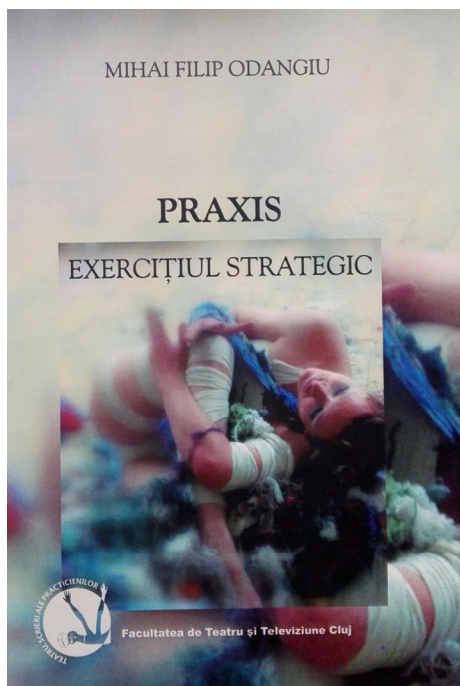
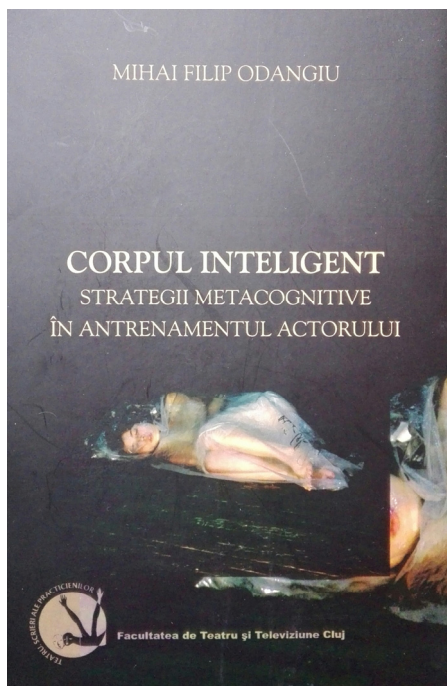


## *On the Art of Acting*

**Mihai Filip Odangiu, *Corpul inteligent. Strategii metacognitive în antrenamentul actorului / The Mindful Body. Metacognitive Strategies in Actor's Training* (203 p.) and *Praxis. Exercițiul strategic / Praxis. Strategic Exercise* (288 p.), Cluj-Napoca, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2013<sup>\*1</sup>**



Actor and plastic artist, assistant professor at the Faculty of Theater and Television of Cluj-Napoca, where he is teaching acting, with almost fifteen years of pedagogic experience, Mihai Filip Odangiu has become an important reference in the history of Romanian theatrical studies, with the publication,

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<sup>1</sup> \* Translated by Magda Crețu.

in 2013, of the two books on stage art pedagogy, *Corpul inteligent. Strategii metacognitive în antrenamentul actorului* [*The Mindful Body. Metacognitive Strategies in Actor's Training*] and *Praxis. Exercițiul strategic* [*Praxis. Strategic Exercise*]. The volumes – taken from what had been the original doctoral thesis – are, in the author's words, a "diptych". Its first part approaches the issue of actor's training from a theoretical perspective, while the second part focuses, as shown by the title, on the practical applications of the previously listed principles. They are illustrated (sometimes literally) by a series of 132 exercises, described in an order that is not at all accidental (according to "families of exercises") and extensively discussed (by indicating the source, by establishing the origin, where possible, by describing the objectives, the activities as such involved by each exercise, by formulating suggestions in relation to *side coaching* and to evaluation, by indicating filiations, possibilities of development, by explaining some concepts and some of the terms used and so on and so forth). Among the references cited by the author a privileged position is occupied by the works of Michael Chekhov, Viola Spolin, Rudolf Laban, David Zinder, Robert Cohen, Jean Benedetti, Declan Donellan, Rhonda Blair, Richard J. Kemp or Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, since their approaching to the training of the actors are, according to the author, in line with "the most recent findings of neurosciences and humanities", which open, as put by Richard J. Kemp, "new perspectives" on the performer's arts; these perspectives are discussed in one of the most inciting chapters of the first volume.

We need to emphasize from the very beginning that the work is a decisive contribution to an update of Romanian documentation in this field, by aligning it perfectly both with the tendencies of modern didactics, supported by the most advanced psychology or neuroscience research, and with the tendencies of Western theatrical pedagogy, with a marked preference for the training systems of the Anglo-Saxon spaces, which are critically and creatively assimilated.

In fact, the author does not hesitate to observe, in a footnote, the small number of Romanian studies in the field, published after the fall of communism; he is unobtrusively aware that his work could fill a significant gap in the field of the actor's pedagogy at the level of the written "discourse on method". He only notes three titles: *O poetică a artei actorului: analiza procesului scenic* [*Poetics of the Actor's Art: Analysis of the Stage Process*] (1996) by Ion Cojar, *Improvizația în procesul creației scenice. Actorul și arta sa* [*Improvisation in the Acting Creation. The Actor and His Art*] (2005) by Killár Kovács Katalin and *Catedra din scenă*

[*The Desk in the Stage*] (2007) by Gasparik Attila. They are followed by *Lungul drum al teatrului către sine* [*The Long Road of Theatre to Its Core*] (2000) by Adriana Marina Popovici (cited by the author in the bibliography at the end of the first volume), *Actorie sau magie: aripi pentru Ycar* [*Acting or Magic: Wings for Ycarus*] (2003) by Florin Zamfirescu or *Propedeutica limbajului nonverbal în arta actorului* [*Propaedeutic of Nonverbal Language in the Actor's Art*] (2012) by Miklós Bács, subject to the fact that the first two and the frequently cited work by Ion Cojar recycle, in fact, ideas and topics from older texts, that date back to before 1990. In a volume published in 2004<sup>2</sup>, Marian Popescu suggested, to this end, for clarification, the reading of the collective manual of the *Actor's Art*, in two volumes, "for the help of first year students in the section of dramatic art" of the Institute of Theatrical and Cinematographic Art "I.L. Caragiale" of Bucharest, published in 1970<sup>3</sup>.

The historic gap between the stage of the development of theory and the practice of theatrical pedagogy has not been decreased visibly, not even after the return in the country, from the long exile caused by the communist regime, of some of the "masters" who reformed the Romanian stage (in the 60s-70s), notes Mihai Filip Odangiu. Directors who has a real pedagogic vocation, established both in Romania and abroad (in Sweden, Germany, the USA etc.), such as Radu Penciulescu, David Esrig and Andrei Șerban, opted for *workshops* in order to be able to impart their teaching, without writing them; the author finds that the echoes of this form of "apostolate" are "modest". Three years after the publication of his volumes the circumstances have improved, but not significantly. As it happens, in the same year with Odangiu's "diptych", two books on Andrei Șerban's methods were published<sup>4</sup> as well as a volume on

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<sup>2</sup> Marian Popescu, *Scenele teatrului românesc 1945-2004. De la cenzură la libertate. Studii de istorie, critică și teorie teatrală*, Bucharest: UNITEXT, 2004, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup> George Dem. Loghin, Paul Popescu-Neveanu, G. Neacșu, S. Marcus, Mihai Dimiu, Vasile Moisescu, *Arta actorului. Manual pentru uzul studenților din anul I, Secția de artă dramatică*, vol. I, and Petre Vasilescu, Ileana Burlacu, George Carabin, Ion Cojar, Sandina Stan, Beate Fredanov, Stroe Marcus, George Banu, Ioana Mărgineanu, *Arta actorului...*, pref. by George Dem. Loghin, vol. II, Bucharest: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> These are the volumes *Academia Itinerantă Andrei Șerban. Cartea atelierelor*, coord. Monica Andronescu and Cristiana Gavrilă, Bucharest: Nemira, 2013, and Andrei Șerban, *Mereu spre un nou început. Atelier teatral ținut la Teatrul Național din Cluj*, a book designed and put together by Eugenia Șarvari, with a *laudation* by Ion Vartic and an afterword by Doina Modola, Bucharest: Tractus Arte, 2013. Tania Radu had published before a bilingual volume called *Cercuri în apă: un atelier cu Andrei Șerban = Circles In The Water: a workshop with Andrei Șerban*, edited by Ștefania Ferchedău, Bucharest: Ecumest, 2005.

the director-teacher Radu Penciulescu<sup>5</sup>. Șerban, who did not get personally involved with the written “record” of his experiences in the field of theatrical pedagogy, has always encouraged the attendance of witnessing “recorders” in the workshops and rehearsals he has conducted in his country of birth. The existentialist theatre promoted by David Esrig, his workshops at the Athanor Academy, which, after 1989, were attended by many Romanian actors, have been the subject of a PhD thesis which was published in Romania last year<sup>6</sup>. In this context, the appearance of Odangiu’s ambitious diptych is a genuine event, although not yet recognized as such in the Romanian cultural environment.

The title of the first volume, *Corpul inteligent [The Mindful Body]*, inspired by the writings of the American researcher Rhonda Blair, asserts, from the beginning, the author’s firm adherence to the integrating view on the human being, which crosses, like a red line, the new movement of thought in humanities (post-Merleau-Ponty philosophy; cognitive, linguistic psychology; the theories of communication). This view seeks to overcome the former dichotomies mind-body (the dual Cartesian model), knowledge-imagination or sense-sensibility (basis of Diderot’s paradox of the comedian), which marked Occidental thinking for centuries and led, in theatre, to the artificial division in training and acting systems that emphasize the psyche of the actors and of the character (the *inside-out* approach) and others that privilege the inward (*outside-in*) approach, from the physical aspects, actions etc. According to the new paradigm, “consciousness (language, thought and emotions included) becomes a manifestation of the body”, notes Mihai Filip Odangiu. For example, the authors of *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, the linguist George Lakoff and the philosopher Mark Johnson, have shown that “the senses of our bodies and even the body’s feeling of presence are the root of the major operating metaphors of thought, of the meanings we circulate and of the values in which we believe and which build our identity”. This is extremely important for the actor, says Mihai Filip Odangiu, because “the actor’s work is conducted in and through the body or, in Phillip Zarilli’s words, in and through the ‘body-mind’ entity”.

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<sup>5</sup> Gelu Badea, *Prințul minor: Radu Penciulescu – pedagogie și creație*, pref. by Sorin Crișan, Cluj: EIKON, 2013. A small monograph album on Radu Penciulescu’s career was edited in 1999 by the Bucharest theatrical university where he had studied and taught before opting for exile (in 1973); the volume, however, was not circulated beyond the said institution.

<sup>6</sup> Florin Vidamski, *Drumul spre spectacol prin metoda David Esrig*, Bistrița: Editura Charmides, 2015.

Another old dilemma, which has been eating on the Occidental theatre for at least three centuries, in relation to the actor's commitment to or detachment from the act ("involvement" versus "distancing"), is clarified by the author in favor of the metaphoric perspective of the actor, of the "as if" behavior, which is also the perspective approached by the metacognitive strategies applied by him in the actor's training. Without entering an open polemic, for this is not the appropriate context, Odangiu disengages, with this option, from the school of acting that was strongly theorized and represented by director and pedagogue Ion Cojar (b. 1931 – d. 2009), adept of Lee Strasberg's method ("*Method acting*"), stemming from Stanislavski<sup>7</sup>. Thus, Odangiu chooses "Stanislavski II", the one in the latest writings on the "method of physical actions", denoting the "reciprocal influences of action – body – though and emotion" or, at any rate, the "revised" version of Stanislavski, from Jean Benedetti, the one who translated in English and edited most of his works, in an attempt to "de-Stalinize" him, by "retrieving the terminology and the concepts that had been removed by Soviet censorship".

The author also detaches from the tradition, deeply rooted in the Romanian theatrical education (i.e. starting from the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), of "master" classes, headed by a "guru"-like instructor (Ion Cojar also fell under this category), by opposing to it the model of the "conceptual" instructor, in relation to a dichotomy developed by the theatrical critic George

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<sup>7</sup> Several observations are needed here: in communism, starting from the 1950s, Stanislavski's system – censored, filtered by socialist realism – was the basis for the training of future actors in the Romanian theatrical education institutes and a compulsory reference in specialty works (rather scarce, the most notable one being the aforementioned *Arta actorului...*). In an interview published in the journal *Concept* of the Bucharest University of Theatrical and Cinematographic Art "I.L. Caragiale" (former I.A.T.C., renamed after the 1989 Revolution), Adriana Popovici, long-standing professor in this institution, states: "Stanislavski found favorable conditions and germinated in the soil of Romanian realism. So the cultural information that eventually came to us, on rather obscure paths, was inserted on the structure given by Stanislavski's approach. For example, very early, since the 1970s, we had translated Viola Spolin, for the internal use of the school. The 60s-70s marked the opening. Large amounts of information followed, the American School, Grotowski..." (1/2010, p. 67). ("The American School" meant, first of all, Lee Strasberg, Michael Cehov and Viola Spolin.) Separations from, reconsiderations, critiques (rather unsubstantial) of Stanislavski's method, expressed by some of the theatre scholars in the periodicals of the age, did not evolve in ampler theoretical views. They seem to have been given a more articulate shape in acting practice rather than in writing (see Stanislavski's reception in communist Romania discussed in Marian Popescu, subcap. *Cenzura, Stanislavski și teatrul românesc*, in his previously cited work, pp. 85-100).

Banu in an article published in *Alternatives Théâtrales* (70-71/2002). Lee Strasberg, Uta Hagen, Herbert Berghof, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner and Rober Lewis would represent the former hypothesis, according to George Banu, cited by Odangiu, and Jerzy Grotowski, Julian Beck, Judith Malina, Peter Brook or Ariane Mnouchkine would represent the latter. While the “master” teaches vertically, downwards, the conceptual instructor acts like a “guide through darkness”, with a formula borrowed by Banu from Peter Brook, from a position considerably closer to his trainees. Furthermore, Odangiu works on a new orientation in Romanian theatrical pedagogy, on the re-defining of the evaluation criteria and especially of its objectives, in accordance with the increasingly unstable institutional context, “given the irreversible, constant decrease of subsidies granted to culture, the increase of the discrepancy between the number of graduates and the capacity of absorption that theatres hold”, etc., in other words the drift of repertoires and the appearance, *nolens volens*, of a context in which the free – and “uncertain”, says the author – initiative will prevail.

This new pedagogy, based on metacognitive strategies of “self-adjustment of learning” (M. Hrimiech) and, by default, of self-evaluation, would come to act “more or less like a ‘lateral pedagogy’ (by analogy with Edward de Bono’s ‘lateral thinking’)”, focusing “more on special objectives, found in the area of the ‘invisible’, of the indefinable”, such as “the controllability of imagination, the mind-body-voice connection, the Zero Point state, *soft focus*, the Sense of the Shape” etc., concepts approached by the author in the second volume of the “diptych”, which is more than a collection of practical exercises for the actors – a real method of training.

Meta-cognition, which is not to be read as a “self-referential analytical exercise”, says the author, may contribute to the overcoming of obstacles. “The remedy against Fear is observation”, claims the author, in line with Declan Donellan, meant to remove the thing that controls (and hinders) the author invisibly, that “state of control devoid of thinking”, which can be dominated by (self)reflection. The role of metacognitive strategies in actor’s training is also to increase the degree of objectivity in the assessment of the stage performance (which is no longer based only on the trainer’s feedback, but also on the “reverse connection” made by the trainee himself), for they are not strictly anchored in the theatrical system (and its various subsystems, schools, aesthetic directions, etc.); instead, they are connected, at least ideally, to the humanities in general.

Regarding the thorny issue of evaluation, the author evokes, at one point, a very interesting experiment conducted for 15 years in communist Romania (at the end of the 1960s and during the 1970s), when a team of researchers, made mainly, but not exclusively from psychologists (P. Popescu-

Neveanu, Gheorghe Neacșu, Solomon Marcus – the famous mathematician –, or Delia Bantea etc.), studied the problem of the actor's specific creativity from various points of view (from the psychology and typology of the actor to the "relationship between imagination and stage expression" or the possible "methods of evaluation of stage conveniences" and up to the "establishment of the theoretical-methodological bases for the creation of stage skill tests"). The subjects of the trial were actors of Bucharest theatres and especially students of the Institute of Theatrical and Cinematographic Art; the outcome of the research was published in *Revista de Psihologie* edited by the Romanian Academy. As a novelty, the 1973 and 1974 IATC entry exams were carried out while some of the members of the research teams were present in the evaluation commission, with the University professors; they applied to the candidates some tests regarding their skills and personality. The approach – labeled as exemplary and far-sighted by Mihai Filip Odangiu, owing to its interdisciplinary nature, showed that "a competent evaluation required the corroboration of psychological criteria with theatrical ones".

The extent of Odangiu's "diptych", the more than sufficient information and the many implications of the investigation, no matter how well structured they are, almost hinder the reviewer's mission; the reviewer can only emphasize some of the aspects of the study rather than summarize it in several pages. Moreover, the two works are followed by annexes that include an interview made by the author with the director and pedagogue David Zinder (the interview can be read, separately, in *Studia Dramatica* issues 1 and 2/ 2011), the index of the tables in the first volume (which include even a model for the evaluation of the student in acting, who is in his first year of training) or the list of exercises, in order of appearance and in alphabetic order, in the second volume. All these aspects recommend Odangiu's books as an operating instrument that can be extremely helpful both for theatre theorists (and not only) and for those who practice it.

**Anca HAȚIEGAN**

*PhD Lecturer, Faculty of Theatre and Television,  
Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca,  
E-mail: ancahati22@gmail.com*

