitioners' perspective. We can observe their responses to a few of the queries we addressed in the following graphics.

Do you consider yourself an *actor-author*?

40%

60%

■ YES ■ NO

Do you actively participate and get involved as well as have your opinions heard when working in groups?

0% 10%

90%

■ YES   ■ NO   ■ I attempt but cannot succeed

How much has university contributed to your professional development?

0%

50% 50%

■ Helped me moderately   ■ It didn't help me much

■ It has helped me tremendously
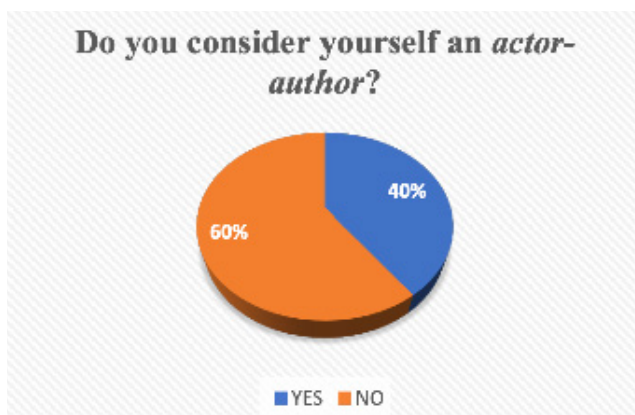
Do you think the public needs to know that you are the author of the text if you wrote it?

25%

75%
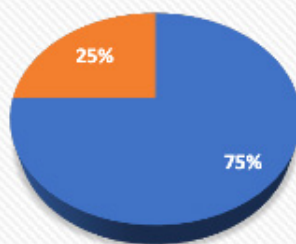
■ YES ■ NO

How significant is it for you to have a strong working relationship with the director?

2%

98%

■ Important ■ Not important

Have you ever worked with methods such as *Devised Theatre?*

25%

75%

■ YES ■ NO

It is important to note that most of the interviewed artists write dramatic texts and some of them also act in the texts they write. The statistics show that a high proportion of the subjects - even if 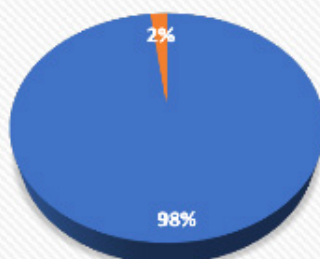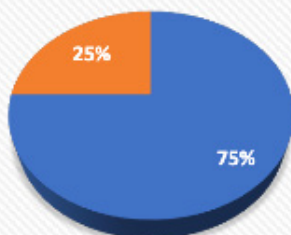they do not consider themselves actor-authors or do not resonate with this term - feel the need to acknowledge that they have authored the dramatic text whether they do so in a collaborative or non-collaborative project.

Although *Commedia dell'Arte* is practiced in Romanian drama schools, dramatisation is studied in acting classes and students are encouraged to learn what dramaturgical thinking consists of, but half of them said that the university did not significantly help them grow and develop their artistic careers. Nevertheless, it can be remarked that most of them have worked at least once with a devised theatre or a collaborative practices method, which tells us more about the relevance of teamwork and the importance of overcoming boundaries of authority and dominance in theatre.

For most of them, the presence of the director is essential. As Mihailovici Nikolai Gorceakov stated, "the director is first and foremost an organiser. Organiser of one's thoughts, dreams, organiser of one's fellow troupe members". (2016, 137). Most of them said that the actor-director relationship is necessary for this kind of work, even if the actor is also the author of the play. One of the participants stated: "Most of the time, the cooperation with the director also exists during the writing process of the text and when working on stage, as I often act in my texts. Whenever possible, I like the texts I write to be performed in accordance with what I have intended, and for that, I need endless discussions with the director and the other actors".

Furthermore, the participants were asked in their own words to define the actor-author term; below are a few selections from their responses:

- The person who reaches the point of performing their writing, or an actor who reaches the point of writing for others.
- Someone who has the ability to organise their ideas in writing with the purpose of putting them on stage.
- An individual who works as an actor but also writes dramatic texts. The two do not necessarily have to intersect.
- An artist who is able to act in the performance they write. I think it is a much more personal experience since you're also writing the text, and you're also an actor - an even more self-contained process as a creator.
- An actor who proposes, an actor who knows how to coherently express himself and sees everything from a dramaturgical and directorial perspective. An actor who doesn't limit himself to acting.
- It depends on how you look at the term. Acting helps me a lot in the writing process. Most of the time, I write texts from the perspective of the actor who uses dramatic thinking and wants to write texts for himself as an actor or for other actors. Besides, I have noticed that

those who have graduated in Directing for theatre understand the meaning of structure well in writing a text, and those who have studied acting stand out with the thread of dialogue and complexity of characters. The actor-author term is not a term I necessarily identify with anymore, but that may be because I abandoned the idea of being an actress because of the pandemic. I used to be flattered by my double specialisation; now, I present myself as a dramaturg only.

It can be noticed that actor-authors, or actors who write dramatic texts, differentiate their practice and methodology. They often write from an actor's perspective and needs, starting by analysing what an actor would need on stage. Throughout the interviews I conducted, it became clear they want to write their own texts as dramaturgs, and they want these texts to come from their experiences so that they can be reenacted on stage from the actor's perspective. Therefore, dramatic thinking, the need to write a dramatic text, and the actor's position fuse together to create a middle ground. On the one hand, we can say that actor-authors desire truly personal texts that speak to them first and foremost. On the other hand, actor-authors have the freedom to give themselves stage actions to create dramatic situations favorable to the play they propose for the text they write.

Hence, most actor-authors, whether they identify with this term or not, have a common practice: they approach their texts from the actor's perspective who wants to perform their dramaturgy, and they rely heavily on the realities and dynamics of the group in which they work or create. Most of them are not just actors who write; they are artists whose status is faded when they enter the creative group, and they work side by side with the rest of the team, committed to a common goal. Even if they have been writing text and performing, they are open to collaborating in any way in the artistic creation. However, a majority of these artists have used new working methods such as *devised theatre*, but not exclusively as we have previously observed, and have a predisposition towards working collaboratively, on stage, or in creative groups; devised theatre is "the theatre of the *actor-creator*", as Lisa Kathleen Jackson emphasises (2006, 15).

Therefore, we can define the actor-author through the prism of their duality and their working methodology. This type of artist encompasses dramaturgical thinking, combining dramaturgical and theatrical roles.

In conclusion, it can be said that there is a change in how actors think, and there is a fusion of the roles they have in Romanian theatre. In the Romanian theatrical practice, we observe these particular artists, th*e* actor-authors, who work according to their methodology and are active in the creative group. Although these artists do not often consider themselves actor-authors or actor-dramaturgs, they fulfill the functions of both positions most of the time — if not always. We can see the importance of dramaturgical thinking,

which is put into practice by the actor-authors. It is considered important that all practitioners embrace the art of dramaturgical thinking and understand its benefits from a multilateral perspective, and practice using new tools to thoroughly explore their art. Even if this is promoted in Romanian schools, most of the graduates are not completely satisfied with the methods they use in their classes and point out that more attention needs to be paid to dramaturgical thinking. To help artists prepare for the reality of today's theatres, this type of learning needs to be embraced from school to training.

The study is worth extending further, and we intend to do so by following the principles of quantitative research design, such as using tables, charts, graphs and other non-numerical forms, thus facilitating the understanding of the data that has been collected. All this for a better understanding of the perspective of the subjects and to conduct a more in-depth investigation of the topic.

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