

SHORT REVIEW

By Prof. Kalina Stefanova, PhD

on

Todor Dimitrov-Mechkarski, PhD,

Stage Arts Faculty, Stage Speech Department,

for awarding of academic position of **Associated Professor**
in Professional Field: Theater and Film Arts (Stage Speech)

Dr. Mechkarski's book "Terminological Fundamentals of Stage Speech" (submitted as major habilitation work) evoked my reminiscence of an unusual performance without actors, by the German Rimini Minutes Company: Rooms After People. A show without actors but not without characters, thanks to the effect of the human voice. The human voice as "an extension of the body in space!", as it was very accurately defined by Prof. Diana Borisova (quoted on p. 23 of the book).

In 8 chambers, among the belongings or usual surroundings of 9 people, their voices are heard, recorded when they realized or decided they would die, telling people after them what happened, what, why and to whom they would like to leave objects or just memories, how they wanted to be remembered, believing or not whether something awaited them beyond. The audience enters there in groups of five persons from a small lobby, sees the face of only one of the characters (on a visual message recorded by him) and just listens to the others. A seriously ill woman chose euthanasia. A diplomat left all her fortune to artists in Afrika where she had worked. An elder couple that wanted to leave, along with their money, also the worth-living wisdom from the mistakes in life. A professor who says, there is nothing after death. And more...

After losing a person in life, the world looks different and we are wiser, at least for a while. After and during this unique experience, one gets attuned to a philosophical wave for much longer. May be, due to the lack of "personal pain" factor. Or simply because it is not exactly the encounter with death here that offers special perspective to life but something quite different which we rarely think about: the margin between the visible and the invisible. And isn't the human voice one of the dwellers of this area unknown to us, or even a kind of a medium between these two worlds?!

The human voice in which sometimes something unearthly sounds, something from the constant world of the spirit though coming out of the body, which is subject to the changeable, passing world of the matter. It is not a coincidence that the Chinese traditional performers must purify

themselves and tune in to the wave of inner peace and tangible integrity before producing sound – either with their voice or an instrument, because only in this way they can become media of divine harmony?!

Dr. Mechkarski's book, in fact, its inspired introduction, drew my attention also towards one of the leading trends in East-European theater for some time which is most clearly manifested in performances of classical works. There, the text may be reduced to a minimum but this is not at the expense of the spirit of the respective work as the focus is on the "letter" but on what brings it to life and drives the characters to say the words. As Grzegorz Bral said, on the occasion of his performance "Hamlet – Commentary" (The Goat's Song Theater, Wrocław, 2017), "the aim is to express what is just hinted at but not directly said by the author". The Lithuanian Nekrosius was famous for his long, almost silent scenes where through physical actions, he managed to make the audience feel the inner path of the words before pronouncing – what preceded and formed them. Today, Bral and to some extent, the Slovene Jernej Lorenzi, are even further in this distilling of the classical works up to their quintessence as they managed to create a so-called "vertical theater" the "body" of which occupies a very scarce place in the material space (horizontally), but leads directly into the territory of the spirit. In Bral's performances of Shakespeare, for instance, one has the feeling that the actors are not made of flesh, but of sound vibrations that extend far beyond their bodies. Therefore, the few words articulated in recitative or sung by them manage to carry and convey much more than their usual meaning. They have nothing to do with the chatter of everyday life, they come from a territory beyond the visible matter. And the ultimate effect of the performances is like an ancient Chinese quatrain which can mysteriously convey an entire story in colours, sounds, pictures, relationships, action.

That Dr. Mechkarski's book can trigger such reflections shows that it is not an ordinary dictionary (the form in which it is written) with dry and boring terms. Therein, the voice is defined as "a psycho-physical phenomenon", "the shortest definition of language is *knowledge*", "of speaking is a *skill*" and "speech is a collective unifying holistic concept about the linguistic and speaking ability of man" (p. 14). The definitions that are quoted unleash the imagination and send it to border territories between the visible and the invisible, or directly beyond our constricted material world. Like the above-mentioned Prof. Borisova's definition, or Peter Brooke's definition of words: "A word does not start as a word – it is the ultimate result which starts as an impulse called forth by attitude and

behaviour which in its turn dictates the need of expression... the word is a little visible particle of a huge invisible edifice.” (p.10).

Dr. Mechkarski surveys the stage speech from remarkably many perspectives: from the area of neurophysiology, neuropsychology, neurolinguistics, speech therapy (in which, by the by, is his second master’s degree), phonetics, medicine, etc., etc. It is just this holistic approach to the subject of the study – fully in the spirit of the definition of the holistic character of speech - that breaks up the generally uniform format of the dictionary-book from within and makes it surprisingly multi-layered and multi-spectral.

For me, as a reader with a starting point theater critical studies and theater studies in general, the interdisciplinary character of the study is one of its strengths. Due to this quality, Terminological Foundations of Stage Speech can be used as a reliable pedagogic aid in training of actors not only for the traditional theater but also for the new theatrical realities on world stages some of which I described above. Of course, all the other contributions of a “narrowly specialized” nature (from the attached list) of the habilitation work are also indisputable.

The combination of respect for tradition and a keen interest in and commitment to new trends, the fine balance between theory and practice, characterize both the book (in which, the terminology is supported by many specific practical examples) and the professional biography of Dr. Mechkarski. As Ralitsa Bezhan wrote very truly in her scientific review of Terminological Fundamentals of Stage Speech, he “skillfully combined academic terminology and practicability of the rules and norms of speech... studiousness, striving for self-development, perfectionism, orderliness, discipline and, in the same time inner freedom, sense of humour and ease of communication”, erudition and “intuition and senses that are wide open to the new”.

Finally, Dr. Mechkarski’s book has a high coefficient of usefulness also for the currently much-needed resistance to the declining speech ‘culture’ – a phenomenon that is expressed not only in impoverishment of vocabulary but also in misunderstood “enrichment” of our beautiful and extremely rich language, with foreign words, expressions and lately even intonations.

In conclusion, I verify that Dr. Mechkarski applies with the documents necessary for the competition, and all the requirements for the academic position are met. Given his professional virtues and the qualities of the habilitation work, I am convinced that he can quite deservedly be

awarded with the academic position of Associated Professor in the professional field of Theater and Film Art (Stage Speech).

I vote with YES.

Prof. PhD Kalina Stefanova