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New Technologies in Documentary Theatre: From Use to Usefulness

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Abstract: There have always been interferences between art and technology, not only at the level of production but also at the level of the artistic outcome. Often, what seemed impossible at a certain moment, was made possible by the hidden technological means, contributing to the magic of the Art of theatre. But is the magic still here when technology is exposed on stage? Is it still useful when its use invades the theatrical space and leaves less and less room for the complexity of human languages? This paper proposes to take a critical look at several recent documentary-style performances, observing and analysing how new technologies do or do not influence the quality of a performance. Nowadays actors interact with them but are they helped or hindered by these artificial presences and what is the effect on the emotions and aesthetical pleasure of the audience?

Keywords: FUTUR4, No Yoghurt for the Dead, Dosarele Siberiei, Evadarea tăcută, technology on stage.

For performing arts cultural consumers, it is undeniable that technology has invaded both our daily lives and the theatre stage. And because theatre has often been considered, since ancient times, as a "mirror of life", it is only

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natural to find on stage what concerns us, what accompanies us in our daily lives, what has become more than a useful tool, turning into an addiction. It is therefore equally natural that the concern of artists and critics alike for the place of new technologies in theatre, especially in relation to the art of acting, should be increasingly active, serious, and legitimate. The specialized literature on this subject, which rightly concerns us, is growing day by day. The aim of this paper is thus to take a critical look at several documentary-style performances, providing an opportunity to formulate observations on how new technologies do or do not influence the quality of a performance, and how contemporary actors interact with, are helped or hindered by them, in improving their stage performance in front of their audience. Is the quality of a performance today dependent on the use of new technologies, or does something else matter? Is their use important for the artists so as to deliver a relevant meaning, or is it secondary, belonging to a mere trend, being no more than complementary stage tools, depending on the talent and vision of each director and actor?

My first observations come from the 2025 Sibiu International Theatre Festival. For 32 years, the entire city has been breathing the joy of the performances promised by the dozens of cultural venues involved in the artistic program, as well as the central streets and squares that come alive with colourful parades and characters stepped out of fantasy worlds for children, but also with acrobatic dance numbers, leaps and balancing on exotic rhythms, fire juggling, and all kinds of demonstrations of physical virtuosity that take spectators out of their daily routine and surprise or even amaze them. It is clear that all these street performances have been carefully chosen, because they go beyond simple entertainment, becoming, for the attentive eye, living proof that art is above all a constant confrontation with self-improvement. Although the first reflex is to take out your phone to film and photograph what you see, many of these casual spectators fortunately allow themselves to be captivated by the spectacular performance unfolding before their eyes, and forget about technology in order to fully experience these moments of mastery, in which the degree of difficulty and the risks involved for the performers are directly proportional to the level of adrenaline and to the pleasure generated.

In fact, nothing compares to this direct, vivid experience, in which you feel that the artists in front of you cannot lie, cannot hide, and that what they are showing you is the fruit of work that you intuit to be all the more difficult and lengthy as the result gives to the superhuman quality of the achievement an incredibly natural and serene appearance. Dance and acrobatics on two-meter-high stilts, aerial choreography with somersaults in which young circus artists float through the air, as if defying all the laws of physics, have the merit of impressing, arousing curiosity among passers-by, generating questions about human capabilities and, implicitly, giving courage and confidence that the human being can do much more than he/she is used to doing.

Let us imagine that these jumps were performed by robots or holograms, that we were watching them on a giant screen, virtual images, graphic creations of a rich imagination made with perfect technique: would there still be that heart-wrenching feeling, that empathy and admiration for the exceptional event we are witnessing? Not at all. The live, immediate experience, *in praesentia*, makes you think about the story behind such a street performance, which actually encompasses the individual stories of each performer, the passion, the desire, the determination that led them to the point of such artistic performances so similar to high-class sports. That story that drives you and feeds your energy, creativity, and tenacity to exceed your limits, that story that will make the difference on stage too, between actors driven by the passion for their craft and those who operate on the basis of the so called "minimal effort", filling the void that lies behind the provided forms with technical and technological material.

Talking about his own theatre and but also that of Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook said that

> "An actor who would want to step onto the stage simply to do what they do in everyday life would have no reason to be in the theatre. In this strange context that is the theatre, what we are looking for is an opening toward *another level of experience*, toward a *different quality of experience*. However, in theatre there is only one vehicle, and that vehicle is the human being – the human being as they are in life, the everyday person. […] The theatrical context allows the actor to become

> someone who reflects a life broader than their own, but, to reach this point, the actor must continually listen to and respond to the call of the impossible."[2]

I deeply resonate with this observation, which places "the human being" at the heart of the art of theatre – the human being as he or she is in everyday life, and thus connected to the present moment of experience; yet this man or woman, having become an actor or actress, makes themselves a voice for an entire crowd, becoming representative and emblematic, because they concentrate in their art and manage to express something that transcends them, whilst at the same time it fulfils their humanity, thereby creating for the audience another level of perception of reality – a stirring and invigorating experience through the questions and emotions it evokes.

Apart from the street performance art demonstrations, two productions caught my attention in this regard. Two contemporary plays, two stories inspired by our world, by our European society, both of a semi-documentary nature, but with varying degrees of theatrical success. The first, *FUTUR4*[3], presents to the audience – on a stage filled with screens, cables, computers and lights – the life of a woman of Saxon origin from Transylvania who left for the West as part of the wave of emigration before 1989, when Ceaușescu sold the German population of Romania to West Germany. In a seven-part account of her life, Ursula tells us about her childhood, with its frustrations and deprivations under communism, but also about the great attraction of the occidental way of life, glimpsed through the pages of *Neckerman* fashion catalogues that hardly made their way into the country. Then we hear about her departure, the experience of being uprooted, the inner and social loneliness, her relationship with her parents, the questions and doubts about her place in the world and her identity, her marriage to a man of African origin, her relationship with her child, and the story of her life as recounted by this child,

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[2] Peter Brook, "Appendix. A Dialogue between Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, led by Georges Banu", in *With Grotowski. Theatre is Just a Form* (Wroclaw: The Grotowski Institute, 2009), 81-104. Dialogue conducted on 5 May 1989, Taormina.

[3] Production of Rimini Apparat in co-production with Goethe-Institut Bucharest, Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden, Sibiu International Festival/ "Radu Stanca National" Theatre (Romania), Theater RAMPE in Stuttgart and Theater im Pumpenhaus, premiered in 2025.

now an adult and a father in his own right. These fragments of stories are embedded in a colourful, illuminated by LEDs, back-and-forth, between the historical past and the past that the character is reconstructing for herself, between the future she longed for but never had that way and the real future that has become the present – a back-and-forth mediated on stage by new technologies: from screens and various types of projections to robotics and Artificial Intelligence.

It looked like a promising production; I knew that the Rimini Protokoll team works with amateur actors and that the Germans are pioneers in stage technology, so Mrs Ursula's life story had every chance of being representative of the thousands of stories of the Saxons who were compensated by the German government. And yet this was not the case; the banality of the performance and the sluggish pace of the presentation, coupled with the repetitive and static dramaturgy, failed to achieve that minimum level of excellence needed to elevate the experience beyond the common. Nor did the technology help; on the contrary, it made the entire performance feel cumbersome, jerky and devoid of harmony and humanity. Consulting a bot – a robotic double of Ursula – might perhaps have been something out of the ordinary five years ago, but technology becomes obsolete extremely quickly, and that is why it can only be a prop in theatre, and not the central focus. This story would have been far more powerful if the text had been more focused, without unnecessary length or repetition, and the protagonist had told it to us directly, just as she would have remembered it, perhaps using only those techniques that would make her speech flow more smoothly – the projected film and photographic images – without any supporting notes, without that characterless Siri or that high-tech laboratory setting which added nothing to the emotion of the story.

The documentary nature of a work, or the fact that it is based on a true story, never guarantees a high-quality production unless the necessary balance of proportions is struck – that special harmony, unique to every work of art, which serves as a springboard for the audience's complex, intellectual and emotional response.

Whilst leafing through Octavian Saiu's recent book of interviews, *Silences and Words*, my eyes fell on exactly what Akram Khan – a theatre practitioner who frequently uses technology in his work – had to say about it. Whilst

acknowledging that technology unites us today through access to information, our attitudes and the way we tell our stories, he emphasises that through technology "we create a kind of virtual relationship that cannot in any way replace direct contact" and, by extension, "the story experienced live in the theatre".[4] And this becomes even clearer if we compare the play I have just mentioned with Tiago Rodrigues's equally personal work *No Yoghurt for the Dead*[5], which draws on his own experience of the permanent separation from his father.

The text and the performance succeed in taking the audience by surprise, drawing them into a game that, unconsciously, many of us have played and continue to play. To be more precise, it so happens that, in situations that are delicate from a relational point of view – extreme situations (which affect us emotionally because they visibly create a potential rift in our everyday lives, in our comfortable routine), we pretend that things aren't that serious, that what is unfolding before us is merely a minor scratch that will heal on its own, not a deep wound that will need to be carefully tended, perhaps for a long time. This trivialisation, serving as an emotional shield, this game of hide-and-seek with pain – so very human and with which we fully resonate – is imbued with theatricality and poetry in Tiago Rodrigues's work.

Neither the father, who is in hospital in the terminal stages of his illness, nor the son, who visits him constantly, will face up to death, thus forcing it to linger and postponing the final moment. The father, a former journalist, wants to write one last report on the condition of the patients in the ward where he is staying and seems to be constantly doing his research, displaying a healthy sense of humour even towards his nurse, whom he tells is the most incompetent in the world, and fixating on details such as the colour of the ink in his pen—which he wants to be black, not blue – a request his son dismisses as a mere whim. The son, who visits constantly, has no idea that, in fact, his father is no longer able to write anything on the pages of his notebook other

[4] Octavian Saiu, *Tăceri și cuvinte: arta dialogului despre teatru* (București: Nemira, 2024), 103. Our translation from Romanian.

[5] Production of NTGent, Coprodução: Culturgest Lisboa, Piccolo Teatro Milano – Teatro d'Europa, Wiener Festwochen, premiered in 2025. With: Beatriz Brás, Hélder Gonçalves, Lisah Adeaga, Manuela Azevedo, Dramaturgy: Kaatje De Geest; Assistant director: André Pato; Decor design: Sammy Van den Heuvel; Costume design: Ilse Vandenbussche; Light design: Dennis Diels; Som: Frederik Vanslembrouck; Music design: Hélder Gonçalves.

than chaotic lines and dots; constantly forgets to bring him the black pen and dismisses his stories about the singer Tereza, who comes to comfort him, as fabrications and reminiscences of past events that recur without rhyme or reason in the sick man's mind. Neither does the son believe his father, nor does he dare to truly draw close to him; nor does the father manage to draw his son close and make him an active participant in his final moments of life.

Once again, we are presented with a testimony, a true and painful story, because, as is so often the case, realisation comes too late, after the loved one is no longer with us. Yet the personal, documentary nature of the story is transformed on stage through the use of theatrical conventions with a playful candour and subtlety at the same time. We are not witnessing "a slice of life" on stage, as the naturalists used to say, nor documentary theatre narrated into a microphone, but rather the constant intrusion of fiction into the construction of each of our own individual, subjective realities; and more than that, we are witnessing an initiation that could be that of any human being, of each and every one of us, into the recognition and acceptance of death in our midst. And this initiation means taking on different roles, crossing successive thresholds, which only acquire meaning with final maturity.

It is in this light that I believe the director's choices should be understood: the multiple endings, which mislead us but emphasise the separation that is so extremely difficult to accept, followed by the casting of two women in the two leading male roles and their interchangeability – that is, the two actresses successively taking on the roles of father and son by donning the costumes, wearing the false beards, and adopting the physical presence and behaviour attributed to the characters in question. The adoption and shedding of these characters' masks is carried out with such deliberate neutrality that the audience accepts it as it is, without finding the artificiality jarringly obvious. On the contrary, the cross-dressing and the actresses' portrayal of multiple characters – including that of the singer Tereza or the mother who appears to the dying man in a splendid lyrical invocation to the afterlife – create a unique dynamic in this production, punctuated by moving Fado-style songs that resonate with the Romanian audience, heightening the dramatic tension on stage through their association with our own "*doine*" and songs of lament. The Portuguese director's international stage experience is evident here and, beyond the fact

that he adapts and integrates current trends in contemporary theatre, a profound understanding of the power of theatre shines through in the expressive, multifaceted presence of the high-calibre actors and actresses cast in the production.

Although this production, too, suffers somewhat from its length and didactic tendencies, the convention is taken to a whole new level, and the characters' presence is so powerful thanks to the exceptional vocal talents of the actresses, who, alongside their subtle portrayal of these identities, deeply move us by transforming the ambiguity of human emotions in front of death into a song of mourning, a song of hope, a song of life. And so, I ask myself: why should we needlessly pollute the planet with dozens of energy-guzzling screens and computers, when the only energy we truly need is human, real, alive and compelling? Brook was right, then. That call of the impossible does exist; it can grip us, the audience, too, when we encounter actors in the flesh who, in turn, practise their art at a superior level.

Truth is not the guarantor of the exceptional that draws us in, for banal truth is tedious, whilst theatre must surprise us, as Tiago Rodriguez himself so aptly remarked. When asked by theatre critic Anda Ionaș whether "theatre ought to play a more prominent social role?", the Portuguese playwright and director replied as follows: "First of all, I must say that theatre is under no obligation to play a role. Theatre simply is; it is part of the human experience, part of the adventure of being alive." It can play many roles, but "there is one fundamental condition: that we must not expect theatre to conform to certain expectations. It must be free, to surprise us, to show us things we do not understand, to explore..."[6]

So here, then, is a successful theatrical experience for us too, which proves the director right when he stated in an interview published in *Capital cultural* magazine that: "wounds become less painful when treated through theatre. I believe that theatre has this power to console, to heal, to soothe (...) theatre that defies death is a way of saying that something which death has cut short can continue through theatre"[7].

[6] Tiago Rodriguez, interview in *Capital Cultural*, no. 38 (2025): 40-41.
[7] Tiago Rodriguez, *Capital Cultural,* 43.

Indeed, these assertions were also confirmed to me by another production, of a completely different style, but which also centres on the confrontation with death, produced and performed by the Mihai Eminescu National Theatre in Chișinău, and which, in turn, succeeded in reopening and soothing, at least partially, the wounds of a society still seeking healing. The production in question is *The Siberian Files*[8], based on a script by Petru Hadârcă and Mariana Onceanu, adapted from the memoirs of Ecaterina Chele, Margareta Cemârtan-Spânu and Ion Moraru – three of the tens of thousands of victims of the Stalinist gulag. On its European tour, with a final stop on 29 June 2025 at the National Theatre in Cluj to mark the end of the season, the production has been running since 2019 with undiminished success, evoking emotions that are impossible to suppress and stirring the soul of every member of the audience.

Here, too, there is a strong documentary element, emphasised by the testimonies of the narrators, as well as a historical dimension, with technology – in the form of video projections – serving primarily to recreate spaces, colours and atmospheres from the past. We have not just one but several true stories that intertwine and take shape through the theatrical convention of which the film projection in the background forms part; here, too, we find that sense of guilt, as director Petru Hadârcă puts it, "for our recklessness, for not knowing and for being so indifferent towards the suffering people around us". Here, too, we experience the cathartic effect of the dirges, through the splendid voice of Diana Decuseară, which follows us beyond the theatre's gates, bringing to mind both the terribly dehumanised figures who shared in death and those who faced it thanks to their profound humanity. The technology used on stage is, in this instance, neutral, or rather benign; it does not draw unnecessary attention to its own presence, but integrates itself, in a conventionally balanced manner, just like the other set elements, into the otherwise classical set design of the production. Its presence fades into the background, giving way to the powerful presence of the characters and their moving life stories.

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[8] Petru Hadârcă, director, *Dosarele Siberiei*, production of Chișinău National Theatre (TNME), premiered in 2019, script by Petru Hadârcă and Mariana Onceanu, stage design Irina Gurin, choreography, Irina Slobodeaniuc, Video Ian Onică, stage fights Oleg Mardari.

One final example deserves our attention in this context of the discussion on the use and utility of technology – be it video, digital or AI – on the theatrical stage with documentary elements. Oana Pellea's production, *The Silent Escape*, staged at the National Theatre of Bucharest (TNB) in 2023[9], based on Lena Constante's harrowing text, left an extremely powerful impression on me. The prison experience of the set designer Lena Constante is indeed, as the wonderful actress who adapted for stage this autobiographical text and directed the production puts it, a "life lesson". The production is simply structured, with the actress standing and then sitting, surrounded by microphones, almost plunged into darkness, whilst on the screen-wall behind her, as the testimonial narrative unfolds, more or less human forms appear – outlines that seem to emerge from the narrator's mind, in black and white: the lines of a prison space, inhuman figures lying in wait. This abstraction of the setting, reduced to the essence and presence of powerful metaphors, created with technological support, enhances the interpretation of the character's life story as she leaves behind the figures and shadows that still haunt her, but which have failed to destroy her.

Culture served as an extraordinary shield for this unjustly condemned woman, who endured unimaginable torture – the sort that would be impossible to believe had it not been put down on paper – a shield against the vileness and wickedness of her torturers and the communist authorities. And Oana Pellea's "testimony" – not the interpretation or the theatrical performance, for that is how she describes this stage exploration of Lena's superhuman resistance – comes across as a living document and a punch to the gut, leaving you speechless, with tears streaming down your face. And then you realise that such a cathartic experience shows how culture can strike without weapons, how it can touch and heal where weapons can only destroy. And here, technology is used sparingly and subtly, coming to help the actress without intruding on her presence, and accompanying her journey back from the shadows – the painful reconstruction of this deeply unjust life story.

[9] Oana Pellea, director, *Evadarea tăcută*, by Lena Constante, concept and adaptation Oana Pellera, stage design Vladimir Turturica, light design Ștefan Dumitra, National Theatre Bucharest, premiered in 2023.

Lena Constante's *Silent Escape*, as well as Anița Cudla's *20 Years in Siberia*, Ion Moraru's *The Steps of Hell*, Ecaterina Chele's *The Book of My Life*, Margareta Cemârtan-Spânu's *Siberia from Home*, and so many other books of harrowing testimonies and memoirs, are written to heal the deep wounds left in the bodies, minds and souls of people who are exemplary in their resistance and resilience. They are documents with a distinctive theatrical quality precisely for this reason, because bearing witness means seeking out the ears and eyes of another who will listen to you, who will understand you and who will pass on the story, just as Horatio does, at Hamlet's urging, at the end of the horrors perpetrated in the most powerful and most human of Shakespeare's tragedies. These documentary texts, seeking dialogue—which went unfulfilled when it was truly needed – seek the stage and find fulfilment through storytelling, taking on an exceptional form in theatrical adaptation, with or without the help of new technologies. A difficult task, for, as Irina Gurin, the set designer for the Chișinău National Theatre's production of *The Siberian Files*, acknowledged, "tackling documentary material is always a challenge for a theatre maker, placing them in a risky position: that of capturing the truth and being able to transform it into an artistic act". Indeed, such subjects require: "the imposition of a coherent and vigorous vision of the historical document, not merely a visual documentary reproduction, because 'theatre is not a replica of reality but a reality in itself, with its own laws that are entirely independent of everyday life'."[10] Documentary theatre can be harsh and hard to take, yet the visual elements provided by video and digital technologies – if well-balanced and harmonised with the narrative discourse – can produce a powerful effect, evoking emotion and empathy, and even enhancing the actors' vivid, real and tangible presence on stage. It is not only the characters' words that resonate in this way in the minds of the audience; the images also linger, keeping our conscience alive, like an alarm that is always on: "Do not seek revenge, but do not forget!" – the final line and leitmotif of the Moldovan production – echoes repeatedly.

Technology has always been present in the performing arts, through various mechanisms – from the simplest to the most complex, from mechanical to digital – supporting the very craft of acting in a variety of ways. We can

[10] Text present in the Booklet of the performance. Our translation.

observe a constant throughout the history of theatre that remains true to this day: where technology enhances the exceptional human qualities of those who take to the stage, placing itself at their service, its use finds a natural place, harmoniously integrated into the stagecraft of a theatrical production. Conversely, where technology takes centre stage at the expense of the human element, beyond the fireworks there is nothing left, and the stories of the living characters can no longer be carried forward, fading away along with the screens, the spotlight and the thousands of LEDs, leaving in darkness that complex and unique human being who dwells in every spectator.

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