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Ovidiu Schumacher on the Nature of Acting

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When Ovidiu Schumacher heard he would receive the Gopo Award for Lifetime Achievement, he did not start counting his triumphs. He did not count his sacrifices either. He asked himself a simpler question. “The first thing that came to my mind was: Why? Why me?”

“What have I done to deserve something like this?” He knew nothing about the honor in advance, and he says the joy came first, ahead of any urge to look back. Whether he deserves it is, in his view, not his to settle. “In the end, you work. You do your work. Sometimes things come to you, sometimes they don’t. You cannot control that. You work, and then it comes. Or it doesn’t come. That’s all.”

It is a modest answer from an actor who has spent more than fifty years in the profession, and it turns out to be the key to the way he talks about everything else. Schumacher has lived several artistic lives, in Romanian theatre during its most volatile decades, in German classrooms and, later, on German film and television sets. He describes each of them less as a plan than as a series of things that happened, and he keeps coming back to the same two ideas, chance and the present moment.

His years at the Bulandra Theatre are often described as one of the most remarkable chapters in Romanian stage history, and he does not argue with that. He also refuses to make it simple. “It was a very special time, but also a very complicated one. There were wonderful experiences, and there were difficult experiences. Both existed at the same time.” There was a great deal of energy, a great deal of creativity, and many remarkable artists working side by side. There was also a shadow that never lifted. He remembers his production of Gogol’s “The Government Inspector,” a huge, beautiful spectacle that audiences loved and that seemed destined for a long life. After only three performances, it was banned.

“That was the reality of those years,” he says. Every success carried a question with it. Would the work continue? Would the authorities accept it? Would it survive at all? “On one side, everything seemed perfect. Wonderful. Exciting. On the other side, there was always a huge question mark hanging over everything.” That contradiction, he says, is what he remembers most clearly.

He is just as unwilling to turn the past into a golden age when he compares it with the present. When he graduated, there was only one acting school in the whole country. Three years in a theatre were mandatory, which meant that a young actor knew where he would work and had the chance to act. The pay was small,

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but the security was real. “That did not mean success. It did not mean you would become a great actor. But it gave you time. Time to learn. Time to make mistakes. Time to discover who you were as an artist.”
Today the schools are countless, public and private, in one city after another, and the number of young actors has grown far faster than the number of positions.

“You finish school and then the real struggle begins. You have to find your place in the profession. You have to find work. You have to survive.” He adds, carefully, “I am not saying that everything was better in those days. Every period has its advantages and disadvantages. But for this profession, life was certainly simpler. And it was certainly more secure.” The work itself, he believes, has hardly changed. “The craft itself has not changed that much. The profession remains the same. What has changed are the conditions.” Competition is fiercer now and uncertainty arrives sooner, but the task is as it always was. “You work with yourself, with your body, your voice, your emotions.”

His own path bent away from the stage earlier than most people expect. When he came to Germany in the 1990s, his theatre career was almost finished. He appeared in one more production, a staging by Leander Haußmann, and he calls even that “rather accidental.” What followed was a rebuilding from very little. He taught acting first. Film roles arrived slowly, among them one of his earliest German films, “Die Honigkuckuckskinder,” which he remembers as a very interesting experience even if the film itself did not have an easy fate. Television followed, and so did his work at the Athanor Academy.

He thinks the way he arrived mattered. “I came to Germany without big expectations. I told myself: I’ll start something and then see what happens. It doesn’t matter. We’ll see. Maybe that was important. I was free. And slowly opportunities came.”
Asked whether he prefers acting or teaching, he does not choose. “Teaching and acting belong together for me,” he says. His students kept bringing new generations and new perspectives into his life, and he kept learning from them. The teaching habit began long before Germany. After some years of work in Romania he became an assistant for acting training at the theatre institute, where he accompanied two generations of students. He understands how fragile young actors are.

“This job is complicated because you work with your body, your voice, your emotions. That’s why it’s important to give courage and trust. You have to try, try, try. Make mistakes. And keep going. Eventually it comes.” He adds a warning that sounds like it comes from long experience. “You must never simply copy what the teacher says. That’s dangerous. You have to think for yourself and find your own solution.”

The screen has also given him something few actors get, a professional meeting with his own child. His daughter, Anna Schumacher, first appeared on camera with him when she was three years old, playing his daughter in a film. He is quick to say she was not acting in any real sense, only being a child, but it was

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already a special experience. Many years later came “Die Reise mit Vater,” where she was a working actress with a small role as a nurse. For him it was exciting because they were there together, “not only as father and daughter, but as colleagues working on the same production.” Then came “Hackerville,” in which she had the lead and he played her father.

By then she was carrying a major production on her shoulders, and what impressed him most was her independence. People tend to assume that an actor father and an actress daughter must talk about the work constantly. They did not. “I never rehearsed scenes with her. Sometimes she would ask me to read through a dialogue so she could learn it more quickly, but that was all. She never asked me, ‘Daddy, how should I play this scene?’ Never. And I think that is very important.” For him, an actor has to take responsibility for his or her own work, and Anna did exactly that.

Ask him what a lifetime of playing other people has taught him about human nature, and he steps back from the grand question. Those thoughts come late, he says, when you grow older and have the chance to look back and analyze what was real and what was not. While you are acting, you are not thinking about eternity. “You are in the moment and you do your job. That’s all. You can’t say: today we are making a masterpiece and tomorrow another one. It doesn’t work like that. It either happens or it doesn’t.”

Freedom is the word he returns to most, and he treats it with some suspicion. “Freedom is a complicated concept. You are always free inside a certain corner. From A to B you are free, beyond that not anymore.” Living in any system means living with limits, and he thinks total freedom would be chaos and anarchy. His comparison is an everyday one. “It’s like driving a car. You are free to drive, but you must watch the traffic lights, look left and right, and follow the rules.” The freedom he cares about is the inner kind, the freedom to think what you want, hope what you want and read what you want. He believes it can be grown deliberately.

“You have to make this freedom richer every day, every second, every year. Then you become freer. Then you also become richer as a human being.”
On the future, he is hopeful about one art form and puzzled by the other. The new wave of Romanian cinema, he says, is strongly connected to reality. Before 1989 there was often a false reality, a propaganda reality. “Today reality can be brutal and harsh, but it is real.” He sees young directors who are very good and very committed, and he knows they need good screenwriters and good authors beside them. For him this is a time of real hope for Romanian film.
Theatre feels different. “I don’t yet see great new Romanian playwrights. I don’t know why.”

His last answer is the most revealing. Had he been free to choose, he would have been a painter. He had some talent, he says, but not enough, and then theatre arrived and he had to pick one. He picked theatre and

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counts himself lucky. He stayed a devoted admirer of painting all his life, going to museums, exhibitions and churches, and keeping many painter friends. “Maybe I went to more art openings than theatre premieres. I think that was good, because it made me richer. It wasn’t only theatre. There was also a life outside the theatre.” Would he do it all again? He smiles at the idea, or at least his answer does. “Maybe. Or who knows.”

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