

## RETHINKING ACTING IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE: THE PARADOX OF CONTEMPORARY ACTOR

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### Abstract

Contemporary theatre is characterised by a wide range of acting forms, which encourages a rethinking of traditional notions of acting and the exploration of new methods for evaluating an actor's work. Traditionally, acting has been understood as the art of representing a fictional character on stage through movement, gesture, and intonation. Therefore, the questions posed in Denis Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor*, which explore the actor – character relationship, have long been central to evaluating actors' work.

However, contemporary theatre increasingly features productions in which the actor does not represent the other, performing instead without the pretence of being one of the fictional *dramatis personae*. Even when an actor does represent a dramatic character, certain roles can appear confusing and ambiguous when viewed through the lens of traditional concepts of acting. For instance, this occurs when an actor portrays a fragmented, unstable character lacking social and psychological characterisation, or when an actor integrates multiple fictional characters into a single role.

By engaging with contemporary acting theory and analysing two case studies from contemporary Lithuanian theatre, this article addresses the paradox faced by contemporary actors.

**Keywords:** *acting, performing, role, actor, character*

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## Introduction

The constantly evolving landscape of contemporary theatre, characterised by its experimental and diverse creative approaches, redefines the role of the actor and fosters pluralistic and innovative modes of artistic expression. As theatre scholar Patrice Pavis observes, contemporary theatre audiences “experience the actor in different ways, much richer than before” [Pavis 2014: 6]. According to Pavis, “actors are no longer only interpreters of text”; they have become “responsible for a new experience of the spectator, for new ways of looking at a text, of producing different interpretations, or simply enjoying theatre in another way”. The proliferation of acting forms and the expansion of the actor’s functions not only necessitate reconsidering the traditional notion of acting but also call for new approaches to evaluating the actor’s art.

Traditionally, acting has been understood as the art of representing a character on stage through voice intonation, physical movement, and gestures. Therefore, the questions raised by Denis Diderot in his famous *Paradox of the Actor* (*Paradoxe sur le comédien*) [Diderot 1994: 100–158] regarding acting technique and the differences between actors who “play from the heart” and those who “act from a head” [Diderot 1994: 103] have long been relevant to the evaluation of an actor’s work.

In *Paradox of the Actor*, Denis Diderot investigates the nature of acting, discusses the significance of mind and emotions in the creative process, and examines the differences between emotional and rational approaches to acting. In doing so, he raises the question of whether great actors genuinely experience the emotions they display during performances, or whether their expressive and emotionally affecting acting results from the masterful technique of imitation.

Diderot’s famous argument is that great actors are excellent imitators and do not need to feel the emotions themselves to portray them convincingly on stage. He argues that acting is an art – where, according to Diderot, the great actor is even more important than the poet – that relies on imitation, skill and control rather than genuine emotional experience. According to Diderot, actors must control their gestures, facial expressions, and voice to convey emotions effectively, without needing to genuinely experience those emotions themselves. Moreover, actors who “act from a head” will “always be the same, unchanged from one performance to the next, always with the same degree of perfection: everything has been measured, thought out, learnt and organised in his head; there’s no monotony, nothing out of place in his delivery” [Diderot 1994: 103]. Therefore, the paradox of the actor, Diderot claims, is that an audience is most affected by an actor who remains emotionally unaffected: “Actors impress the public not when they are furious but when they act fury well” [Diderot 1994: 157].

Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* has significantly influenced the theory and practice of acting and has been extensively studied and discussed by theatre scholars and practitioners. Almost all major modern theories of acting have repeatedly revisited the question of whether an actor should create a role through emotional involvement and empathy, or remain a detached "imitator", accurately portraying the image of the dramatic character for the audience – "a mirror, always ready to picture things and to picture them with the same accuracy, the same power and the same truth" [Diderot 1994: 104].

The questions raised in Diderot's theory about the most effective acting techniques for creating convincing characters and emotionally impacting the audience remain pertinent in contemporary theatre, especially in drama-centric practices where actors primarily develop their roles from dramatic texts, and acting continues to be understood as the art of portraying a dramatic character. And yet, in contemporary theatre, we increasingly encounter performances where acting is no longer perceived as the representation of a dramatic character, and, according to theatre theorist Elinor Fuchs, we witness "the death of the character" [Fuchs 1996]<sup>1</sup>.

Elinor Fuchs applies the concept of "the death of the character" to contemporary theatre productions that "leave the dramatic mode behind", embrace "non-linear narrative structures", and shift the focus away from individual characters [Fuchs 1996: 106]. Thus, this concept signifies a departure from established dramaturgical and theatrical conventions, including the presence of predictable, figuratively represented characters on stage.

In contemporary theatre practice, "the death of the character" can be associated with both postmodern drama, which features undefined and fragmented characters open to multiple interpretations, and multifocal, non-linear (or *postdramatic* as Hans-Thies Lehmann calls them) performances, in which, as Elinor Fuchs notes, "the human figure is no longer the single, perspectival "point" of stage performance" [Fuchs 1996: 12]. In both postmodern drama and postdramatic performance, the phenomenon of "the death of the character" significantly impacts the work of actors, forcing them to move beyond traditional character acting and explore innovative creative techniques.

Based on two cases from contemporary Lithuanian theatre, this article examines acting in theatre that experiences "the death of the character" and

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this article does not address various non-acting or post-acting forms associated with such contemporary theatre practices as documentary theatre, community-based theatre, participatory performance, site-specific theatre, immersive theatre, socially engaged performance, etc. Rather it focuses on contemporary performances created by professional theatre directors and actors in traditional drama theaters that radically disrupt established acting traditions and enter the realm of postmodern or postdramatic theatre.

attempts to answer the question: What is the paradox for the contemporary actor? The cases are two performances staged at the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre in Vilnius. The first, *Roberto Zucco* by French playwright Bernard-Marie Koltès, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas in 1998, is one of the earliest postmodern drama productions in Lithuania. The second, *Lokis*, by playwright Anka Herbut, directed by Łukasz Twarkowski in 2017, is one of the most prominent recent examples of postdramatic performance. Both productions received exceptional attention from audiences and critics, not only for their innovative dramaturgical languages and directorial approaches but also for their unconventional acting, which challenged traditional methods of character creation. An analysis of the actor's work in these productions reveals a significant shift in acting over the last two decades, influenced by "the death of the character", which manifests in both postmodern drama and postdramatic directing.

### ***Roberto Zucco*: Playing the Fragmented and Intangible Character**

"Koltès's protagonists are not characters in the conventional sense, concrete beings engaged in dramatic situations; they are logical abstractions (...)" [Pavis 1992: 100]

Oskaras Koršunovas's production *Roberto Zucco*<sup>2</sup> stood out in the context of Lithuanian theatre at the time not only because of the Bernard-Marie Koltès' play's drastic and shocking content and its atypical "street anti-heroes" – figures representing the fringes of society – but also due to its innovative directorial language. Koršunovas sought to create a performance that, in his words, would create "the inadequacy between a word and an action, a word and a view" as well as "the collision of action and text" [Koršunovas 1998]. The result, as critics noted, was that communication with the audience relied less on narrative or character development and more "on musical and scenic rhythm, visual changes, dynamics (following the montage principle of the performance), atmospheric shifts" [Daunytė 1999: 41]. *Roberto Zucco*'s staging not only encouraged the audience to perceive and interpret the theatrical action in creative ways, but also inspired new approaches to acting. Reviews of this performance highlighted that Koršunovas's *mise-en-scène* provoked such a mode of acting that "had nothing in common with native psychological theatre traditions" [Gedgaudas 1998] and that "balanced on the edge of naturalism and pure aesthetics" [Vasinauskaitė 1998].

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<sup>2</sup> For additional information about the production, see: Teatrotekos svetainė; <https://www.okt.lt/en/plays/roberto-zucco-2/>



Figure 1. *Roberto Zucco*, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, 1998,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre  
(Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

In their analysis of *Roberto Zucco*, critics identified significant changes in acting: a departure from traditional psychological acting, an unstable relationship between actor and character, and a shift from traditional character playing to physical acting and performing, where the body became a primary means of expression. However, critics associated these changes more with the innovative directing of Oskaras Koršunovas than with the postmodern dramatic language of Bernard-Marie Koltès. Nevertheless, it is clear that the changes in acting in this production were strongly influenced by the specific characteristics of the postmodern drama – namely, its rejection of the linear narrative and its fragmented characters.

Postmodern drama erases the identity of the character, retaining only the most basic traits and presenting a fragmented outline of the personage. This outline may either stand out or fade, depending on the reader's ability to connect the fragments into a relatively stable portrait of the character. Perceiving and capturing the essence of such a character is not only complicated but almost impossible. The character is constantly changing, revealing new facets of its identity and clearly demonstrating that the self is merely a repertoire of various, more or less significant roles [Mažeikienė 2008: 165–166].

The unstable and ever-changing characters of postmodern drama challenge traditional acting techniques and encourage a fragmented style that forces actors to perform individual episodes of a role while disregarding the psychological continuity of the characters. Therefore, when portraying a postmodern character, the actor's focus shifts from developing a coherent theatrical persona to embodying a series of actions and moments that, despite their separation, are interconnected within the larger *mise-en-scène*. It can be argued that the fragmented identity of postmodern dramatic characters results in a *decentered* acting style, which is more accurately understood not as character creation but as the assembly and montage of a polyphonic role text.

This approach to acting is exemplified by the performance of the actor Saulius Mykolaitis as the main character Roberto Zucco. In B. M. Koltès's play, the character of Roberto Zucco is deliberately left undefined: he lacks clear physical and psychological characteristics, a consistent personality, explicit motivations, and clearly defined relationships with other characters. As stated by director Oskaras Koršunovas, the primary objective for the actor was to create a theatrical representation of Roberto Zucco that would preserve the character's inherent ambiguity, rendering him "intangible" and "invisible" [Koršunovas 1998]. This was achieved by constructing a role that combined disparate elements and integrated a variety of expressive techniques, both realistic and abstract, as well as verbal and physical.

In some scenes, the actor performed on behalf of the character, thereby emphasising the referential function of his actions. In contrast, in other scenes, the actor concentrated on physical movements as part of the staged performance text, where the performative function of his actions predominated. In this way, Saulius Mykolaitis's acting encompassed both the representation of a dramatic character and engagement in pure performing, wherein the actor's movement, gesture, or posture could be understood as conveying independent meaning within the performance text.

A compelling illustration of this approach to acting is the "Killing of a Mother" scene, which is staged with remarkable effectiveness. Although the audience sees the inscription "Killing of a Mother" projected on a screen hanging in the depths of the stage, no actions explicitly simulating murder take place. During a brief monologue ("Did I give birth to you, Roberto?"), the mother (played by Eglė Mikulionytė) climbs onto the back of her lying son and kneels. Meanwhile, Roberto Zucco (played by Saulius Mykolaitis) crawls across the stage, dragging the mother, who is curled up on his back like a snail. As the monologue progresses, the Mother's voice fades; her breathing becomes heavier and more laboured until she stiffens and falls off her son's back. This way Roberto Zucco "does not kill, but just gets out and





Figure 2. *Roberto Zucco*, directed by Oskaras Koršunovas, 1998,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre. On the right:

Roberto Zucco – actor Saulius Mykolaitis

(Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

leaves her like an empty stiff shell” [Koršunovas 1998]. The *mise-en-scène* of this episode frames and constrains the actor’s individual expression, encouraging him not to “act” the killing but to perform the physical score with precision. The scene’s final meaning arises from the interplay of its individual elements – visual, physical, verbal, and aural – and depends on the audience to assemble these fragments into a cohesive whole.

The postmodern nature of the dramatic character and Koršunovas’ *mise-en-scène* led Saulius Mykolaitis to adopt a style of acting that can be described as an intermediate state between acting and non-acting. For much of the performance, the actor seems to be merely “being” and “performing” on stage, rather than “acting” or “playing the character”. The fact that the audience sees not the actor Saulius Mykolaitis, but the character Roberto Zucco, is less a consequence of the actor’s identification with the character than a result of the overall theatrical situation, which encourages the audience to perceive the actor’s actions as those of the character. One could argue that the postmodern dramatic persona allows the actor to focus less on building a character and more on performing the precise score of the role. Thus, in portraying a postmodern dramatic character who lacks

clear physical, psychological, and social characteristics, the actor does not need to construct a fully rounded character but rather to provide references that enable the audience to assemble the final image of the theatrical character for themselves.

### **Lokis: Performing multiple characters**

“The actor of postdramatic theatre is often no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering his/her presence on stage for contemplation” [Lehmann, 2006: 135].

The dramaturgy of performance *Lokis*<sup>3</sup> freely intertwines three stories, allowing for an exploration of human complexity, the relationship between humanity and bestiality, and the intersection of creation and death. These stories include the novella *The Bear* by French writer Prosper Mérimée (set in Lithuania) and the controversial, tragic life stories of two artists: Vitas Luckus, Lithuanian experimental photographer, and Bertrand Cantat, the lead singer of the French rock band *Noir Désir* (with a focus on the tragic incident in which he killed his partner, the renowned French actress Marie Trintignant, in Vilnius). By creatively interpreting these stories, the creators of the performance (playwright Anka Herbut and director Łukasz Twarkowski) not only explore the liminal states of the human being but also the liminal states of performance itself. *Lokis* blurs the boundaries between theatre, cinema, dance and performance art, between acting and non-acting, between various forms of media and artistic expression, thus entering the realm of postdramatic theatre, where, according to Hans-Thies Lehmann, dramatic text is “merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition” [Lehmann, 2006: 46].

Reviewing the performance *Lokis*, theatre critic Andrius Jevsejevas noted that ““Lokis” felt like a gust of freshness and modernity, a feeling I did not have since “Roberto Zucco” by Oskaras Koršunovas” [Jevsejevas 2017]. According to the critic, ““Lokis” has shown how powerful and dynamic postdramatic expression can be when the written text is deemphasized, when it no longer is the primary means of developing a narrative, and becomes equivalent to other means of theatrical communication, to other elements of directorial and dramaturgical expression” [Jevsejevas 2017].

*Lokis* fits naturally within the framework of postdramatic theatre, which rejects traditional dramatic conventions in favour of emphasising the spatial and visual dimensions of theatrical action. This production lacks a gradually unfolding plot, clearly defined characters, and a coherent development of scenic events within

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<sup>3</sup> For additional information about the production, see: [https://www.teatras.lt/en/productions/anka\\_herbut\\_lokis\\_director\\_-\\_lukasz\\_twarkowski/](https://www.teatras.lt/en/productions/anka_herbut_lokis_director_-_lukasz_twarkowski/)





Figure 3. *Lokis*, directed by Łukasz Twarkowski, 2017,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre (Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas.  
Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

a consistent space and time. The traditional linear structure of theatrical action is replaced by a complex audiovisual text that emphasises the spatial relationships between individual scenic elements and their continuous transformations. By separating and juxtaposing text, imagery, movement, and sound, and by manipulating and reconfiguring these elements, the creators construct a multifocal multimedia performance that complicates the act of viewing and perception. Consequently, in this production, the audience's attention is drawn not so much to the story or characters, but rather to the multiple actions within a constantly shifting theatrical landscape. As theatre critic Dovilė Statkevičienė observed, "Twarkowski focuses not on creating a plot, but on creating a universe of images", "we can finally discuss theatre as states, as structures of scenic dynamics, as stage landscapes" [Statkevičienė 2017].

The recurring term "stage landscape" in reviews of this performance invites us to revisit Elinor Fuchs [1996], who has extensively analysed the concept of performance as a theatrical landscape. According to Fuchs, in such postmodern performances, "which have non-linear spatial structures and are concerned not with individual character or a temporal progression but with a total state or condition", the "human figure, instead of providing perspectival unity to a stage (...) is treated as



Figure 4. *Lokis*, directed by Łukasz Twarkowski, 2017,  
Lithuanian National Drama Theatre

(Photo: Dmitrijus Matvejevas. Courtesy of the Lithuanian National Drama Theatre)

an element in what might be described as a theatrical landscape” [Fuchs 1996: 92]. By conceptualising the performance as a theatrical landscape, the actors (and the characters they create) are no longer regarded as the primary participants in the theatrical action. Lithuanian theatre critics assessing the performance *Lokis* have also noted that all theatrical components are considered equal, positioning the actors as just one part of the whole. As Vaidas Jauniškis [2017] observed, “actors are trying to realise that their role may be just a brushstroke in the corner of the overall picture, but no less accurate and valuable”.

In this performance, the actors face the challenging task of embodying multiple characters from different, intertwining narrative lines. At the beginning of the performance, the actors, lined up in front of the stage in a lit theatre hall, introduce themselves to the audience as if they were members of the international creative team: namely, director Łukasz Twarkowski, costume designer Dovilė Gudačiauskaitė, playwright Anka Herbut, composer Bogumił Misala, scenographer Fabien Lédé, and others. In a non-acting style, they present the performance and its creative process, mentioning the challenges the actors of this production faced when asked “to get rid of every possible actor’s system and build this world on the ruins of

a character or a story". Later, all of these actors appear on stage masterfully embodying several different characters. For instance, Airida Gintautaitė portrays both the actress Marie Trintignant and the assistant director Giedrė Kriaučionytė, while Darius Gumauskas takes on the roles of Bertrand Cantat, Wittembach 1, and set designer Fabien Lédé. However, the overall *mise-en-scène* ensures that the actors do not create the illusion that they are someone other than, for example, actor Darius Gumauskas or actress Airida Gintautaitė. Instead, they function within the performance text as flexible theatrical figures, significant as part of a multidimensional stage discourse. As Statkevičienė noted, "in this universe, the actor is above all a moving figure, defined (...) as a visual body with visual characteristics (...) it doesn't matter whether Darius Gumauskas is Darius Gumauskas, or Bertrand Cantat, or Wittembach 1, or Fabien Lédé: what matters is that he is" [Statkevičienė 2017].

One could argue that *Lokis* introduced a completely different approach to the actors' work on stage, allowing them to "exist on stage without playing", to perform without the need for specific character portrayal. Such a way of acting enabled the actors to seamlessly weave together different episodes, words and actions from various characters, freely balancing between acting and non-acting, acting for both the stage and the camera, and navigating between representing and performing. Thus, in this production, to paraphrase Patrice Pavis [Pavis 1996: 59], the actors do not merely *simulate* being someone else; instead, they *stimulate* the audience's reaction, encouraging spectators to interpret their roles both as audiovisual elements within the theatrical landscape and as distinct theatrical characters.

## Conclusions

Contemporary theatre practice demonstrates that actors are increasingly tasked with the creation of roles that do not have a clear prototype in the literary text. Traditionally, role creation has been understood as the process of transferring a dramatic character from the medium of verbal language into physical space (from text to body). However, more recently, role creation is increasingly seen as a multifaceted performance by the actor, without the need to hide behind a fictional character. This shift makes Diderot's question – whether the actor should experience the character's emotions or merely demonstrate them skilfully to the audience – less and less relevant. In the face of the so-called "death of the character", it is not the techniques of character creation that are central to acting, but rather the actor's performative presence during the performance, their existence on stage, even without conventional acting.

Returning to the question of what constitutes the paradox of the contemporary actor, one could argue that it lies in the fact that actors are increasingly encouraged not to play a specific character or even not to act in the traditional sense at all.

In the light of this change, Pavis proposes to “de-dramatize” the role of the actor and to acknowledge that the actor’s role “is only a part of the theatre performance: it takes its meaning from the whole performance, both from the view of the production (as a semiotic structure) and from the point of view of reception (as a construction through the spectator’s viewpoint)” [Pavis 2014: 10].

Thus, the paradox of the contemporary actor emerges from the collaborative nature of meaning-making in contemporary theatre, with the realisation that the character is not solely crafted by the actor but is significantly shaped by the spectator. The final image of the character crystallises in the audience’s mind.

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