

## *The Actor's Body as an Instrument: Expression, Mind, Hope. A Dialogue with Actress Maia Morgenstern*

**Sorin-Dan BOLDEA<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** A conversation with Maia Morgenstern prompted interesting reflections about what it means to be an actor. In it, subjects such as fear, motivation, desire, and even the differences between stage and film acting are touched upon. We explore both surface matters as well as profound and extremely sensitive aspects about the actor in general and his instrument. Maia Morgenstern is a celebrated theatre and film actress, known for theatre productions such as *An Antique Trilogy* (Andrei Șerban, 1990) and films such as *The Oak* (Lucian Pintilie, 1992) and *The Passion of the Christ* (Mel Gibson, 2003).

**Keywords:** theatre, film, actor, performer, body, motivation, emotion.

Maia Morgenstern was born in 1962, in Bucharest, Romania, into a Jewish family. After graduating from the "I.L. Caragiale Theatre and Film Institute" in Bucharest in 1985, she played in various acclaimed and successful movies and theatre productions, both Romanian and international. She has been the recipient of numerous awards for best actress, including at the Venice Film Festival (1992) and granted by the European Film Academy (1993). In 2003, she was named Actress and Woman of the Year by the European Parliament from Strasbourg. In 2012, she was awarded the Order of *Arts and Letters* in

---

<sup>1</sup> Sorin-Dan Boldea, MA Student: Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeș-Bolyai University, Romania, email: sorin.boldea@stud.ubbcluj.ro



the rank of *Knight* by the President of *France*. In addition to her impressive career as a professor, theatre and film actress, Maia Morgenstern is a humble and emotive person I've had the opportunity to meet a few times. I've always been curious to discover the stories and insights of an actor of her status, as explored in the dialogue that follows.



*Maia Morgenstern (copyright Raluca Ciornea, 2021)*

**Sorin-Dan Boldea:** *First of all, I am pleased to be here today and to have the opportunity to carry on this dialogue. I'd like to begin by complimenting you on all your career achievements. Moving on to the first question to you, we know that many actors choose either theatre or film. There are also actors who choose to do both. I personally have chosen both because love and passion are equally strong in both directions. And you have a career in both also, hence the question, from your perspective, why theatre and why film?*

**Maia Morgenstern:** I would have loved to give a complex answer with some depth, and with a horizon that would lead to some conclusions, but I will just say that I was offered different challenging and interesting roles in different projects, to which I answered yes. I have to confess with all the assumptions, that I don't know how to say no, and that when it was the case, I answered yes to different, interesting, challenging, exciting, controversial projects, not a few times, especially in cinema. I love working in the theatre, I love working on the set, or in television, whether we're talking about a series, or something else, whether we're talking about an installation, new forms of performance. So that's my answer, I've been given opportunities! And I honestly don't see working in theatre, creating a role in theatre, as different from creating a role in the film. Yes, maybe the methods, and the way of expression, of course, differ, and it's normal to be like that, but basically, I think they both start from the core of truth, from emotion, and from communication.

*From my point of view also, based on my experiences gained so far, there is not a huge difference between them, I think we can talk about adjustments and nuances rather than differences. On the other hand, again, in your opinion, how do they complement each other in an actor's career? Theatre and film, or theatre acting and film acting?*

I don't know how they complement each other, but I know they sometimes contradict each other. At times these hypostases, these dimensions, these paths that an actor walks in theatre or film can be challenging. When I started practicing my profession, my craft, at the faculty in Bucharest, I learned as hard as I could, that's how it was done back then, a lot of practice in order to perfect your professional existence. I don't know how they complement each other, but I think they do. Sometimes you are told in the theatre, that you are being theatrical, or you are told that you have to play filmic in a certain scene, and this is also because the means of expression and the methods of addressing the audience have diversified, and yes, we play with a microphone, not only in musical performances, even in normal performances, and it is like this because the performance economy, the artistic conception, implies a certain degree of intimacy, of utterance. The camera is also used not rarely in theatre performances.

I'm thinking now specifically of the performance *Empire*<sup>2</sup>, part of the European trilogy by Milo Rau at Schaubühne, a performance with which I have toured the world. In this show there was a camera, we were on stage, and we had the lavalier glued to our bodies so that it captured every breath, every inflection, to capture the truth and the emotion, and to be as alive, as present. Sure, it was played out on stage, but it was played back in the image and sound on a screen. It was different. On the other hand, you hear not rarely in the film, speak louder, speak clearer, no one can understand what you're saying. Of course, the art of film acting involves murmuring, and I assume this term, murmuring is a term for conveying emotion and information. Yes, sometimes the technique tells you that you need to speak more clearly, you have to be careful about the incandescence of emotion, truth, and communication. You need to convey the real truth of the stage, television, or cinema production.

*We all know that as actors, we have a few moments in our careers when we put so much heart into certain projects that it ends up overwhelming us. Personally, I had this experience only once, at the theatre, in the production Fragil<sup>3</sup> at the Maidan Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, when I had to play a character who was extremely depressed, with homicidal tendencies that ended up really disturbing me. Some of our colleagues have had extremely deep and difficult-to-control feelings in film projects for example. For you, when did these intense feelings arise, when working on stage or in the film?*

Firstly, thank you for this question, and secondly, I can say that I am learning to manipulate my emotions. I have felt it, I have sensed it, it crystallizes, it conceptualizes, it takes shape for me, I mean what it means to work with the mind, with emotions. It's not easy. To be in control, for me, is important, it is important to control and manage with wisdom and dignity and with moderation, your feelings, and emotions. And it can happen that

---

<sup>2</sup> *Empire*, a theatre performance, drama, directed by Milo Rau, with Maia Morgenstern, Rami Khalaf, and Ramo Ali. First performance in Berlin at the Schaubühne Theatre. Premiere: 2016.

<sup>3</sup> *Fragil*, a theatre performance, drama, directed by Diana Aldea, with Dan Boldea and Paul Tonca. First performance in Cluj-Napoca, Romania, at the Maidan Theatre. Premiere: 2021.

you are overwhelmed by a kind of emotion, a kind of passion, that is not beneficial, or rather useful in the economy of the show, or film production, and this can make you tense, and distract you. There's nothing to do with your overdose of emotion, and this must be well understood, and it's all about craftsmanship, and mastery. Personally, I'm a fan of good management, of diversifying the tools and methods I use to practice my profession. With this comes control.

*Dominic LaCapra said that most of the time, traumatic moments in one's life do not register in the conscious mind at the moment of impact, but long after, when something makes us relive the trauma we have suffered and makes us aware of it.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, in the same performance I mentioned earlier, I had this kind of experience and it took me a long time to understand what actually happened to me. In all your years of acting, have you had a moment, or several moments, where you've relived a trauma on stage or on set through the role you've played?*

No, that did not happen to me.

*In my early years of college, I always heard from my mentors that my body is my own instrument. So, yes, the actor's body is his instrument, but what are its limits?*

Its limits are numerous, and here we are talking about three-dimensionality, and that's all, but there are also limits of the knowledge and other limits. Perhaps it would be interesting to know them first, to be aware of them, to accept them and then it is up to us to work on them from here on. Limits fluctuate and vary, according to age, according to the stage of personal or artistic development, basically, you have to know where you start and what you are aiming at, and what are the means by which you can get where you want to go. I think that not infrequently, at least from my point of view, there are barriers and cultural limits to knowledge, and these we could overcome, and manage through knowledge, information, and documentation, and everything beyond that, are the limits that we can not overcome. As much as I would like to be a contortionist now, or a ballerina, I don't know if I could, these are my limits. I would like to add something else, maybe

---

<sup>4</sup> Dominic LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (New York: Cornell UP, 1996), 177.

prejudices can also be limits in the free approach and in the free expression of creation, prejudices of all kinds, maybe a certain construct or another in which we have been educated, can be a limit, or a barrier.

*In the last few years, I've taken on projects that I wouldn't normally take on or done things in certain projects that I wouldn't want to do. When should you say STOP in the work process?*

I'm afraid I don't have an answer to this question.

*Although I'm past 25, I often feel much younger, especially when working in a pleasant environment. How old is Maia Morgenstern's inner body?*

The body? What does the inner body mean? The inner mind? I have no idea. Let's say 16, or maybe even 12.

*Yes, a young age. How wonderful it is to be young! However, we all have our down times. Maybe we have periods when we don't take some castings and we don't play in anything, or when our self-esteem drops dramatically. What do you think saves our bodies and minds when we go through dark times in our careers?*

Self-respect, correct information, courage. Does it save us or not, I don't know, this is a very hard question, but perhaps the courage to assume our own opinions, or the courage to at least live according to our principles or just not to abdicate from what we consider to be our principles, our beliefs, or our truth, that can save us! And here I have an example, I don't know if it's the best, maybe it's the worst. My father lived according to the truths he knew, that he formulated, and was simply shattered from his social and professional life, but nevertheless, he did not abdicate. That is not to say that there was not enormous suffering and pain, and he needed the support of my mother, his wife, and his family. Something that I didn't understand at the time, and I wondered why my father had to be different, and why he had to do yoga to make people laugh at us on the beach in Mangalia. Why? Because it was good for him, and he knew and felt at that time, in the 60s, that this was public opprobrium, and only that they didn't throw stones at him, and yet he sat on his mattress and did his mobility exercises. He was approaching the age of 50 and his body and his mind and his breathing needed it. His scars needed it, he had found relief in yoga, but the world

THE ACTOR'S BODY AS AN INSTRUMENT: EXPRESSION, MIND, HOPE.  
A DIALOGUE WITH ACTRESS MAIA MORGENSTERN

booed him. Well, what to do? Nowadays, yoga and breathing exercises and all that are in demand, but back then... He didn't abdicate, he knew it was good for him back then. So, I don't know if courage and all that is salvation or not, maybe, but self-respect is.

*Throughout college, I had many moments where I felt fragile and extremely emotional. Not infrequently I judged myself for this and thought it was not normal. We know that in addition to your career in theatre and film, you have also mentored generations of actors. Because you have had the opportunity to observe many actors in their growth, I ask you, how fragile is an actor?*

An actor is very fragile and very vulnerable and maybe the way he is being raised by school and teachers, or at least it was like that in my time, in order to learn the mysteries of this profession, as I tell my students, you have to understand that these mysteries are sensitive and moving and this kind of profession is a noble but hard one. When you are inspired, you know it all, you don't need anyone to tell you anything, and I believe that each of us, those of us who love and who want to approach this art in one way or another, have moments of inspiration. I think there are moments of divine inspiration, that's what I think. But what do you do with all the other moments when inspiration doesn't come down to you? And then I think in those moments, you have to have a very solid foundation, a very deep root in the ground, a grounding, a strong base. You must always be firmly rooted in the ground, you must have a solid anchor that does not let you break at the first gust of wind, at the first dissatisfaction with yourself, or at the first failure that most of the time is from the point of view of others.

So there may be such moments, how do you move forward? Well, as I said, it takes very solid preparation and self-respect. You must always not waste your energy except to grow, you must always channel your energy for transformation, for self-improvement. It's good, it's not good, see who tells you, how they tell you, whatever. I think every actor, at the beginning of a new project, is a beginner. So yes, we're terribly vulnerable and it's very good that it's like that. And then we have to think about what we become actors for, for virtual appreciation or for concrete appreciation, or are we a mirror of society, or a landmark, or can I make a difference through the universes I create through my acting?

*Throughout our discussion I deduced how important self-respect and love for your own body and your own profession are. Yes, it's good to be friends with yourself, but with all that said, there are times when we can't be friends with ourselves and others, what do we do? Who do you talk to when you don't want to talk to anyone?*

Yes, exactly. Well, I talk to my parents, in my thoughts.