

**DOCTORAL SCHOOL FOR THEATRE AND PERFORMING ARTS  
DOCTORAL FIELD: THEATRE AND PERFORMING ARTS**

**THESIS SUMMARY**

**The actor's world of silence: the structural significance and the artistic impact of silence  
in the theatre**

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## Prologue: a defence of the non-verbal in theatre

The starting point that I considered crucial for any critical analysis of the importance and the impact of silence in theatre is the true, yet painful realization that we live in a world (mundane or artistic) which is defined by noise. Whether we think of the omnipresent music in bars and pubs, automobiles, public spaces, the dehumanizing noise of the cities, or the ubiquitous ovations at the end of a theatre performance, which have largely lost their significance due to the aforementioned fact, we can't but admit that the modern individual associates entertainment and a good time with noise. Both as part of the Department of Theater Art and as actor at Radu Stanca National Theatre I noticed the lack of literature on one of the most significant elements of modern theater: the actor's silence. Actors, directors and screen writers can only interpret silence through the filter of their own personal experience; nevertheless, in theatre, the term remains foggy and uncertain.

Silence in theatre, and especially in the actor's art, creates a perception niche and experience which allow new ways of understanding art. The break offered by silence allows both the actor and the spectator to discover new sides to the artistic dimension and to filter the dramatic text and its representation on a different level. In the beginning was the word – in the end, there can only be silence, especially if we refer to the post-modern critical receptions, according to which everything has already been said and everything that might be created has already been created. In this apparently difficult context for artistic creation, it is vital to see the significance of acting talent which is necessary for interpreting the text through mimicry and movement, rather than. Language and text.

The silent world of theatre, from Chekhov's eloquent pauses to Wilder's animated mimicry, from Pinter's painful silence to Beckett's non-verbal dramas, there is, as Bari Rolf says, a world of corporality, where one speaks body language and where the actor's body language, gestures and actions need to be filled with meaning and theatrical body. To paraphrase Jaque Lecoq, the founder of the Paris School of Mimicry and Theater, silence does not necessarily substitute the word, nor is it superior to it, but are corollary to it.

### **Chapter 1. Nonverbal in theater. From silence in antique theatre to mime and the gesture of commedia dell'arte**

The first chapter started from the idea according to which contemporary mimicry refuses to accept mimicry as technique. Modern mimicry creates a blend of rigorous physical training, being closely connected to acting notions – a process that creates a complex alchemy: clowning, traditional mimicry, commedia dell'arte, dance, physical theater, visuals, acting and design.

Thus, I was curious to find out what is the function of silence within the discourse, from a linguistic point of view. In linguistic discourse as a discipline, the preferred and less preferred answers, are not applied to the interlocutor's silence: silence is not the expected answer, nor is it an unwanted answer. Silence can be defined as a non-answer. Other causes for silence can be categorized here, for instance illness or an unreceptive state, similar to those present in Sophocles' Philoctet or Euripides' Hippolytus. These examples can be perceived as locutionary inefficiency, as the interlocutors cannot communicate due to various external factors; they do not understand the requirements.

A close-up look at the dramatic texts under analysis revealed the paradoxical nature of silence in antique theater: because it signals a break in the metric language of tragedy, I have come to the conclusion that silent characters still offer an answer, despite the fact that they are silent, or thanks to the fact that they are silent. The types of silence highlighted might carry illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects: by choosing not to speak, the interlocutors offer a more profound reaction and cause a more powerful effect upon the speaker. The silence of the persuasive discourse are either the effect of certain external factors – for instance illness or madness – or of internal factors, such as strong emotions. Discourse analysis terms may prove helpful in classifying types of silence, as well as their explanations: thus we can distinguish voluntary and involuntary silence, internal and external silence, as well as the degree of influence of the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor. The fact that the silent characters choose to answer as they do, indicates dramatical significance.

Routine or necessary moments of silence do not usually carry much dramatic relevance. The spectator's attention is not drawn to them, thus, they often go unnoticed. On the other hand, playwrights discovered and demonstrated that silence can be filled with significance and can, more often than not, express more than words. The spectator pays attention to silence when it carries meaning. Such a moment of silence is not necessarily required by technical issues. They are part of the performance. The distinction between significant and insignificant moments of silence is vital. According to Taplin, certain types of silence are positioned halfway. He goes on to argue that the traditional analysis of Aeschylus' work ignored the double typology of silence, thus giving birth to naïve doctrines, and neglecting significant arguments.

Focusing on *commedia dell'arte*, one of the most fascinating aspects that I discovered analyzing the images of early performances of that time, is their enigmatic corporality, the way in which the actors take certain positions, and have gestures that seem exaggerated, hyperbole-like, filled with hidden significance, openly emblematic, but which are not so much visually perceived. This is not at all surprising, given the fact that body language in *commedia dell'arte* functioned as a complex instrument of expression. Gesture and mimicry operated within the same artistic form, and served as replacements of facial expressions, as body movement was supposed to articulate the changes and mimicry of a hidden face and to evoke the sensation of metamorphosis produced by the effect of the mask upon the face. What is more, these movements carried their own expressional function, not modifying the effect produced by direct speech, but underlining the impulses of the exterior world, the various aspects of personality and of the body, occasionally highlighting the context of human nature, character, identity, rather than situations, attitudes, emotions.

Thus, we can conclude that a quick look at the history of silence as a primordial instrument in acting, shows that the literature of antiquity up to modernism completely ignored the vital importance of the non-verbal. The need for dramatic re-evaluation and re-interpretation is evident.

## **Chapter 2. The structure of silence as apparent inactivity. The non-verbal as a bridge towards the verbal**

The second chapter is focused mainly on defining the philosophical and cultural dimension of the term 'silence', applied and applicable to acting, as well as on the effects of silence on the dramatic structure of the performance and on the relationship between actor, director and spectator.

We tried to define the term 'silence' through the lens of different authors who analyzed the phenomenon. My first stop was the Norwegian Erling Kagge, who underlines this very necessary primordial phenomenon. For him, silence is an act of wondering and respect for nature, as he concludes that the two cannot exist in absence of the other. He quotes Heidegger, who also says that when we are silent, we can emerge into a world up to the point of its disappearance. Creative contemplation cannot exist without silence – silence, thus, becoming a *modus vivendi*.

The second critical voice studied was that of Susan Sontag, who demonstrates the profound social nature of silence. Silence is not a social act to Sontag, meant to isolate the individual or the artist, on the contrary – given that art cannot exist without an audience, even when the artist chooses to be silent, art will always find a listener. Sontag also says that the present day world is characterized by a profound and painful paradox: we know that there is nothing left for us to say, yet we continuously talk about it. This is where the world of noise is born, a world which speaks a lot about nothing.

George Prochnik is the third critic whom I focused on. He highlights the fact that silence is a natural and creative reaction to a world where sound is always a narration told to us by someone else. Prochnik offers a Buddhist perspective on silence as a phenomenon, explaining that silence is the choice we make to be quiet in a chaotic world. To whom silence is perspective, it is a choice. Not every action requires a reaction, and choosing to be quiet often means choosing non-action, not being passive, but a profound understanding of the fact that we must not necessarily have an opinion about everything. I also analyzed the nine types of silence defined by Goodman – also adding a tenth type to the list, the one characterizing acting: creative silence. I have defined creative silence as a type of silence born from passiveness, but which, at the same time makes way for new meanings. When the actor is silent on stage he creates new meanings that could not be uttered otherwise. The silence on stage cannot be aligned to any other type of silence defined by the authors mentioned above. It requires a unique status. In this case, silence is not lack of reaction, negation, but a creative flow, source of significance, matrix of being.

In the section entitled *Nonverbal as a bridge towards the verbal* I concluded that the actor needs a specific stage voice, which needs to be different from his everyday voice. Nevertheless, this voice alone is not enough to create a convincing character on stage. Alongside that powerful voice (alluded to by Hamlet) the actor needs to know how to capture and keep the attention of the spectator, by engaging paralanguage, gestures, mimicry, authenticity. I have also focused on the non-verbal as substitute for the verbal. Within the art of mimicry, dance and tumbling, actors depend heavily on non-verbal hints.

The conclusion of this chapter is based on two main ideas: there is a need for a specific definition for the art of acting. The existing definitions of silence cannot encompass the creative character of the actor's art. In conclusion, silence on stage is just apparently inactivity; in fact,

it creates new meaning. It is important for this type of creative silence, typical for the actor, to be studied systematically, as it is completely different from other types of silence defined from a philosophical, social or cultural perspective.

### **Chapter 3. Silence as expanded time. Time, thought and freezing of space through the non-verbal**

In this chapter I came to the conclusion that even though verbal and non-verbal communication can be differentiated based on spoken language, both contain silence, non-verbal communication does not contain speaking and verbal communication is characterized by prosodic elements highlighted by Čulo and Skendrović. Silence can be seen as part of spoken communication, because it may influence rhythm and intonation.

Silence can be seen as related to the environment. Silence is not spoken word or communication per se, but a result of images and events that surround it. Silence is extended throughout space and is influenced by it. Silence as condition of possibility can be possible for any type of communication, as it is not opposed to the spoken word, but rather related to it. In this environment one can either find language or its absence. Both verbal and non-verbal communication can encompass silence as a condition related to environment. They both include silence. If we view silence as a special phenomenon, rather than an action or a state, the understanding of communication is expanded, in order to include the context of environment, in other words, communication can happen in space, but also within the body. As the body is never completely silent, silence is a sort of pre-condition for communication.

Theater needs to be experienced more than just on a hearing level. Dramatic art does not only include written text, but also the text of the performance, which is based on non-verbal communication. In its turn, nonverbal communication can be caused by physical expression. Rosenberg (1963) is for this view, as he states that adding meaning to silence is fundamental in theater communication.

This, verbal and non-verbal communication are closely related, as are space and silence. The two types of communication influence one another and can often be found within the same context. In theater, silence has the ability to communicate, as it is an integral part of communication and context. Silence is often a framework for non-verbal communication.

## **Chapter 4. The fall of the curtain. The actor's art beyond words**

In this chapter I tried a double perspective approach to the actor's art, from a theoretical point of view, based on George Banu and Octavian Saiu's work. This double perspective supported the mission of demonstrating that the actor's art, and art in general, needs to be silent in order to express something. In the era of post-modernism, where everything has already been said and done, where noise is omnipresent in our everyday lives, and in art, we are witnessing a return to the artistic spirit of the creator: silence. I have been particularly interested in how this silence is reflected within the actor's art, the spectator's attitude, and the whole structure of dramatic art.

Saiu mentions movement as part of silence in *Waiting for Godot*. In his opinion the space of the text is characterized by its organic relation with the bodily presence of the character. In all the plays that followed *Godot*, the characters lose their ability to move – ability which the characters had in *Godot*, where the dialogue is accompanied by gestures. In Beckett's plays, those who move the most, speak very little, and vice-versa, says Saiu. Later on, Beckett will introduce more movement to the dialogue in plays for television. I wanted to come back to the idea I underlined in the introductory part, namely movement, body, and gestures – all of which fill the void left by the absence of the verbal in theater. The body carries a tongue-tied voice, of a desperate scream, which, in its turn is tongue-tied and similar to Munch's painting. In *Godot*, Beckett mocks the body itself, as the bodies in the play are dangling within a void, within a space that does not exist – as seen in *Endgame*.

I have concisely analyzed the juxtaposition of sound and silence in some of Beckett's most important radio dramas. I tried to show that sound and silence were completely connected in Beckett's plays, which contributed to the general meaning of his plays – through silence – a means to express the inexpressible.

### **Conclusions**

The aim of this doctoral thesis is the focus on a less discussed and less analyzed topic in the actor's art: the significance of the actor's silence and of silence, in general, within an art usually associated with the spoken word. Of course, it would have been impossible, nor was it my intention, to offer an extensive view upon the topic – but a starting point for future papers that might take on this challenging subject the actor's silence, as well as other points that the present paper did not manage to highlight.