

*Romanian*  
*Performing Arts.*  
Perspectives





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# Contents

Irina Ionescu	<i>Intro</i>	6
Alice Georgescu	<i>An Alternative View of Alternative Theatre</i>	8
Cristina Rusiecki	<i>The Independents</i>	21
Iulia Popovici	<i>Stage Politics in Contemporary Romanian Theatre</i>	39
Oana Stoica	<i>In Search of Identity</i>	
	<i>Trends in Contemporary Theatre in Romania</i>	56
Monica Andronescu	<i>Independent Theatre in Bucharest</i>	
	<i>Entertainment beats Experiment</i>	74
Cristina Modreanu	<i>The Theatre of the New Generations</i>	
	<i>Cracks in the Pedestal of the Statue</i>	86
Ludmila Patlanjoglu	<i>Silviu Purcărete and the Apocalypse of Us</i>	104
Ludmila Patlanjoglu	<i>Andrei Şerban's Triumph and the Power of the Performing Arts</i>	113
Ludmila Patlanjoglu	<i>"The Crisis Syndrome" and Dr. Chekhov—</i>	
	<i>A Triptych by Andrei Şerban</i>	121
Octavian Saiu	<i>Towards a Rich Theatre: A Case Study in the Reception of</i>	
	<i>Eugene Ionesco on the Romanian Stage</i>	129
Gina Şerbănescu	<i>The History of Dance or the Dance of History?</i>	146
	<i>The 2015 National Theatre Festival:</i>	
	<i>Historical Perspectives and New Horizons</i>	158
	<i>Sibiu International Theatre Festival</i>	185



Irina Ionescu

# *Intro*

This publication brings together a range of different points of view which together paint a comprehensive—albeit not exhaustive—picture of the performing arts in Romania in recent years. Using both words and images, we cover the most important trends in terms of cultural policy and artistic themes, while also providing an account of the ideas that have circulated and continue to circulate in the field, of landmark performances and the venues where they were staged, as well as of the Romanian actors, directors and writers who enjoyed most success among the public and critics.

We hope this publication will be useful to our readers and our international partners—theatre producers, selectors and curators of performing arts festivals, theatre critics and cultural journalists.

In it we have sought to present a balanced view, one not weighed down by an excess of historical data or academic analysis, and with an emphasis placed on information and critical reviews drawn up in line with good journalistic practice. Our intention was therefore to create a tool for the sharing of cultural information and lay the foundations for future debate and individual research projects—all with the ultimate aim of forging a better link between the Romanian performing arts and international cultural markets. The selection of the content in these pages highlights a diversity of subject matter and organisational structures, as well as of the types of public at which the productions in



question were aimed. It features repertory theatre, independent projects and artists, artistic experiments and commercial theatre.

As a national cultural institute, our aim is to promote the Romanian performing arts beyond the country's borders, thereby enhancing the presence of Romania's leading productions and artists on foreign cultural markets (dedicated programmes, festivals, international theatre fairs, etc.).

We would like to thank all of our contributors for providing us with new material and allowing us to republish existing articles, as well as all of the theatres, artists, artistic consultants, literary secretaries and PR specialists for their generosity in providing us with access to images of the performances described in these pages—which we hope will act as an agreeable interface between the world of the Romanian performing arts and the international cultural scene.

Irina Ionescu holds a BA, an MA and a Ph.D. in Theatre Studies and was trained in an IATC Young Critics' Seminar. She is Director of Programmes (General Department for Romanian Cultural Institutes Abroad) at the Romanian Cultural Institute (RCI). Currently, she is a Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the Arts University in Târgu Mureş and Visiting Lecturer at the National University of Theatre and Film (NUTF). She contributes theatre articles to national publications.



Alice Georgescu

# *An Alternative View of Alternative Theatre*

In Romania, alternative theatre appeared on the scene under this explicit name immediately after 1990. Not that those advocating on its behalf had a clear idea of what it was all about. In fact, this combination of words was initially more a means to attract attention, arouse curiosity, to shock, even to annoy. But who? Here things were even more unclear. After the immense wave of civil unrest of December 1989—a wave which also swept up theatres audiences, carrying them out into the public squares, where it held them, on and off, for over three years—it was hard to believe that the “bourgeoisie” (?!), those inert/inept spectators, those sleepy minds could still be shaken out of their familiar comforts by a work of fiction, however daring. The time of *Hernani*, and the romantic uprisings launched on the grounds of theatrical aesthetics, had long since passed; revolutions



would no longer be triggered by an irreverent work (as is said to have been the case in Paris, in 1789, with Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro*), but by a perfectly orchestrated mass media, even when "under occupation". So then what?

Interestingly, the indigenous uprising against mainstream theatre, against "traditional" theatre, against theatre "as we (used to) know it", had from the outset (and this is sometimes still recognisable today) a very strong self-referential component: above all, the leading lights of the "new theatre" wanted to shock or, in certain cases, impress the "established" theatre critics, their own, more conservative colleagues and representatives of the state cultural authorities (especially with a view to obtaining funding), and only then, if at all, the paying public. And it is for this reason that the shape of alternative theatre in Romania remained ambiguous for many years: "alternative" predominantly denoted the venue, while the ideas, subject-matter, means of expressions and techniques essentially stayed the same. Consequently, the public would find itself in places that had never or only rarely been used for theatre before (restaurants, abandoned or unfinished buildings, basements, attics, etc.); they were forced to squeeze into places where the chairs were uncomfortable and few and far between, or where they might even have to stand in suffocating—or, conversely, freezing—rooms in order to see, most often from the same frontal perspective found in traditional theatre, either rehashed classic works or (more) recent but often inconsequential plays in which the only innovations were the extremely crude language and skimpy costumes of the actors.

Of equal note is the fact that for a long time the alternative to "official theatre" was provided by the very employees of the latter, who were unhappy with the roles they were being given in the state



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theatre (where, however, they remained... on the payroll) and who formed small companies of actors with exotic names, some of which disappeared very quickly and whose *real* contribution to theatrical life was, at best, short-lived. Does anyone, for example, recall Teatrul Unu (not to be confused with Unteatru)? Or Teatrul Inexistent (albeit this company existed from the end of the 1990s until the beginning of the present decade, even producing a few plays)? So, naturally, this was not a normal state of affairs. But, that being said, the political state of affairs described by Caragiale in *A Lost Letter*—“On the one hand *The Carpathian Roar*, on the other padding your friends pockets”—will forever be valid in Romania, including in cultural affairs. In other words, people in this part of the world (including those working in theatre) wish—“like the impartial Romanian”—to be at one and the same time both in power and in opposition, inside and outside, for and against, conservative and innovative, alternative and established.

One explanation might be that we suffer from a short memory (and not only when it comes to theatre). Still in the cultural sphere, a study ought to be carried out, even if only on a statistical level, of our ability to acknowledge our predecessors, to see ourselves as belonging (and not just paying lip service) to a tradition, a school of thought, an aesthetic movement, as following in the footsteps of a great master. Reading the interviews, the “declarations of faith”, the “testimonies” of young artists, you see that each appears to belong to a spontaneous generation, each appears to have emerged, artistically speaking, from out of nowhere, each appears to believe that theatre began (and, naturally, ends) with him or her; the only affiliations permitted, in extremis, are those with people of their own generation. Not only do names such as that of the inimitable Ion Sava—who, in 1946, produced the famous *Macbeth with Masks*, which, in more favourable

circumstances, might have revolutionised both Romanian theatre and Romanian theatre's place within European theatre at the time—sound alien to the latest generation of “alternative artists”. The same can also be said of the work of far more recent directors—such as the likes of Aureliu Manea, Iulian Vişa and Alexandru Tocilescu, to name but a few of those who died only recently and who embraced a *different* kind of theatre in Romania—which represents a kind of vague, abstract and unmapped territory, where no root has taken hold and from which no offshoots have appeared. To be original in (alternative) theatre in Romania is to have no past.

For looking back, however cursorily, without prejudice at Romanian theatre of the last 70 years (the precise duration of copyright!) reveals a constant searching for the new, an insatiable thirst for *something else*, an inexhaustible source of genuine creative energy, all of which survived for decades, unaltered by the different organisational forms they were forced to adopt, the hostility of the times and the whims of the powers that be of the day—in a word, by external circumstances. If the aforementioned *Macbeth with Masks* (staged by the National Theatre in Bucharest) can be considered the inaugural performance of what—for want of a better term, that is a term richer in content and more subtle in expression—we call alternative theatre, then another ten years would pass before Liviu Ciulei (actor, director, stage designer and architect, and perhaps the most complex figure in Romanian theatre) would lay, consciously and systematically, in a famous essay published in 1956, the foundations of theatre as an artistically autonomous structure, different from the dusty and propaganda-serving artefacts of those times; and it would be another five years before he would put these principles into practice, at the Bulandra Theatre, in his famous staging of the Shakespearian comedy *As You*



*Troilus and Cressida*, directed by David Esrig, Comedy Theatre, 1965



*Like It*, in which he recreated the atmosphere of the Elizabethan era through a vivid use of colour and sound. With the dam now open, the stream began to pour forth with impetuosity and, on the “official” stages—that is, in the state theatres, subsidised by the central budget of the Communist government—this *different* kind of theatre began to break moulds, to overturn conventions, to spark delirious enthusiasm and fierce opposition, to enchant and to shock. *Fools under the Moonlight* (“Proștii sub clar de lună”, Lucian Pintilie, 1965, Bulandra Theatre), *Troilus and Cressida* (David Esrig, 1965, Comedy Theatre), *King Lear* (Radu Penciulescu, 1971, the National Theatre in Bucharest) and *The Government Inspector* (Lucian Pintilie, 1973, Bulandra Theatre) are but a few examples—the most “visible” ones,

those which produced effects felt beyond the stage and in society—of this *alternative* movement in Romanian theatre. These were accompanied by a considerable number of plays which, while creating less of a stir, nonetheless helped consolidate this new approach, which found itself at odds with the majority of productions and the dominant ideology of the time. Examples of the latter include *The Girl from Andros* (Grigore Gonța, 1970, the National Theatre in Bucharest), *Twelfth Night* and *Elizabeth I* (Liviu Ciulei, 1973 and 1974, Bulandra Theatre), *Oedipus Saved* (Mihai Măniuțiu, Casandra Studio, 1977), *Arden of Faversham* (Aureliu Manea, Ploiești State Theatre, 1978)... And I should also mention here a theatre which for years was known among the public and theatre professionals alike as a place dedicated—through its constitution, one might say—to alternative theatre: the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț. Founded at the beginning of the 1960s and “equipped”, in the guise of the successive directors Ion Coman and Eduard Covali, with two authentic cultural animators who were constantly open to experimentation and creative disobedience, the theatre in Piatra Neamț not only produced an outstanding generation of actors—thereby creating a *sui generis* school that carried on and perfected the work of theatrical education itself. It was also, through its permanent or guest directors, responsible for a number of legendary productions of Romanian theatre: *The Good Person of Szechuan* (Andrei Șerban, 1968), *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Alexandru Tocilescu, 1978), *The Taming of the Shrew* (Iulian Vișa, 1979), *The Dragon* (Victor Ioan Frunză, 1980), *The Little Square* (Silviu Purcărete, 1987) and *The Orphan of Zhao* (Alexandru Dabija, 1992). Also worthy of mention are the productions for adults to come out of the Țândărică Theatre (in the 1960s and 70s, during the tenure as director of Margareta Niculescu), the unforgettable Nocturnes,



Miriam Răducanu and Gigi Căciuleanu in *Nocturnes*, Tândărică Theatre

theatre and dance productions by Miriam Răducanu and Gheorghe Iancu (at a time when neither the genre nor idea of dance-theatre had been heard of in Romania), as well as Gigi Căciuleanu's performances, at Small Theatre, during the tenure of Radu Penciulescu. This foray into "prehistory" can be concluded by mentioning two great directors who, even if they would never have called their work *alternative*, systematically (as was their nature) practiced the art of swimming against the principal, majority, accredited, "approved" stream: Alexandru Tocilescu and Andrei Șerban. Tocilescu, who passed away in 2011, is, among many other things, the author of productions such as *Bizarmonia* (instrumental theatre, based on the music of Nicolae Brânduș, ARCUB, 1999) and *Elizabeth Bam* (based on the short



surreal text by Daniil Kharms, Bulandra, 2006), performances that were entirely new at the time not only by comparison with all existing theatre tradition, but also with the “conventional” language of theatre itself. Şerban, having returned triumphantly to Romania in 1990 after a long and professionally fruitful period of self-imposed exile in America as the first post-communist director of the National Theatre in Bucharest, unleashed on Romanian theatre, through his famous *An Ancient Trilogy* (the National Theatre in Bucharest, 1990; the second of which, *The Trojan Women*, being restaged with significant changes at the National Opera in Iaşi in 2013), an authentic cultural revolution (albeit of an entirely different nature to that introduced in China by Mao!). And, in the following years, he continued his iconoclastic artistic endeavours, causing, for example, a huge scandal by staging George Enescu’s opera *Oedipe* at the Romanian National Opera in Bucharest in 1995. Today, now in his seventies, Andrei Şerban continues to be one of the most “alternative” directors in Romanian theatre.

So, here we are again, back in the present, a present marked by a veritable explosion of alternative theatre—alternative, at least in name. And, as I said earlier, by ignoring or despising the past, most of the young artists who today practice a *different* type of theatre either produce prose unknowingly, produce bad prose or simply produce anything but prose (naturally, with the exception of directors such as Radu Afrim and Gianina Cărbunariu, who in time have become veteran rebels against the mainstream, albeit operating from the very heart of the mainstream, the national theatres). But I won’t dwell on the failures; I will only very briefly mention three cases of alternative theatre embraced openly, creatively and... successfully. The first of these is Masca. Founded in May 1990 by the actor Mihai Mălaimare, Masca Theatre became—in particular on account of its “street”,





“itinerant” component—a *popular* theatre in both the historical and social sense of the word, attracting an extremely large and diverse audience thanks to its direct style of communication and refined means of artistic expression. For, despite “handing itself over” to the community, Masca stubbornly continued to place itself in the service of art—an art, naturally, adapted to the space, but still of an impeccable aesthetic substance. Somewhat on the opposite end of the spectrum lies an inter-disciplinary group of artists whose make-up and name vary, a group formed at the National University of Theatrical Arts and Cinematography (UNATC) in Bucharest and who later sought a new base and, perhaps, a home, elsewhere. Some of the group’s more regular members include the playwright Mihaela Michailov and the



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Bogdan Georgescu



directors and playwrights Bogdan Georgescu and David Schwartz, who has initiated theatre projects in disadvantaged areas of the capital (in Rahova, for example) and who attempted not necessarily to bring theatre closer to the residents in question, but rather to involve the latter in an artistic debate about their lives. A final example is given by Crista Bilciu, a poet and director and self-declared devotee of traditional and institutional theatre who, in 2013, in a performance based on the writings of Mircea Cărtărescu entitled *Nostalgia 53*, produced a powerful example of genuine alternative theatre, authentic in terms of both aesthetics and structure, an impressive show thanks to the dedication of the performers and the quality of artistic expression.



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theatre is always alternative.*

Proof, probably, that the best prose is written when you don't set out with this goal expressly in mind.

At the end of this brief review of the birth and uneven development of alternative theatre in Romania—notwithstanding the imprecise nature of the terms used by theoreticians and the philological (though not only) equivocation of those that practice alternative theatre—the conclusion is that—as anywhere and anytime in art, in any art—it is not the labels that are important, but the results. In short, alternative theatre may not always be good, but good theatre is always alternative.

Alice Georgescu is a theatre critic with many years of experience. She is a former editor of *Teatrul azi* magazine, executive editor of *Scena.ro* magazine, editor of *Ziarul de Duminică* newspaper and artistic consultant at the National Theatre in Bucharest. She has also been artistic director of the National Theatre Festival (1999–2000 and 2011–2013) and president of the Romanian Section of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC, 2008–2015). She is a recipient of the UNITER prize for criticism (1992 and 2000) and the UNITER lifetime achievement award (2009).



Cristina Rusiecki

# *The Independents*

Let's go back a couple of decades. At that time, every big city in Romania had a national or municipal theatre. And with its almost 10 state theatres, including those for children, Bucharest had a privileged status. Then as now, each theatre would be chasing a relatively small number of star directors. But whereas today almost every self-respecting theatre has a policy of working with young artists, back then things were completely different. Not to mention that the state theatres weren't hiring new people and independent venues were simply non-existent. There was nowhere for university graduates to put on a play or to act. On the one hand, they were condemned to unemployment, on the other, the impossibility of expressing themselves artistically. No one from the authorities seemed to care what they had to say. Things would change with the appearance in Bucharest of the first independent theatres, ACT Theatre and LUNI Theatre at Green Hours.

First, the Green Hours bar, with its prime location in the centre of Bucharest on Calea Victoriei, would transform, one day a week, Monday, into a venue for theatre. The man behind this initiative, Voicu Rădescu, started out with jazz concerts, but it wasn't long before his venue would also be opening its doors to theatre. Today's star directors, such as Gianina Cărbunariu, made their debuts at LUNI Theatre at Green Hours. Her show *Stop the Tempo* was a manifesto for young people unable to find their place in a rigid society that was far

too narrow to accommodate their desire for freedom. Soon after, just down the road on Calea Victoriei, in a basement once used for interrogations by the former secret police, ACT Theatre would be born. It was through these two outlets that independent theatre in Romania would explode, and for at least a decade they were the only representative spaces for new theatre in the capital. So it is for this reason that, in my discussion of independent theatre in Bucharest, I will mainly fall back on these two cases. For the rest of the country I have chosen another pioneering theatre as an example, <sup>74</sup> Theatre from Târgu Mureş. Together these institutions would inject a breath of fresh air into Romanian theatre.

New playwrights unheard of at the time, such as Peca Ştefan, or the actors Lia Bugnar and Mimi Brănescu, all made their debuts on these stages. More than a few of those we consider leading directors today, in 2015, would direct plays year after year in independent theatre. More than a few of today's respected actors would act year after year in independent theatre. And, because the venues they had to work in were small, fitting no more than a hundred spectators, independent theatre is also where multimedia sets were first used, designed back then by the stage designer Andu Dumitrescu. All who passed through ACT or LUNI left their mark and honed their style there. And soon these places would become centres of theatrical effervescence. If today we can speak of the Cristi Juncu, Vlad Massaci or Theo Herghelegiu style of directing, or the Radu Afrim brand, etc., this is because these all took shape in these locales.

Unquestionably, there were also many actors who were the driving force behind these theatres. Marius Manole acted in an enormous number of the productions staged at LUNI Theatre. Mihaela Sîrbu was another driving force, translating and selecting emblematic works



Paula Gherghe and Maria Obretin in *Stop the Tempo*, directed by Gianina Cărbunariu

and introducing to the public top American playwrights such as Neil LaBute. Young actors, like Marius Florea Vizante, Vlad Zamfirescu and Gheorghe Ifrim, first appeared at ACT in a fabulous production, *American Buffalo* by David Mamet, directed by Cristi Juncu, which has been running for 11 years on the trot to full houses and with tickets sold out weeks in advance. Independent theatre was not only experimental and was not only aimed at a niche audience—gradually, it would also attract a loyal public of its own.

Who were the people who went to see the plays directed by the independents?

Their profile was varied. Mainly, there were those fed up with the conventional, metaphorical, high-brow theatre to which they were treated by most of the state theatres. Those who wanted to see contemporary people in contemporary situations, without an excess of aesthetic affectation. Of course, there were also some young artists who felt more attracted by *what* their colleagues (also young) from non-conventional venues said and, especially, *how* they said it. The people that went to these kinds of performances wanted to see



*Independent theatre was not only experimental and was not only aimed at a niche audience—gradually, it would also attract a loyal public of its own.*





Vlad Zamfirescu, Gheorghe  
Ifrim and Marius Florea Vizante  
in *American Buffalo*, directed by  
Cristi Juncu

a different kind of acting than what they found in the big and fossilised theatres; naturalness and simplicity; a new approach to acting, in tune with the times, devoid of overly-theatrical declamation and second-hand screams, devoid of melodrama and tears in the eye. Lively, colourful, succulent language and scripts that spoke truths about the world. Big truths and small truths. All the better when they were big. A new language, with elliptical, unfinished sentences that reproduced spoken language, thus elbowed its way into the world of theatre, in particular through the translations of Bogdan Budeş.

## Beginnings and directions

### ACT Theatre

ACT Theatre benefitted from the popularity of its founder: Marcel Iureş, one of most celebrated figures of Romanian theatre who almost every theatre in Romania would love to have on its stage and an actor also known for his Hollywood films. First, the plays in which he acted became iconic works. Then, demonstrating the intelligence, flair and openness he still retains today, he brought in new, hitherto unknown talent. Many directors who began their careers here would

go on to become famous over the next 20 years. Two good friends, Cristi Juncu and Vlad Massaci, introduced the works of David Mamet, Neil LaBute, Evgeny Grishkovets, etc. Today, plays such as *Bash*, *The Shape of Things*, *American Buffalo* and *The City* would be at home in almost any theatre. Back then, however, they could only be seen at LUNI Theatre at Green Hours or at ACT. Their performances met with great success. Their style, based on clean directing, with few flourishes, with a focus on working with the actors and turning each role into an acting masterclass, was honed in these places.

Gradually, new directions began to emerge in Romanian theatre. In *Bash*, by Neil LaBute, Vlad Massaci put on a form of theatre entirely different from the productions of the day. The actors didn't speak as if they were on the stage, but exactly as they would in "real life". With a naturalness and a lack of artifice, stripped of melodrama, the gap between art and the public grew smaller and theatre thus became much easier to digest. In establishing a new direction, *Bash* entered the history books. The characters didn't get up from their chairs for the entire duration of play. Through the performances of the actors (Mihai Călin, Vlad Zamfirescu, Ioana Flora and Mihaela Sîrbu), the script became too powerful to require additional stage "effects". The three criminals each recounted their crimes without showing remorse. None were tainted by the stigma of manslaughter, as in Greek tragedies, but, rather, they engendered feelings of sympathy. The human beings they portrayed were fundamentally evil, but fundamentally likeable, too.

In *American Buffalo*, written by David Mamet and directed by Cristi Juncu, the twists and shifts in the balance of power, the rapid changes, from one minute to the next, in the emotional dynamics, all of which flow from the internal logic of the scenes, took the audience

on a rollercoaster ride of excitement. Information, meaning, relationships, plans—all were constantly in flux and constantly defying conventions. There was a lot of graphic language, but this was all part of the play's impeccable internal logic. The explanation for the vulgarity resided in the words that went unspoken, which, despite the macho posturing, hid a lack of confidence, fear and an inability to manage the situation. The long pauses, a gift to the actors, became pregnant and suggestive. So, although the language was vulgar, *American Buffalo* can be seen as a genuine lesson in coherence in which nothing is extraneous. The directing contributed to the play's internal logic at every step, generating high quality of humour combined with ebullient acting and powerful, brilliantly defined characters.

ACT Theatre lived up to expectations once more with the play *How It's Done*, directed by Theo Herghelegiu, one of the best plays to be staged in Bucharest in that period: directorial extravagances delivered with the utmost seriousness, flexible scripting to the point of proposing different endings to be chosen by the audience, actors who sometimes descended on ACT Theatre by helicopter. In time, Herghelegiu would become one of the biggest names in independent theatre, a type of theatre for which she would express her fondness on a number of occasions.

Another memorable production from ACT Theatre, consisting of 11 monologues, was *Natural Born Fuckers*, written by Eric Bogosian and directed by Marcel Țop. Consisting of a series of portraits, this play documented all forms of excess from the male world as well as moral decay on a universal scale. What defined the rogues in question was their mental chaos and aggression. The sense of revolt could not be stifled and was looking for an efficient way to express itself, providing an opportunity for a formidable generation of young actors

(including Toma Dănilă, Radu Iacoban, Răzvan Oprea and Tudor Aaron Istodor) to demonstrate their talent.

### Quality Theatre at the Bar

#### LUNI Theatre at Green Hours

Marcel Țop would become one of the most daring and versatile directors in independent theatre. The revolution was underway. His staging at LUNI Theatre of *The Deformed* remains a milestone. Firstly because it wasn't based on a play, but an author. The public were presented with a number of texts in prose or poetry (monologues or dialogues) by some very young (aged up to 30) contemporary Romanian poets, prose writers and journalists: Mitoș Micleușanu (also initiator and coordinator), Răzvan Țupa, Claudiu Komartin and Adina Zorzini. Their aim was to provide a poetic study of contemporary reality. Their texts were conceived, written and thought out "collectively". *The Deformed* performed an incision into reality in a way, as the artists' statement explains, "recent Romanian playwriting fails to do, being in the midst of a continuous and interminable process of recovery of pseudo-non-conformist and stereotypical ways of producing theatre, based on the display of a trivial cross-section of society comprised of colourful characters, fleshed out in a forced and mediocre manner, encountered in commonplace and inexpressive dramatic situations." The result was a cabaret of urban poetry, exquisite acting performances and much humour that reflected Romania at the time. A metaphor for the year 2008 and an eccentric cocktail in which the scenes abounded in boys from the city (Toma Dănilă) and boys from the countryside, who shoot up while listening to Romanian folk music (Tudor Aaron Istodor), in cadaverous narcissists (Iulian Gliță) taken



Iulian Gliță in *The Deformed*,  
directed by Marcel Țop

from our synthetic world, in ironically portrayed ostentatious theatricality (Adina Zorzini) and in pure poetry (Diana Cavallioti).

The playwright Peca Ștefan, who from the beginning has always been concerned with the problems faced by young people, also made his debut in independent theatre. His first production at LUNI Theatre, *New York (Fuckin' City)*, deals with one of Romania's biggest problems today: the exodus of young people from the country. Aged 22, Peca Ștefan had already acquired the art of the twist and electrifying pacing, as well as an ability to create a torrent of real conflict out of commonplace occurrences. His 17, 18 and 23-year-old characters dream of becoming established international actors. Until then, they live out the usual dramas of their respective ages, minute by minute, on a cosmic scale. Their inner torment is intense, their emotional impulses... apocalyptic. Their lives are made up of 50 heartbreaks an hour, and many, many dreams. At heart, the three protagonists are drowning in the tedium of their home town of Târgoviște, their world, their parents and their teachers. They aspire to run away as far away as possible—that is, to the capital or—why not?—to New York.

It was also at LUNI Theatre that Radu Afrim would invent his own form of commercial theatre. Two productions would see



Romulus Chiciuc, Andreea Bibiri and Alin Tegaș (front), Ada Milea and Marius Manole (rear) in *America-Knows-It-All*, directed by Radu Afrim

Green Hours more packed than ever before: *Kinky ZoOne* and *America-Knows-It-All*, the latter based on a work by Nicole Duțu. In both productions by Afrim, who was to go on to become one of the strongest “brands” of Romanian theatre directing, the fantastic capacity for improvisation of the entire troupe, their explosive energy and the director’s resources for irony and self-irony unleashed cascades of laughter. The actors made fun of everything: the taboos and air of obsolescence in Romanian culture, the outdated spirit of 1848, the inertia of society and, last but not least, of themselves and their fellow actors. The director’s earlier work also didn’t escape the fun-poking, self-citation being one of his favourite techniques.

It was in this same theatre that another distinctive figure of Romanian theatre made a name for herself: the director Carmen Lidia Vianu, who, for a while at least, also worked in independent theatre. In *Bitter Sauce*, written by Eric Bogosian and based on Shakespeare’s Sonnet 118, the register of denotation appeared entirely out of synch with that of connotation. Pursuing the path of deconstruction, Carmen Lidia Vianu’s play combined different languages in a form hitherto unseen in Romania. From the world of installations she took the active three-dimensional gaze, from film the convention of the camera and





Ramona Bărbulescu and Paul Dunca in *Bitter Sauce*, directed by Carmen Lidia Vidu

point of view, and from photography the frozen time of static perspective. Not to mention the glacial acting, intentionally colourless so as to have minimum impact on the visually translated forms of internal time. The result was a style that was daring and modern on account of its schizoid perspective and the continual balancing act struck between physical time—that of the acts and lines, maintained by the actors who create the situation, the encounter of the characters in the real world—and internal time, where the lines recited reveal an immense affective content, untranslatable into spoken language. It was these things that made Carmen Lidia Vianu the most experimentalist director in Romania.

## 74 Theatre in Târgu Mureş

In 2003, in the Butchers' Tower of the fortress of the city of Târgu Mureş, the well-known actor Nicu Mihoc, from the city's National Theatre, and his younger colleague, Theo Marton, with the help of Laurențiu Blaga, Zeno Apostolache and Bogdan Moraru, decided to create an independent theatre. They called it 74 Theatre, in reference to the theatre's original number of seats. The founders had become aware of a worrying fact—namely that “the proportion



*As with Bucharest's independent theatres, the equation remained the same: new scripts about issues of interest to young people in plays staged by young directors with young actors, most of whom were not attached to any particular theatre.*



of new plays in our repertoire does not exceed 7–8%, while in most European countries the figure is around 50%.” Knowing the interest among younger audiences for contemporary theatre, they made it their goal to promote new playwriting. Both were good actors, with a strong dramatic sense and a nose for what might go down well with the public. Setting out to change the way people think, the theatre they founded struck the perfect balance between the opportunities provided by new forms of theatre and the expectations of the public. Nicu Mihoc and Theo Marton used the weight of their considerable acting talent to tackle new subjects, including the problems faced by ethnic, sexual and religious minorities, then still taboo subjects on the Romanian stage.

As with Bucharest’s independent theatres, the equation remained the same: new scripts about issues of interest to young people in plays staged by young directors with young actors, most of whom were not attached to any particular theatre. And the opportunities for young artists, as well as emulations and the models created, would continue to exist later, after 2010, thanks to two extensive European-funded programmes for students from Târgu Mureş, Cluj-Napoca and Sibiu. The productions at 74 Theatre were good, lively, interesting and performed in a modern, minimalist style, with acting that was convincing from the first line. Alongside ACT, 74 Theatre provided one of the more important stages where Cristi Juncu would hone his technique. His attention to detail in the construction of the characters, something which in time would become a trademark, found the perfect match in the small troupe of 74 Theatre.

In *The Lime Tree Bower* by Conor McPherson (based on a poem by Coleridge) and directed by Cristi Juncu, the characters remained seated throughout the performance, almost without moving. It was charming to watch the three men calmly telling stories about growing



Marius Turdeanu, Cătălin  
Mindru and Theo Marton in  
*This Lime Tree Bower*, directed  
by Cristi Juncu

up and looking back, with the occasional disbelieving smile, at the things they once did. The youngest, innocent and hieratic; the oldest, simple and dreamy, capable of committing a heist out of... kindness; the other, weary of life and the comforts of being a university lecturer. Three monologues intersected, one weaving into the other, complementing each other. From time to time, one of the protagonists would cut in one of the others' stories, inserting his own recollections. This play, performed by Theo Marton, Cătălin Mîndru and Marius Turdeanu, was one of 74 Theatre's greatest displays of acting prowess.

Another production from 74 Theatre was *Criminal Genius* by George F. Walker, directed by Theodor Cristian Popescu with stage design by Andu Dumitrescu. It was a black comedy that drifted gradually towards social realism. For, towards the finale, the realist substance of the play retroactively began to pervade the laughter. In the torrent of different scenes, the actors Monica Ristea, Cristina Toma, Nicu Mihoc, Theo Marton and Cătălin Mîndru performed parodies, to the evident delight of the public, of different kinds of acting.

*How I Ate a Dog* by Evgeny Grishkovets, directed by Adrian Iclenزان and performed by Theo Marton, told a story within a story, jumping rapidly between different moments in time and different



Cătălin Mindru, Theo Marton,  
Nicu Mihoc and Cristina Toma  
in *Criminal Genius*, directed by  
Theodor Cristian Popescu

selves—that of the child, the adult, the soldier. In the foreground were the episodes and layers about becoming part of the system, with a significant detour via a period, full of absurdity, of military service. In brief, an hour’s worth of *Bildungsdrama*, which Theo Marton delivered with candour, irony and warmth.

Today...

As already discussed, independent theatre acted as a laboratory in which, for a good number of years, many directors who are today big names in the world of theatre were “born” and honed their skills. It is where they first tackled new subjects and opened up new directions hitherto unknown in Romanian theatre. And, in 2014, it was again ACT Theatre that led the way in respect of a subject that, while theoretically permitted, was in practice taboo until very recently on the Romanian stage: a play based around a gay couple, *Cock* by Mike Bartlett, directed by Horia Suru and performed by Rareș Florin Stoica, Fulvia Folosea, Vlad Nemeș and Ionel Mihăilescu.

Compared with two decades ago, things have changed enormously. In recent years, independent theatres have exploded.



Vlad Nemeş, Rareş Florin Stoica  
and Fulvia Folosea in *Cock*,  
directed by Horia Suru

The majority are to be found in bars and, therefore, compelled to conform to commercial pressures. One independent theatre director with a wide appeal is Chris Simion. Her plays, with their accessible scripts and star actors, have an audience of their own. While the plays put on in these bar-cum-theatres tend to avoid the weightier issues, the young actors performing in them are good. The most successful of this kind of venue is Godot Café-Theatre, whose example would be followed by tens of other venues. Despite its preference for commercial productions, Godot Café-Theatre—also founded by an actor, George Remeş—remains the most important independent theatre in terms of number of productions. Here, young actors find ample opportunity to showcase their talent.

On the other hand, for the last four years there has also existed a group that stands out in the landscape of independent theatre: UNTEATRU, founded by the director couple Andreea and Andrei Grosu, is one of the few independent art theatres and one with a relatively stable troupe of actors. It is a place for those who wish to experiment and as such UNTEATRU is the rightful successor to the movement begun by ACT.



*Compared with two decades ago,  
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The conclusion? Without the original effort, energy and courage of the aforementioned artists and many others besides, without their desire to tear down barriers, Romanian theatre would not be so flexible and open to new themes as it is today. It remains only for us to thank them.

Cristina Rusiecki is a theatre critic and culture journalist. A graduate of the Faculty of Literature and the Faculty of Drama, she was awarded a doctorate for her thesis “The Theatre of Cruelty and the Romanian Plays of the Last Decade”. In 2001 she began publishing regular theatre reviews. In 2012, she published the book *Radu Afrim. Țesuturile fragilității* (Tracus Arte, Bucharest) and, in 2013, *Despre dictatori și alți demoni. Julius Caesar—Jurnal de repetiții* (Atent, Timișoara National Theatre). She is the author of the chapter “The Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj” of the collective work *Teatrul românesc contemporan*, published in German, in Berlin in 2010, and the chapters “Alexander Hausvater—Shakespeare. An X-ray of Power” and “Bocsardi Laszlo—Shakespeare or on the Poetry of the Irrational” of the collective work *Lecția de Shakespeare*, 2014.



Iulia Popovici

# *Stage Politics in Contemporary Romanian Theatre*

Documentary, social, educational, community, political. Or conceptual. These are the terms, used alternatively or in combination, to describe the artistic practices of artists and groups on the Romanian independent theatre and contemporary dance scenes of the last 10 years—independent theatre itself being a term whose definition is hotly debated, but which in essence is about the type of financing involved—project-based, as opposed to subsidised public theatre—as well as aesthetic-thematic considerations.

Expanding rapidly after 2000–2002, the existence of the necessary conditions for the emergence of independent theatre (venues, producers, artists) was mainly circumstantial. On the one hand, during this time (and until the crisis that hit Romania in 2008–2009), economic prosperity, the first for decades, created the conditions for

the opening of new theatre venues—initially almost exclusively bars and night clubs—other than those belonging to the state, while providing the ever increasing number of theatre graduates (in particular actors, but also directors) with the confidence to pursue a career outside of the state sector. The fact that these new venues were atypical in comparison with the traditional stages of the state theatres had the effect of short-circuiting performance practices as well as those of the public in a manner whose effects would be felt in time. If the founding, in Bucharest in 1996, of the first private independent theatre in the country, ACT Theatre, had already led to a rewriting of the “rules” of the acting game (the small size of the stage at this theatre, the proximity of the public and their seating around three sides of the stage being at odds with the wide, Italian-style stage tradition in which all Romanian actors were trained), then these new conventions were based around a renegotiation—if not outright discarding—of the “buffer zone” between the public and the performers and a rethinking of the entire concept of spatiality according to different rules and in a technically far more precarious manner. *Stop the Tempo* (2003), which tells the story of the journey of three young people, disillusioned with consumerism, from one night club to another, which they cut off from the mains, was the debut script and play by Gianina Cărbunariu (b. 1977), the best known voice of Romanian independent theatre. Staged at LUNI Theatre at Green Hours, it provides the perfect example of this renegotiation of the relationship with spatial conventions: with three actors equipped with three torches, the production exploits the narrow space of the bar and its structural features through a dialogue with the public that is dynamic and intimate without becoming participatory or interactive. Down the years, LUNI Theatre has, in fact, been the go-to place for experimental stage



*Understandably, given that the members of dramAcum were trained as directors, and given the prominence of the director in Romanian theatre, the most successful attempt to “refresh” artistic practices on the Romanian stage—which was decisive for the following decade and a half—concerned playwriting and its themes.*


*Stop the Tempo*

design and directorial practices tailored, thematically and stylistically, to suit the confines of the given space. (Lia Bugnar, an actress by training, made her debut here as a playwright and director, developing her own, initially biographical language.)

Together with Radu Apostol, Alexandru Berceanu and Andreea Vălean, and later also Ana Mărgineanu (all of whom graduated in Theatre Directing from the National University of Theatre and Film in 2002–2003), Gianina Cărbunariu was a founder, while still a student, of a group called dramAcum (short for “drama now”), whose mission was, on the one hand, to stimulate and professionalise Romanian contemporary playwriting (through competitions, writing workshops, stage readings and even the staging of plays), and, on the other hand, to counteract the “dictatorship” of the classic, canonical scripts found in the state theatres through the extensive translation of contemporary works, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe. Understandably, given that the members of dramAcum were trained as directors, and given the prominence of the director in Romanian theatre, the most successful attempt to “refresh” artistic practices on the Romanian stage—which was decisive for the following decade and a half—concerned playwriting and its themes. The approach of



*Offline family*, directed by  
Radu Apostol  
© Paul Băila

dramAcum was to reconnect the script to the present and to everyday life, to reinvent the language of theatre by incorporating the language of the street and disadvantaged groups, and to become increasingly actively involved in social debate. The most important result of this initiative is the Write about Yourself programme, initiated by the director Vera Ion (borne of the dramAcum crucible) and the actor Sorin Poamă, which supports personal and biographical playwriting among “non-professionals” and employs many of the writing techniques used by dramAcum.

Founded in 2005, The Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN) was the first body with the power to award public financing (up to 90% of the budget) to the projects of independent organisations (and, admittedly, those of public institutions, too) on a countrywide basis. The impact of the AFCN on the production and distribution of theatre (and contemporary dance) was significant in every respect, including in terms of the regularity of productions and, in particular, the professionalisation of the independent theatre scene. A professionalisation that was not concerned with the training of the artists (all those working in theatre were theatre studies graduates), but rather the opportunity to work continuously and exclusively



*Tales from School*, directed by  
Radu Apostol  
© Vlad A. Arghir

in independent theatre and to develop distinct and coherent artistic approaches that were different from those accepted in the conservative state theatre and incompatible with those of a private commercial theatre. Almost all of Gianina Cărbunariu's plays from 2009–2013 were co-financed by the AFCN. The role of the AFCN proved equally vital when it came to the educational projects of Radu Apostol (*Offline Family* from 2013, *Tales from School* from 2014, by Mihaela Michailov) and documentary and community projects, as well as those looking at the situation of workers (often female) initiated by David Schwartz, Bogdan Georgescu and Ioana Păun.

Not that independent theatre (independent not in terms of its existing outside the state system, but rather as an artistic and political act) had not existed, albeit in a much more precarious form, before 2000. In the mid-1990s, Tîrgu-Mureş for a while played host to a festival called Dramafest that aimed to support new playwriting and was itself initiated by a playwright, Alina Nelega, who, in a theatre dominated by directors, was interested in rehabilitating the playwright as the author of the work of theatre. Together with a group of actors, Nelega supported the production of independent theatre (in a space belonging to the children's theatre in Târgu Mureş) for an



Monica Ristea-Horga in *Amalia Takes a Deep Breath*, a play by Alina Nelega

entire decade, while also choosing at a certain moment to stage her own works. In Romanian theatre today, it is not particularly unusual for a director also to be the author of his or her own productions, but Nelega's case is special, primarily because for her the act of directing occurs from the perspective of the playwright, and also because, as opposed to playwrighting directors, who develop their scripts while already working on a performance, her plays already existed (and were even published) before the process of their staging began.

Until recently (that is, until she became the artistic director of the Romanian language company at the National Theatre in Tîrgu-Mureş, something which afforded her access to resources unavailable to independent theatre), Alina Nelega had employed an artistic language involving minimalist directing centred on the actor as a vehicle of the performative possibilities of the text. Most of the plays she both wrote and directed were based on one or two characters (albeit, in the latter case, still always in the form of parallel or intersecting monologues), with the author dedicating several years to exploring the scenic and dramatic possibilities of the monodrama, the best known of which being *Amalia Takes a Deep Breath* (2005), a personal history of the Romanian communist dictatorship told in the form of



Nicu Mihoc in *Hess*, a play by Alina Nelega

a female biography, and *Hess* (2006), a revisiting of far-right ideology from the perspective of Rudolf Hess.

One of the most important characteristics of the theatrical practices to emerge and evolve after 2000–2005 is their consciously non-hierarchical nature: while in general they do not negate the existence of different functions in the production of a play (stage designer, director, actor, etc.) and also do not embrace the model of devised theatre, they have a tendency to challenge the idea of individual authorship (of the script and the directing). This explains why many performances are authored collectively by all members of the creative team and why the actors played a far more active role in determining the aesthetic direction—all the more so as they do not normally work for just one company, but collaborate with a string of directors with similar thematic concerns and approaches, something that often lends an air of familiarity to projects that are otherwise unrelated.

David Schwartz (b. 1985) is probably the most interested in the verbatim documentary technique and what might be called the zero degree of theatricality (not entirely paradoxically, by resorting to a minimalist realism centred on a type of performer who distils the means of expression as much as possible). His first verbatim

## Heated Heads



play, *Heated Heads* (co-written in 2010 with the dramatist Mihaela Michailov and the actor Alexandru Potocean, the latter a permanent presence in socially-engaged independent productions), was a mono-drama that made undisguised references to the “style” of the American artist Anna Deavere Smith (*Twilight: Los Angeles* and *Fire in the Mirror*). Taking as its subject a violent and controversial episode from 1990s Romania (the Miners’ Riots), *Heated Heads* introduces what would become a favourite theme among a number of young theatre artists (coinciding with a similar interest in the films of the Romanian New Wave): the critical reappraisal, using documentary techniques, of the recent past—e.g. the role and functioning of the communist secret police, the Securitate, in Gianina Cărbunariu’s *x Millimetres in y*



*Kilometres* (2011) and *Typographic Capital Letters* (2013); the past and present of the mining industry in *Underground. The Jiu Valley* (2012), initiated by David Schwartz; the Holocaust in Romania, in *Inter@FACE* (2014 and 2015), directed by Alexandru Berceanu; homosexuality under communism and immediately afterwards, in *After Trajan and Decebalus*, by Mihaela Michailov and Paul Dunca.

A fellow-student of David Schwartz on the Theatre Directing course at the National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, Ioana Păun (b. 1984) is particularly interested in the themes of labour relations and the situation of workers in contemporary society, in all their different guises, and especially the situation of women (just as, on a formal level, she is more attracted to performance than conventional forms of theatre). Her two most recent plays are written explicitly from a feminist perspective: *Domestic Products* (2014) looks at the exploitation of Filipino au pairs in Romania, while *An Enemy of the People* (2015), an adaptation of Ibsen's play, is performed by an all-female cast and turns the female characters into active agents of revolt against the system.

Also a fellow student of Schwartz and Păun, Bogdan Georgescu (b. 1984) is a playwright and director whose subject matter is also inspired by real life, his favourite way of working being community theatre and artistic exploration on the theme of community. Working for a long time on projects involving the members of a Bucharest community affected by eviction and gentrification (in the Rahova-Uranus area), as well as performances created together with members of said community or the inmates of a maximum security prison (in other words, non-professionals), Georgescu currently practices a type of theatre based in the real world that is concerned with how communities negotiate moments of social crisis (as in his recent 2015 work





*Moreover, Double Bind is one of the few examples in Romania of devised theatre (the script and performance being developed together with the actors based on their direct experiences as inhabitants of the same city).*



*Antisocial*, directed by  
Bogdan Georgescu  
© Adi Bulboacă

*Antisocial*, staged in Sibiu with masters students from the local university and based on the media scandal concerning the private Facebook group of a group of high school pupils from Cluj).

Interestingly, in the last few years Alina Nelega has also become interested in documentary theatre—her most recent projects, developed together with Réka Kincses at the National Theatre in Târgu Mureş—*Double Bind* (about Romanian-Hungarian inter-ethnic relations in Târgu Mureş) and *Romo Sapiens* (about the plight of Roma people)—apart from exploring social interactions in a way that no longer places the focus on the individual personality of the actor/character employ an artistic language which sees the playwright's earlier minimalism blend with elements specific to the documentary theatre developed by younger generations (David Schwartz, Radu Apostol, Ana Mărgineanu, etc.). Moreover, *Double Bind* is one of the few examples in Romania of devised theatre (the script and performance being developed together with the actors based on their direct experiences as inhabitants of the same city), thus inevitably placing it, on account of its theme and different aesthetic approach, in a complex relationship with Gianina Cărbunariu's 2010 production *20/20*. Coproduced by dramAcum and Studio Yorick, an independent venue in Târgu

Mureş, *20/20* was created 20 years after the most serious inter-ethnic conflict in post-communist Romania (the so-called Black March of 1990). In fact, *20/20* was the first work by Cărbunariu to use documentary techniques in a manner that later would become a trademark: a period of research involving the entire team, followed by the development of the script while also working on the performance in direct collaboration with the actors, all the while retaining the convention (and structure) of the “true event” and sets of references recognisable to the local public, yet departing from the documentary structure in favour of metaphorical and symbolic fictional structures with far more complex ethical goals. The only other artist to practice this form of reality in theatre appears to be Bogdan Georgescu.

For many years, Bucharest was host to the greatest (and most visible) proportion of what goes by the name of independent theatre (and contemporary dance) in Romania—notwithstanding the (isolated) efforts of Alina Nelega in Târgu Mureş or those of Impossible Theatre in Cluj (encouraged by the director M. Chris Nedeea, Impossible Theatre published a magazine and number of books, produced plays and held the first festival of experimental theatre). It’s hard to say exactly why, from 2010 onwards, Cluj developed into a centre of alternative theatre with its own identity on the independent scene, but an important role was clearly played by the opening, in 2009, of Fabrica de Pensule, a former industrial site that was transformed into a creative hub of artists’ studios, visual arts galleries, performance spaces, and the development at local level of an extremely active civic culture. While the seeds of the “politicisation” of an entire generation undoubtedly are sown by university (the bilingual Babeş-Bolyai University is the largest in Romania, and combined the students of all Cluj’s universities account for almost half of the city’s population) and

*It's hard to say exactly why, from 2010 onwards, Cluj developed into a centre of alternative theatre with its own identity on the independent scene, but an important role was clearly played by the opening, in 2009, of Fabrica de Pensule (The Paintbrush Factory), a former industrial site that was transformed into a creative hub of artists' studios, visual arts galleries, performance spaces, and the development at local level of an extremely active civic culture.*

faculties such as Sociology, the trigger was the debate surrounding the opening of the Roşia Montană gold mine located not far away. A former gold and silver mine dating back to Roman times, Roşia Montană became the target of an international corporation looking to gain official approval to use cyanide to extract precious metals. The subject of environmental and social concerns among journalists and activists in Cluj (the use of cyanide necessitated the displacement of the local population and the death of the region's rural economy), the plight of Roşia Montană became a national concern in 2013, with opposition to the mining project unleashing the largest street demonstrations in Romania since 1990. The Roşia Montană campaign acted as a catalyst in the mobilisation of civic resources seen at regular intervals thereafter (for example, Cluj is the only city in Romania that has officially experimented with participatory budgeting), while students and recent graduates of theatre began to engage in a far more complex way with their own profession and with the “ideal” of art theatre than their predecessors. This is something that was also evident in the work of the Reactor and Reciproca associations (both of which were founded in the last two years and have constantly worked together), as well as the Create.Act.Enjoy theatre company and the Váróterem Projekt organisation (the “oldest” in the list, dating from 2010, and working in the Hungarian language and therefore belonging to a different aesthetic tradition).

An actor with the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj and a teacher at the Faculty of Theatre, as well as a co-founder of the independent contemporary dance company Groundfloor Group and the author of works combining performance and theatre and contact improvisation, Ferenc Sinkó (b. 1979) entered a new creative stage of his career with his 2014 work *Parallel*, co-created together with the


*Poker*, directed by Leta Popescu

director Leta Popescu (b. 1989) and the performers Lucia Mărneanu and kata bodoki-halmen. Without actually being devised theatre (on account of its hybrid nature, somewhere between dance and performance, but a theatrical structure), *Parallel* is the result of an encounter between artists of different artistic interests and different life stories: it is the first performance in Romania to discuss lesbianism, sexual orientation and discrimination, which it does from personal and performative perspectives. In 2015, Sinkó produced *Parental CTRL*, a performance with musical and contemporary dance elements about the lack of communication between parents and their children (as in many of his works, for example *Divas* in 2011, the entire cast was female), and *#swansong*, a performance about the process of growing old inspired by



*Ending*, directed by  
Leta Popescu

Chekhov, again infused with music, that was staged at the Hungarian State Theatre; while Leta Popescu concentrated on a personal artistic project involving the dramatisation of Romanian contemporary prose—such as *Poker*, based on the novel of the same name by Bogdan Coşa and co-produced by Reactor and Reciproca in 2014, and *Ending*, by Florin Lăzărescu, staged at the National Theatre in Cluj.

Iulia Popovici is a performing arts critic and curator. She writes for Romanian, European and American publications about the alternative performing arts scene in Romania and Eastern Europe, documentary practice and the new conditions of production in the contemporary arts. The author of the work *Un teatru la marginea drumului* (Cartea Românească, 2008) about the dramAcum theatre group, she also edited the bilingual anthologies *New Performing Arts Practices in Eastern Europe / Noi practici în artele spectacolului din Europa de Est* (Cartier, 2014) and *The End of Directing, the Beginning of Theatre-Making and Devising in European Theatre / Sfârșitul regiei, începutul creației colective în teatrul european* (Tact, 2015) commissioned by the Sibiu International Theatre Festival.



Oana Stoica

# *In Search of Identity. Trends in Contemporary Theatre in Romania*

## Historical Context

Twenty-five years after the fall of the communist regime, the performing arts in Romania find themselves in a state of heterogeneity in terms of aesthetics and content and confusion in terms of direction. In a predominantly state-funded system—a network of theatres financed by either the ministry of culture or the local authorities (city halls and county councils)—theatre has remained a prisoner of the notion of “art for art’s sake” promoted during the communist period. Repertory theatre has cultivated a conservative mentality (among



artists and the public), has favoured classic and modern over contemporary playwrights and has worked according to Stanislavski's method (arts education in Romania to a large extent being based on psychological realism). Theatre companies have a pre-determined staff, and young actors and directors (of which there is an increasing number thanks to a growth in the number of students) find it hard to enter the state theatres, where, once they do get in, they more often than not reproduce the aesthetics of their teachers (the development of a student's artistic sensibilities and independent thought are not encouraged in education).

These historical circumstances described briefly above lead to the flight of artists—mainly young and independent, though, in time, also those working for state theatres, tired of perpetuating the same types of performance—to underground venues, where they put on plays they finance either themselves, through crowdfunding or with the help of the AFCN. (The AFCN, or “The Administration of the National Cultural Fund”, redistributes to the cultural sector—the performing and visual arts, publishers, heritage, etc.—state funds obtained from gambling or taxation based on competitions for projects. Though not exclusively aimed at independent artists, the AFCN is essential to the survival of the independent culture sector, and yet it struggles to survive itself due to the irregular receipt of funds and an unstable internal organisation that makes it politically vulnerable.) Initially, artists with a clear direction, or one they were looking to clarify, those who wanted to stage productions deemed unacceptable in the state theatres (which, in 1990–2000, were still adverse political and social topics, experimental theatre and contemporary playwrights, reluctance that still persists today), turned towards the independent sector. This led to the emergence of the first examples of “engaged theatre”, which took a critical view of society and social, political, economic structures and examined

the recent past (the interwar, communist and post-communist periods) and the present. In the capital, two independent theatre venues stood out from the rest: LUNI Theatre at Green Hours, a bar where jazz was played and theatre performed and where many of a new generation of artists began their careers; and ACT Theatre, a venue dedicated exclusively to theatre, created around the actor Marcel Iureş and primarily intended for contemporary drama. The last ten years have seen an explosion in the independent sector, albeit predominantly in commercial theatre (relationship-based comedy and stand-up) performed in cafés and bars. For some people, independent theatre has become an alternative to the “rigid” and “pretentious” theatre, in their opinion, offered by the state; for others, it is the only form of culture. Commercial theatre has grown its own stars (who bring in the public), established its own venues (which are also places to eat and drink, such as Godot Café-Theatre) and even held its own festivals.

The term “independent” needs to be clarified. The Romanian understanding of the word is generous and generic, and includes all forms of theatre that do not rely on permanent funding from the state. (The exception being productions that receive their funding from the AFCN, which has a clear, limited budget with which to fund certain projects for a short and finite period of time.) Consequently, any production that does not receive regular money from the state is deemed “independent”. This clarification is necessary, because the generosity of the term as it is understood in Romania has created a need for differentiation within the phenomenon itself, i.e. in terms of commercial theatre, engaged theatre (social, political, critical, etc.), private theatre and experimental theatre, which are all different, with different aims, aesthetics and audiences, even if they all fall under the independent umbrella.

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Artists with a critical view of society would finance productions exclusively through the AFCN or crowdfunding, while in recent years, their voice has become more audible (in terms of prizes, international success, etc.), which has led to their acceptance in the state sector. These are usually international co-productions with the financing structured in such a way that the local host theatre does not have to “risk” much, at least not financially. The success of these productions has seen the state theatres relax their position towards critical theatre, with the result that, although the general state of paralysis on a managerial level remains intact, contemporary playwrights, the idea of civic engagement and young artists are slowly being welcomed on official stages. A normal exchange of ideas, aesthetics and generations between universities and theatres is still a long way off, but the world of Romanian theatre nonetheless appears to be changing.

### The Mainstream

In Romania, the script is still central to the play and the director still dominates the creative process (authority and authoriality). Auteur plays, with a strong vision of the script and a recognisable style, account for the majority of productions found in the state theatres (i.e. the mainstream) and have allowed for the rise of important directors, such as Silviu Purcărete (the creator of spectacular, predominantly visual, baroque plays). Indeed, the state theatres are dominated by influential directors (in their 50s) who remain relevant today despite the fact that their individual performative language, sufficiently polished in each instance to be considered an individual style, is not particularly open towards the latest trends. Mihai Măniuțiu, Andrei Șerban, Gabor Tompa, Victor Ioan Frunză and Alexandru Darie, for

example, are all formidable directors, de facto “dictators” of the creative process, yet nonetheless slave to their own aesthetics.

### 1. Alexandru Dabija

A director of great refinement in the way he works with his actors, Alexandru Dabija possesses a sharp sense of humour and a profound understanding of the script. Dabija has an ongoing project involving Romanian fairy tales, some of which are written by Ion Creangă (an iconic figure of children’s literature in Romania), which he transposes for the stage within an atemporal universe with contemporary elements. Dabija recreates micro-village communities (on the verge of extinction), stripped of their fairy tale aura, for he is highlighting the harshness and shortcomings of rural life, albeit with a sense of warm understanding and jovial humour and without judging and without hiding anything, because, for him, these ancestral stories of formation (*Bildungsroman*) in concentrated form are cross-sections of contemporary society. Dabija’s approach explores the fundamental elements of community: sexuality (*OO!*, The Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț), religion (*Absolute!*, ACT Theatre, a play that creates a micro-cosm from the perspective of the Wandering Jew, demystifying the symbols of figurative religion—God and St. Peter—and those of folklore—the She-Devil and the Grim Reaper), revenge (*The Goat and Her Three Kids*, ACT Theatre, a play that identifies the subtext of horror in the story and focuses on the noir imaginary in children’s literature) and relationships between parents and children and the (de)mystification of love (*Sânziana and Pepelea*, The National Theatre in Cluj). Dabija likes to paint a picture of group figures (in *A ... Crate*, The Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț, the old women of the village constitute a



*O ... ladă (A ... Crate)*, directed by Alexandru Dabija, The Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț

form traditional moral authority). He reveals, sometimes in a licentious manner, the seductive nature of the sensational, the funereal and gossip in rural society and the way in which an individual is subjected to the judgment of collective consciousness. The rural world is no less competitive and harsh than its urban counterpart. The parodic image of one of Rembrandt's paintings, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, recreated in *A ... Crate* with the audience made up of the old women of the village and the deceased *Old Man with Rooster* (the last man in the village) as the "subject of dissection", resembles a grotesque execution: a collective assassin (the women) and a symbolic victim (the man). An everyday domestic murder.

With their succulent humour and delicious perspective, Dabija's fairy tale-based plays—often accompanied musically by the composer Ada Milea and her absurd sense of humour—reveal, with caustic indulgence, the degradation of human nature.

## 2. Radu Afrim

One of the most powerful voices in Romanian theatre is that of Radu Afrim, a complex artist, director, photographer, who majored

in literature and music lover with his own inimitable universe (as proven by the failure of his imitators) that is luxuriant and intelligent, dominated by emotion and aesthetics. Afrim uses a complex performative language, with supra- and extra-realities, and is able to see beyond the visible world, as if a door has been opened to him taking him to an unknown place in which indescribable suffering and beauty are gathered, traces of which are felt in the script. For Afrim, the script provides an impulse to explore these empathetic territories, for an architecture of emotion which he constructs predominantly aesthetically. His inventory contains kinky characters and anti-heroes (maltreated children, abused adolescents, vulnerable old people), vicious and vitiated relationships, unhealthy sexuality and torturous family conflicts expressed through depression and suicide. It is the world of the contemporary drama, a form of literature the director promotes in his own extreme way, choosing only scripts previously unstaged in Romania. On rare occasions he has also staged classic works, but he passes these through a personal filter so powerful they become his own (rewritings that go against the original). Afrim's fans include rock stars, who follow him from one theatre to the next. Yet he also has his detractors, who, though perhaps less so than his fans, are still sufficiently vocal as to maintain his status as a controversial artist. With a career that began in independent theatre and rapidly saw him accepted by the state theatres, Afrim has always remained an alternative artist within the mainstream. He imposes his vision, scripts and way of working with impetuosity. And he has created "Afrimesque" spaces within state theatres without being contaminated by official aesthetics. He has staged plays ranging from dramatisations of Aglaja Veteranyi (*Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*) to Martin McDonagh (*The Pillowman*), from Vassily Sigarev





*The Devil's Casting*, directed by  
Radu Afrim

(*Plasticine*) to Pau Miró (*Giraffes—urban fable#1*, *Buffalos—urban fable#2*), including traumatising tales of fish that fall from the sky and old people walking stuffed bears, of sensual transvestites singing chansonnettes in their black or red velvet dresses, of 400 coloured cats or dozens of washing machines, none of which, in fact, can be found in the original scripts. Afrim is not a director, he is a world full of phantom pain. Beyond their baroque imagery, his plays are predominantly social, yet devoid of ostentation. He prefers a psycho-emotional exploration of traumas, he seeks their roots or emotional consequences, he rejects politics and explanation. Afrim laughs irreverently, sometimes deeply and at length, he detests ceremony and hypocritical politeness, he is frank and sophisticated at one and the same time—as in *The Devil's Casting*, a play about Szekler identity written and developed together with ethnic Hungarian actors from Târgu Mureş. His most recent production, also staged with the ethnic Hungarian company of the National Theatre in Târgu Mureş (Romania has Romanian, Hungarian, German and Yiddish-language theatres, with Hungarian theatres being most numerous in Transylvania and the one of Târgu Mures currently one of the best), marks the beginning of a change. *Tranquillity* is an extensive work, a dramatisation of the novel of the





*Tranquillity*, directed by  
Radu Afrim

same name by Attila Bartis (a Romanian-born Hungarian author) about an emasculating relationship between a mother and her son set during communism. In this play, Afrim for the first time no longer insists on imposing his own vision, preferring instead to follow the author's lead and his fabulous prose (in which, naturally, he discovers suffering and pathos that tear at the mind and the flesh). Afrim's productions, in all their luxurious wealth, nonetheless follow a rule: there always exists a real and an imaginary space, not necessarily separately, in which the visible existence of the characters and their invisible traumas cohabit symbiotically. Thus, we have trees growing on houses, oceans of giant algae and dark Scandinavian forests. We have libraries of fish or people and ice rinks inside houses. His pictorialism, a priority for the director though never gratuitous, intertwines with strange music that is performed live—for his works are equally special in terms of sound as they are visually.

## Critical Theatre

The new generations (Afrim represents, in his own unique way, the border between traditional theatre in terms of structure, working



*X Millimetres in Y Kilometres*,  
directed by Gianina Cărbunariu

methods and objectives, and contemporary, post-modern theatre) have introduced new ideas to theatre, for they have a different way of viewing the world. They took a clear-headed look at the world around them and made theatre out of it: raw, minimalist, devoid of metaphor or props, straight from the street. The number of those who began to work in this way was not huge, but in recent years it has grown. The political, social, anti-establishment and civic and critical theatre they produced is discomforting, but not sufficiently so as to elicit the reaction of the authorities. Ignored for a while, in time this type of theatre created its own public and began to make a name for itself, making its way onto (only in a few cases for now) the stages of the state theatre.

Gianina Cărbunariu, a director and playwright, tackles some of the most sensitive topics of the day (in *Roşia Montană: The Physical and Political Divide*, the use of cyanide in gold mining, in *For Sale*, the issue of shale gas and the real estate mafia) or of the past (in *20/20*, the inter-ethnic Romanian-Hungarian conflict of 1990 in Târgu Mureş, and in both *X Millimetres in Y Kilometres* and *Typographic Capital Letters*, the communist secret police, the Securitate). Cărbunariu researches her subjects in the field (sometimes, the field is the immense and all-but inaccessible archives of the



*Typographic Capital Letters*,  
directed by Gianina Cărbunariu

Securitate), including interviews with the protagonists or witnesses in her chosen subject, after which she creates a fictionalised script using real data but imaginary multiple perspectives. She creates a panorama of different points of view (*For Sale* presents the views on the subject of land of different groups: farmers, corporations, land owners, local authorities and the employees of shale gas extractions companies, etc.) or of possible interpretations of a reality impossible to reconstruct accurately (*X Millimetres in Y Kilometres* contains multiple interpretations of the same pages of the Securitate file on the dissident Dorin Tudoran). Some of her plays were co-produced with state theatres (e.g. *Solitariness*, which was produced together with the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, and *Typographic Capital Letters* and *For Sale*, by the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest) as part of international projects (e.g. *Typographic Capital Letters* was part of the Divadelná Nitra International Theatre Festival in Slovakia on the theme of “Parallel Lives—The 20th Century through the Eyes of Secret Police”).

The same was applicable to Bogdan Georgescu, an artist with an interest in community theatre and activist art at a time when such concepts were all-but unknown in Romania. Georgescu has staged theatre performances in prisons and became involved with the issues



*Antisocial*, directed by  
Bogdan Georgescu

facing the inhabitants of Rahova, an area of Bucharest where the Roma population living in houses that had been nationalised during communism were evicted and their homes returned to their original owners. His first project in a state theatre, *Triple Point*, was a co-production between the National Theatre in Târgu Mureş and the Colectiv A association from Cluj on a subject (Romanian-Hungarian inter-ethnic relations, given that both cities have mixed populations) based on a real event that occurred in Cluj. His success in Sibiu with *Antisocial* (also inspired by a real event in Cluj, this time with education being the focus) cemented his reputation. Like Cărbunariu, Georgescu fictionalises his research material while retaining some real elements—although, at the start of his career, he also staged productions in which he not only didn't change the material, he also brought the real protagonists themselves onto the stage (*No Support*, a play about the closure of the laBOMBA centre, which had been created by artists for the disadvantaged communities living in Rahova).

There is also a non-fictionalised area of documentary theatre that is practiced by a number of artists, the most visible of which being David Schwartz (who always works with a playwright and a group of actors who share in the creative process, with the director acting



*Underground*, directed by  
David Schwartz

as coordinator). Schwartz tackled various topics, from the situation of the tenants in nationalised homes being returned to their original owners (*Make Way!*) to that of the miners from the Jiu Valley after the fall of communism (*Underground*). He researches his topic and, together with a playwright (Mihaela Michailov), creates the script, without, however, interfering with the story or the characters. The result is an intentionally objective perspective on the subject or a demonstration of the impossibility of the existence of an objective truth, as was the case in the one-man show *Heated Heads* (protagonist: Alexandru Potocean), in which the perspectives of the participants in the events (e.g. the Miner's Riots of June 1990) were so different that the only point of convergence was the existence of manipulation.

Another type of engaged art is the one practiced by Radu Apostol, a director interested in educational theatre in a country in which the education system (which perpetuates the ideas of conformity and learning off-by-heart and does not encourage critical thinking in children) is in a permanent state of decline. Apostol works with children, encouraging them to discuss their problems, some of which are serious (*Offline Family* is a play about children left at home on their own or in the care of relatives while their parents go to work





*Offline Family*, directed by  
Radu Apostol  
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abroad; *Tales from School* portrays the education system as seen from the perspective of the children).

### A Special Case

A special type of critical theatre is that of *Parallel*, a performance/phenomenon about lesbianism in a conservative society. Why did this performance, which contained dance, a drag king show and theatre, cause such a stir? (It was the hit of 2013, with two of its authors receiving the Uniter Award, the most important award in Romanian theatre, for Best Debut.) The answer lies in the production itself and the local context. On the one hand, we have a first-time director and her teacher (Leta Popescu and Ferenc Sinkó, respectively) creating an independent show (produced by GroundFloor Group and the Colectiv A association from Cluj) with debut roles for an actress and a performer with a background in theatre criticism (Lucia Mărneanu and Kata Bodoki-Halmen, respectively). This performance broke entirely with any artistic formulae learned at drama school, and this rupture took place immediately after graduation (a metaphorical divorce from the rigidity of Romanian drama school).

*The new generations (Afrim represents, in his own unique way, the border between traditional theatre in terms of structure, working methods and objectives, and contemporary, post-modern theatre) have introduced new ideas to theatre, for they have a different way of viewing the world. They took a clear-headed look at the world around them and made theatre out of it: raw, minimalist, devoid of metaphor or props, straight from the street.*



*Parallel*, directed by  
Leta Popescu and Ferenc Sinkó

On the other hand, we have a debate about homosexuality in a hypocritical, conservative, religious and, moreover, misogynistic society (homosexuality is predominantly considered a masculine phenomenon, with the female variant scarcely acknowledged). In addition, the subject of the performance is the relationship with parents, the way in which young people are able—or not able—to discuss with their parents the matter of their sexuality and a conservative upbringing in a family in which communication is kept within safe bounds (discussions about sexuality do not feature in children’s upbringing in Romania). The performance is overwhelming for it is told from the perspective of the daughters, who become aware of the distance between themselves and their parents, a gulf that does not appear to be getting any narrower. *Parallel* also alludes to gender stereotypes (“Our Father who art in heaven, Our mother who art in kitchen”), criticising the persistence of patriarchal mind-sets in a contemporary world able to divide generations.

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does freelance work for other cultural publications. She is the author of various radio shows with a main focus on promoting the independent performing arts. She is a frequent guest on the panels of experts appointed to review cultural projects and is also a member of the jury of the “10 for Film” programme of the Transylvania International Film Festival.



Monica Andronescu

# *Independent Theatre in Bucharest. Entertainment beats Experiment*

After three independent theatre festivals in Bucharest, one after the other in this autumn of 2015—first Undercloud, then the Bucharest Fringe Independent Theatre Marathon and then the National Festival of Independent Theatre—it might be said that the independent theatre scene in Romania is strong and healthy. Not so! It's neither strong nor truly healthy.

We have reached the end of 2015. With each day that passes, small, so-called independent theatres are springing up everywhere, albeit somewhat more so in Bucharest than elsewhere. In a capital city of relatively few performance venues this is in principle a good thing.



More places to perform means diversity, competition, and therefore quality. It means “opposition” to the state system, it means courage, it means the freedom to dare. Yet, on the ground, things look entirely different. At heart, the entire independent “system” is up in the air. The situation is as follows: the state theatres have not been hiring for years, salaries are extremely low and there is an inflation of graduates—in short, lots of people want to work in theatre, but there’s nowhere, and no way, for them to do so, and as a result independent theatre has become an outlet for people working in theatre. Most actors need to make a living and so are migrating to independent theatre. As the venues where independent theatre is performed also need to be paid for somehow, there exists a chain of cause and effect in which financial gain is inevitably sought over quality. And, in pursuit of this financial gain, more and more compromises are made and many productions stray into the area of entertainment, where the quality is often doubtful. In indulging the idea that “The public that comes to these places, and at this time of the day, is in need of some entertainment, so let’s give them what they want, so they’ll come back again”, a large part of the spirit of this so-called “independence” is lost.

If we agree that independent theatre, beyond the fact that it is not paid for from the state budget, is supposed to constitute an artistic movement—a movement of substance, characterised by diversity, which “seeks new forms”, which experiments and stands in opposition to the conformism which, without a doubt, is to be encountered in state theatre—then what the independent scene currently offers is clearly a long way from this.

In theory, independent theatre is the alternative to the state-funded system, it represents “something else” and is the expression of an authentic quest. Through its form, its ideas, its interpretations,



*In a world in which actors struggle to survive, then for obvious reasons the productions of independent theatre seek public success—be it on account of the script, the subject matter or the cast.*

etc., it seeks to address and to educate a new type of public; it seeks to be new, to be a reaction/reply to something; it seeks a form of originality, seeks to be contemporary, to take risks, to dare, to be revolutionary. In practice, things are quite different. Most productions can be classified as conformist, complacent, never straying beyond the sphere of light entertainment. The humour is crude and dished out generously, along the lines of: “If that’s what the people want, then why give them anything else? The public is always right.” In a world in which actors struggle to survive, then for obvious reasons the productions of independent theatre seek public success—be it on account of the script, the subject matter or the cast.

### The Recipe

The prototype of the independent theatre play is as follows: a play for two or three actors, usually a bitter-sweet comedy and usually on an everyday subject. As opposed to subsidised theatre, where the director is king and his or her name a guarantee of quality that acts as a kind of magnet for the public, in independent theatre the name of the director is of less importance. Why is this? There are many explanations, some of which have to do with the cultural background and disposition of the occasional theatre-goer. On the other hand, this type of audience—in principle open and less prejudiced, but already operating as a kind of market that only purchases a certain type of show and therefore dictating the supply—comes for the stories and the actors, less so for any complicated and daring theatre direction.

During the two-and-a-half decades that have elapsed since the anti-communist revolution, a period in which independent theatre has become an increasingly visible and powerful movement, there

have been many initiatives, some of which failed pretty quickly, others which hung around much longer, as in the case of the famous Green Hours. In Bucharest today there are a handful of good examples of independent theatre associated with particular venues with their own loyal public. In addition to these, there are from time to time a number of separate initiatives, albeit these are of a relatively short life span and of little consequence, failing to provoke a reaction, let alone emulation.

### Unknown territory

Founded in 2010 by two very young directors, Andrei and Andreea Grosu, UNTEATRU is one of the more visible examples of independent theatre. From the outset it sought to produce only quality performances, based on art theatre and generally using only important scripts. Without compromising on quality, UNTEATRU can be considered a kind of art theatre or its equivalent on the independent scene. It managed to create a loyal following. It is, perhaps, one of the few venues in the country where you can encounter a genuine interest in real experimentation and for which theatre represents a quest. In the old building at no. 1 Ilfov Street, behind the Romanian Savings Bank on Bucharest's Calea Victoriei, where UNTEATRU was based for five years and where it put on plays that were nominated and won prizes at important festivals, the unsuitable conditions—freezing cold in winter, boiling hot in summer—became part of the performance itself. This small space, heated in December with under-powered electric radiators and the odd cup of hot tea, saw the staging of some extremely interesting productions, both classic scripts—redimensioned, revisited in one way or another, but always meeting the


*With the Gypsy Girls*

© Adi Bulboacă



highest of expectations—and provocative contemporary plays. For five years, its repertoire never failed to reflect this vision, including works such as *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, *The Betrayal* by Harold Pinter, a production based on Mircea Eliade’s novella *La țigănci* (*With the Gypsy Girls*), Larry Tremblay’s *The Ventriloquist* and Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

Let’s take the example of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Andrei and Andreea Grosu, which won the Award of the International Association of Theatre Critics in 2013. Beyond the quality of the production itself, this staging of the play can be seen as a subtle means of showing what true independent theatre is really all about, an intelligent demonstration of the idea that great scripts can be staged


*A Streetcar Named Desire*

© Adi Bulboacă

in any type of venue and an elegant way of “competing” with big budget productions in which they emerge victorious thanks to their undeniable quality.

In order to stage Tennessee Williams’s famous play in such a small space—on a stage hardly big enough to fit more than one actor at the same time, a play that requires set changes and is scarcely conducive to a form of minimalism, whether intentionally or out of necessity—besides courage, you need four actors who, through their energy, coherent directing and a clear vision, are able to compensate for the conditions. You also need a stage designer with an equally clear vision, so as to make full use of the few square metres of space available in the old building. And this space was exploited in spectacular fashion.

The play opens with a powerful image: Blanche—dressed in a gigantic wedding dress covering the entire stage, looking like some strange kind of deity, all of which is reminiscent of *Great Expectations*. Then, out of the white veil that becomes torn as the story begins, the stage designer creates an entire small and sordid world, a small room that fits in its entirety under the white mesh of illusions of a woman living in her own world. Of the bride dominating the stage like a statue we are left with only the woman discarded by all. With great



subtlety, the directing and stage design juggle elements of the real world and Blanche's delusions, brought to life through scenic solutions that are not only ingenious, but also entirely justified artistically—a rare feat, even in Romania's big theatres, where stage design is usually an end in itself.

UNTEATRE is perhaps the only theatre on the independent theatre scene in recent years to have placed an exclusive focus on quality, while also having the courage not only to reinterpret classic scripts, but also to perform contemporary, often unfashionable works—something which has attracted a loyal group of actors and a loyal public. The wonderful speech given by the director Giorgio Strehler at the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier in November 1987 describes perfectly this type of theatre, open and full of substance and probably the most coherent at the present moment: “What matters is that you are never satisfied, you never stop. To define art theatre the way I've always seen it, I use a Faustian term that is hard to translate: *streben*, which means ‘to strive towards’, ‘to exhaust oneself in pursuit of something’... *streben* implies movement towards something not present. [...] You must aim constantly for something... This is also how we can define the history of art theatre, a theatre in motion that always wants to achieve something better than yesterday, always wants to shine a light deeper into the mysteries of this life.”

### Known territory

In the other direction, not to say at the opposite pole, we have Godot Café-Theatre, which is housed in a building in the old centre of Bucharest and is primarily concerned with the entertainment side of theatre, while also functioning as a bar. Naturally, this venue, as well

as the expectations of its consumer-audience, implies a certain type of show. Its schedule is full, with up to three shows a day, while all its productions follow the same template: a simple mix of comedy and drama, normally with good acting, an almost non-existent set and a contemporary script, which in 90% of cases focuses on romantic couples, and in many cases a contemporary script written by an actor or director specifically to suit this type of venue dealing with subjects from everyday life.

The best examples of successful plays staged at Godot Café-Theatre are those of Lia Bugnar. In fact, if there's one group firmly based in independent theatre, a group that unashamedly sets out to create crowd-pleasingly theatre, a type of theatre based on simple, well written stories based in everyday life, stories that are neither banal nor aggressive but still resembling our own lives, a theatre that is well acted and openly "non-experimental"—then this is the Lia Bugnar group. Lia Bugnar is one of the few Romanian playwrights fortunate enough to receive commissions for her plays and someone who is extremely involved in everything, including the marketing of her own company as well her own productions. The public adore her and follow her around, for they already know what to expect. She offers them that irresistible combination of happy and sad, bitter and sweet, warmth and irony that they miss so much in a world (of theatre) in which they are too often given everything but. Her stories are full of life, humour and truth, and as a result the public is never bored.

One such play is *Two Lines*, based a script written by Lia Bugnar for an anti-abortion organisation. Yet nothing of what goes on the stage can be considered moralistic. Instead, the author, together with her usual group of actors, tells a pleasant story in which she knows how to press the comedy button when the story is in danger

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*Two Lines*

© Oana Monica Nac



of becoming uncomfortable. The protagonist, a young woman who has already had 17 abortions and has just produced two pink lines in a new pregnancy test, is facing her 18th termination. Only that this time she is looking for an engagement ring, not an abortion. The dialogue between the members of this “murderous” couple is irresistibly candid. And behind every peal of laughter we feel a sense of bitter sadness at the thought of the 17 previous abortions. All of which is expressed in a language and at a level perfectly reflecting the couple’s social background.

## A “mirror of society”

To recap, these are the two main trends in independent theatre in Bucharest today. Alongside these there are also some chaotic initiatives—held in small venues that open overnight and often close just as quickly—that serve to reflect, whether deliberately or not, these two types of theatre. The difference usually lies in the lack of money, which can only very rarely be solved. It’s no secret that in most cases the costumes used in these plays come from the actors’ own wardrobes and that the “investment” is almost never recovered. And all of these factors affect the quality... Too few productions and too few artists can afford to be truly “independent” and to seek, to innovate, to dare... something which is, or in a normal world ought to be, the very purpose of independent theatre. “Independence” is a state that independent theatre in Romania only partially experiences, and in this sense independent theatre is perhaps closer to being a “mirror of society” than any other form of theatre, for in it all the traumas and problems of a society in a permanent state of transition are felt most directly.

So what quality does independent theatre possess today? Talent! What does it lack? Courage, rigour and discipline.

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Cristina Modreanu

# *The Theatre of the New Generations. Cracks in the Pedestal of the Statue*

Twenty-five years of progress towards capitalism in Romanian society have left their mark on the local theatre scene, in both a positive and negative sense. The co-existence of two different systems of funding—state funded and privately funded theatres—has resulted in two kinds of theatrical culture existing side by side: one that enjoys financial security yet perpetuates tired aesthetic models and flagrantly commercial performances for consumption by a passive audience; the other highly dynamic, often chaotically so, eager to discover new authors and new means of expression, but obliged to temper its admirable energy in plays staged on low budgets due to a chronic lack of

financial resources. Some examples of the latter kind inevitably also fall prey to the temptation of “theatrical commerce”, producing consumer theatre that often comes bundled with a pint of beer in the pubs and clubs where the plays are performed. With one foot still in the socialist order of things—in which culture was a common good, created using common funds—and the other in the capitalist reality of the new era, Romanian artists wishing to keep up with the times learn as they go along and of their own accord how to transform themselves into micro-entrepreneurs of their own talent, while at the same time striving not to betray it.

In these complex circumstances, which are not particularly favorable to creativity, the healthy signs of an artistic resistance movement designed to promote innovation in theatre are welcome. Not intimidated by the ever-increasing commercial pressures on the repertoires of theatres all around the country, and especially in Bucharest, a number of young artists are continuing their experiments in form, sometimes participatory in nature, in order to transmit relatively different types of content, all of which are equally relevant in today’s world: from the need for the new generations to reappraise the recent past, experimentation with new devices meant to accentuate the sensory plane and place it at the service of militant content, to a rediscovery of poetry in theatre with the aid of the visual dimension “prepared” by video artists.

Whether staged in theatres or not, all the performances I discuss below have one thing in common: through their types of approach—each of which, in its own way, diverges from the traditional format generally offered to the Romanian public—they generate significant cracks in the pedestal of what has already become the “statue of Romanian theatre”. This not only provides Romanian

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*The Censor's Office*, concept by  
Alexandru Berceanu

theatre with an opportunity to reinvent itself. It also creates the necessary conditions to attract a new audience to an art form under threat of becoming wholly irrelevant in Romania.

## I. The Censor's Office

One chilly evening in Bucharest, I entered a house in the city's Old Centre and stepped into a large, almost empty and dimly lit room. The walls were covered in files you had to struggle to read, while the middle of the room was dominated by an old wooden desk that reminded me of the teachers' desks in secondary school and the way you dreaded being asked to come to the front of the class. The sensation was the same here: alone in this semi-anonymous space, in which you heard official speeches about collectivisation coming from an old radio, you were given short instructions telling you what you were to do after sitting down at the desk. A cleaning woman brought you some fruit preserves and a glass of water—a small symbol of the preferential status you were to be afforded for a limited time. What you had to do was subject yourself to a re-enactment, to try and perform an act of censorship on a play, the idea being to make you



understand better the mechanism to which Romanian theatre repertoires were subject during the communist period. That is, to write down on the paper in front of you the words with which you would forbid the performance of a play and to find/invent, using the files placed at your disposal, reasons in support of your decision. When finished, the document signed by you would be exhibited on one of the walls of the room, alongside those of the other participants in this exercise of “internalising censorship” (which, I must admit, I did not manage to complete).

During this short journey back in time, you came to realise—after consulting the old files found in the drawers of the desk—that people themselves suffered far more than the theatrical repertoires

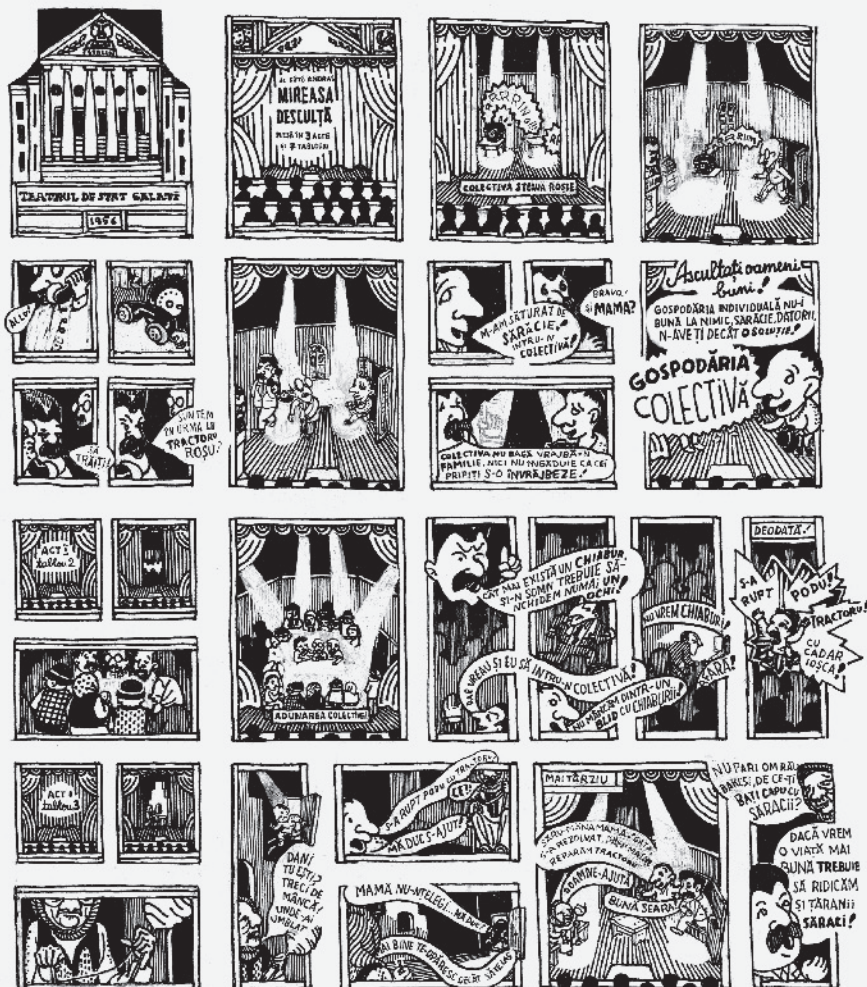
in question. Their way of thinking, of judging, of acting, was deeply perverted by the fear of repercussions, and the symbolic bending of their will and the corruption of their artistic ideals was the root cause of a profound mutation, whose effects we still feel today in so many ways. The play being censored in this journey back in time proposed by Alexandru Berceanu was András Sütő's *Barefoot Bride*, which director Valeriu Moisescu had staged in 1958 and had defended before the "decision-making bodies" at the risk of ruining his career. The story of the play and its author is also told in the form of a comic (by Sorina Vazelina), while the "prepared desk" is also a heavily theatricalised instrument, meant to transform every participant in this one-to-one experiment into a living conscience. Whether or not you censor the play, and in what form, remains your prerogative as a participant in the re-enactment, but something of the atmosphere of the censor's office remains with you nonetheless.

## 2. Augmented Reality

Another example of participatory art is the installation by Ioana Păun *This Is Not a Game*, produced by the Ofensiva Generozității group in Iași and Bucharest. On another day, this time warm and sunny, I had a meeting in a café with the person the organisers had assigned to give me the "introduction" to the experience I was to have. I would not normally have accepted the instructions she gave me—to entrust her with all the personal belongings I had with me—but I decided to respect the convention in order to see things through to the end. Once parted with his or her own identity and all means of communication (phones had to be switched off and also left behind), the participant was equipped with a pair of sunglasses with which to



MIREASA DESCULTĂ  
BAZATĂ PE TEXTUL LUI SUTO ANDRÁS



view the augmented reality—an instrument that mediates the perception of reality through the use of technology. This was another object “prepared” in such a way that it became an intermediary between the participant and the outside world—this time the contemporary world rather than that of the censor’s office—thus providing you with a fictional existence. In this case, the life of a victim of human trafficking, as became clear from the interaction with the driver of the car that transports you into the unknown following the “introduction”. This character, as well as the “intermediary” you encountered later in the hallway of the block of flats where your first “meeting” was planned to take place, created the framework within which you found yourself part of a game of exchanging identities. In the final “scene”, you entered a “prepared apartment” in which, following successive visual and audible signals transmitted through the glasses, you reached a climax of sensations—a cocktail made up of fear of the unknown, the horror of losing your identity, the sensation of physical danger and the fear of losing control. All of this on the condition that you deliberately suspended disbelief and your own judgment, without which a state of natural alert would have interrupted the “experience” on more than one occasion.

Preaching to the converted, this installation with clear theatrical elements—the dialogues written for the driver and the intermediary being the most obvious examples—does not allow for the possibility of the participants, while nonetheless entitled to react, becoming actively involved. When I replied to the driver that I wasn’t interested in taking a milk bath in a hotel in the Caribbean (which is how he said I would be repaid if I treat the client well), the actor proved unprepared for this kind of reply, just as he remained speechless a while earlier, when I failed to recognise straight away a photograph of a famous



Romanian TV presenter (to whom he promised to introduce me, if I recall correctly). Leaving to one side the technical problems posed by the sophisticated device—the glasses that altered reality were not quite at the level of Google Glass—this kind of participatory structure needs to be carefully refined before being exposed to the public, who should not be treated as the lowest common denominator. Otherwise, the educational benefits of this endeavour are more than clear and it would be worth making this installation a part of mandatory practical training programmes in high schools, as a tool in the prevention of human trafficking, a trade to which young people in Romania and around the world still fall victim today.

To a certain extent, Ioana Păun's installation falls in the middle of the debate "aesthetics versus ethics in contemporary participatory art"<sup>1</sup> and gives rise to a number of questions, of which the first might be: is the social utility of a project sufficient justification for us to overlook its formal shortcomings? The answer to which remains to be found, perhaps, in the future "interventions" into the fabric of reality by this young and extremely interesting artist, who remains someone to watch in the future.

### The Power of the Gladiator Butterfly

After a series of collaborations with directors from different generations, for whose productions she created the video components (in some cases more elaborate, in others less so), the video artist Cinty Ionescu took the risk of staging her own show, *Traces of Destruction on Mars*, a performative video installation with texts by Bogdan Ghiu in which the actress Nicoleta Lefter engages in "hand-to-hand combat" with images projected onto two large screens behind her. This type of

confrontation is found today in many contemporary performances, in which the actors must use their strength to emerge victorious from a fight that appears unevenly matched on account of our underestimation of the power of images. But how many times have you failed to observe the person passing in front of the television because you were so absorbed by the images on the screen?

And yet these two young artists take the risk of interweaving the live presence of the actress with pre-recorded images, snippets of an interview with the author of the texts alternated with a series of video clips edited in such a way that, in combination with the music, they create an ambience, a mood. At certain moments, this ambience even coagulates around the live presence of the actress, suggesting that she is “immersed” in a special, distinct space, like a fish swimming in a brightly-lit aquarium. You view this aquarium with a kind of cold fascination, admiring it dispassionately, until the actress suddenly leaves the “video-controlled perimeter” and enters the space assigned to the audience. What’s more, she engages with some of the members of the audience, coming right up to them and staring into their eyes while reciting lines from the poet’s work. If the audience member is open to this unusual form of communication, then there ensues a meaningful transmission of the poetic content via the medium of the actress.

One of these poems, one about “a gladiator butterfly”, appears to describe exactly the situation of the live presence of the actress clashing with the recorded images on the stage. During this special moment of the performance, the actress, fighting with the powerful images behind her like a gladiator (despite the essence of an actor being more akin to that of a butterfly), becomes the medium which conveys the poetic content. It is a new type of poetry that feeds on both the live presence and individual energy of the actress, as well as

the pre-recorded images rolling across the screen. It is the poetry of tomorrow's theatre.

### 3. Protest Theatre

Subtle social commentary is provided in the plays of the young directors Bobi Pricop (*Against Progress*, by Esteve Soler, translated by Luminița Voina-Răuț, staged at Bulandra Theatre) and Eugen Jebeleanu (*dontcrybaby*, text by Catinca Drăgănescu, Green Hours). For both, the script is paramount, and, given the extremely small venues in which they work, both the movement of the actors and the sets are minimalist. Naturally, these external constraints lead to a focusing on the acting, while the exchange between the actors and the audience—who are so close to each other that they become accomplices—becomes the central point of the two shows.

*Against Progress* was initially performed together with *Against Love* and *Against Democracy* (the trilogy that brought Soler fame), in a reading carefully staged by Bobi Pricop, at the time still a student at the National University of Theatre and Film, as part of the Contemporary Script Laboratory initiated by the playwright Mihaela Michailov. Soler's play was staged by Pricop at the Bulandra Theatre with only a few minor changes made. However, there was a tangible intensification of the cynical-absurdist tone of Soler's script, at times touching on the grotesque, acutely reminiscent of television adverts, at other times making the actors look like the avatars in a crude computer game, the author of which had been unable to capture the subtleties of human nature. All with a crazy sense of humor.

Sliding over the vaguely science fiction-like surface of a humanity fallen on the slopes of progress, Soler's characters start out from



real life situations, only to plunge themselves into a tunnel of dehumanisation, taking the audience with them for an “avant-première viewing”. In fact, as soon as they enter the auditorium, the audience feels the gaze of the actors, already on the small stage in wheel chairs. Scrutinised in this way, we realise there’s nowhere for us to hide: we must confront our own disintegration. The young actors Ioana Manciu, Aida Avieriței, Vlad Pavel and Cezar Grumăzescu quickly exchange roles, playing 4–5 different parts, some long, some short, although all requiring a high level of concentration and an ability to shift registers—which they do admirably.

Staged at Green Hours by the very active Compagnie 28, founded by Eugen Jebeleanu and Yann Verburch, *dontcrybaby* was described by its authors as a “show/performance by Eugen Jebeleanu based on a script by Catinca Drăgănescu (vaguely inspired by the Brothers Grimm’s Little Red Riding Hood)”. With the help of the set designer Velica Panduru, Jebeleanu creates a vector space in which the story acquires direction and meaning. Sliding down the long white corridor running the entire length of the basement at Green Hours, all five young actors, dressed smartly and stylishly and entirely in black, remain on the stage throughout in their white wheel chairs (a recurring theme in new theatre in Romania today, an amusing symbol of its low-budget nature). Conrad Mericoffer, Ștefan Huluba, Camelia Pintilie, Cristina Drăghici and Silvian Vâlcu also swap identities, in this case in the form of a detective mystery, through which, however, we learn of the disintegration of social and family relationships, destroyed in the never-ending rush to acquire money, property, wealth, fame. Peppered with the sharing of confidences (based on improvisations by the actors during rehearsals), the show acquires critical strength through voices that speak for a generation determined

to break free from the frustrations and hypocrisy of their predecessors. During the enigmatic finale, the sixth actor, Nicoleta Lefter (the undisputed female star of Romanian independent theatre), provides the moral of the tale, which—summarised reductively—might be that a constant obsession with money and fame reduces us to the condition of animals, thus depriving us of one essential thing: the freedom to be ourselves and the freedom to choose.

Captivating the audience on either side of the improvised stage, through the humour of the dialogue and exciting dynamics of the performance, which involve jumping from one scene to the next while juggling different identities, the characters being interpreted in different scenes by different actors, *dontcrybaby* is a unique textual experiment in Romanian theatre that confirms Catinca Drăgănescu's considerable talent as a playwright. Even if the thread sometimes gets lost and the mixture of characters and the voices of the actors can be confusing, this innovative way of approaching a text for the stage deserves much greater visibility than it has received in the out-of-synch world of Romanian theatre, which is dominated (with few exceptions) by a mixture of shows with boulevard leanings, hungry for applause, and sterile scripts that are incapable of whetting the appetite of directors. It is also very important to note that these two productions serve to strengthen belief in a new generation of actors—actors who are not only well trained, but are also flexible, creative and able—and willing—to express their own opinions about the world they live in.

Although they may appear to be mere drops in the ocean, it is worth noting their existence and encouraging these creative cracks in the pedestal of the statue of Romanian theatre in their various forms—from devised theatre/theatre as experience (Berceanu & Păun) to performative video installations (Cinty Ionescu) and subtle social



commentary via the medium of innovative scripts (Bobi Păunescu & Eugen Jebeleanu). This is not the “theatre of tomorrow”, but rather the creative and active theatre of our world today.

### Note on Artistic Citizenship

It is not easy to maintain a clear head in Romania today: the level of public discourse has been in constant decline in recent years, with a kind of barbarism bubbling to the surface that had previously been hidden by a European veneer. Whenever you switch on the TV, you are bound to see someone shouting—both men and women, guests and hosts, politicians and intellectuals, all snapping at one another, speaking over one another, their only goal being to cancel out their opponent’s words, even if in doing so they render their own speech unintelligible.

Readers’ comments on opinion pieces are so extreme that writing something or, by extension, doing anything that would bring you public exposure in Romania is a risky undertaking, even in the world of culture. In this public domain, strongly impregnated with resentment and hatred, it is difficult for movements to emerge that are capable of taking us forward and it is difficult for people to come forward who are capable of “setting things right”, as was asked of Hamlet.

And yet, in this world with the volume turned up to maximum, in this public domain that mass-produces illusions designed to distract us from what truly matters, there are still some people (from the world of theatre, in this case) that have not lost sight of what is important.

Gianina Cărbunariu continues to build a performative archive by means of which she probes our recent past and “translates” it for the stage, showing it not only to her peers, but also to all those with



*All these young artists are not only consistent in their endeavors to shed light on a country in great need of intervention, but also incredibly responsible in a world for which this word, citizenship, has long since ceased to exist. They are not merely artists, but conscientious artists and true citizens of this country.*



open eyes, the ability to remember and a desire to understand more about themselves. Ioana Păun is deepening her exploration of the transformations affecting labour relations in today's post-globalised world. And whether she does this in London (with her performance *Muncitor: All Workers Go To Heaven*, co-produced by Theatre Royal and the Romanian Cultural Institute in London) or at Fabrica de Pensule (The Paintbrush Factory) in Cluj, Romania, she creates a map that helps us better understand the world in which we live and our fluctuating relationships with it. Alexandru Berceanu has stepped out of the theatre and into the gallery in order to create, together with the Ofensiva Generozității group, an installation in which you are invited to assume the role of an official censor during the communist regime and decide whether or not to ban a piece of theatre. David Schwartz and Mihaela Michailov intentionally blur the boundaries between theatre, documentary and social activism, recreating, in their *Underground* project about the lives of the miners from the Jiu Valley, a picture of a world absent from all statistics and not glamorous enough to feature on the television. Which doesn't make it any less our own. Eugen Jebeleanu makes theatre whose collage-like texture draws heavily on Romanian society as it appears today.

For these artists Romania is a place where, while perhaps not happy to have been born there, you can at least use your imagination to help save or build something.

All these young artists are not only consistent in their endeavors to shed light on a country in great need of intervention, but also incredibly responsible in a world for which this word, citizenship, has long since ceased to exist. They are not merely artists, but conscientious artists and true citizens of this country.

In writing these words, I am acutely aware of how they have lost all meaning in Romania in recent years, yet I insist on using them precisely because these artists are among those capable of restoring their full meaning to them. In everything they do, they have earned what might be called—to borrow a term employed systematically by others<sup>2</sup>—their artistic citizenship.

1 A debate which culminated with the publication in 2012 of the book *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, by Claire Bishop.

2 *Artistic Citizenship. A Public Voice for the Arts*, by Mary Schmidt Campbell & Randy Martin, Routledge, 2006

Cristina Modreanu (b. 1974) is a curator, theatre critic and expert in the performing arts based in Bucharest and New York. She holds a Ph.D. in theatre from the National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest and is the author of five books on Romanian Theatre. She is the current editor of the performing arts magazine *Scena.ro*, which she co-founded in 2008, a curator of theatre and performance events and an associate professor at the University of Bucharest's Centre for Excellence in Visual Studies. She is also a Fulbright Alumna and in 2011–2012 was a Visiting Scholar at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Performance Studies Department, New York. She has curated the most important theatre festivals in Romania: the European Performing Arts Festival in Timișoara (2011 to 2013), the National Theatre Festival (2008–2010), the Romanian New Drama Festival in Timișoara (2006–2008) and, as co-curator, FestCo, the festival staged by Bucharest's Comedy Theatre (2005–2006). She initiated a series of translations of some of the most important texts in the field: the essays of Richard Schechner, Hans-Thies Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre*, Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* and Michal Kobialka's



essays on Kantor; and co-translated Routledge's influential *Fifty Key Theatre Directors* (2010) and *The Routledge Companion to Theatre and Performance* (2012). As editor of the Romanian theatre magazine *Scena.ro*, she has published excerpts from these books and also wrote and commissioned articles about the international performing arts scene. (more information at [www.cristinamodreanu.com](http://www.cristinamodreanu.com))



Ludmila Patlanjoglu

# *Silviu Purcărete and the Apocalypse of Us*

Theatre professionals have recognised his achievements in superlative terms: “A magnificent production” (Bernard Faivre D’Arcier, former Director of the Avignon Festival); “Purcărete’s show has been one of the greatest hits of the festival, an original and powerful production” (Frank Dunlop, former Director of the Edinburgh International Festival); “Masterpieces... brilliant, powerful and free” (Marie Helene Falcon, Director of The Festival de Théâtre des Amériques). Silviu Purcărete’s theatrical achievement is a synthesis of archaeology and anticipation; it is a theatre of the Art of Direction, in which classic works are rediscovered by means of contemporary forms of expression and invention. His productions are impressive. They are forms of jubilation, they offer “excessive images” and most of the time they use non-conventional spaces.



In his early career he directed an outdoor performance of *Atrides' Legends* in the scenic surroundings of an ancient city, with 8-metre high masks and *Hecuba* on a beach on the Black Sea coast. He then went on to work abroad. Performances designed and realised for conventional spaces were transposed to non-conventional spaces. Natural elements like stone, water, the starry sky, the sun and the moon enriched the ideation and artistic expressivity of these theatre settings. At the Milan Festival, under the open sky, *Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth* was staged in a Greek and Roman theatre built in a nineteenth-century villa. At the Gibellina Festival in Sicily, *Fedra* was performed in a village in the mountains untouched since a devastating earthquake in 1968. The successful *Les Danaïdes* production by the Craiova National Theatre (co-producers: Holland Festival, Wiener Festwochen, Festival d'Avignon, Grande Halle de la Villette), compared to the Mahabharata by Peter Brook, was performed at the fiftieth anniversary edition of the Avignon Festival in a miraculous setting—La Carrière Redland à Boulbon. *Faust*, staged in a disused factory by the Sibiu National Theatre, became, at the invitation of Jonathan Mills, a triumph of the 2009 Edinburgh Festival, where it was enacted at Ingliston Lowland Hall near the airport. *Metamorphoses* by Ovid, a show produced by the same theatre company as part of the European Capitals of Culture Programme for 2007 (Sibiu and Luxembourg), was held in a pool full of water lined with multimedia stages and screens.

By escaping to non-conventional spaces, Silviu Purcarete makes the cardboard swords of the theatre cut through flesh. There is an overwhelming combination of panic, despair and evil that devours the world, and a sense of anxiety and crisis in a world in which God is dead, everything is meaningless and Man futile.



*Faust*, directed by  
Silviu Purcărete



## A World Demonised by Play and Eros

The elements selected by Purcărete from Goethe's dramatic work include the Faustian bargain, the relationship between Faust

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and Margaret, Walpurgis Night and Faust's ascension to Heaven. The script is essentially a libretto for text, music and mime. The chant "Christ has risen" accompanies the audience as they enter the performance space. The curtain is raised to reveal Faust's "study"—a cold, austere chamber containing heaps of paper, newspapers and books, a dirty sink and benches occupied by Faust's students: homunculi working at laptops resembling the residents of a lunatic asylum. Faust, fearing death and old age, finds himself overwhelmed by a monstrous kind of vitality and a vampire-like desire to live. He therefore enters into a pact with Mephistopheles, a bizarre, androgynous, caricatured being—part transsexual, part living dummy. The windows fly wide open, Faust's chamber falls apart and we advance into Walpurgis Night together with the actors. Sex, the matrix of life, without love will give rise to devastating passions akin to bestiality, sodomy and paedophilia. The stage is invaded by a sadomasochistic world, a world driven by basic instincts and repressed obsessions and which shamelessly exhibits its exasperated sexuality. We witness an apocalyptic vision of life and death: shocking images of Margaret, played by seven girls, the heroine's rape at the hands of the devil, the disfigurement and murder of the child borne of Faust's relationship with Margaret.

The stage director constructs a playful dream, an atemporal and, at the same time, contemporary show that alludes to our daily dreams and nightmares. Elements of multimedia—a rock group performing live, streams of fire and fireworks—are but some of the ingredients of this production that makes you feel the power of the theatre.

Faust and Mephistopheles demonise the world through play. They do it with aesthetic pleasure. Theirs is an absolute freedom, for they love no one. In the end, Mephistopheles' solitude is cosmic. The other world is not an island that saves you from nothingness. Faust's



*Metamorphoses*, directed by  
Silviu Purcărete



death and ascension to Heaven are merely staged. The roles have been reversed: Faust winks at Mephistopheles grotesquely, shouting, “I’ve got the better of you!”—for he has taken on Mephistopheles’ role of “God’s fool”.

## Homo Animalis vs. Homo Spiritualis

In *Metamorphoses* after Ovid, the director follows Satan's Law, according to which there is no other world, no other reality; there is Nobody and there is forgiveness.

"If I do theatre, it is to force the audience to confront the monstrosity of our lives and help them to exorcise it," explains Purcarete. And because he likes texts worn old by time, he chose for inspiration the 250 myths written 2,000 years ago in verse. Interpreted in a post-modern manner, the poet comes across as a very contemporary author. The myths of humanity are illustrated by characters on which erotic and gastronomic fantasy exercise a tyrannical hold.

Man, "created in God's image, ruler over all", struggles with the beast in himself. "The syndrome of the wild beast" associated with the sexual act and that of eating is the leitmotif of this production. We witness the "zoomorphism" of the human being and the "anthropomorphism" of animals.

Staged in Sibiu, the performance takes place in the city, in a car park, in a spectacular theatrical setting: a pool full of water, bordered on one side by the stage with scaffolding on the other, and with a screen in the background where the players practice metamorphosing into animals. Resembling dancers in their soft white, tightly fitting costumes, the players perform in water, on practicables, on the screen. They give life to "temperaments" harmful to man's conscience. They strain under the burden of sin against nature and God. There are unforgettable scenes like the Flight of Icarus, Centaurus, the Plague of Aegina. The ceremonies of cruelty—constructed using their bodies and voices—sends a chill down the spine. In the end, escaping the confines of humanity is not to be achieved by reaching for the skies.



Icarus falls down, the world is taken over by plague, the fight does not destroy the monsters, it does not dispel the darkness. Salvation and light are brought by fire. The infernal space is burned, and the actors speak to the public, confronting the indifference of a world stigmatised by the cross of non-love. “Evil,” explains Silviu Purcarete, “will never disappear, it can only be counterbalanced by civilisation. Wherever you are, if you despise demons, they will return.”

*Faust* and *Metamorphosis* form a satanic diptych that speaks about the apocalypse of us.



Faust *and* Metamorphosis *form*  
*a satanic diptych that speaks*  
*about the apocalypse of us.*





Ludmila Patlanjoglu

# *Andrei Șerban's Triumph and the Power of the Performing Arts*

Two opening events, Jean Philippe Rameau's *The Gallant Indies* and *The Trojan Women* after Euripides, turned the Romanian National Opera in Iași into a privileged cultural space. Sold-out performances were given to packed houses and rewarded with standing ovations. The architect of this high point of the season was the theatre manager Beatrice Rancea, who had the fortuitous inspiration to invite Andrei Șerban.

The director staged a baroque opera-ballet and a tragedy that has reaped tremendous success in famous theatres around the world. These productions are not mere remakes—they are new performances

borne of an encounter with the local ethos, with the superb, recently renovated building of the National Theatre in Iași, with the performers' sensibilities and, above all, with the anxieties of our time. Șerban remains faithful to his credo: "I don't like doing the same thing twice. My thinking evolves." He is continuously inspired by his passion for renewal. A powerful new element in this process is the bridge between opera and theatre.

The production of *The Gallant Indies*, staged at the Paris Garnier, has a much wider scope, for the director's freedom knows no limits. Impressed by the lavish theatricality, we are seduced by love stories set in exotic places, in which the god of love confronts the goddess of war. We participate in Incan, Persian, Levantine and Indian floral celebrations together with the 120 performers. Dancing and singing, they humorously, graciously, candidly celebrate a love feast.

Life seen from an opera box and through Șerban's eyes is charming. The director doesn't "make conversation," he "communicates". His combination of baroque and modernism is seductive. He eliminates "the singers' clichés as well as the traditional clichés—the hidden enemies of the opera," to put it in his own words. Lured by theatre, opera singers gain both vocal and dramatic expressive power. In both the group and close-up sequences, the characters come alive through their voices and bodies. The production is decorative and dramatic.

In the interplay of lines, shapes and colours, the arabesques created by the famous choreographer Blanca Li (assisted by Deborah Torres) sparkle. One relishes the chromatics and the design of the set and the 700 costumes created by Mariana Drăghici—a designer recognised both in Hollywood and on Broadway. And what we find in Iași is a collaboration between Drăghici and the stage designer Carmencita Brojboiu.



*Life seen from an opera box and  
through Șerban's eyes is charming.  
The director doesn't "make  
conversation," he "communicates".*

In polishing the singers' and dancers' performances, Șerban enlisted the creative help of Daniela Dima (assistant director), Nicky Woltz (stage movement), Gabriel Bebeșlea and Adrian Morar (conductors), as well as Luminița Guțanu (choral director). The singers' verve and enthusiasm grip the audience; the love feast engulfs the house, the performers enter the boxes and we are covered in a shower of roses. In a time that "loves lovelessly", as Andrei Șerban puts it, the god of love emerges victorious. In the end, together with the performers and the director, we smoke the pipe of peace, feeling happy and overwhelmed by sensual optimism.

The pagan faith in love found in the *The Gallant Indies* touches on the divine in *The Trojan Women*. The latter is one part of a well-known trilogy—*The Ancient Trilogy*, a masterpiece of contemporary dramatic art that changed the face of Romanian theatre. The first version of it premiered 40 years ago at New York's LaMama Theatre, while the second, staged in 1990 at the Bucharest National Theatre, toured the world to great success, featuring at famous festivals around Europe, Asia and Latin America.

The version now being staged in Iași introduces new artistic elements. For the first time, *The Trojan Women*, with the contribution of the American composer Liz Swados, is performed as it was conceived—that is for opera singers. Also, for the first time, a score was written for this opera, which, until now, had existed only in oral form. Its author is the orchestrator and musical director of the performance, Lucian Maxim. A priceless gift for present and future generations, for those who will stage this opera again.

Just like 22 years ago at the National Theatre in Bucharest (when I attended the rehearsals), *The Trojan Women* gives us joy and fills us with wonder. We feel that its essential qualities never wear thin.



*The Trojan Women*, directed by  
Andrei Șerban



The reception by the world's critics—"a milestone in the history of contemporary theatre", "the reinvention of theatre, a daringly experimental opera"—is confirmed. Together with the new generations of performers and audiences, we realise that this legendary production is



*A grim tragedy ends in hope.  
In times of confusion, greed  
and desacralisation, Andrei  
Șerban confesses in turn that  
he cultivates “an art meant to  
heal, to purify, to strengthen  
us. An art that helps us live.”*

still alive. Once again we are thrilled by the wealth of images, shocking associations and explosive visuals. The show is larger than life. It is played in the wings, on the stage, on the balconies and, for the first time in the history of this production, in a sumptuous venue, an architectural gem.

In the first part, lit by torchlight, 100 performers create a kind of procession frieze of the conquest of Troy. The spectators mingle with the actors. We are transported to a dark land of flames and blood, where we witness the cruelty of the executioners and the suffering of their victims. The physical and vocal battle reaches a state of maximum tension. The stage is seething. The music of the instruments, the words chanted in ancient Greek and Latin, emerge as groans, screams, yells. The syllables, the consonants, the vowels torture, torment, caress, kill. We empathise with the protagonists' suffering: Andromache's heart-breaking lament as she leads her child to his death, the outburst of the statuary queen Hecuba, who helplessly witnesses the destruction of the citadel and of her people. We shudder with horror at Helen's stoning—naked, raped, mud-stained and beheaded for her frivolity, which had caused the downfall of a civilisation. The ceremony is violent—it induces panic and a sense of peril. "This is how theatre should be, it should give you the feeling you're walking the tightrope," says Șerban.

In the second part, the dark energies disperse. Weightless rhythms become dominant. Historical solitude becomes cosmic. Released from their captivity, the audience are led to their seats by the Greek conquerors. It is a moment of reflexive consideration. The music of the instruments and the words, a mixture of archaeology and anticipation created by Liz Swados, the exquisitely stylised costumes by Doina Levintza, the plasticity of the movement and the immobility

of the statuary groups created by Nicky Woltz unleash energies and powerful emotions that amplify, distort and sublimate the performers' and the audience's feelings.

In this masterpiece of direction by Andrei Șerban, the performers take risks. Physical and mental barriers are removed. The play is performed in a state of controlled trance. Many sequences of the show were inspired by ancient rituals from Bali (Indonesia) and Bahia (Brazil), in which the flesh becomes spirit. Directed by Șerban, the performers are "cold on the outside and burning within", striking a balance between grace and the grotesque, between power and finesse. The double, even triple casting requires inventiveness and fresh reactions. The thrill is transmitted. Inner participation is total. "It's a dream we don't want to wake up from", the actors confess in unison after the show.

A grim tragedy ends in hope. In times of confusion, greed and desecralisation, Andrei Șerban confesses in turn that he cultivates "an art meant to heal, to purify, to strengthen us. An art that helps us live."

In the end, the Trojan women are pleading shadows overpowered not by the violence of the earth, but by the burden of heaven. As they board the ship, together with the Greeks with whom they will build a new civilisation, a religious restoration occurs. Grief and despair become sacred and meaningful. For Andrei Șerban, theatre may be a factory of illusions, a torture chamber, but it is also mystery and liturgy.





Ludmila Patlanjoglu

# *“The Crisis Syndrome” and Dr. Chekhov— A Triptych by Andrei Șerban*

*“You should carry your cross and keep your faith.”*

(Nina Zarechnaya, *The Seagull*)

At the outset of the 21st century, Chekhov remains a dramatic and existential model for our world. A world that gives rise to a question of individual and collective choice: to take refuge in the past or to accept the present with all its evils? His work has been adapted by established names of theatre and young filmmakers alike, including Árpád Schilling’s *The Seagull*; Eric Lacasade’s staging of *Platonov* at Avignon in the Palace of the Popes, which was a huge success, followed



*Ivanov*, directed by  
Andrei Șerban, Bulandra  
Theatre in Bucharest



by two other landmark productions, *The Seagull* and *Three Sisters*; Peter Zadek's *Ivanov*; and the stagings of *Three Sisters* by Lev Dodin and Stephane Braunschweig.

Among the most memorable productions we also find a trilogy of Chekhov works staged by Andrei Șerban in Romania at three prestigious theatres: *The Seagull* at the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, *Uncle Vanya* at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj and *Ivanov* at the Bulandra Theatre in Bucharest. The Russian playwright is a constant feature of Andrei Șerban's work, with the Romanian director widely recognised as an important Chekhovian interpreter. In different parts of the world, Șerban has staged performances that enjoyed great success among critics and audiences alike. *The Cherry Orchard* at

the Lincoln Center Theatre in 1977, *The Seagull* at the Shiki Theatre in Tokyo and New York's Public Theatre in 1980, *Three Sisters* at the Boston American Repertory Theatre in 1982, *Uncle Vanya* at La MaMa in 1983 and the Alexandrinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg in 2009, and *Three Sisters* at the National Theatre in Budapest in 2010.

The Chekhovian Triptych staged in Romania in essence holds a mirror to the crisis syndrome so much invoked today the world over; it is a reflection on the perversion of the gift of life and sin. In Șerban's vision, *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya* and *Ivanov* are atrocious and hilarious tragicomedies about our confusing times, so lacking in love, faith, hope. "You live very badly, gentlemen!" —Chekhov's famous words (recollected by Gorky) sum up these performances, in which God is dead, the world is meaningless and man heartless. The protagonists' lives are a web of lies, errors and illusions. An illusion of escape that conceals repression and abandoned ideals and aspirations. The greatest frustration, the cause of all suffering, is the lack of love. The scene is invaded by human beings with cannibalistic traits towards themselves and others. For them, the couple, marriage, pain, death are simulacra or caricatures. In order to quell the boredom, despair and hopelessness they take refuge in sex, alcohol, gossip and the pursuit of money. They live in a suspended time, devoid of eternity. The settings are disturbing in their dreamy realism. Words are spoken powerfully. A dialogue of the deaf, which is remarkable in terms of the choreography of the characters. In *The Seagull*, staged at the Radu Stanca Theatre in Sibiu, they are on the stage together with the audience and surrounded by translucent curtains as in a greenhouse. In *Uncle Vanya*, performed at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, the audience and the actors are on stage in the auditorium for the first part, then together on the stage. In *Ivanov*, performed at the Bulandra Theatre, the performance of



Rehearsals, *Uncle Vanya*,  
directed by Andrei Șerban,  
The Hungarian State Theatre  
in Cluj



the protagonists takes place backstage, extending into the auditorium and the private space of the audience. The theatre environment emotionally enhances the dramatic situation not only of the characters, but also of the audience. It is not only the protagonists who are tragicomical, Andrei Șerban explains, but also us: “We are afraid to live here and now: this forces us to look in the mirror, but we refuse to see, preferring to escape into dreams, fantasy and non-reality.”

The difference between theatre and life dissolves. They do not perform, rather they assume the characters’ condition. Șerban says: “What intrigues us and always attracts us with Chekhov is the correspondence with our own lives. With *The Seagull* I have to question myself.” In these explosive, visually and audibly striking performances,



*Șerban says: “What intrigues us and always attracts us with Chekhov is the correspondence with our own lives. With The Seagull I have to question myself.”*

Andrei Șerban is subtly contemporary. Words sound familiar. Our daily routines—rough, pedestrian, but also ineffable and poetic—make themselves felt through the costume details and props, creating a bridge between yesterday and today, between Chekhov’s time and our time. The actors find inspiration in Șerban’s creative and assured directorial baton. It is the kind of experience that matters not only in terms of performance, but also the road travelled. The audiences and artists experience a profound concept of theatre from this poet of a director. From established names to young performers, all demonstrate exceptional expressive qualities in both individual and group scenes. Their acting swings between the graceful and the grotesque, between finesse and power.

Doctor Chekhov diagnoses a sick world characterised by “crisis syndrome” for which “Dr.” Andrei Șerban finds a cure. It is implied at the end of the performance that there exists hope of a way out. Like the characters, we understand that, on account of our DNA, we are unique and inimitable, that we were created for eternity.

*Tomorrow I Leave. Goodbye. I’m Going Away to Die.*

These prophetic words, spoken by Chekhov to a young friend, were a source of inspiration for the Romanian director. The salvation of devastated souls in the writer’s plays is achieved in Șerban’s productions by death, seen as a gateway to life, as a reunion with God. In *Ivanov*, Sarah, the Jewish girl converted to Christianity, who wrests her cross from her neck and dies to the general indifference of those around her, appears at the end among the living and helps Ivanov to pass away. In *The Seagull*, the figure of the mother merges with that of her son, who from the world beyond rings the bell and utters



*For Andrei Șerban theatre  
may be a factory of illusions,  
a torture chamber, but it is  
also mystery and liturgy.*

the words that open and closes the performance. At the end of the Tarkovskian *Uncle Vanya*, the characters, burdened by sin, wallow in the mud, while a purifying rain pours down on them. The hopelessness and the pain become graceful and begin to make sense to these cold and stony hearts.

For Andrei Șerban theatre may be a factory of illusions, a torture chamber, but it is also mystery and liturgy.

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Octavian Saiu

*Towards  
a Rich Theatre:  
A Case Study  
in the Reception  
of Eugene  
Ionesco on the  
Romanian Stage*

*Beyond the Absurd and Derision*

## Ionesco's Figurations of *Beyond*

As a playwright and as a thinker, Eugene Ionesco—who in many ways was the “playwright as thinker”, in the words of Eric Bentley—was obsessed with the question of what lies beyond the limit of human existence. His entire oeuvre is a meditation on this never abandoned metaphysical theme. In his works, this limit is either translated into a type of objective delimitation between *here* and *beyond*, or suggested in the form of the thin line between the absurdity of living and the logic of dying. What else is the tragicomic mediocrity of life that he depicted if not a journey towards a predictable *beyond*? And what else is the end of this journey, seen from this perspective, if not a silent answer to the questions of a life lived in derision? The absurd and derision are the two faces of Ionesco's universe, for which death as *beyond* seems to be the only attainable solution.

Always loaded with a sense of despair, his plays initiate an experience in which theatre as life and life as theatre are more than mere metaphors borrowed from Shakespeare. They are both paired with a shattering axiom: death as theatre. This is why, in the landscape of European drama, Ionesco is unique. Through his distorted lenses, death looks like the ultimate reality of the human condition, even more theatrical than life itself. For Ionesco's characters, death is indeed the counterpart of life, a staged exit towards that expected *beyond*.

The striking feeling of absurdity in Ionesco's theatre is afforded by means of an aggressive stylistic arsenal meant to conceal this profoundly philosophical content. Nonetheless, of all the authors tormented by an obsession with the absurd, Ionesco is, paradoxically, the most comic. His works are dominated by this immense oxymoron. And this to some extent accounts for the fact that he remains one of the



*The Lesson*, directed  
by Victor Ioan Frunză,  
Csiky Gergely Hungarian State  
Theatre of Timișoara



most preferred dramatists among directors, in spite of all recent trends in playwriting. If Becket is the author worshiped by an entire scholarly industry, Ionesco has become an emblematic figure of the “absurd” on the stage, however debatable the authority of Martin Esslin’s concept may be in the twenty-first century. This is because no one else succeeded in insinuating the chilling presence of *beyond* within the very core of irresistible comedy, as we find it in the endings of *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* and *Exit the King*. In these plays, however, the tragic and the comic never annihilate one another: they are kindred categories and equally honest expressions of the same meaninglessness of human existence. As Wolfgang Iser would say, the smile simply freezes on the spectator’s lips at the sight of Ionesco’s figurations of *beyond*.



*The productions that capture most convincingly Ionesco's explorations of beyond are those that make up the trilogy of a unique Romanian director, Victor Ioan Frunză: The Lesson, The Chairs and Exit the King.*

There are certainly countless possible ways of approaching the manifestations of this theme in Romanian theatre by analysing various stage renditions of Ionesco's plays. However, the landmark productions, the productions that capture most convincingly Ionesco's explorations of *beyond* are those that make up the trilogy of a unique Romanian director, Victor Ioan Frunză: *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* and *Exit the King*.

### *Beyond* the Unbearable Solitude of Being

Frunză is a stage director who is continuously in search of the new. For a long time, unless he had no choice, he chose not to create theatre in buildings traditionally designed for this art form. He is a Don Quixote constantly dissatisfied with the tangible reality of the classical stage, seduced by the possibilities of alternative universes, which he attempts to conquer by means of a visuality that has become a distinctive mark of his style. Created in partnership with the stage and costume designer Adriana Grand, this is a style that remains consistent to this day, yet renewed from one production to the other. The superb poetry of their joint creations springs from this synthesis between the novelty of the location chosen for a specific production and their recognisable system of expression.

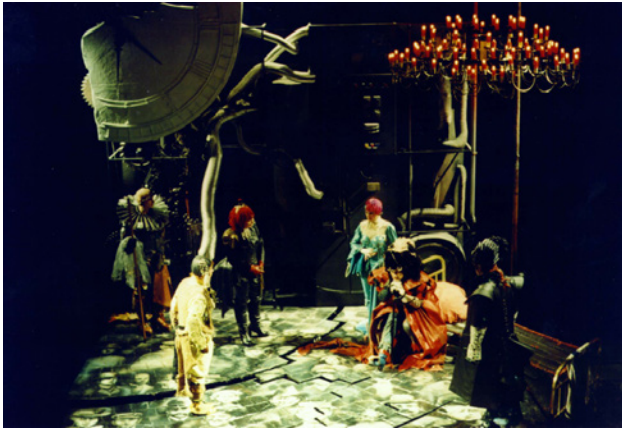
In Frunză's and Adriana Grand's theatrical projects, visuality is an organic expression of a profound cult for the dramatic text. Frunză understands theatre as a dialogue—between the stage director and the dramatist, between actors and images, between the body and the space. It is, at the same time and, perhaps, more significantly, a dialogue between the performance and the audience. In this series of dialogues, the text plays a decisive role. While other directors take

the liberty of transforming the literary plays with which they start into their own scripts, amputating entire sections, remodelling characters and restructuring relationships, Frunză demonstrates exemplary respect for the chosen textual material, which he studies minutely and penetrates in its profoundest meanings. Thus, his virtuosity in creating images always stems from this type of engagement with the text, and each element of visuality covers an idea, a connotation, an emotion derived from that text. Nowhere is this more evident than in his stagings of Ionesco's plays.

The series of Ionesco productions in Frunză's career began with his flamboyant staging of *Exit the King*. In a space that could have been a "Bouffes du Nord" of Bucharest, the show overwhelmed through *images* and *ideas* that nourished one another. A live orchestra, a stage that was broken into large sections, dazzling opera costumes and an immense chandelier with melting white candles—these were all *images* that cannot be forgotten. A king living through his own end, the end of the world and the end of the theatre, his death as a philosophical solution to a life devoid of meaning, love as an inefficient antidote to vanity—all these *ideas* amounted to an entire exegesis of *beyond* translated into the fibre of a complex theatricality. The show integrated the hidden musical cell of Ionescian literature and an abundant, aggressive imagery in a decomposing space. In this memorable production, the Shakespearean dimension of the theatre of the absurd revealed itself in the profound way in which Ionesco himself read, understood and assimilated Shakespeare. In the "chaotic age" of literature (as Harold Bloom memorably defined it) and in the chaos of Ionesco's world, Bérenger was a decayed image, the grotesque reflection of the great heroes from the gallery of Shakespearean tragedies. Like Edward Bond's hero, Bérenger was the King Lear of a post-human world.



Marius Bodochi, *Exit the King*,  
directed by Victor Ioan Frunză,  
Theatrum Mundi



Frunză's version of *Exit the King* displayed yet another spectacular feature, which salvaged the essence of a literature whose label—*absurd*—has been called into question in recent Western studies. Ionesco's use of the absurd (and in this, more than in any other sense, he is similar to Beckett) is a form of denouncing life as a degraded ritual, as inert matter, repetitive and deprived of transcendence. Ultimately, it is a form of denouncing life as an insane automatism without substance, woeful consolation for the man's wandering through history. Death, by contrast, offers the chance to recreate the relationship with the world *beyond*, that of lost sacredness. The hero's final gesture, unhurried and precise, marked an existential dialectic: slowly, after blowing out the candles, the king... dies. Alone. "All characters die in



solitude,” Ionesco once said of the heroes of Shakespeare’s tragedies, in which he saw only an unsettling image of failure. The failure of each individual in the face of his or her own destiny, as well as of generations in the face of history—this expression of helplessness appeared in Frunză’s production as a sapping of energies in the dark. Half naked, disrobed of the false glory and of the eccentric emblems of royalty, the king watched by the spectators in the production of Victor Ioan Frunză and Adriana Grand was a mere human being confronted with the limits of his own humanity, transformed into nothingness.

In this stage rendition of *Exit the King*, a certain philosophical connotation of Ionesco’s drama could be identified, one oriented towards the theme of death as a transition to a *beyond*. This was a *beyond* conceived of as a re-definition of a humanity in dissolution, a *beyond* clearly delineated in the symbolic geography of the performance.

### Beyond Eros and Thanatos

Theatre critics have often reduced Frunză’s style to the images that he creates, images that find their form in the scenography of Adriana Grand, his permanent collaborator. However, this approach to Frunză’s work is restrictive and even inaccurate. This is primarily because, in his case, the visuality (while indeed of an overwhelming richness) does not have the semantic gratuitousness typical of visual theatre, in which the imagery of the staging assumes its own life, independent of the text and somehow separable from it. *The Lesson*, which he staged in Timișoara, bears testimony to this.

The unforgettable atmosphere of Frunză’s *The Lesson* revealed itself in an intimate chamber space—a small school classroom in which



the pupils were the spectators. It is difficult to imagine a more efficient way of generating a sensation of authenticity than through those old, blackened desks at which the spectators were seated. The spectators were thus not only integrated into the performance space, they also became an extension of it. The actor and the spectator encountered one another through a convention that brought them together not just physically, but also ontologically. In this way, it was impossible for the spectators to remove themselves from a story that culminated in murder, because each one of them became part of the performance. A diffuse sensation of terror thus began subtly to enter the viewers' minds, together with the half-innocent, half-perverse pleasure of watching, of relishing a universe in which the world itself was hyperbolically projected.

The Freudian pleasure principle is the conceptual key to Victor Ioan Frunză's production. On stage, this was translated into the murder committed as a savage sexual act, the apotheotic end of a spontaneous and aberrant love story. In the terms proposed by the director, the pleasure principle became the argument for a genuine conspiracy of silence for everyone present. Silent witnesses captive in the same universe as the Pupil, the spectators shared the murderer's guilt through their passivity, through the quasi-perverse decision not to interfere, under the immunity granted by theatrical convention. The Professor became a Mr Hyde-like image of each of the voyeuristic spectators of the murder. Encouraged by the silence of the audience, the Professor continued *The Lesson* to its fatal end, when everything would be too late. After this end, the Pupil appeared from *beyond* a blue wardrobe. She looked liberated. Her death is an ironic answer to all the Professor's questions, to all the questions of life. The conclusion of the performance is bitter and overflows into sheer poetry:

salvation is only possible in the realm *beyond*, for the world is irredeemably contaminated by evil.

The perfect logic of Frunză's reading of *The Lesson* was based on an entire theory of the absurd in theatre: its apparent lack of sense must be constructed, organised down to the last detail, for nothing can be left to chance when it comes to stage symbols. Instead of a facile reading, centred on the political meaning of Ionesco's play, Frunză suggested a psychoanalytical vision in which the traumas of the unconscious reverberated in every object, in the entire texture of a mirror-space. His *Lesson* was a real symphony of *beyond*, even when seen through a wardrobe-turned-window. The musicality of the show composed a metaphysical melody, a sort of variation on the theme of death. Was that *beyond*, in itself, a possible Paradise? Was it perhaps the only possible Paradise? In the end, the requiem music suggested a positive answer. It sounded like a reconciliation of the Pupil's spirit with her traumatised body and it emphasised a key dimension of Ionesco's drama: the thin boundary between Eros and Thanatos.

### Beyond the logic of dying

In Ionesco's *The Chairs* any theoretical framework seems restrictive and disputable, an attempt to provide definite answers to unanswerable questions: who are we? Why are we here in this world? What is *beyond* this world? Ionesco is the voice through which these questions become the chorus of a closed world, which suffocates humanity. Like Kafka's and Beckett's, his is the sombre verdict of a great sceptic.

All over the world, *The Chairs* has been understood and staged as an encounter with the chaos of the contemporary world, with the constant dilemmas of existence, with the impossible and tragic

condition of the couple in a space of inert, predictable, identical objects. In Frunză's staging, only the chairs on which the spectators are obediently seated were identical: small and white, characterised by a visible neutrality. By contrast, the *chairs* that later invaded the performance space, in front of the spectators and in close proximity to them, were meticulously constructed items, each with its own individuality. Remnants of an already extinct civilisation, the *chairs* in the show became part of an installation: in many different shapes, colours and sizes, they lead an autonomous life, as pieces of fragmented history. It is difficult to describe the visual impact that this show produced. Yet its imagery was only partially exhaustive and autonomous, for it was nothing but the metamorphosis of an exemplary exegesis of the play.

One pole of this exegesis was the text itself, the other was the performative space. Between the two, every element found its profound role: no line from the play remained subject to chance, no gesture escaped the plan rigorously delineated at the beginning. An architect of performance, Frunză focused his attention both on the word and on the image, for he wanted them to convey the human and fictional reality of his *The Chairs*. The imagery of the performance became a simulacrum of broken humanity, in a post-dramatic and post-human era. It mirrored the text in its most profound meanings, involving not merely the question of physical extinction, but the more terrifying prospect of spiritual annihilation.

Only an authentic and free artist like Frunză could have the courage to re-dimension the relations within the text to the point of creating apocalyptic human typologies, which reminded one of Terry Gilliam, the poet of the absurd in cinema. Frunză conferred upon the chairs—as emblematic objects—an archaeological meaning: they became testimonies to a world that has become defunct, pieces



*The Chairs*, directed by  
Victor Ioan Frunză, German  
State Theatre Timișoara



of broken cultural memory. The internal conflict of the text was contained within this visual metaphor. On stage, it entailed a psychoanalytic exploration of maternity to which the suggested presence of the aquatic elements pointed. It reminded one of the theories of Gaston Bachelard, for whom water was a symbol of maternity, as well as of suicide, the territory of an “Ophelia complex”. In Frunză’s production, everything was the ritual of a death/wedding through which three characters slid towards *beyond*. The Oedipal connotation of the relationships challenged the established patterns of Ionesco’s reception. Suddenly, the spectator entered a mental zone that was hyperbolised to the extreme within a terrifying, meticulously composed setting, placed between the absurdity of life and the implausible logic of death.



*Frunză remains loyal to his own principles, to his actors, to his team, and, above all, to his vocation of creating a kind of theatre that is always new, always different.*

Desperate fear and passive death are the two possible conditions of the absurd ego. This is a thesis that Frunză presented against an overwhelming, rich scenic background. Ionesco's theatre of *beyond* was a new theatre of death, inspired by Kantor, but filled with exacerbated eroticism: the theatrical image devoured its content, so the characters died *in* and *through* the visual performance. More than a commentary on Ionesco's play, Frunză's *The Chairs* represented a discourse on the mysterious relationship between man and the world. Old Man and Old Woman did not commit suicide. As metaphors for a self-destructive civilisation, the two gradually annihilated themselves, for not even love could save them. The show ended with a personal apocalypse that swallowed everything: a sunken world, a mere roof salvaged from the flood... This was the space of Ionesco's own *Endgame*!

Viewed through the small window of an elevator and re-presented on the TV screen, death became just a video effect of a universe *beyond*. Today, as Frunză reminded the audience, television is the medium of the grotesque alienation that Ionesco captured in his theatre back in the 1950s. Through it, death is constantly present in everyone's home, in the intimate existential universe of the contemporary human being. Yet, for the suicidal heroes with no spectators in *The Chairs*, the sole chance to acquire an identity was the "15 minutes of fame" in the deaf and volatile space of a screen, predicted by Andy Warhol for every mortal of the twenty-first century.

### In Lieu of a Conclusion

Frunză's approach to Ionesco deserves an entire monograph, with extensive chapters dedicated to some of his other shows, to his entire career. A career in which the ideal reading of a text and the





*The Lesson and The Bald*  
*Soprano*, directed by Victor Ioan  
 Frunză, The Comedy Theatre  
 © Adriana Grand



concrete endeavours to find its stage expression are inextricably interwoven. Frunză is an incurable idealist of the theatre, fully committed to his understanding of a play, to a superior sense of creative fulfilment through that play. For him, the contemplation of Ionesco's

drama has an acutely personal meaning. It is a path towards his own self. When staging such texts as *The Lesson*, *The Chairs* or *Exit the King*, even though he has confidence in his decisions, Frunză displays the doubts of the artist who constantly tries something else in an attempt to discover new possible answers. If other creators look for a specific prototype of theatricality when they stage Ionesco's plays, Frunză gets lost in what might be called an odyssey of rereading, a search for the realm of that unknown *beyond*, which he nevertheless knows he will never discover. This search is for Frunză a means of salvation, a means of staying alive: his most recent version of *The Lesson*, produced by The Comedy Theatre in Bucharest, is a completely different theatrical experience from the one mentioned above. For him, perseverance in the quest for the most suitable rendition of a text by Ionesco bears testimony to an intrinsic need for freedom, as well as to a risk assumed with artistic stoicism. Frunză remains loyal to his own principles, to his actors, to his team, and, above all, to his vocation of creating a kind of theatre that is always new, always different. His search for the perfect performance, for a rich theatre inspired by Ionesco is therefore not over yet.

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and Eugène Ionesco. He has been actively involved in a number of international theatre festivals and conferences in North America, Australasia and Europe, including the Edinburgh International Festival. Since 2004 he has been Chair of the Conferences of the Sibiu International Theatre Festival. He is currently the Adjunct Secretary General of the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) and Director of the Eugène Ionesco-Samuel Beckett Research Centre. He has published academic articles in various international journals, as well as seven books on theatre. He received the Critics' Award in 2010 and the Award of the Union of Theatre Artists in 2013 (UNITER).



Gina Șerbănescu

# *The History of Dance or the Dance of History?*

*No artist is ahead of his time. He is the time. It is just others  
that are behind the time.*

(Martha Graham)

The writing of history is without a doubt a subjective endeavour—whether dictated, assimilated or even well intentioned. Every time a system collapses, “we have no history anymore”, it needs rewriting, and we start afresh, beginning from the moment the old historical perspective is deemed invalid. The many different philosophical views of history (in most cases contradictory) demonstrate the impossibility of achieving an objective view of the passage of time.

An atypical phenomenon occurs, however, when we try to record the history of dance. How can we record gesture, how can we freeze ephemeral motion within an interval of time that is itself frozen in a succession of moments considered significant to this art form?



A great paradox occurs when we talk about a historical perspective on dance: there is a fundamental tension between the motility and the ephemerality of choreographic endeavours and the attempt to freeze this motion, fixing it in memory. When we are fortunate enough to come across video recordings of older performances, we can easily say there exists between us and the artistic work in question a deep divide in terms of the spirit of our time and that of the time in which the work in question was created. An example of this is given by the Lumière brothers' film *The Serpentine Dance* from 1899, with Loie Fuller, a pioneer of modern dance on an international level, as the protagonist.

In so far as the history of Romanian dance is concerned, and in particular contemporary dance, this appears to be a Sisyphean undertaking. Given the precarious situation of this art form in Romania, especially on an institutional level, the writing of its history would appear to be a continuous struggle. In addition, it would seem that we are faced with a contradiction in terms. How is it possible to write the history of something contemporary? How can we record and capture a moment? Does "now" have a history? And this leads to a series of questions that never cease to arise in connection with this



*To be contemporary, therefore, is more about being universal than being “en vogue” or responding to the demands of the present.*

art form. What does it mean to be contemporary? What is contemporary dance? From what moment, and until when, can we describe an artistic endeavour as being contemporary?

If we take contemporary to mean the ability to transcend time, the present moment and the given historical context and, through an aesthetic endeavour, to go beyond the immediate demands of the present, then we can also begin to construct a historical structure for choreographic art. To be contemporary, therefore, is more about being universal than being “en vogue” or responding to the demands of the present. The authentic dancer is, in the spirit of Martha Graham, time itself, something, however, that can only be true based on a capacity to assimilate the ethical and aesthetic profile of a given period, precisely in order not to remain frozen in a given form and to allow for the evolution of his or her art.

In light of these terminological definitions of what it means to be contemporary and, in particular, what it means to be part of the historical context of contemporary dance, we can now turn to the recent endeavour of the National Dance Centre in Bucharest to create a history of contemporary dance in Romania: *Time Dance Connection. Bucharest in Action (1925–2015)—The Map of Contemporary Dance History in Bucharest*.

The seeds of this project were planted in 2006, when Vava Ștefănescu (currently the manager of the National Dance Centre, but at the time its artistic director) initiated the *Sertar* (“Drawer”) project, of which two editions were to be held: the first was dedicated to Esther Magyar, the director the Ballet Ensemble of the Romanian Opera in Bucharest and director of the School of Choreography during the 1960s; the second (at the initiative of Răzvan Mazilu) to Trixy Checais (1914–1990), a leading figure in the history of Romanian

dance and a multi-disciplinary artist with a unique, inimitable style who was mainly active in the interwar years.

After the anti-communist revolution of 1989, contemporary dance in Romania emerged as if out of nothing or, to be more precise, as an attempt to bring itself into line with trends in contemporary dance on an international level—a first step in this sense being the project *La Danse en Voyage*, which ran between 1991 and 1993 and as part of which many important French choreographers were invited to coach Romanian dancers just starting out in their profession and who would go on to forge successful careers.

Step by step, Romanian dance began to gain a foothold on the international scene thanks to the initiatives of Gabriela Tudor and Cosmin Manolescu, who played a decisive role in fostering an understanding of Romanian dance and its integration into the world of international dance.

During the 1990s, Romanian dance was in its early stages. As in all other areas, Western influences began to be felt ever more strongly. Traditional definitions, such as the labelling of dance as the art of movement, began to be challenged.

An interest in new forms of expression and a desire to make up for the gap between Romania and the West were the main concerns of the post-revolution Romanian choreographic scene.

This saw the advent of a type of dance that was mainly addressed to the spectator and which turned the latter into an active participant and integral part of the performance (a type of artistic performance introduced to Romanian contemporary dance by Cosmin Manolescu).

Still in the 1990s, through the productions from the early part of his career, *The Lady of the Camellias* and *Talk to Me Like the Rain and Let Me Listen*, Răzvan Mazilu introduced to the Romanian dance

scene the phenomenon of dance theatre, which would gain a permanent place in the Romanian performing arts.

Dance would become committed to experimentation in the field of contemporary art, both in terms of social dialogue and engagement, and would begin to manifest itself as political art in Romania through the work of *Solitude Project*, an organisation set up in 1999 by the choreographer and dancer Mihai Mihalcea, who later, between 2005 and 2013, was to be director of the National Dance Centre.

Also in 1999, the first steps were taken in the creation of an institutional framework for the development of contemporary dance in Romania: this was the year in which Vava Ștefănescu founded the Multi Art Dance Centre (MAD), a non-governmental organisation that existed until 2003 and which functioned as the first home of contemporary dance in Romania. The structure, actions and activities of the MAD centre had a great impact on the public and boosted the visibility of contemporary dance in Romania and abroad, while also providing artists with the basic working conditions they required. The MAD centre was the forerunner to today's National Dance Centre, currently managed by Vava Ștefănescu.

The post-revolution endeavours were focused on reducing the gap between the level of contemporary dance in Romania and that in the West, while also building an identity of its own, something which occasionally gave the impression that Romanian dance had started from scratch.

Three Romanian initiatives stand out as part of this process of realignment with the international dance scene: The Gabriela Tudor Foundation (led by Cosmin Manolescu), which promotes intercultural mobility and dialogue and created a culture of dance residencies, which play an important role in the artistic development of



Trixy Checais—photograph from the personal archive of Andrea Roșca, the artist's daughter

dancers; the 4 Culture Association (led by Andreea Căpitănescu), which organises the prestigious Explore Dance Festival, now in its tenth year; and the Colectiv A Association, which, thanks to the tireless efforts of Miki Braniște and cultural projects such as the Temps D'Image festival, has managed to integrate contemporary dance into an interdisciplinary framework with the aim of highlighting the most urgent issues facing contemporary art as a whole.

As of the year 2000, contemporary dance in Romania began to expand its sphere of interest from a discourse based on experimentation to the provision of space within which young dancers and choreographers could express their individual styles and approaches.



*The post-revolution endeavours were focused on reducing the gap between the level of contemporary dance in Romania and that in the West, while also building an identity of its own, something which occasionally gave the impression that Romanian dance had started from scratch.*

Nonetheless, the lack of interest for what had gone on before 1989 gave the impression that the foundations of Romanian contemporary dance were laid only after the revolution and, to a large extent, as a reaction against the dominant academic discourse.

An important initiative in terms of correcting this impression was that of Romanian Dance History, a project begun in 2008 by a number of choreographers, including Brynjar Bandlien, Florin Flueraş and Manuel Pelmus, which was inspired by the choreographer Stere Popescu (after whom the performance space of the National Dance Centre is named) and his revolutionary work *The Hammer Without a Master*.

Thanks to this initiative of the National Dance Centre, the false impression was eliminated. In describing its mission, the National Dance Centre states that its purpose is to “initiate and support research, documentation and studies that place the resources of contemporary history in an active environment, with a focus on the people who created the history of Romanian contemporary dance.” Adding that, “In 2015, the National Dance Centre launched the Romanian Dance Archive, which through documents, articles, images and films, sought to present the still unexplored history of Romanian contemporary dance.”

From the press release for this project we learn that the National Dance Centre launched Time Dance Connection. Bucharest in Action (1925–2015)—The Map of Contemporary Dance History in Bucharest, a project aimed at shedding light on a hitherto unseen history consisting of six events held in the period 24–29 November 2015 at various locations around Bucharest. Through this project, the National Dance Centre will be introducing to the public a number of outstanding names and their hitherto unknown sensational stories.

Thus Floria Capsali, Esther Magyar, Trixy Checais, Vera Proca Ciortea, Stere Popescu and Ioan Tugearu will find their place in Romanian culture and the contemporary artistic landscape. Innovative, revolutionary and courageous in their day, Romanian contemporary dance is indebted to these names for the freedom of form and movement it exhibits today. Time Dance Connection. Bucharest in Action (1925–2015)—The Map of Contemporary Dance History in Bucharest is but one of the endeavours aimed at rediscovering the history of Romanian contemporary dance initiated by the National Dance Centre from as early as 2007. The role of the National Dance Centre is all the more important in light of the upcoming launch of the Romanian Contemporary Dance Portal (UptoDance).

As of the time of writing, two of the aforementioned events have taken place: those dedicated to Floria Capsali (researched and curated by Corina Cimpoiu) and Trixy Checais (on which I had the honour of working and during which I launched the book *Trixy Checais. Cartografia Zborului*).

Rediscovering the importance of these artists is fundamental to the rethinking of the formation and development of contemporary dance in Romania.

The famous Romanian ballet dancer Gelu Barbu said of Floria Capsali: “She was the founder of Romanian ballet. She created dance to the symphonic music of Mihail Jora and Paul Constantinescu [...]. For nine years, Floria Capsali studied classical ballet in Paris with Christine Kerf at the Big Opera House, after which she studied under the famous teacher Enrico Cecchetti from Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet, a company he led for many years. Her last teacher in Paris was Nicolas Legat, a dancer with the Mariinsky Ballet in Sankt Petersburg, from whom she learnt many of the secrets of ballet.”

Trixy Checais was an inimitable figure of Romanian culture, and not only in the field of choreography. A fine arts graduate, he first became interested in dance after seeing a performance by Floria Capsali. He developed his style at the school of Paule Sybille, a dance teacher from France trained in the spirit of Dalcroze and Rudolf von Laban. Sybille had a decisive influence on the interwar dance scene and later would also leave her mark on the idea of corporeality in theatre, such as in the work of David Esrig, whom she taught and with whom she worked together.

Trixy Checais studied under and worked with Floria Capsali, while together with Iris Barbura he introduced the German expressionist style to Romania. As a matter of fact, Trixy had studied under Harald Kreutzberg, a leading figure in this important artistic movement. In the 1950s, Trixy Checais became a victim of the communist regime and was condemned to forced labour on the construction site for the Danube Black Sea Canal. After his release, he would breathe new life into the Timișoara dance scene, before being tried again and sent into permanent exile in Galați. As well as being the founder of an atemporal style, Trixy Checais would also discover a number of great talents, such as Gelu Barbu and Miriam Răducanu.

The recording of history is extremely important, for it creates those historical pillars that help us, with care and respect, to preserve our values. However, we will never be sure whether we are writing the history of dance or whether history itself is making us a part of the choreography of its temporality, of the succession of time, whose spirit draws rhythms, lines and circles on a map that will remain forever unfinished.

One thing remains fundamental: we must never forget!

Gina Șerbănescu holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Bucharest. She is a dance critic for the publications *Dilema veche*, *Observatorul Cultural*, *Teatrul azi*, *Scena.ro*, *Art Act Magazine* and *LiterNet.ro*. She took part in Moving Dialogue, a cultural exchange programme between Romanian and American artists initiated by the Dance Theatre Workshop, Gabriela Tudor Foundation and Movement Research (New York). At the proposal of the 4 Culture Association, she took part in the Critical Endeavour programme of the Working Title festival in Brussels and the ImpulsTanz festival in Vienna. She has worked as a choreographic dramatist and assistant dramatist for the Jardin d'Europe resident artists from Denmark, Croatia, Bulgaria, Great Britain, Sweden, Belgium and Hungary. She is the author of the books *Dansul Contemporan—Sensuri ale corpului* (2007), published by the National Dance Centre and the Camil Petrescu Foundation, and *Trixy Checais. Cartografia Zborului* (2015), published by Eikon and the National Dance Centre.



# *The 2015 National Theatre Festival: Historical Perspectives and New Horizons*

The 25th National Theatre Festival (NTF) took place in Bucharest between 23 October and 1 November 2015.

This edition of the festival was once again organised by the Romanian Association of Theatre Artists (UNITER) and under the high patronage of the Romanian President. Combined with the support of and traditional partnerships with the Ministry of Culture, Bucharest Municipality, the Romanian Cultural Institute and the main public media organisations and partner theatres of Bucharest, this confirms the National Theatre Festival's status as one of the leading annual cultural events in the country. This 25th anniversary edition

of the festival was dedicated to one of the most important names in Romanian contemporary culture: the director Lucian Pintilie.

Naturally, this round figure—25—also afforded the organisers an opportunity to take a look back, both on a professional and personal level, at the uninterrupted history of the festival during a period of historical and social upheaval that has witnessed changes of mentality in Romanian society, in the way people perceive the world via the medium of art and, not least, in the role played by theatre in contemporary life.

*Looking back at the history of the National Theatre Festival today, 25 years after its first edition, we find many gaps. And the entire team has done its best to fill these gaps, to make the public more aware of this 'architectural' ensemble of Romanian theatre culture, as a whole and in perspective, in order to paint a more complete picture of the development of the performing arts during our first quarter-century of 'free' theatre.*

Marina Constantinescu

NFT artistic director

It was an edition in which the anniversary of 25 years of free Romanian theatre combined naturally with the principal purpose of the festival itself—that of presenting to the public the most representative performances of the 2014–2015 season, based on a rich selection (44 productions from across the country) made by the NFT's sole selector, the theatre critic Marina Constantinescu. The latter had the following to say during the run-up to the National Theatre Festival: "I did not set out to indulge in an exercise in 'festivism'. I did not seek to bring together productions—names, numbers, performances—from all over. I've never succumbed to those pressures. This year's will



*Antisocial*, directed by  
Bogdan Georgescu, Radu  
Stanca National Theatre—Sibiu  
© Adi Marineci



*Buffalos—urban fable#2*,  
directed by Radu Afrim,  
Radu Stanca National  
Theatre – Sibiu  
© Adi Bulboacă

be a wide-ranging festival in which the quality, value and sophistication of the performing arts will provide a natural demonstration of the culture and spirituality that exists within all of us. And in this country. This is the only festival that tells the fascinating story of Romanian theatre over the last 25 years.”

In total, during the course of its duration, the National Theatre Festival featured a total of 95 Romanian performances, as well as three international guest productions being performed for the first time in Romania. All of these were met with great interest among the people of Bucharest, as well as those who travelled especially to the capital to see them. This was evidenced by the large number of sold-out performances and full houses that most of the shows enjoyed. More



precisely, there were a total of 35,000 spectators present in the theatres and other venues that staged events during the festival.

And whereas the interest shown in the foreign productions can be explained in terms of the public's curiosity for one-off events and the critical acclaim and pan-European reputation of the productions in question, in the case of the Romanian productions, the appetite (at times even voraciousness) shown for them by the public provides the greatest evidence of Romanian society's need of interaction with art.

*Theatre speaks to our most intense and varied experiences, to this country and this moment in history. The more than 40 different productions selected for the festival are, at the end of the day, 40 different stories about us. Today, tomorrow, yesterday. At any time. They paint an intense and powerful portrait of Romanian theatre—but also of the world of which it is born. A restless, troubled world, one riddled with conflict, danger, war, terrorism, deceit, indolence, hatred, envy and crime. Yet a world from which love and truth have not disappeared. This is what I sensed in my over ten months of following Romanian theatre.*

Marina Constantinescu

The ten days of the festival also included dozens of different theatre-related events: exhibitions, debates, lectures, book launches, live broadcasts of performances, workshops and presentations by special guests, screenings of films about great names from the world of cinema, a special concert/performance produced by the NTF, a charity auction held in aid of disadvantaged artists, and countless encounters with the wider public held at the city's busiest pedestrian crossing: the pedestrian underpass in University Square, which for the duration of the festival became the "NTF Underpass".



*Cats' House*, directed by  
Radu Iacoban, The Small  
Theatre – Bucharest  
© Florin Biolan

The theme of the festival in 2015 was “War. Conflict. Theatre”—a theme that almost suggested itself, given the issues addressed by the majority of the productions invited to Bucharest, though by also the immediate reality of the world we live in.

*We are surrounded by all manner of wars, conflict, terror and terrorism. The way theatre approaches the theme of war—whether in the plays of Ancient Greece, Shakespeare or contemporary works—should be followed and studied. It is also for this reason that, in 2015, the NFT programme includes a series of performances that not only touch on this subject, but also study it in depth, producing different perspectives on the subject and forcing us to realise how we also play an active role in these troubled and troubling times. They force us to confront war, past and present. The war outside or the war raging within us.*

Marina Constantinescu

This year the organisers again strived to preserve the international nature of the festival. Thus, alongside the Romanian productions selected from the 2014–2015 season, the public was also able to see three foreign guest productions: “Front”, directed by Luk Perceval;



Iulia Colan in  
*Flowers for Algernon*  
© Adi Marineci

“The War”, directed by Vladimir Pankov; and “The Tiger”, directed by Sofia Jupiter from Sweden and based on “The Tiger of Sibiu” by Gianina Cărbunariu. The first two were successful on the European theatre scene on account of the way they approach the key theme of the world we live in: war and its effects on humanity.

“The War”—a production created during the year of the First World War Centenary and described by its author as “an opera with text recitals”—was a co-production of the Chekhov International Theatre Festival in Moscow and the Edinburgh International Festival in collaboration with SounDrama. After its premiere performance (9 August 2014, Edinburgh), the newspaper *The Scotsman* wrote: “Pankov’s ‘sounDrama’ simply ravishes the senses, in 150 minutes of continuous, unforgettable theatre; the 19-strong ensemble cast all play instruments, sing in a rapt operatic style, and act magnificently, creating an avalanche of stunning visual images accompanied by the wild and haunting ‘jazz’ of ambient sound design”. The NTF public who found themselves in the capital on the evening of 25 October 2015 (and the date was certainly no accident!) filled the Grand Hall of the National Theatre in Bucharest to the rafters to witness this unique moment of theatre, described by the author himself, Vladimir

Pankov, in the following terms: “The whole performance is based on associative perception and each person may come away with something of their own.” As to the authors intentions and ideas in creating this monumental production: “We need to refresh our memory, to point out the past, to warn our and the next generations, to remind ourselves about the meaninglessness of war and to pose a question: do men need a new war to start to appreciate the present moment?”

“Front”, a production of the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg, is similar to a stage oratorio and written in four different languages in order to convey the experiences of soldiers on the front line. One hundred years since the end of hostilities, the Flemish director Luk Perceval transported the 11 actors and the spectators back to the apocalyptic universe of the First World War.

*It is an honour to have been invited to an event as important as the National Theatre Festival in Bucharest. This being my first time in Romania, I took the opportunity to get to know a little bit about the Romanian theatre scene, and I can tell you that I was pleasantly surprised by just how lively theatre is here, by how eager Romanians are to ‘consume’ theatre. I had no idea that this art form was followed so intensely by your public. And, having talked to people after our performance of ‘Front’, I was very pleased to discover the impact it had. To be quite honest, I had my doubts, during the show, about whether the Romanian public would understand the clear references to the context of the play—that of the German-Belgian front during the First World War. I was very impressed by the public’s knowledge of those circumstances and the keen interest with which they followed the play.*

Luk Perceval

Luk Perceval, as a special guest of the festival, also gave a creative workshop entitled “Peace for the Monkey Mind”, in which the experienced (and experimental) director shared insights with ten Romanian actors about the use of oriental meditation techniques, using the texts of William Shakespeare and Jon Fosse as examples.

One way or another, the majority of the plays performed during the festival—from “The Tiger” and “Powder Keg” to “Nathan the Wise” and “20 Years in Siberia”—reflected the central theme of this 25th edition of the festival, that is, conflict—whether of the military variety or in the sense of the ‘domestic’ wars and social conflicts synonymous with our times. An eloquent example of this was the project created off the back of “Antisocial”—a play by Bogdan Georgescu that looks at the breakdown in communication between young people, teachers and parents being accentuated by the unprecedented developments in the field of IT and the changes we are all experiencing during these early years of the new millennium. Following on from “Manifesto of a Generation”, launched two years ago through the successful production of the musical “West Side Story”, for 2015 the National Theatre Festival presented “Manifesto for Dialogue”: a platform for debate inspired by Bogdan Georgescu’s play, the script of which was developed using Active Art techniques together with the seven young actors in the play in a workshop run by the Faculty of Theatrical Arts at the Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu. Thanks to a partnership between the most important theatre festivals in Romania (the National Theatre Festival and the Sibiu International Theatre Festival), “Antisocial” is still touring the country today, with each performance followed by a debate (aimed at a target audience of high school pupils) entitled “Manifesto for Dialogue”.



*Imagine All the People*,  
directed by Gigi Căciuleanu,  
The Romanian National Opera  
of Iași  
© Andrei Gindac



*The Brothers Karamazov*,  
directed by Albu István,  
The National Theatre of  
Târgu Mureș  
© Mihaela Marin

A special and unique event took place during the National Theatre Festival on its penultimate night in the Marble Hall of the National Bank of Romania, an esteemed partner of the festival: a performance by Czech composer Jiří Antonín Benda's "Medea". This work was performed by the Virtuozii Chamber Orchestra from Bucharest and conducted by Horia Andreescu with the special participation of the actors Maia Morgenstern, Teo Corban and Rodica Negrea. "Medea" is a melodrama in one act written by Benda with a German libretto by Friedrich Wilhelm Götter. It was first performed in 1775 in Leipzig and at the time was considered one of the most influential works of musical drama among composers of the day.

*We are convinced that this evening has only brought us closer together; it strengthens our solidarity with excellence, whether at home or abroad; and it strengthens our hope that, in the long term, culture will prove to be the most noble and complex investment we can make—while we, those who cherish it and let it enter our hearts and minds, have a duty, now as always, to demonstrate our admiration of excellence.*

Marina Constantinescu

The main theme of the festival—“War. Conflict. Theatre.”—was also reflected in the series of NTF Lectures, the first of which was entitled “The Reflection and Effects of Theatre in Conflict Zones” and took the form of a debate on the question of if and how theatre is able to alleviate the manifestation of various forms of violence in contemporary society. The debate was attended by a number of respected experts, including the director and dramatist Fabio Tolledi, the president of the International Institute of Theatre Italy, Alexander Stillmark, the president of the International Institute of Theatre Germany, and the Romanian director Gianina Cărbunariu.

This series of lectures also enjoyed the participation of traditional partners, such as the Polish Institute, which was celebrating 250 years of state theatre in Poland. The theme of their lecture, “Theatre and Memory”, delivered by the dramatist and theatre critic Piotr Gruszczyński, was entirely in keeping with that of the festival. The event was followed by a screening of the film “(A)pollonia” by Krzysztof Warlikowski.

Another interesting lecture with a provocative title, “Pseudo Doctoral Thesis”, in the form of a workshop on poetry recital, was given by the actor Ion Caramitru. Why don’t actors need a doctorate? Why is there no call for this form of academic ‘validation’ in a



profession that deals in emotions? These questions were used by the renowned actor as a pretext under which to take those filling the Media Hall of the National Theatre in Bucharest on a journey into the art of “speaking” poetry—or, in the words of the great thespian himself, “a deciphering of the poetic text and the steps that must be taken before reciting a poem on the stage.” Caramitru was accompanied by the musician Aurelian-Octav Popa, who gave a demonstration of how music can be used to increase the power of the poetic message.

*Through its tantalising discourse, poetry becomes a spectacle. Music is nothing if not poetry—a poetry that is transmitted and disseminated by means other than speech [...] Poetry needs a black box. It needs closed eyes.*

Ion Caramitru

All of these events, both on and off the stage, were accompanied by a series of eleven exhibitions showcasing some of the most fascinating personalities of the Romanian stage, providing the public with an opportunity to remember some of the great names of theatre who died before their time, while also learning about some of the new and unique artistic projects of leading names on the contemporary scene. Indeed, throughout the course of this festival celebrating its 25th anniversary, visitors were able to relive some of the important stages in the history of Romanian theatre through photographic exhibitions featuring important names such as Gina Patrichi, Amza Pellea, Ștefan Iordache, George Constantin and Gellu Naum (the 100th anniversary of whose birth was celebrated in 2015).

Gina Patrichi—a rare talent, creator of legendary roles and one of the favourite actresses of many a great director of Romanian theatre





*The History Boys*, directed  
by Vlad Cristache,  
The Excelsior Theatre  
© Adi Marineci



*Front*, directed by Luk Perceval,  
The Thalia Theatre (Hamburg)  
© Mihaela Marin

and film—played many memorable roles both on the stage and the silver screen. The exhibition dedicated to her life and work, carrying the subtitle “The Mirage of Seduction”, comprised snapshots of the actresses’ complex and fascinating life: her home life, friendships and travels, and, in particular, her beautiful and tumultuous love affair with the stage. The photographs from this exhibition can still be seen today in the foyer of the Bulandra Theatre in Bucharest.

During the ten days of the festival, two other late great actors of the Romanian stage and silver screen, Amza Pellea and Ștefan Iordache, were once again brought face to face. Through the exhibitions “Amza” and “Iordache”, staged together in one of the busier foyers of the National Theatre, the National Theatre Festival and the

*Mișcarea de Rezistență* association afforded festivalgoers the opportunity to “meet” these inimitable artists via the medium of photographs, some on display for the first time.

The “Naum 100” exhibition paid an elegant tribute, 100 years since his birth, to the writer experts consider to be Romania’s most important surrealist, an avant-gardist through and through: Gellu Naum. The photographs, made available by the foundation that bears his name, were enjoyed by those who came to see the shows or to the book launches scheduled to take place throughout the duration of the festival at the Metropolis Theatre.

Besides these events focused on the memory of Romanian theatre, the public was also afforded a glimpse of the private world of the director Silviu Purcărete in the form of an exhibition of the director’s own photographs—“Purcărete’s World”, an event hosted by the National Theatre in Bucharest and which opened the 2015 National Theatre Festival itself. “To me, Silviu Purcărete is a fascinating personality. Not only because he is extremely intelligent and cultivated, playful and sophisticated, a creator of worlds that are unique to himself and no one else. He also observes everything. And anything. He senses every vibration, every detail, taking them with him on an intimate and subjective journey. [...] I am launching this photographic exhibition as a challenge to you. Welcome to ‘Purcărete’s World’! Dramatic, intense, subtle, enthusiastic, poetic, fragile, voluptuous. Full of fabulous stories and details. He observes the world around him with amazement and humility. Each of Silviu Purcărete’s seductive photographs tells us something in the story of a great artist,” Marina Constantinescu declared at the opening of the exhibition.

In parallel, the actor Horațiu Mălăele’s mastery of graphic art and caricature could be admired in the collection of nudes and

portraits—of an incontestable refinement—on public display in the exhibition “Graphicatures”. The exhibition “Comedy Remix”, created in collaboration with the Comedy Theatre in Bucharest, looked back from a contemporary perspective at the history of said theatre (1960–1990), featuring some of the most notable theatre actors of the day. The virtual exhibition of theatre photography, entitled “NFT—25 Years. A History in Pictures”—curated by Mihaela Marin using photographs (some of which of invaluable documentary importance) belonging to the different theatres, NTF photographers, actors and the UNITER archive or that of the *Teatrul Azi* magazine—created a veritable visual universe, recreating the history of the festival from 1990 to 2014.

The exhibition “Posters in Time. The Time of the Theatre”, held in celebration of the festival’s 25th anniversary and displayed in the NTF Underpass in University Square, was enjoyed by thousands of passers-by, who stopped to contemplate the remarkable collection of theatre posters from the last quarter-century. (An estimated 250,000 people passed through the NTF Underpass in the period 17 Octombrie–1 November 2015). The great interest shown by the public for this exhibition could be felt from the hundreds of requests to buy the posters on display—memorabilia of the 25 years of free Romanian theatre.

*The diversity of the exhibitions in this anniversary edition of the National Theatre Festival is a reflection of the multi-coloured mosaic that is the fine arts. The public—of different tastes and ages, yet all with an interest in the performing arts—was able to admire photography, decorative objects, graphic art, three-dimensional installations, media art, stage design and poster art. The world of the fine arts in relation to*



*The Lesson*, directed by Mihai  
Măniuțiu, Radu Stanca  
National Theatre—Sibiu  
© Mihaela Marin



*The Beggar's Opera*, directed  
by Kokan Mladenović, Csiky  
Gergely Hungarian State  
Theatre of Timișoara  
© Adi Marineci

*theatre is expanding with each day that passes, exploring new areas that only yesterday were unknown to the fine arts.*

Irina Tapalagă

Curator and NTF image director

Last but not least, NTF theatregoers were also inducted into the world of stage design in the form of the exhibitions “Roots” and “Freedom”, which were also part of the Romanian pavilion at the 2015 Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space. Their inclusion in the National Theatre Festival was made possible with the help of the Romanian Cultural Institute.

*I am convinced that certain projects from other countries need to be brought to the attention of the Romanian public. We have been a notable presence at the Prague Quadrennial for some time now, and 2015 was yet another successful year. The exceptional creativity of the young stage designers under the guidance of an exceptional teacher, Ștefania Cenean, is something that should also be seen by the people of Bucharest. These exhibitions were also highly appreciated by the organisers of the Quadrennial, perhaps also because 'Roots', for example, represents a highly distilled contemporary revisiting of Romanian traditional spirituality. Not an everyday occurrence.*

Radu Boroianu

President of the Romanian Cultural Institute

Naturally, there was again a particular focus on the printed book during this 25th edition of the festival. As in previous years, the National Theatre Festival continued to turn the act of publishing into a public event: 16 book launches were held, including literature, theatre books and academic studies. These events brought together writers, critics, journalists, special guests and, of course, many members of the public. From *Scrisorile despre teatru* ("Letters About Theatre") by Giorgio Strehler, to the exquisite *Costumul de teatru—De la schiță la miracol* ("Theatre Costumes—From Drawing Board to Miracle"), by Doina Levintza; from the texts of Andrei Șerban gathered together in the book *Regia de operă. Gânduri și imagini* ("Opera directing. Thoughts and Images") to the nostalgic recollections contained in Cristian Pepino's *Cartea de la Vama Veche* ("The Book from Vama Veche"); from the confessions of the professor George Banu, *Parisul personal. Casa cu daruri* ("My own Personal Paris. The House of Gifts") to the very special novel (in "noir prose" style) by

the director Mihai Măniuțiu, *Aventurile hingherului în Balkanya* (“The Adventures of the Dogcatcher in Balkanya”); not to mention the European and Romanian studies on contemporary theatre... all these book-related events demonstrated the public’s interest for the printed word. A special moment was enjoyed with the occasion of the launch of Florin Vidamski’s *Drumul spre spectacol prin metoda David Esrig* (“The Road to the Performance by the David Esrig Method”), an event that once more brought together the renowned director and theatre professor David Esrig, who was a special guest of the festival, and the actor Marin Moraru, who starred in a number of his memorable productions during the 1970s.

*I am very pleased to have been invited to Bucharest and the National Theatre Festival. Firstly, I must admit that from the perspective of the man in the street the presentation of the festival has improved greatly. It is much more like in the West, in the more positive sense of making culture events more appealing to the public and encouraging their knowledge of and fascination with the stage [...] Secondly, I had the opportunity to watch a large number of shows, of which some were truly interesting, others showing great potential that could be developed further. At any rate, it was an interesting selection, and the fact that theatre is enjoying such importance, as evidenced by the staging of a national festival of this magnitude, is remarkable. Of course, how we are reflected by the artistic production of the country is very important. For—and this is something I have said before, albeit in a different context—theatre is not the art of words but the art of action.*

David Esrig

Professor and director





*Platonov*, directed by  
Andreea Vulpe, Maria Filotti  
Theatre (Brăila)  
© Andrei Gindac



*The Ease*, directed by  
Radu Afrim, The National  
Theatre of Târgu Mureş  
© Cristian Munteanu

As mentioned at the outset, the 25th edition of the National Theatre Festival was dedicated to the film director and leading light of Romanian culture Lucian Pintilie. This meant that the festival also broadened its horizons to include cinema, with the organisers staging four film screenings as special events within the festival. In honour of the great director, Studio Cinema in Bucharest (in partnership with the Romanian National Film Centre and the Romanian Filmmakers Union) held a special screening of one of the most iconic films of Romanian cinema: *Carnival Scenes* (Original title “De ce trag clopotele, Mitică?”, 1981, screenplay and directed by Lucian Pintilie). Banned for ten years, though the film is based on I. L. Caragiale’s *D’ale Carnavalului* (“Carnival Scenes”), it still bears the unmistakable

stamp of Pintilie. Indeed, the pleasure of watching some of the most important actors in the history of Romanian cinema made this penultimate night of the festival one to remember. The previous night, the National Theatre Festival had paid homage to one of the most respected theatre and film actors today: Teodor Corban. Corban, from the Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre in Iași, played the lead role in Radu Muntean's latest feature film, *One Floor Below*, which was part of the official selection at the 68th Cannes Film Festival, in the *Un Certain Regard* section, and had its Romanian premiere in September. The screening of this film, in the company of Teodor Corban himself, provided another highlight of the festival.

In keeping with the spirit of openness adopted at the 2014 edition, the NTF in 2015 continued to interact with the digital world, taking advantage of the latest technological developments in terms of the diversification of live transmissions to include live streaming, an online presence through dedicated websites and social media campaigns, as well as the launch by UNITER of a professional online theatre platform—MyStage.ro. The latter, inaugurated in October specifically for use by festivalgoers, allowed for the centralised purchasing of tickets for all performances in the festival.

These high-tech innovations embraced by the NTF benefited from the excellent collaboration with Grand Cinema & More at Băneasa Shopping City, which involved Romania's first ever live screening, both in Romania and abroad, of a selection of the most popular shows performed during the festival: *Mein Kampf*, *The Star Without A Name* and *Buffalos—Urban Fable#2*, which were broadcast live to five venues in five different cities across Romania (Cityplex in Constanța, Cinema Trivale in Pitești, Cityplex in Brașov, The Central University Library in Timișoara and, of course, Grand Cinema &



More Băneasa in Bucharest). Similarly, thanks to the excellent partnership with the Romanian Cultural Institute, Romanian theatre lovers in London, Vienna and Chişinău were given the opportunity to enjoy the performances taking place in Bucharest via live broadcasts at the Romanian Cultural Institutes in Vienna and London, as well as the Grand Hall of the Mihai Eminescu National Theatre in Chişinău.

*The project with Grand Cinema & More, which started in 2014 with a performance of Rhinoceros at the National Theatre in Craiova, was extended this year, in an absolute first for our country, to the national and international level. The novelty resides in both the live screening of theatre performances in non-conventional spaces, as well as the participation of the Romanian Cultural Institute abroad and the live screening of three of the most acclaimed productions of the 2014–2015 season.*

Marina Constantinescu

As far as its online initiatives go, this year the National Theatre Festival again enjoyed a comprehensive partnership with the Adevărul.ro online group. As a result, no fewer than ten performances from the festival were broadcast via live streaming on the Adevărul.ro website. These broadcasts were available for viewing not only on personal devices with internet access, but also by passers-by in the special viewing area set up by Adevărul.ro in the NTF Underpass in University Square. In addition, between 19 October and 4 November, the series of online broadcasts entitled “NTF Interviews—Adevărul Live” featured live interviews with 25 of the best known artists taking part in the festival, who shared their experiences and opinions about their work and lives.



*UbuZdup!*, directed by Gábor Tompa, The National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca  
© Lucian Muntean



*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, directed by Victor Ioan Frunză, Metropolis Theatre  
© Maria Ștefănescu

*In this era of unprecedented technological progress, the virtual space has become a new kind of stage that robs the real heroes of theatre of their energy. People are spied on, monitored, manipulated, made to feel terrified of tomorrow, of poverty and war. To expect them to come to the theatre to forget this would be absurd and inhuman... for what alternative does a good night out or a comedy offer them!? But then why are the theatres full? Why, when they go to see Romeo and Juliet, do people forget their suffering? Why do the public appear to show Hamlet the way in his battle with deceit, murder and fate? Is this not perhaps because in theatre one is an actor and a spectator at one and the same time?*

Ion Caramitru

President of UNITER

A separate section of the NTF 2015 was that of “On Air. Radio Theatre”, in which each night of the festival the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Corporation broadcast through its Culture Channel the productions of its National Radio Theatre department. These recordings from the archives allowed listeners to hear the voices of some of Romania’s greatest actors performing some of the plays also featuring in the festival.

*Most of us grew up with the radio, we grew up with the voices of the people on the microphone, with radio drama. And I also know there are still many who continue to listen to radio plays by great actors and great directors. A state of perfect harmony existed during the festival between the stage and the radio studio. I see this as a real achievement, but also a form of shared solidarity and a way of providing the public, whether as spectators or listeners, with a different form of the same play. As a consequence, the festival was able to enter people’s homes and, one way or another, everyone had the chance to enjoy a taste of the world of Romanian theatre during the course of the festival.*

Marina Constantinescu

For the second time in its history, the National Theatre Festival, acting out of a concern for the plight of retired theatre professionals, organised an auction, at the Artmark Gallery in Bucharest, of various works of art and a number of private possessions and souvenirs from the world of theatre, all donated by leading artists of the day. The money raised from the sale of these objects (over 5,000 euros) was donated to the UNITER “Artists for Artists” campaign, which helps seriously ill theatre professionals. Thus, a whole swathe of objects of great sentimental and artistic value was placed at the service of those

who devoted their lives, whether in front or behind the curtain, to the creation of emotions.

All these events held as part of the National Theatre Festival needed to be promoted as efficiently as possible among the public—be that a general public, a potential public, a specialist public or the ordinary people of Bucharest, whose festival-going habits need to be stimulated. The promotion of the festival, therefore, also entailed more direct forms communication: three special issues of the festival's dedicated newspaper (15,000 copies distributed in over 40 locations); the official website of the festival, [www.fnt.ro](http://www.fnt.ro), with over 30,000 unique visitors responsible for 243,442 page visits between September and October 2015; online pages about the NTF in various social media platforms; detailed information about the performances on the MyStage.ro platform; 170 photo galleries and 74 videos documenting the events of the festival; radio and TV teasers; as well more than 30 official press release—all of which were at the disposal of journalists (130 accredited), official guests from Romania and abroad (including 109 foreign invitees) and the public.

The direct contact between the general public and the NTF was significantly improved in 2015, thanks to the remarkable expansion of the concept of direct communication in the NTF Underpass (first introduced in 2014 in Bucharest's University Square). Thus between 20 October and 2 November, a dedicated, dynamic and interactive space was created featuring over 250 historical festival posters (the "Posters in Time. The Time of the Theatre" exhibition); the stands of the festival's partners (e.g. radio stations, publishers and Margareta Pâslaru and her charity CD "Actors Singing"); information points run by volunteers (who handed out all manner of promotional materials relating to the shows and other events of the festival); a constantly

updated and specific soundscape; a dedicated area for watching live streams on large screens of ten different performances from the festival; and “The Five O’clock Meeting”, in which 45 well-known artists and participants of the festival interacted directly with passers-by for an average 100 minutes each day. All of this helped increase the visibility of the festival and created a feeling of “belonging to the festival” among passers-by in a capital city with a considerable deficit when it comes to a shared sense of (cultural) celebration.

Naturally, this 25th edition of the National Theatre Festival was not free of disruptions and obstacles. However, while internal issues were dealt with rapidly, as is only normal, the tragedy that occurred at the *Colectiv* Club in Bucharest with just two days of the festival left to go had a profound effect on all the participants of the festival, from the artists and special guests to the public. The declaration of a period of national mourning, in memory of the fire that broke out during a rock concert claiming the lives of many young people, made it necessary to make a quick change to the festival programme. While one option was to cancel the remainder of the festival, the organisers took the correct (and wise) decision to postpone only four of the 28 remaining events—namely comedies and other performances which by their nature would have been considered insensitive in the circumstances. These four productions, accounting for seven separate performances, were rescheduled for after 2 November, while before each of the remaining performances during the last two days of the festival, a minute’s silence was held in the sold-out auditoria in memory of the victims of the tragedy. And it was for this reason that the festival did not have an official closing ceremony. In her only media appearance during those days, the artistic director of festival, Marina Constantinescu, told Radio Romania: “We close this 25th edition of

the National Theatre Festival naturally with a sense of joy at having provided the public with a strong and challenging festival. But we are also shocked by the tragedy affecting us all [...] I believe, however, that these last few hours have shown how Romanians are able to come together during such moments, moments in which we realise we are living in a country that has lost its sense of equilibrium. In a country where there is no system. And no laws. A country in which ... ‘anything goes’. The festival continued, but the programme was modified in keeping with the spirit of a period of national mourning, a demonstration, perhaps, of the fact that we know how to come together as a people. And perhaps that, for those of us who work in the world of theatre, the moments of silence, in which a deafening and absolute silence descended on entire auditoria, as well as on our thoughts and on our pain, ensure that we will never forget what it is that brings us together. I truly believe that art brings us together and will be our salvation... both here on earth and in heaven.”

In conclusion, beyond its principal aim of providing theatre lovers with a comprehensive overview of the best productions of the 2014–2015 season, this 25th anniversary edition of the National Theatre Festival has continued and consolidated the series of innovations introduced during the first year of theatre critic Marina Constantinescu’s second mandate as director and selector, while also seeking to diversify the means by which it reaches its main beneficiary: the general public. Indeed, the public reaction was very positive, as seen by the interest shown for the guest productions, as well as the massive participation of the people of Bucharest in the other, theatre-related events of the festival. In fact, the public’s great appetite for the festival became apparent as early as September 2015, when the National Theatre Festival was voted by the public the winner of





*War*, directed by  
Vladimir Pankov  
© Mihaela Marin



*War*, directed by  
Vladimir Pankov  
© Andrei Gindac

the *BucureștiTu* municipal award for theatre, with the NTF winning 40.4% of the online vote organised by the municipal cultural centre ARCUB. According to the cultural surveys conducted after the festival by ARCUB as part of the “Cultural Strategy for Bucharest: 2016–2026”, the National Theatre Festival emerged (alongside the biennial George Enescu classical music festival) as one of the favourite cultural events among inhabitants of the capital, with a score of 7.6%.

The final word of this presentation goes to the team of organisers of the National Theatre Festival, a small but experienced and efficient team (coordinated by Aura Corbeanu, the executive director of the festival and president of UNITER), which succeeded in overcoming all of the problems that inevitably occur when organising such a



large festival, while also giving the over 1,700 direct participants in the festival the impression that the entire festival community is one organic whole working together for a higher purpose—that of communion through art—and allowing the general public to experience the thrill of an important national festival that remains faithful to its primary purpose—that of transforming the act of culture into a celebration to be enjoyed by all.

*What, in fact, is theatre? It is the miracle of coming together. And this is precisely what a festival is about. The joy of coming together.*

Marina Constantinescu





# *Sibiu International Theatre Festival*

Sibiu International Theatre Festival, the most important theatre and performing arts festival in Romania, sustains a creative dialogue at a European and international level. The festival aims to promote artistic creation of the highest quality by presenting only the most representative performances of the moment in order to identify outstanding cultural landmarks at a national, European and international level.

The festival is structured into 16 different sections: Theatre Performances, Contemporary Dance Performances, Street Performances, Circus Shows, Theatre and Concerts in Churches and at Historic Sites, Music of the World, Flamenco Performances, Meetings of Theatre Art Schools and Academies, The Visual Arts Platform, Play Reading Performances and Radio Theatre, Special Conferences and Lectures, Book Launches, Film Theatre, Specialised Workshops, Sibiu Performing Arts Open Market and Meetings of Cultural Networks.

Sibiu International Theatre Festival is proud to be a leading performing arts platform bringing quality works to a wide range of audiences. More than 427 carefully selected performances, 67 different

venues, 10 days and 65,000 people who get to experience the creative side of life. The festival's goal is to promote the active growth of the community through culture by strengthening cultural interaction between various groups within the cultural community and the general audience.

Over time Sibiu has been a witness to and a beneficiary of the extraordinary contributions of countless cultural and artistic personalities from around the world to the development of Sibiu as we know it today. Each of these personalities has his or her own remarkable story to tell within the history of the performing arts, stories that make them part of Sibiu's destiny and which remain engraved in the heart of the community. Inspired by the famous Hollywood Walk of Fame, the Sibiu Walk of Fame is designed as a cultural event that pays tribute to excellence in the performing arts, a permanent place of celebration and recognition that lends something unique to the place and the festival itself. With the passion, quality and professionalism they have shown in their work, the artists and cultural personalities we celebrate through this event have enriched the world's culture, while the cultural heritage they leave for future generations acts as a source of inspiration, creativity and innovation. Ariane Mnouchkine, Eugenio Barba, Silviu Purcarete, Declan Donnellan, George Banu, Nakamura Kanzaburo XVIII, Krystian Lupa, Lev Dodin, Peter Stein, Peter Brook, Gigi Căciuleanu, Radu Stanca, Martin Hochmeister, Kazuyoshi Kushida, Klaus Maria Brandauer, Neil LaBute, Eimuntas Nekrošius and Joël Pommerat have all been honoured with a star on the Sibiu Walk of Fame for their achievements in the performing arts.

Volunteers play a key role in the cultural sphere, bringing vitality and innovative ideas. Romania has little or no tradition in the field of volunteering by comparison with other countries of the European

Union. Sibiu is an exception, however, and the Sibiu International Theatre Festival and other noteworthy events represent the country's largest and most important platform for informal education through the performing arts. This platform hosts independent cultural projects for the community that are initiated and supported by volunteers trained as part of the Sibiu International Theatre Festival. A community of 300 youngsters from Romania, Hungary, Japan, Korea, Canada, Switzerland, Germany, Poland and France are trained to assist the Festival team during its 10-day duration.

Sibiu Performing Arts Open Market is an associated structure of the Festival, a unique event in the cultural sphere in Romania that each year brings together directors from the most important cultural institutions of Romania, Europe and Asia, managers of performing arts festivals, representatives of the most powerful cultural centres in the world, as well as some of the world's most important artists. As part of the Sibiu Performing Arts Open Market, independent artists, companies and programmers, festival managers and directors of cultural centres from Romania and abroad take part in cultural discussions. The Market is in itself a platform for intercultural dialogue, where artists and professionals from around the world establish collaborations and experimental projects between partners in various educational, artistic, cultural and research areas.

Some of the highlights of the 2015 edition of the Sibiu International Theatre Festival included: Klaus Maria Brandauer/Peter Stein, the Deutsches Theater from Berlin, the National Theatre from Brussels, the Théâtre de la Ville from Paris, the Schauspiel Stuttgart, the Burgtheater Vienna, the Polish Theatre in Wrocław, the Brenda Angiel Aerial Dance Company, the Teatro Stabile from Torino, Yoshi Oida, the Meno Fortas theatre group (Eimuntas Nekrosius),



Street/Open Air Performances  
in Sibiu

© Dragoş Dumitru



© Paul Baila



© Sebastian Marcovici

the Teatro de la Abadia (with a performance by Olivier Py) and the Poliplanity Productions Company from Greece with the *Iliad*.

A total of 70 countries were represented at the Sibiu International Theatre Festival in 2015.

In the same year there was a strong Romanian component, as represented by leading theatre directors such as Silviu Purcărete, Mihai Mănuțiu, Alexandru Dabija, Radu Afrim, Gianina Cărbunariu, Bogdan Georgescu and Gavriil Pinte.

Several productions of the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu were staged, including *Faust* and *Oidip*, both directed by Silviu Purcărete; *The Lesson*, directed by Mihai Mănuțiu; *Giraffes—Urban fable #1*, *Buffalos—Urban fable #2* and *Tattoo*, directed by Radu Afrim; *Antisocial*, directed by Bogdan Georgescu; *Why Hecuba?!*, directed by Anca Bradu; *The Ghost is Here*, directed by Kushida Kazuyoshi; *Nathan the Wise*, directed by Armin Petras; and *Marat Sade*, directed by Charles Muller.

The Romanian component also included performances by well-known Romanian theatres as well as independent companies: e.g. *Mein Kampf*, directed by Alexandru Dabija (Cluj-Napoca National Theatre); *For Sale*, directed by Gianina Cărbunariu (Odeon Theatre); *The Line*, directed by Iarina Demian (Bulandra Theatre Bucharest); *Why Not Do It in the Road?*, directed by Neil Labute (co-production of FITS, the TETA association and ACT Theatre); *In the Heart of the Night—The Hamlet Episode*, directed by Gavriil Pinte (Queen Marie Theatre Oradea); *With the Gypsy Girls*, directed by Andrei and Andreea Grosu (UNTEATRU Bucharest); *Possible Words*, directed by Theodor-Cristian Popescu (Multimedia Centre Association FiX Theatre), *N(AUM) Texts* by Gellu Naum, directed by Mariana Cămărășan (UNTEATRU Bucharest); *Imagine All the People*, directed by Gigi Căciuleanu (Romanian National Opera Iași); and *West Side Story*, a performance by Răzvan Mazilu.

In the Meetings of Theatre Art Schools and Academies section, the most important theatre schools in Romania were represented

by the Lucian Blaga University Sibiu (*Almost Mine*, *Black Choir* and *The Jubilee*), the Babeş Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca and the Lucian Blaga University Sibiu (*Kathie and the Hippopotamus* and *Never Let Me Go*), the University of Arts Târgu Mureş (*A Blue Hour* and *Hands Around*), and the Caragiale University of Theatrical Arts and Cinematography in Bucharest (*Picnic on the Battlefield* and *The Dog in the Manger*).

*When you set out to create an event in a community, in order for that event to be healthy, you need to start from the specificity of that community. When trying to develop an event, you don't start by thinking that it will or might become a landmark event for Romanian culture. The event has to be a necessity. At the same time, in order for the event to grow, it must be in agreement with life and all its challenges, changes, major events and all details—something which can make all the difference. When you start from a necessity and something is born, that something is like a child that needs to grow and cope with all the challenges of growing up. It also feels the need to fulfil and develop itself, to become an entity and give birth to other structures. When the Sibiu International Theatre Festival became a mature structure, it began to develop reflexes and spawn other structures as a part of its development. This was true in the case of the Theatre and Cultural Management School from Sibiu, the Sibiu Performing Arts Open Market and Sibiu Theatre, a national theatre that began initiating numerous international projects first developed by the festival in collaboration with various partners, structures and associations. The same happened in the case of the European Capital of Culture programme, which grew out of the festival.*



*All these structures become entities which, in turn, begin to generate other entities. A movement based on the principle of communicating vessels is produced, bringing adjustment through which society and the community can fully express themselves and create a cultural agenda that affords benefits under the sign of quality. At a certain point, a festival like the Sibiu International Theatre Festival not only becomes a market leader and opinion shaper, but also a guarantee of change in the community and society: through its quality it influences the other structures it has created. These structures then give birth to other structures, and so on. Being based on quality, they serve to enhance the health of the community and provide a means of ensuring its development.*

*Of course, this cannot be achieved without a team, without specialists, without people that grow and respond to the challenge that each structure poses. A team which must build a dialogue with all the related structures and associations of structures in order that the most innovative trends from around the world are brought to the Sibiu International Theatre Festival.*

Constantin Chiriac

President, Sibiu International Theatre Festival

*International festivals, such that in Sibiu, mainly contribute to enhancing the visibility of European cultural diversity and creating a feeling of European identity. This festival, which is one of the most prestigious cultural events in Europe, unique in its own way in terms of its scope, has played a major role in the development of the region, especially after the city was awarded the status of European Capital of Culture in 2007. Apart from the benefits that year brought—for example, an increase in tourist activity of 14% over the previous year—this status made it possible for Sibiu to become even more attractive and better known across*



*Europe. Sibiu 2007 is the best example of the positive impact cultural events can have on European cities and their citizens.*

Androulla Vassiliou

European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth





*Using both words and images, we cover the most important trends in terms of cultural policy and artistic themes, while also providing an account of the ideas that have circulated and continue to circulate in the field, of landmark performances and the venues where they were staged, as well as of the Romanian actors, directors and writers who enjoyed most success among the public and critics.*