

University of Theatre and Film Arts Doctoral School

The Epic Actor
or
the challenges of „modern training” for actors

DLA Doctoral thesis

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First drawn to the movement of epic theatre and acting when I encountered a defining theatre experience abroad (*Roland Schimmelpfennig: Der goldene Drache, 2010*), I was led to the study of Brechtian theories. A possible practical realization of this came to me through Sándor Zsótér during my university education, and this very experience launched me on my independent creative and later teaching career.

My thesis follows and introduces my own learning process through five works, which are analysed in chronological order.

The first example is Zsótér's course on *Don Carlos* (2014), which I examined from the point of view of a student director who got to observe the actors at work. Throughout the course it became tangible for me that the dramatic text itself as a creative impulse has the power to generate new ideas. Furthermore, I understood that it is essential for the actor to face the audience with an active nervous system, receiving and processing impulses, so that the liveliness of acting can be realised.

In 2016, while directing *The Invasion of Ingolstadt*, I managed to make new observations about „the epic actor” both as a directing teacher and as a fifth-year director student.

It was mainly owing to Zsótér's notes that I realised that the sentence can be perceived as the rhythmic unit of time on stage, and that the text of the performance can be approached through musicality, as long as I treat the text as rhythm.

In order to explore the power of creation that lies within thinking, my next step was to reduce the actors' artistic expression radically, so that it would become easier to focus exclusively on the laws of the dialogue on stage. In the course of staging *The Beautiful Days of Aranjuez* (both the 2016 and the 2021 renovated version), I was mostly studying the load bearing capacity of the actors' nervous system and meanwhile got a deeper understanding of the power of real attention, which is essential for the presence of the actors.

The Great Capitulation (2021) is the odd one out in my thesis, as it was not my own work. However, it was this theatre experience that made me realise that 'presence' is a kind of umbrella term that can be related to almost all problems of acting. By examining Natasa Stork's performance, I was able to construct a model image of what acting 'without explaining oneself' really means.

I consider *Urbi Et Orbi* and *The Tombstone* to be the culmination of the "learning to see" experience discussed in my thesis, as I was able to integrate a significant part of my learnings of the past years into these processes - albeit them not being specifically epic plays. In this chapter, I examine epic theatre from a dual perspective, that of the teacher-self and that of the

director-self focusing on the issue of stage presence. It has become clear to me that the act of telling a text on stage can also function as an indicator of the intensity of presence.

I use the term "epic actor" to describe the type of actor's work that I have experienced and seen in Zsótér's theatre as well as through his teaching. The focus of my thesis is the analysis of his approach to teaching, and a possible and admittedly personal interpretation of it. By defining the 'epic actor', I am trying to define and outline what I believe to be an ideal actor model, and to document the thought process that led to the birth of this concept.

In my thesis, I aim to gather and summarise my experience of epic theatre as I conclude that it is of utmost importance that this approach, with its strong theoretical and practical foundations, becomes an integral part of actor training, as well as the performative way of playing that is increasingly influential in contemporary theatre practice. Together they should complement the principles of the realist school. This eclectic approach to actor training can bring the modernity of an actor's curriculum.

An important source for my research was the book *Wer bin ich, wenn ich spiele? (Who am I when I play?)*, published in 2021, which gives a comprehensive overview of actor training at the Bern Academy of Acting (HKB). The subtitle of the book is *Fragen an einer modernen Schauspielausbildung (Questions on a modern actor training)*¹, and it is with this volume (among others) that I am trying to enter into a dialogue within the framework of my doctoral thesis, as the subtitle as a paraphrase indicates (*The challenges of a 'modern actor training'*).

The reason why this source is relevant to my research is that it contains methodological approaches that I have also encountered in practice as Zsótér's teaching assistant, albeit in a slightly different way.

Furthermore, the monograph on HKB also concludes that „while realistic, epic and performative modes of acting have long alternated on stages, the curriculum of basic actor training courses deals almost exclusively with dramatic theatre and psychological-realist ways of acting.”²

Our class, launched in 2019 in collaboration with Zsótér, had been designed and developed in the spirit of the above mentioned fusion concept. We felt it was important to expose students to as many different approaches as possible, while all being connected by a basic theatrical mindset that looks at the role with curiosity and without preconceptions.

¹ Frank Schubert – Martin Wigger: *Wer bin ich, wenn ich spiele? Fragen an einer modernen Schauspielausbildung*. Berlin, Theater der Zeit, 2021.

² The quotation appears on the blurb of the book „Wer bin ich...?”

Furthermore, we attempted to lay the foundations of an acting work that requires a thoughtful stage presence, as well as an awareness from the actor of their responsibility for the audience while on stage. This needs to be made conscious repeatedly in the preparation, so that the actor can perform with this responsibility in mind.

Three highlighted examples (*The Medical*, *Arturo Ui*, *Kaspar*) were chosen by Zsótér for the collaborative work that clearly show that the students were able to experience elements of realistic, epic and performative acting. It is of utmost importance to underline that these approaches are not in a hierarchical relation to each other, that none of them is better than the other, and that, above all, neither school can guarantee success as an actor or the validity of communication.

I believe that it is important that the Hungarian theatre scene, alongside the university training, integrates the approaches that are considered "non-traditional", as the equal treatment of different methods can create a richer and more colourful theatre culture. I have also attempted to draw attention to the work of important theatrical authors - whose contributions, in my view, have not yet received sufficient attention in the domestic theatres, - using a few examples.

These include Marieluise Fleißer, the author of the first epic dramas, Peter Handke, who emerged at the time of the performative turn, and János Pilinszky, who worked under the inspiring influence of the Wilsonian theatre. Integrating the works of these authors was also part of the process of exploring the possibilities of modern theatre education, as the dominance of realist aesthetics has meant that important 20th century authors have been marginalised.

Initially, I believed that the epic actor approach was a more valid theatrical method compared to other artistic approaches, yet my research and experience have confirmed that the truthfully acting actor is above such aesthetic categories.

It is only the actor's faith, will and playfulness that can breathe life into any formal approach. In the theatre, it is this life, the actor's own life, sublimating into community dimensions, that is the most essential.

The scripts for *The Invasion of Ingolstadt* and *The Beautiful Days of Aranjuez* (both my own translations) and the rehearsal diary for *Urbi et orbi/The Tombstone* are attached to my thesis. The recordings of these lectures (and the accompanying transcripts) are available at the links below.

The Invasion of Ingolstadt: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FAFF7amJnzw> (full performance)

Critiques:

<http://www.potszekfoglalo.hu/2016/11/11/keplekeny-kiabrandulas/>

http://mezeinezo.blog.hu/2017/01/31/odry_szinpad_egy_lany_a_sokbol_nagy_katica_az_ingolstadt_i_invazio_2017_01

Interviews:

<https://szfe.hu/hirek/az-ingolstadt-i-invazio/>

The Beautiful Days of Aranjuez: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AleeY-LiIL8> (full performance)

Critiques:

<http://www.prae.hu/article/9327-es-megint-egy-szep-nyari-nap/>

http://kultonline.blog.hu/2016/07/04/peter_handke_aranjuezi_szep_napok

<http://www.kutszelistilus.hu/publicisztika/kritika/297-antal-klaudia-egy-par-beszede>

http://7ora7.hu/2016/07/07/a_szovegbe_vetett_hit

http://mezeinezo.blog.hu/2016/09/13/bethlen_teri_szinhaz_nem_drama_csak_egy_nyari_parbeszed_peter_handke_az_aranjuezi_szep_napok_2016_sz#more11703143

<http://szinhaz.net/2016/08/18/papp-timea-maganugyek-kozerkolcsok-2/>

<https://revizoronline.com/hu/cikk/6217/26-thealter-fesztival>

<https://www.prae.hu/article/12123-testetlen-vagyak/>

Interviews:

<http://kutszelistilus.hu/publicisztika/interju/293-jelenlet-es-kolteszet>

http://7ora7.hu/2016/06/28/nincs_ki-

[be_maszkalas_beszeltetes_szilagyi_balINTTAL_es_ZSOTER_SANDORRAL](http://7ora7.hu/2016/06/28/nincs_ki-be_maszkalas_beszeltetes_szilagyi_balINTTAL_es_ZSOTER_SANDORRAL)

https://vasarnapihirek.hu/izles/megkerdeztuk_szilagyi_balintot_az_aranjuezi_szep_napok_for_ditojat_es_rendezojet

Urbi et orbi/The Tombstone: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UIWiZ-4mR7w> (full performance)

Critiques:

<https://szinhaz.net/2021/12/10/gabnai-katalin-unnep-fekete-feherben/>

<https://magyarnarancs.hu/kritika/a-pillanat-hossza-244406>

<https://litera.hu/magazin/tudositas/kovacs-dominik-es-kovacs-viktor-sirni-es-enni-egyszerre.html>