

On a historical scale, thirty years is not a long time, but on the scale of a human life it is a lot, accounting for at least a third, if not a half, depending on how much time each of us is allotted. It is only natural to want to look back, so as to know what road to take at the crossroads at which you have stopped for a moment or two, in order to replay the story of your life thus far. In this case, the story of Romanian theatre over the last 30 years.

This publication, the first of its kind to be specifically created for an international audience, is meant to provide a kaleidoscope of different perspectives on the theatrical landscape in Romania. The contributing authors are leading experts on Romanian theatre, they are people of vast experience who have witnessed the development of the national scene within an international context and who here offer a selection of succinct studies written from different perspectives, i.e. the way the theatre system operates (Marian Popescu); the evolution of Romanian playwrighting (Alina Nelega); the development of stage aesthetics (Oltița Cântec); the reimagining of performativity in relation to a constantly changing society (Oana Stoica); and the relationship of the “subject”, i.e. Romanian theatre, to European theatre (Mirella Patureau). The author of these lines also contributes to this endeavour by – apart from coming up with the concept of a kaleidoscope – orchestrating these different points of view and illustrating by means of a representative selection of archive images, as well as by providing the following brief overview of each decade of this thirty-year period and its defining features.

## 1. STOP & REWIND (return, recover, reconnect, remember)

For Romanian theatre, the 1990s began amid a tumultuous state of general confusion, something which of course reflected the state of Romanian society as a whole at the time and whose immediate effect was to empty the theatres, especially during the first two years of the decade. In the wake of this crisis, just like after the 1968 uprising, some actors went out into the streets to protest and to perform – with some even staying there, such as the founders of Masca Theatre, which went on to become the only company to produce street theatre in Romania.

Like a summer storm that threatens to destroy everything in its path but is over in



*The bald soprano, directed by Gabor Tompa, Cluj Hungarian Theatre, 1993*  
• photo: Courtesy of Hungarian Theatre in Cluj

a flash, despite all the thunder and lightning seen at its outset, this first decade passed without there being any structural change to the system or the mindsets of the people working in performing arts institutions.

Probably the best thing to happen during this period was the return to the country of some exceptional creators of theatre who had emigrated during previous decades and the consequent reconnection with their aesthetics, with new ways of working, with a broader horizon of ideas. Windows that had until then been nailed shut began to open (or at least some of them did) and the isolation began to recede, although it would still be a while before it ended completely. The first international tours, some of which highly prestigious, took place, and this saw a number of Romanian names establish themselves on the world’s stages, e.g. the directors Silviu Purcărete and Mihai Măniuțiu and the actors Marcel Iureș and Ion Caramitru. As to those who had previously emigrated, including Radu Penciulescu, Liviu Ciulei, Vlad Mugur, David Esrig, Lucian Giurchescu, Andrei Șerban and Alexander Hausvater, not only did they return to Romania, they also acted as an essential inspiration for the post-1989 generations and helped Romanian artists regain a place on the European stage where they rightfully belonged. Besides artists, another such example was that of George Banu, the eminent theatre critic who emigrated to France in 1974 and who has been an unwavering supporter of the theatre he left behind in choosing to save himself. Throughout the last three decades, George Banu has helped, supported and promoted Romanian theatre, facilitating essential exchanges with world theatre.

The 1990s also witnessed endeavours to revive Romanian playwrighting, such as in Târgu Mureș, where the author Alina Nelega coordinated three editions of the Dramafest festival, attempting to change the prevailing tradition of the playwright sitting in his (more than her) ivory tower writing philosophical plays never to be modified in direct collaboration with actors and directors. This initiative, while too short-lived, created fertile ground for the revival of Romanian playwrighting that would take place during the following decade.

## 2. PLAY (AGAIN)

The summer storm of the 1990s was followed by a period of adjustment and consolidation. Serving as a form of compensation, an obsession with directorial masterpieces, grand productions and grand directors with their equally grand visions would dominate the first half of the 2000s, leading not to a period of creative effervescence but, rather, one of stagnation through reconfirmation. However, the decade was marked by a minor revolution in playwrighting that would eventually prove unexpectedly fertile for Romanian theatre as a whole: the dramAcum playwrighting competition. Starting out as an isolated “avalanche” occurring within the confines of the drama school in Bucharest, the dramAcum phenomenon acted as a magnet for latent energy waiting to be expended to good effect and grew in direct proportion with the emergence of new generations of directors in search of scripts and actors in search of characters that spoke their language. New themes, ideas and subject matter called for new ways of working and aesthetic innovations, with the result that the productions of



Mihaela Drăgan in *Urban Body*, directed by Catinca Drăgănescu, Giuvlipen Company 2017 • photo: Ciprian Popa

contemporary (Romanian or translated) works created by the post-2002 generations (2002 being the year of the first edition of *dramAcum*) would gradually come to change the face of Romanian theatre, creating the conditions for a long overdue regeneration.

This avalanche of new realities – in terms of content and form – was complemented by increasing exchanges of productions and artists, who shared some of the experience of Western theatre, thus helping to bring about a necessary harmonisation in this respect.

Towards the end of the decade, before and immediately after the global financial crisis of 2008, this process of harmonisation was in full swing. For example, a single edition of the National Theatre Festival, i.e. that of 2010, brought together a host of big names on the international scene: Krzysztof Warlikowski, Romeo Castellucci, Rodrigo Garcia and Billy Cowie, not to mention the veterans Lee Breuer and Matthias Langhoff; while previous years had seen Thomas Ostermeier, Alvis Hermanis, Joël Pommerat and Jean-Luc Lagarce stage works in Romania for the first time, with the likes of Richard Schechner, Richard Foreman, Hans-Thies Lehmann, Michal Kobiłka and Aleks Sierz giving lectures. Moreover, the influence of international directors who staged plays in Romania, in particular Yuri Kordonsky, whose productions have formed part of Romanian theatre repertoires for decades, and Andrey Zholdak, a director known for his controversial working methods but also for the courage with which he radically reinterprets classic works, was felt throughout this decade, either as a continuation of the predominant, Stanislavskian aesthetic (Kordonsky), or in opposition to it (Zholdak).

Also during this second decade of the post-communist period, the theatre of Romania's minorities became more visible and recognised for its professionalism, especially the ethnic Hungarian theatre, spearheaded by the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj led with great vision since the early 1990s by the director of international repute Tompa Gabor, and the ethnic German theatre, with that in Timișoara later rising to the level of a European institution. Unfortunately, Romania's second ethnic minority numerically speaking, the

Roma minority, still does not have a theatre of its own, despite the independent feminist theatre company Giuvlipen, founded by the actor of Roma descent Mihaela Drăgan, having in recent years launched a public campaign for the founding of such an institution.

The handful of productions created by this company, as well as those created by another shining example of this ethnic minority, the actor Alina Șerban, have forged a sense of identity and are promising stepping stones on the path towards establishing a theatre that represents the Roma minority.

During this same period, the process began of regulating the situation of freelancers working in the performing arts, the number of whom is constantly increasing thanks to the creation of new state and private drama schools, resulting in a surplus of graduates the existing theatrical institutions are unable to absorb. A process that would unfortunately soon be cut short, when, around the middle of the following decade, a trend to bring under state control and heavily tax freelancers put a stop to any progress once and for all.

The institutional infrastructure inherited from the communist regime – which had made intensive use of the theatre for propaganda purposes and therefore took good care of its nationwide structure – was neither expanded nor even merely improved in the period after 1989, with the neglect of certain essential aspects, such as the creation of a legal framework in the field of culture, often seeing work in the cultural sector come to a grinding halt. However, in a country incapable even of upgrading its network of roads and motorways, the dysfunctions of its cultural institutions were and remain of secondary importance, especially as during the first two decades of this period Romania's artists proved incapable of organising themselves and lobbying on behalf of their profession, despite the positive image they still enjoyed. Fortunately, this would also change.

### 3. FAST FORWARD (reinvent, rebuild, regenerate)

Against this backdrop of chaotic growth and self-regulation, the third decade, at the end of which we find ourselves today, was marked by an explosion of the independent sector, which became an outlet for the surplus of talent.<sup>1</sup> Although the first independent

1. In 2013, the director and professor Theodor-Cristian Popescu, the founder of one of the first independent theatre companies in Romania, published his doctoral thesis entitled *Surplus de oameni sau surplus de idei. Pionierii mișcării independente în teatrul românesc post 1989* ("A Surplus of People or a Surplus of Ideas. The Pioneers of the Independent Movement in Romanian Theatre post-1989") (Eikon, 2013)

1 Post-revolution story  
Cristina Modreanu

4 30 Years of Theatre in Romania  
or the Price of Freedom  
Marian Popescu

9 From literary theatre to  
documentary theatre.  
The playwright and the  
dramatic author  
Alina Nelega

14 From ideologically driven  
theatre to the freedom of  
the transition period  
Olița Cîntec

18 Dance and performance in  
post-communist Romania  
Oana Stoica

22 Zoom out view of Romanian  
theatre after 1989  
Mirella Patureau

EUROPALIA  
ARTS FESTIVAL  
ROMANIA

INSTITUTUL  
CULTURAL  
ROMÂN

A journal published by  
Romanian Association for Performing Arts

arpas  
ASOCIAȚIA ROMÂNĂ  
PENTRU PROMOVAREA ARTELOR  
SPECTACULUI

A special issue of *Scena.ro*  
performing arts magazine

Scena.ro

www.revistascena.ro

Texts translated into english by  
Sammuel Onn

Cover I: *Solitaritaty* by Gianina Cărbunariu  
Photo: Angeliqne Surel

companies began to appear in the mid-1990s, they were few and far between, more the exception than the rule, and only two of these original companies still exist today: Teatrul Luni at Green Hours, founded by the cultural animator Voicu Rădescu; and Teatrul Act, founded by a group of theatre creators led by the Hollywood actor Marcel Iureş. Just as these two “veteran” independent companies were running out of steam at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a number of new groups sprang up, with or without permanent homes, but driven by a desire to make theatre despite the increasingly unfavourable conditions. They grew like plants in a jungle, with no legal framework to regulate and support their work, no reliable funding system to help them develop and no interest from potential sponsors who, in more developed societies, shoulder some of the responsibility for supporting the arts in the absence public subsidies.

Like Făt-Frumos, the Prince Charming of Romanian fairy-tales, the independent cultural sector in Romania “grew in the space of one year as much as others did in ten”, becoming, by the last decade of the period, the most creative area of Romanian theatre. Independent theatre is a hub of contemporary themes, ideas and characters, it is where new playwrights make their debuts and grow, it is a testing ground for new directorial ideas/ working methods and new means of building a public and staying in touch with it. Many of these “good practices” developed organically, out of necessity; the people in charge were chosen from within these young groups, while multitasking is the order of the day for all involved, otherwise they cannot survive.

In the absence of any research into this growth, thus far observed only empirically, especially given the constant comings and goings in the field, it is hard to say just how many artists and members of technical crews are currently employed in the independent sector. Worthy of mention, however, beside the two “veteran” independent theatres in Bucharest mentioned earlier, are those companies that have existed without interruption in various cities around the country, e.g. Auăleu in Timișoara, Teatrul 74 in Târgu Mureș, Teatru Fix in Iași, Reaktor de Creație și Experiment and the more recent Rondul de Noapte in Cluj, and unteatru, the Replika educational theatre centre, Godot, Teatrul de Artă, Apropo and Linotip (independent dance theatre company) in Bucharest, to name just a few, with some of these at the time of writing having existed for as long as 13 years (Auăleu), others just for a few months (Rondul de Noapte). The fluctuating state of what during the last decade has been an extremely creative and active sector is of no interest to the authorities, who ignore the fact that these companies are more judicious than they are in the use of the limited resources



Nicholas Catianis jr. in *Itineraries* directed by Eugen Jebeleanu  
• photo: Adi Bulboacă

they have at their disposal, that they are forced to survive on much smaller budgets than state theatres, and that they have managed to attract and build up a new public with a much lower average age than that of the state institutions and who show a real, i.e. not socially affected, attachment towards the material being performed. Romania, which is still led, 30 years later, by those who stole the Revolution of 1989, continues to be a “gerontophilic” country which looks more to the past than the future, which, alongside the endemic corruption it is struggling to eradicate, is holding back, or at least slowing down, its development in all areas, not only in the cultural sphere.

However, to end on a positive note, it must be said, despite all the obstacles and the lack of a stable operational framework, that, as William Gibson put it, the future is already here, it’s just not evenly distributed. The energy of the new generations of theatre creators is a force that is not to be underestimated, all the more so as in recent years it has been amplified by a growing sense of civic responsibility. Visible throughout Romanian society, which has been constantly engaged in protest actions since the tragedy that occurred at the Colectiv night club,<sup>2</sup> this is also increasingly felt in artistic circles.

This year, 2019, has seen an unprecedented

2. *Sixty-four people died and over 140 were hospitalised with serious injuries as a result of the fire that broke out at the Colectiv night club on 30 October 2015. The massive protests that followed led to the resignation of the Ponta government and the mayor of the sector of the city containing the club, which had been operating without a fire prevention permit from inside a former Bucharest factory. The fire was the worst accident in Romania since 1989.*

financial crisis engulf the cultural institutions of Romania, institutions which were already suffering from a lack of reform, both in terms of infrastructure and labour relations and in terms of the content being provided and their relationship with an increasingly heterogeneous and ever-changing public. The state theatres, run by artists with good reputations but in most cases no real managerial skills and an average age in excess of 65, increasingly appear to be behind times. Romania’s independent theatre companies are coming up strongly from behind, but they are competing in an unfair race, with weights tied around their feet. In these circumstances, systemic reform in the field of culture seems all the more imperative and looks like being inevitable. Perhaps it really does take 30 years for a revolution to truly happen.

*Cristina Modreanu is a theater critic and performing arts curator. She holds a PHD in theatre from the National University of Theater and Film “I.L. Caragiale” in Bucharest and she is the author of five books on Romanian Theatre. Modreanu is currently the editor of the Performing Arts Magazine Scena.ro which she co-founded in 2008, and a curator for theater and performance events, among which Bucharest International Theatre Platform.*

*Modreanu is also a Fulbright Alumna and she was Visiting Scholar at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Performance Studies Department. Her book “A history of Romanian theatre from communism to capitalism. Children of a restless time” is soon to be published by Routledge publishing house. [www.cristinamodreanu.com](http://www.cristinamodreanu.com)*

# 30 Years of Theatre in Romania or the Price of Freedom



*The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* by P. Zindel,  
directed by Cătălina Buzoianu, 1977  
• photo: Courtesy of Mic Theatre

I am writing these words in the summer of 2019 against a backdrop of government decisions with a toxic effect on many of those working in theatre, especially those employed only for the duration of the production and staging of a play. I am writing these words in full knowledge of the flaws that exist in the legal framework governing the work and status of theatre professionals and the status of artists in general in my country. I am writing these words 25 years after I co-organised the first protest by those working in theatre in Romania after the events of December 1989 in reaction to the bad decisions taken by central and local government.

I am a theatre critic, a teacher of theatre studies and a translator of British dramatic works. I have been following theatre since the end of the 1970s. I have been involved in or have led large theatre programmes and projects; in 1997 I spent six months at the head of the department for performing arts institutions within the Ministry of Culture; I helped build up a number of theatre festivals

and I have worked as an artistic consultant to two theatres. For the last few decades I have contributed to public debate about theatre and culture in general. I have written about these issues in articles and books. I will incorporate in this text some of the ideas contained in my published works,<sup>1</sup> but will first reflect on what has happened in Romanian theatre since 1989. Indeed, I will try to provide an overview of the development of the theatre as an institution and the way in which the central and local authorities have treated theatre and those who work there.

When the political regime changed in 1989, Romanian theatre was still being run according to a centralised, entirely subsidised system that was ideologically controlled by the central authority known as the Council of Socialist Education and Culture (CCES) and by local authorities through the cultural inspectorates, all of which were controlled by the local branches of the Communist Party. It was a system introduced by the Soviets after 1947. In time this would instil an instinct for subordination, a diminishing appetite for artistic independence and a reliance on state funding, something that would still appear to be the case today. In December 1989, Romania had 46 subsidised theatres (among which a handful in the Hungarian, German and Yiddish languages), six of which were national theatres; a single theatre magazine, issued monthly; and two university centres with theatre faculties, i.e. in Bucharest and Târgu Mureş. Up until that point the censorship had been twofold, targeting both the script and the performance. It was carried out by the staff of the CCES and the propaganda departments of the Party, both centrally and locally. Following the creation of the Councils of Working People within theatres, their approval also became obligatory. Also based on the imposed Soviet model, the only organisation representing people working in theatre and music was the ATM, which was made up of various specialist "sections" with the role of "controlling" artistic activity. The ATM was disbanded in February 1990, when a new organisation, UNITER (the Theatre Union

1. I will include certain passages, with a few changes made here and there, from my book *Scenele teatrului românesc 1945-2004. De la cenzură la libertate*, UNITEXT, 2004

of Romania) was founded. I didn't want to be a member of the ATM before 1989, but I did attend the meeting at which it was disbanded and UNITER was founded, being elected vice president of the new organisation. At the time, Romanian theatre was a repertory theatre; it lacked an experimental component (this had been wiped out by censorship) and did not have a single alternative, independent or underground company.

As we now know,<sup>2</sup> censorship in Romania was more brutal than anywhere else in the space that found itself under Soviet control between 1947 and 1965. After Ceauşescu came to power in 1965, and with the end of the ideological "thaw" in 1970, the mechanisms of censorship grew in complexity in order to meet the needs of the new cultural policy imposed by Ceauşescu and expressed through the infamous "July Theses" of 1971. Commissioned by Ceauşescu in order to bring the cultural sphere into line with the nationalist doctrine and the product of the Party propaganda machine and the Securitate, this political document also came about as a result of the moments of "inspiration" Ceauşescu experienced while on official visits to China (where he met Mao), North Korea (where he met Kim Il-sung), Vietnam and Mongolia. The "Theses" would, in the form of regulations, guidelines, imposed themes and the use of overly formulaic language, exert a stranglehold on both the legislative and thematic framework used to assess "quality" and the "responsibilities" of those working in the cultural field. This explains the relatively few acts of artistic dissidence to be found

2. I wrote the first study of censorship in Romanian theatre as part of a research project for the Dutch Theatre Institute in 1996. It was published in *The Dissident Muse: Critical Theatre in Eastern and Central Europe, 1945-1989: Report on the Symposium and the Weekend of Events, De Balie, 29 November-3 December 1995*, Dragan Klaić, Katarina Pejovic (eds.). See also the collection of documents published by Liviu Malița, *Cenzura în teatru. Documente. 1948-1989*, Cluj, Editura Fundației pentru Studii Europene, 2006, as well as his book, *Viața teatrală în și după comunism*, Efes, Cluj-Napoca, 2006. Miruna Runcan works on a research project about censorship and theatre criticism prior to 1989 and is also the author of the book *Modelul teatral românesc*, UNITEXT, Bucharest, 2000.

in Romanian theatre compared with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and even the USSR.

Thirty years on and the number of subsidised theatres has grown to more than 60; there are more independent,<sup>3</sup> private theatres and theatre companies (the first independent theatre, with its own performance space, was Teatrul ACT, founded in 1998), most being concentrated in Bucharest and Cluj-Napoca; and the number of theatre publications varies, with only two still in print (*Scena.ro* and the subsidised *TEATRUL azi*), although there are also a number of websites and blogs about the performing arts. The number of universities and theatre faculties has grown, whether as departments within humanities faculties or as faculties or universities in their own right. Today there are still only two dedicated universities (Bucharest and Târgu Mureş, the latter with a Hungarian-language faculty), three faculties (Cluj-Napoca, Iaşi and Timișoara) and a number of theatre studies departments within other faculties (Constanța, Galați, Craiova, Pitești and Sibiu). All of these are financed by the Ministry of Education. Two private universities, both in Bucharest, have also opened in the meantime, although their survival is now in doubt.

The development of university-level theatre studies programmes, in keeping with the recommendations of the Bologna Accord (1999), not only resulted in inflation, in particular in the number of acting graduates, but also a distortion in terms of the obligation to conduct research, publish articles and ultimately to obtain doctoral qualifications. Indeed, without obtaining a doctorate, directors, actors, stage designers, musicians and theoreticians are unable to enter the university system and thus train the next generation.

After 1989, the central authority when it came to culture, the CCES, was replaced by a ministry-type structure that would undergo numerous changes as a result of successive changes of government, being at various times called the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Culture and Religious Affairs, the Ministry of Culture and Heritage, and, as it is known today, the Ministry of Culture and National Identity. In the space of 30 years, there have been 25 different ministers of culture, some of their mandates lasting only a few months or at most a year. Only two completed the full, four-year term. In 1990, this central body

3. See the book by the director Theodor-Cristian Popescu, *Surplus de oameni sau surplus de idei. Pionierii mișcării independente în teatrul românesc post 1989*, Eikon, Cluj-Napoca, 2012.



Not your business, directed by Alexandru Dabija  
• photo: Courtesy of Act Theatre

contained a Directorate for the Performing Arts (today known as a "Service"). The number of theatre institutions subsidised from the state budget has fallen, especially after the rushed legislative measures introduced with a view to decentralisation: with the exception of the national theatres, all other theatres have been subordinated to and are funded by local authorities, with many finding themselves unprepared by this measure, first initiated in 1996 and then put into law in 2006 and, again, in 2017. Interestingly, in its first ever issue, published in 2009, *Scena.ro* magazine discussed the debate surrounding this issue, i.e. decentralisation, in terms of the consequences it would have for the national theatres.

#### Resistance to reform

An analysis of Romanian theatre over these 30 years, including the cultural policies affecting it, reflect not only the long transition, with few major positive effects, but also the resistance of the theatre as a whole to the idea of *reform*. While the creative spirit of many authors and players facilitated the development of the independent sector,<sup>4</sup> repertory theatre, the product of state-subsidised theatre, was now beginning, albeit with great difficulty, to get to know its publics. As a matter of fact, the big paradigm shift in Romanian theatre has been the recognition that there is not just one public, as the policy of the single party prior to 1989 would have had it.

4. See, in addition to the cited work by Theodor-Cristian Popescu, the works of Cristina Modreanu, *Casa dinăuntru, Cartea Românească, 2008*, and *Fluturile gladiator. Teatrul politic, queer și feminist pe scena românească, Curtea Veche, 2016*, as well as that by Iulia Popovici, *Un teatru la marginea drumului, Cartea românească, 2008*

For many theatre practitioners in Romania it is today difficult to accept that *theatre no longer holds the privileged position it enjoyed during communism*. For the first decade and a half after 1989, the whole of Romanian society found itself on board a dizzying carousel and undergoing a reorientation of its avenues of development. A complex, simulated process of dismantling the architecture of the communist centralised state – implying a hasty and "timid" review of the *past* – was being superimposed on another, equally complex, *spasmodic* process of Euro-Atlantic integration, involving a fleeting gaze towards the *future*. A lot has been written and said about how unprepared we are to undergo this virulent metamorphosis; about how *unreliable and lacking in tenacity* we are when it comes to putting into effect the significant act and effort of envisioning a different future.

Theatre, as a public experience of communication, is also subject to this centrifugal force, which often robs you of reference points. If during the communist period its role and place was firmly fixed on a scale with regulated values and the position of the artist was afforded the attention worthy of a means of propaganda or influence, then, after 1989, this *attention* was to disappear. The artist became a *marginal figure*, and only through an oriental form of lobbying or Byzantine, occult practices would he or she manage, every now and then, once more to become the centre of attention. While before 1989 the artist's relationship with the public was not considered vital, given that theatre was one of the very few permitted ways of spending free time, today it is becoming so, because it poses a threat to the very means of asserting one's artistic creativity and expressivity. The forced, uniformising stability, guaranteed



Florin Piersic jr. in *Every brilliant thing* by Duncan Macmillan, directed by Horia Suru  
 • photo: Narcis-Pop

politically prior to 1989, was rapidly replaced by a sense of *generalised uncertainty* that was also politically generated. Actor X is no longer placed at the centre of the local community and today becomes more difficult to integrate into the nucleus of public space. The public has diversified its participation in social and political or civic spheres, and its concern for living conditions and social and professional success are far more acute, more stringent. The cost of these preoccupations are greater than they were prior to 1989, and going to the theatre, as we know, is today *just one of many available options*.

This may explain the desperation, anxiety and vehement reaction of part of the world of theatre, which, as was often the case, demands official recognition of the excellence of their art through laws, central or local government decisions, privileges, greater subsidies, etc. The seemingly never-ending cavalcade of awards of all kinds and at every possible level is characteristic of this desperation, this anxiety. Politics plays a role here, too, for, just like before 1989, essentially following the same script, attracting big names from the sphere of art and culture into its orbit is a means of *legitimation* for both the Power and the Opposition. However, very few artists have made names for themselves in the civic, rather than political sphere. There are more who want or allow themselves to be enlisted in various different political parties. Or who prefer to dedicate themselves only to their profession. Very few theatre professionals are in a position to put forward management plans that would eliminate the status and salary-related dysfunctions that exist in the world of theatre.

### The Artist and Authority

The time elapsed between 1989 and the present day can easily be labelled a *transition*, but it can also be described as the start of a change in the relationship between the Artist and Authority. After the abolition of censorship and the mechanisms of the political and ideological apparatus used to enforce it, the position of the theatre in all of the countries of eastern Europe began to change. This is only natural, but at the same time it is a process whose consequences are still difficult to assess. A generic characteristic of theatre as an institution of the countries of the former "Soviet bloc" is the existence of a single theatre network made up of a chain of "state" theatres funded variously from the state budget, with repertoires being approved based on a formula that changed depending on the current ideological construct of the single party. If for some in the West this represented an anomaly from the point of view of the market economy, for others it became the focus of nostalgic admiration: the certainty of funding for the theatre, without which it would face serious difficulties.

While it is generally true that with the transition to democracy and a market economy the level of state funding for the arts has fallen considerably in the former communist states, this "retreat" of the state has been accompanied by other phenomena that call into question, whether in a more emphatic or more veiled manner, the very role of the state itself vis-à-vis national culture. There have been very few coherent efforts in Romania to rethink the role of the state in this respect within the new, post-1989 context. Beyond the many

contacts, meetings, exchanges and official reports aimed at facilitating the transfer of know-how from West to East, beyond Romania's acceptance into the European Union in 2007, it is clear, in the absence of a strategy of cultural development, that the efforts of the public authorities have focused more on sharing out the ineluctably limited resources in such a way that the traditional cultural subdivisions – literature, theatre, music, film, the fine arts – receive a relatively acceptable level of financial support. However pleasant, important or interesting it may or may not be, the managing of these efforts reflects the current political configuration and the development of a democratic society, whose operational representation is to be found in the political agenda of the day.

The performing arts, and theatre in particular, are still battling against the uniformisation practiced under the old regime in terms of treating the public as a single entity. Barricaded behind an outdated concept of repertoire, many theatres do not develop artistic profiles tailored to a particular public. In general, the idea of culture presupposes – precisely because cultural institutions are subsidised from the public purse – the implementation of an artistic strategy in which the cultural offer both reflects a real knowledge of one's audience and serves as a showcase for artistic creativity: from the modern interpretation of classic works to experimentation and approaches that heavily favour creative expression, everything is able to contribute to the artistic profile. The provision of educational programmes in theatrical institutions, for example, was extremely rare during the first decade and a half following 1989, and the fostering of deeper relations between arts and culture and distinct audiences, as well as the construction of an institution's image based around its cultural offer, have been stifled by the dependence on government subsidy.

Things began to change after 2000, when groups of young theatre directors, playwrights, curators and specialists in sound design, lighting and multimedia began to emerge. They stood up to the theatre establishment, they cut their own path in the performing arts, often generating debate around the conflict between different generations. The most significant example is that of the dramAcum group (2002), which promoted a new kind of relationship between the director and the writing of a text intended for the stage. The productions of the group's founding members, who included both male and female directors (Andreea Vălean, Gianina Cărbunariu, Radu Apostol and Alexandru Berceanu), would

gradually bring innovation to Romanian theatre. They were joined, among others, by Alexandra Badea, Vera Ion, Ștefan Peca, Gabriel Pintilei, Mihaela Michailov and Ana Mărgineanu. The critical voices writing, publicly intervening and working to bring about change and a stop to the bad things going on in the world of Romanian theatre and in relationship between the State/ Authority and the Theatre included people from different generations, from the older (e.g. Miruna Runcan and Marian Popescu) to the younger (e.g. Cristina Modreanu and Iulia Popovici) generations. Actors from older generations (e.g. Victor Rebengiuc and Oana Pellea), as well as those from younger generations (e.g. Marius Manole), also made public interventions. Directors, on the other hand, were the least vocal in the public debate.

It has been clear for a number of years now that the tension existing between the adoption of French-inspired structures in keeping with the cultural tradition of the previous century, something visible in the development of the idea of repertory theatre, and the more recent exposure to British practice is equally to be found in the state of the theatre as an institution with respect to state funding during the first two decades of the post-1989 period. As a consequence of the system that existed prior to 1989, subsidies would cover 95% of the total costs of a theatrical institution until towards the end of the 1990s, when a slight decrease was observed. As of 1997, the subsidies awarded to theatres were used primarily for salaries, to the detriment of the production and promotion, etc. of plays. This remains the great problem facing Romanian theatres today, which, by delaying or refusing structural change that should have been carried out at government level, find themselves faced with the prospect of stagnation and the impossibility of development. Or with the inefficient spending of their subsidies.

The election year of 1996 also coincided with an increasing preoccupation among international (European, to be precise) cultural bodies with the status of the artist and the condition of art and culture in the context of a generalised attack by the means of producing information. What we are experiencing today might also be described by saying that information about culture is under fierce competition from the culture of information. A report of the European Council of Artists<sup>5</sup> began by identifying the

5. *Arts and Mass Media, Report of the European Council of Artists, Aarhus, Denmark, September 1996*



*Istvan Teglás in Plastic by Marius von Mayenburg, directed by Theodor Cristian Popescu*  
 • photo: Courtesy of ARCURB

great danger posed by the proliferation of new audio-visual technologies to the creation and reception of art and of culture in general. The threat is reflected by the absorption of culture and the arts by industry and business to such an extent that the imagination, as an essential component of spiritual development, is being expelled from its original environment, i.e. cultural and artistic production, artists and cultural figures, so as to become the prerogative of a mode of production tailored to business and marketing requirements. In a nutshell, the sphere of culture, of art, and of the performing arts in particular, is being shaped by the direction of economic development. However, in terms of the theatrical output of the new generation that emerged after 2000, these new technologies are not only used intensely and experimentally, they also demonstrate a desire to change the nature of the act of reception. Many young creators and performers wishing to work outside of the subsidised system find themselves faced less with the “fear” of the new technologies (far from it, in fact), and more with significant economic and financial constraints. Even today, in 2019, to put on an independent production is a highly stressful endeavour.

**The dangers of the ghetto mentality**

After 1989, and up until the end of the 1990s, Romanian theatre showed a lot of interest in the West and less in the East. I was often able to note the neglecting of great examples of Central and Eastern European dramatic literature. The repertoire of Romanian theatres faithfully mirrors the limits to their

repertorial experimentation, both in terms of Western and Eastern plays. There are some exceptions, of course. What I mean to say is that circumstance played an essential role in the choice of repertoire. Things would change, especially after 2000, when concerted efforts were made to stage new plays, dating from the 1990s, at the independent ACT theatre, the Odeon and a handful of other subsidised theatres. The efforts of translators, who, like Victor Scoradeț and Carmen Vioreanu, introduced new types of plays, invigorated the theatre scene, as did the efforts of the young directors, who tried out authors and dramas less frequently staged in Romania.

Despite greater access to specialist information, the ghetto mentality is still felt in the world of the performing arts. Material difficulties and the uncertainty surrounding the funding of the arts in general, a lack of proper management, the state of indecision and confusion created by the unstable legal framework, and the state of higher education in the arts, in which change and restructuring of the curriculum and study opportunities were still taboo subjects, have at last – ten years after 1989 and even if in a haphazard manner – begun to bring about the dismantling of the theatre system as it existed prior to 1989. However, no new vision has emerged in terms of how repertory theatre should function in Romania today.

After 1989, a wave of younger generations of directors, playwrights, curators and actors would champion new ways of doing theatre and introduce new subject matter beyond the conservative approaches of many repertory theatres. The Seeding a Network programme, the Romanian segment of which I coordinated via UNITER for four years between 1991 and 1995 and in partnership with the LIFT Festival in London and the Royal National Theatre, was the first organised attempt to bring about change, through a job shadowing scheme, in the habits of Romanian theatre practitioners, as well to provide an opportunity to partners in the West to see for themselves the potential and expressive power of Romanian theatre. Personal contacts and a commuting between East and West then began to bear fruit, and the young Romanian theatre practitioners, who were much better adapted to digital culture, especially after 2000, and who also had a different approach to creating theatre, began to plant the seeds of change within the new Romanian theatre. Many founded independent companies, staging productions that created a new public, such that today, in Bucharest and Cluj, in particular, one can see performances whose forms and structures come from a



*Solitaritay* by Gianina Cărbunariu • photo: Dragoș Dumitru, courtesy of TNRS



*Reactor* • photo: Courtesy of Oana Mardare

### Thirty years on: what is the state of Romanian theatre today?

In brief: the ideological and propagandistic censorship of old has disappeared; the number of theatrical institutions has increased, experimental theatre has emerged, independent theatre companies have appeared, the tension between subsidised theatre (which ensures the survival of the theatrical establishment) and new directions, both artistically speaking and in terms of a rethinking of the way theatre is financed and its social status, has become more acute; the number of higher education institutions in the field of theatre has grown disproportionately, causing inflation on the job market; the politicisation of leadership positions in theatrical institutions is on the rise, with destructive consequences for the theatre community; the legal framework is unclear and unstable and fails to ensure that the positions and employment relations in theatrical institutions accurately reflect the way a performance is produced today; the social protections available to those employed on fixed-term employment contracts, the "collaborators" (in France, "les intermittents du spectacle"), is currently very limited; the allocation of funds and their disbursement for use in theatre projects is subject to political control and, on occasions, incompetence; new generations of theatre creators and performers are finding it difficult to break through due to the political environment and the lack of a reformist vision in the cultural sphere, often having to overcome various problems such as the lack of working spaces (something true not only of theatre, but also of dance) and the shortcomings of the legal framework in terms of securing funding for their work, as well as the fierce competition

different world than that of repertory theatre. Many, including an increasing number of female directors and playwrights, were now challenging the resistance to change of the theatrical establishment, the rigidity or short-sightedness of the state funding system for institutions in general, as well as of projects and programmes in the world of theatre.

Another factor that also played an active role in the breaking down of the ghetto mentality was that of theatre festivals. Before 1989, the number of festivals reached 16, being held in different cities, especially those with existing theatres. After 1989, their number fell sharply, until around the period 2000-2004, when many were revived. Through its director, Constantin Chiriac, the Sibiu International Theatre Festival became a giant showcase for the latest trends in the performing arts, while the National Theatre Festival diversified, becoming more adventurous under the directorship of Cristina Modreanu and more thematic under Marina Constantinescu. At the same time, important festivals with specific profiles are attracting large audiences in Cluj, Oradea and other cities.

coming from the entertainment industry; there has been a breaking up of the single, monolithic public and the emergence of new theatre *publics*; state subsidies continue to be used for the funding of *institutions*, with far less going towards the funding of *artists* and their *work*; in terms of representative bodies in the world of theatre, the single model, dating from before 1989, still dominates (see UNITER, the Theatre Union of Romania, which officially attracts funding, has had the same president for 30 years and represents a certain proportion of theatre professionals in their relations with Authority), despite the emergence of various other bodies, such as ARPAS (the Romanian Association for the Promotion of the Performing Arts); the difficulty of correctly establishing the position of the theatre, and the performing arts in general, in relation to Authority has persisted throughout this period, despite various efforts made to clarify the situation over the years.

Freedom of expression, discovered in Romania after 1989, comes at a price in a democracy, a price that Romanian theatre often finds it hard to pay. But it has also led to the emergence of a number of remarkable young talents.

*Marian Popescu teaches at the University of Bucharest, he has been writing about theatre and culture since the end of the 1970s, he is the author of seven books about theatre and culture, he is an independent expert in the fields of the performing arts, cultural policy and literature, a translator of English-language drama and a co-founder of UNITER and its first executive vice-president, a role in which he proposed the creation of the first theatrical publishing house after 1989, UNITEXT, the first independent theatre, Inoportun Theatre, and the Play of the Year award for playwrighting. He supervises doctoral theses in the field of Theatre and the Performing Arts at the Faculty of Theatre and Film in Cluj-Napoca. He is currently a member of the Scientific Committee of the IRAFPA (Institut de Recherche et Action pour la Fraude et Plagiat Académiques, Genève), he heads the CARFIA (Centre for Academic Integrity at the University of Bucharest) and is working on a research project about Voice in public space.*  
[www.marianpopescu.arts.ro](http://www.marianpopescu.arts.ro)  
[profmp2001@yahoo.com](mailto:profmp2001@yahoo.com)  
[www.carfia.unibuc.ro](http://www.carfia.unibuc.ro)

# From literary theatre to documentary theatre. The playwright and the dramatic author

Alina NELEGA

9

## 1. In search of lost time

After the fall of Ceaușescu, not only the Romanian world but also the international community waited with bated breath for the masterpieces censored by the communist regime to resurface. Paradoxically, however, the Romanians began the new era with a pause. The handful of directors exiled in Europe and the United States came back to stage new versions of productions which had earned them fame in the free world of the 1970s and 80s. With playwrights the process of recovery was no different: the post-absurd plays of Matei Vișniec, the poet and playwright living in Paris, were staged continuously in the period 1990-1995. At least one work by Vișniec, usually *Old Clown Wanted*, could be found on the bill of each of the almost 50 repertory theatres that existed at the time. Unexpectedly, the miracle occurred: Purcărete's *Ubu roi* saved the face of Romanian theatre and gave Caesar (read the West) his due (read the Masterpiece). A similar miracle was attempted in playwriting (with a play by Alina Mungiu, a political analyst, or that by Vlad Zografi, a dissident physicist), albeit without success.

As theatre always reflects the social and political structure that generates it, in Romania theatre operated according to a paternalistic model in which the author of the play was the dictator director, who held absolute power over all the components of the production, from the acting to the script. Therefore, despite disingenuous calls to write for the stage, in the absence of an environment favourable to playwrights, new works were slow to appear. For, in practice, as a dramatic author you had only one of two options: to add to the thousands of pages published without being performed, or to become the servant of a director with the freedom to impose his "theatrical reading" not only on the play itself, but also on the great works of literature, whether written for the stage or not, in the spirit of what, a few years later, Hans-Thies Lehmann would call "post-dramatic theatre". Theoretically at least, there was also a third option: to win a playwrighting competition. Only that, even the UNITER Play of the Year competition also had a literary goal: the publication of the winning script. In brief, there was no programme designed to encourage or finance the production of new texts. And there was no real interest from directors either. The fault, all were agreed, lay with the playwrights. But the fact was that what new texts needed was a different kind of director, a

new generation whose time would only come at the onset of the third millennium together with the wave of independent theatres that would change the face of Romanian theatre, becoming its most dynamic, provocative and innovative component. And, to a great extent, this was thanks to the inclusion of new texts.

A historical argument demonstrating the link between new playwriting and independent theatre is given by the existence of a handful of initiatives that changed the approach to the writing of new texts for the theatre and which developed out of alternative, niche environments and with a minimum of funding.

## 2. Dramafest (1996)

The philosophy of Dramafest was simple: to write about things that affect us and concern us, to introduce the idea of the workshop to the process of creating a text and to take responsibility for the production of a text, being present at every stage of the process. The programme received more international<sup>1</sup> than local funding and was based – naively – on a placing of trust in repertory theatres and directors. Aware that the majority of the new Romanian plays being staged in theatres were the sub-products of clientelist relations, Dramafest launched a festival in Târgu Mureș, hosted by the city's National Theatre, which promoted a selection of new plays and had a jury made up of directors from the theatres in question and who would themselves be staging the plays. The plays were performed in parallel with various talks and discussions involving international panellists (the Royal Court Theatre, Paines Plough, the SACD, the Theatre Instituut Amsterdam, the Open Society Institute Budapest, the Ivan Vazov Theatre, Bulgaria, etc.), which highlighted the importance of producing new theatrical texts.

From the very beginning, Dramafest served as a launchpad for an important author, Andreea Vălean, a sociologist and student of directing, and her play, *Eu când vreau să fluier, fluier* ("If I Want to Whistle, I Whistle"), which was almost immediately selected at the Bonn Biennale, at the time the most important festival for new plays in Europe. Authors such as Saviana Stănescu (today a well-known Romanian-born American playwright), Ștefan Caraman (a novelist, playwright and bank manager, who

1. *The Soros Foundation, the Pro Helvetia Foundation, the Goethe Institut, European Union cooperation funds, the British Council, etc.*



*Ubu Rex*, directed by Silviu Purcărete, TN Craiova, 1992  
• photo: Mihail Raul Pîrîianu

continues to switch between these three roles today), Vlad Zografi (a physicist and translator and today a novelist more than a dramatic author) and Dumitru Crudu (a poet and prose writer, actor and playwright from the Republic of Moldova whose works are still staged and published today) developed under the Dramafest umbrella and by participating in the workshops given by the Royal Court and in play readings held during the festival. They were joined by directors such as Theodor Cristian Popescu, the architect of Andreea Vălean's success story, and Radu Afrim, who at the time was just embarking on his directing career.

Despite its success, Dramafest ceased to exist as a festival as of 2000, after three consecutive editions, when the partnership between an NGO and a national theatre proved to be dysfunctional, suffocating and loss-making.

## 3. dramAcum (2000)

The idea of adopting a different approach to writing for the stage, however, remained highly topical and, naturally, was adopted and developed further by another project initiated by the aforementioned star, the director and playwright Andreea Vălean, together with other



Ada Navrot and Mihai Calin in *What shall we do with the cello*  
by Matei Vișniec, directed by Vasile Nedelcu  
• photo: Monday theatre archive

students of directing, encouraged by their tutor, the director Nicolae Mandea, under the umbrella of the theatre school in Bucharest. Also based on the model of selection, readings of new texts were held which began to draw spectators of the same generation, thus also proving attractive for the repertory theatres, which by the end of the 1990s had lost a large part of their audiences, in particular their young audiences. Alongside new Romanian plays and the new names proposed and promoted by dramAcum, a group of directors imposed their strategy on the Romanian theatre market, introducing new international plays to theatre repertoires and drawing on links with Serbian, Bulgarian and Russian playwrights and similar projects in the region, such as NADA and the Lubimovka Young Russian Playwright Festival. Their diversity played an important role in expanding and educating the tastes of younger audiences.

#### 4. Readings at ACT. Teatrul Luni at Green Hours

During the same period, i.e. at the start of the new millennium, with the support of the Goethe Institut, the critic and translator Victor Scoradeț organised a series of readings of new German plays at Bucharest's first private theatre, ACT Theatre. The readings were followed by discussions in which the audience, especially its younger members, participated. The persistence with which this programme was supported over the space of almost two years led to the creation of a "public which listens", which is aware of the fact that new plays not only require a visual representation, they also need to be listened to. Alongside ACT, less than one hundred metres down Calea Victoriei was the underground jazz club Green Hours, whose owner at the time, Voicu Rădescu, an art lover and patron of the arts, founded one of the most fashionable places to stage new plays: Teatrul Luni. The wealth of new plays staged with minimal resources for a maximum of 40 spectators soon gave rise to a number of remarkable productions that travelled to important theatre festivals,

from the Dublin Fringe Festival to the Bonn Biennale and the New York Fringe Festival.

The success enjoyed at ACT and Green Hours also encouraged other Bucharest theatres to take the risk of using their studio spaces or creating similar such spaces for the staging of new works. Teatrul Foarte Mic, Teatrul Mic and the Odeon were the first theatres to show such openness, with the Odeon also launching a weekly programme of play readings, mostly translations of works by new European and American authors.

The newly-developed taste for a theatre that spoke more directly to its public led to the creation of a new generation of urban and cosmopolitan playwrights who created an indigenous form of in-her-face theatre and enjoyed success among the so-called xennial and millennial generations. Almost all of them are also directors, or at least they don't shy away from directing their own plays. This phenomenon is illustrated by the likes of Ștefan Peca and Gianina Cărbunariu, who refer to themselves as "authors".

#### 5. The dramatic author

The case of the director-playwright Gianina Cărbunariu deserves special attention. Within a short space of time, and after some brief flirtations with literature, she found herself at the forefront of her generation with *Stop the Tempo!*, produced at Teatrul Luni at Green Hours. Soon afterwards, *mady-baby.edu* (later circulating in published form and in other stagings under the title of *Kebab*) was produced by Teatrul Foarte Mic. The latter play spoke openly and directly about juvenile prostitution and labour emigration and enjoyed immediate international success. The same was true of Gianina Cărbunariu's following plays, based on her own scripts, in which she highlighted and criticised everyday realities, regardless of whether she was working in Romania or internationally, with her also being the most independent and most international of her generation.

It was also Cărbunariu who, in a committed and direct way, introduced to Romanian theatre the tools of documentary theatre, whether in addressing Romanian-Hungarian tensions as in *20/20*, or the sale of ethnic Germans from Transylvania during communism, as in *Sold Out* (which premiered at the Munich Kammerspiele), or whether investigating the lustration that never happened in Romania, as in *x mm din y km* ("X mm from Y km"), or in *Tipografic majuscul* ("Uppercase Typography"). Inevitably and naturally, her subjects are of the left, her direct style at times reaching inflammatory, highly provocative levels à la Clifford Odets, as in *Oameni obișnuiți* ("Common People") on the theme of whistleblowers. But Cărbunariu also adapts her approach according to the type

of investigation or research in question. At times ironic, as in the mockumentary *Tigrul sibiian* ("The Tiger of Sibiu"), other times minimalistic, as in *Solitaritate* ("Solitarity"). After having worked in independent theatre for almost ten years without giving up her international projects, Cărbunariu took the risk of becoming manager of the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț, thus becoming part of the system but bringing with her a strategy that did not seek to attack, but rather to re-energise this legendary theatre and the festival of the same name. As director of the theatre, Cărbunariu generously promotes younger playwrights and directors at the forefront of the new wave: Elise Wilk, Eugen Jebeleanu, David Schwartz, Mariana Cămărășan, etc.

Another important name launched at dramAcum is that of Bogdan Georgescu, who is also an author and director and who works in the same field of documenting topical subjects, while also being actively socially engaged. His first production, co-directed with David Schwarz at the National Theatre in Iași while he was a student, *România, te pup!* ("Romania. Kiss Me!") is much more incisive than the discourse of any other member of his generation. His leaning towards community theatre and active art resulted in two major projects: *TangaProject* and *Ofensiva Generozității* ("Attack of Generosity"). His way of working, combining documentation with devised theatre, his direct referencing of reality and substitution of theatricality with the ludic are common features of the other productions in which Georgescu explores social themes: school education, in *Antisocial*; homophobia, in *ROGVAIV*; and the families of those gone to work abroad, in *Punct triplu* ("Triple Point").

Like Bogdan Georgescu, Mihaela Michailov also developed a discourse that is left-leaning, militant and especially critical of Romanian social realities. She is not a director, but rather comes from the field of philology and theatre criticism. The subject matter of her plays deals with the abuses and manipulation of the authorities, the distortion of history (*Capete înfierbântate!* "Hot-Headed", 2010), oppression, the education system in Romania (*Copii răi!* "Bad Kids", 2010) and violence in schools. Again like Bogdan Georgescu, she enjoys an international career, but, unlike the other dramAcum playwrights, Mihaela Michailov does not shy away from repertory theatre, with her first important play, *Complexul România* ("The Romania Complex") winning the UNITER Play of the Year Award and subsequently being staged at the National Theatre in Bucharest. She has happily worked with repertory theatres, curating festivals and sitting on juries, but her collaborations with the subsidised sector gradually began to wane before she fully dedicated herself to independent theatre through her projects with activist directors:

Radu Apostol, with whom she created the projects for the Replika Centre for Educational Theatre; and David Schwarz, who is himself a dramatic author. Radu Apostol frequently works with another very special playwright, Ștefan Peca, whose natural talent for writing was nurtured by the playwriting studies he pursued in New York. After a while spent trying to break through onto the Romanian stage by submitting scripts to competitions or directly to theatres, outraging those who read his works with his brutal language, full of invective and expressly intended to provoke the potential spectator (*Ziua futută a lui Nils*/"Nils' Fucked-Up Day"), he honed his technique, paid more attention to structure and polished his plays, which thus acquired a shine and originality. The works of Ștefan Peca, who also has musical leanings (he sometimes also works as a DJ), were staged at Teatrul Luni and then at Teatrul Mic, where, together with Ana Mărgineanu, he created the production *Anul dispărut 1989* ("The Missing Year: 1989"), the first part of the "trilogy of missing years" in which the two artists attempt a symbolic recovery of our recent history. The second production, *Anul dispărut 1996* ("The Missing Year: 1996"), was staged by the same authors at the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț; while the third, *Anul dispărut 2007* ("The Missing Year: 2007"), was staged in November 2017, again at Teatrul Mic in Bucharest. Also drawing on interviews and fictionalisations through performance, implying spectator-involvement within the performance space and with the actors, Peca's texts follow in the same direction embarked upon by Cărbunariu and Georgescu, i.e. that of docufiction and the enhanced performativity of the staging concept.

For Maria Manolescu, a theatre directing graduate (although she does not practice this trade), a novelist and copywriter, 2007 was also an important year. *With a Little Help from My Friends* was staged with much success by Radu Apostol at the National Theatre in Iași, while, again in 2007, *Sado-Maso Blues Bar*, directed by Gianina Cărbunariu, filled the seats at Teatrul Mic. Manolescu still writes today, with her most recent play, *Micul nostru centenar* ("Our Little Centenary"), having its premiere at the Reactor centre in Cluj-Napoca in 2018.

Another playwright less concerned with critiquing social realities and yet without ignoring them is Gabriel Pintilei, an actor at the Odeon Theatre. His first play, *Elevator* (2004), designed as an experiment based on the idea of two youths being locked into a closed space, was staged in over 10 different theatres around Romania, as well as internationally, while also being adapted for film. Another of his plays, *Blifat*, was staged successfully at the Odeon Theatre. Pintilei also writes scripts for children, short stories and novellas.

Noting the success of dramAcum, mainstream theatres also began to demonstrate an interest



In the air by Alexandra Pazgu, TNT • photo: Adrian Picișan

for new drama. The Romanian Drama Festival in Timișoara duly reinvented itself, giving priority to new works (with Mihaela Mihailov for a while even being responsible for selecting the plays). This brings us to around 2007, a year marked by Romania's entry into the European Union and a considerable growth in cultural networking and international interest for new Romanian plays. Not to mention the introduction of dedicated lines of cultural funding (from local and central government) for the independent sector.

## 6. Those who walk alone<sup>2</sup>

The dramAcum playwrights belong to the European brutalist trend, specifically producing plays with themes based around family relations, adolescent depression and the tragic cynicism of the downtrodden human being. There is, however, a handful of other authors – less radical, but with clear voices – who are worthy of mention. To a greater or lesser extent, they are the children of absurd theatre.

Mihai Ignat, a poet and playwright, writes intelligent comedies in a post-absurd manner. *Crize* ("Crises"), initially written for radio and winner of a BBC award, was extensively performed on the stage. Ignat is a prolific playwright and a winner of the UNITER Play of the Year Award in 2007. However, none of his subsequent plays achieved the same level of stylisation and dramatism as *Crize*.

Of those playwrights who already tasted success in the 1990s, we should also mention Radu Macrinici, whose plays on words, while creative and sarcastic, are nonetheless literary (*TȚara mea*/"My Country", *A! frical*, etc.). Twice a winner of the Play of the Year Award, Macrinici is an erudite and intellectual playwright who

2. *Although exemplary and successful, I have not included here authors such as Nicoleta Esinencu, an exceptional writer from the Republic of Moldova, and Alexandra Badea, a disciple of Vișniec, albeit different in style and manner, and adopted by the same French culture and writing in French. While they do not belong on the map of indigenous Romanian playwrights, they nonetheless are worthy of separate detailed studies.*

was well received during cultural exchanges by the French public, who are more familiar with this kind of literature for the stage.

Another interesting case is that of Vlad Zograf, the physicist who made an explosive and brilliant debut on the Romanian theatre scene. Hailed as his much-awaited masterpiece, *Petru sau petele din soare* ("Peter or the Sun Spots") is an ambitious, beautifully written, almost realist play about cultural differences between the East and the West and it was immediately staged by an important director of the 1970s generation: Cătălina Buzoianu. This was followed by a few other works in the post-absurd style that never made it to the stage.

We can place Petre Barbu somewhere between the two aforementioned playwrights. Although a two-time winner of the Play of the Year Award, his works are rarely staged, being more frequently aired on radio, while the subject matter of his plays, although rooted in everyday life, is treated analytically, in a literary manner. With a diverse range of interests, Barbu is a complex intellectual, novelist and journalist.

Another important voice of the 1990s is that of Saviana Stănescu. Her experimental discourse was "exploited" by Radu Afrim as staging material for an underground production in Târgu-Mureș (*Infanta. Mod de întrebuințare*/"Infanta. Users' Guide"). Stănescu then wrote a minor dramatic gem, *Numărătoare inversă* ("Final Countdown"), and won the Play of the Year award for *Apocalipsa gonflabilă* ("The Inflatable Apocalypse"). Another of her works, *Proscrisa* ("The Outcast"), did not make it to the stage, although attempts were made to work with a director/choreographer. But then, in the early 1990s, dance theatre and performance theatre were still unfamiliar genres in Romania, so the opportunity to stage an extraordinarily powerful script was missed. Saviana Stănescu subsequently went to New York, making a name for herself as a playwright in the United States and, surprisingly, less so at home. Romanian theatre had already become addicted to the shock factor, heavy subject matter and radical approaches; dramAcum was doing an impeccable job.

The path abandoned by Stănescu, albeit much later, in the early 2010s, was taken up by Alexandra Pâzgu, whose processual writing attracted directors who, however, were still not prepared to abandon plot and character in order to bring the flowing nature of her works to the stage. After winning a handful of awards in Romania, albeit unaccompanied by productions that brought the most out of her texts, Pâzgu enjoyed more success in the German-speaking world, with her plays being staged in Vienna and Leipzig. Her projects today include dramaturgy for dance and performance.

## 7. Where are our playwrights?

In the 1990s, playwriting workshops were extremely unpopular, as was the idea that playwrights, like actors and directors, could be trained to achieve. It took almost 20 years for a master's course in playwriting to be launched at the National University of Theatrical Arts and Cinematography (UNATC) in Bucharest, thus belatedly officialising the profession of playwright, although it still does not feature on the COR.<sup>3</sup> The *Dramaturgia cotidianului* ("The Theatre of Everyday Life") project was then launched in Cluj as part of the master's in theatre studies programme coordinated by theoretician and playwright Cristian Buricea-Mlinarcic and the writer and theatrologist Miruna Runcan. One programme that grows with each year that passes is that of the playwriting residency initiated by the Reactor de Creație și Experiment centre in Cluj, in which new writing is just as important to a production as the directing or acting.

For ten years now the University of Arts in Târgu Mureș has been offering a masters in playwriting. The curriculum of this course includes exchanges and workshops with international groups with experience in producing new texts, e.g. the Lark Play Development Center from New York and international playwrights from the European Fabulamundi. Playwriting Europe programme.<sup>4</sup>

The masters programme in Târgu Mureș has proved highly productive, serving as a launch pad for playwrights such as Alexandra Pâzgu, Elise Wilk, Ioan Peter, Mariana Starciuc, Olga Macrinici, Daniel Oltean and Gabriel Sandu. One particularly notable graduate of the Hungarian language master's course is Székely Csaba, a much-loved playwright in Romanian theatre.

3. *Code of Occupations in Romania.*

4. *Fabulamundi. Playwriting Europe is a European cooperation project among theatres, festivals and cultural organisations. The network aims to create areas of interest in European cultural space in order to support and promote contemporary playwriting. It brings together 120 authors from 16 different countries and 200 scripts. As a cultural exchange programme, it introduces new international texts to Romanian theatre and provides Romanian authors with a model that allows theatres, agencies and publishers to place them in the engine room of theatrical production.*



*Antisocial, by Bogdan Georgescu • photo: TNRS, Grimm*

His plays, ironic and iconoclastic, in the spirit of Caragiale, make creative use of language and plot. *Trilogia minelor* ("The Mine Lands Trilogy"): *Flori de mină* "Mine Flowers", *Beznă de mina* "Mine-Blindness" and *Apă de mină*: ("Mine Water"), *MaRo* ("HuRo", i.e. Hungarians/Romanians) and the controversial *Mihai Viteazu* ("Michael the Brave") are important, provocative texts that tackle sensitive political realities – nationalism, homophobia, minority isolationism, etc. – using the tools of comedy but without any of the frivolity associated with the genre and drawing on the heavy artillery of the playwright's journalistic, satirical talents. The best productions of Székely Csaba's plays were also staged in independent theatres: e.g. at the Yorick and 3G in Târgu Mureș, and at ACT in Bucharest.

Another entirely remarkable voice of the last five years is that of Elise Wilk. Encouraged by her success at *dramAcum*, she went on to complete a master's degree in playwriting in Târgu Mureș, where she wrote her first successful play, *Pisica verde* ("The Green Cat"), which was followed, over the next three to four years, by a further two plays, i.e. *Avioane de hârtie* ("Paper Airplanes") and *Crocodil* ("Crocodile"). Together these form a trilogy about adolescence in which Wilk explores, to great dramatic effect, the problems faced by young people, e.g. bullying, separated families, depression, the difficulties of growing up and becoming an adult, etc. Staged and promoted with the support of the Fabulamundi programme in theatres in Germany and France, Wilk is without a doubt the most powerful voice of her generation.

## 8. In lieu of a conclusion

Within the space of 30 years, Romanian playwriting has gone from post-absurd to brutalism and hyper-realism, having today arrived at a generalised interest for adolescence-related themes, i.e. school education, bullying and the family viewed from the "child's pose". For the playwrights themselves are becoming younger, the world of their experience being very close to childhood and adolescence, while the public is growing younger, too. As a phenomenon, the outmoded model of the dictator director is being rivalled and overshadowed by the success of collaborative

methods, the dilution of directing into stage coordination or of playwriting into improvisation and fixing the moment. Moreover, the performance as the expression of the body in space and time is increasingly instilling itself in the production of dramatic texts.

However, one thing has not changed: as a general rule, outside of independent theatres with their limited resources and where the playwright is welcome and supported, Romanian authors have still not developed a legitimate relationship with the repertory theatres. Their fees are minimal. The most important Romanian playwrights have agents who come from other fields. There is no real professional association. (There are, however, political, subsidised initiatives<sup>5</sup> which confiscate and compromise the idea of a theatre dedicated to dramatic authors.) There is no theatrical centre with its own programmes, residencies, events and agenda, with a clear profile and with sustainable funding, which is able to develop and promote new, fresh works. Such a place, where dramatic authors might feel at home, does not exist today in Romania.

*Alina Nelega is one of Romania's finest playwrights and authors. Her plays have been translated, published and performed in Romania and internationally. Among other distinctions, she has won the prestigious UNITER award Best Play of the Year twice (in 2001 and in 2014). She holds the „European Author” accolade (Heidelberg Stueckemarkt, 2007), and since 2008, she has been Honorary Fellow in Writing of the Iowa University. She was an Artistic Director of the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureș (2012 – 2017). She is also the tutor of the Playwriting MA at the University of Arts in Tîrgu-Mureș, a course which 90% of today's most accomplished young playwrights have graduated from.*

*5. The Theatre of Romanian Playwrights, founded in 2016 by București Municipality, is a macabre and costly joke which will not be discussed here. Just as there has been no mention made of those other two or three authors, whose works, even where they have been staged and published, are in my opinion of little interest here, as they contribute nothing new.*

New from


**Routledge**  
 Taylor & Francis Group

Spring 2020

# A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism

*Children of a Restless Time*

This first book on the subject in decades unveils the striking transformations taking place in the last three decades of Romanian theater since the 1989 fall of the Berlin Wall. Using the personal tone of an insider, the book connects Romanian theater to the international stage experience and analyses in detail, from the viewpoint of an experienced professional, the slow but steady process of reconnecting a local theatre movement to the global stage and its new tendencies, especially the ethical turn in theatre and performance. Based on its author's experience as a theatre critic

and curator, the book questions the relationship between artists and power, both before 1989, behind the Iron Curtain, and in the current global political context, with nationalism manifesting itself in Eastern Europe and beyond, as seen in the critical work of Romanian theatre makers. In the aftermath of the 1989 Romanian Revolution, contemporary Romanian theatre makers are now free not only to speak up but also to contribute to the foundation of a new society. Looking into the future of the Romanian stage in an international context, the book asks a key question: can theatre help revive and reform a society?

*"This book will surely become an indispensable guide to the last few decades, and it is a terrific compass for the next generation too."*

**Tom Sellar**, editor Theater magazine, Yale University

*"Modreanu is a life-long observer and active participant in Romanian theatre. She holds up the mirror but also shapes the scene through her impressive curatorial work at Romania's most significant theatre festivals. Carefully, with great attention to detail, she describes the historical and newly emerging performative landscape like a cartographer"*

**Frank Hentschker**, director Martin Segal Theater Center, CUNY University



photo Cornel Lazia

**Cristina Modreanu** is a Romanian theatre critic and curator, co-founder of Romanian Association for Performing Arts. Modreanu holds a PhD in theatre studies from National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, and was a visiting scholar at the Performance Studies Department of New York University. She is a Fulbright alumna and the author of five books on Romanian theatre. Modreanu is currently the editor of the performing arts magazine *Scena.ro* which she cofounded in 2008, and a curator for theater and performance events, among which Bucharest International Theatre Platform.

# From ideologically driven theatre to the freedom of the transition period



Ion Caramitru and Marcel Iureş in *Hamlet*, directed by Alexandru Tocilescu  
• photo: Courtesy of Bulandra Theatre

## Romanian theatre in 1989

Between 1965 and 1989, over 900 plays written by approximately 350 playwrights were given the censor's stamp of approval, thus deeming them to be in line with the communist ideology and fit for performance in theatres around the country. As a closed system subject to political control, Romanian theatre only had access to the pool of works that had passed the censor, to foreign classics and to a handful of contemporary foreign works mainly originating from other countries of the former communist bloc (the USSR, the GDR, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Hungary and Poland) with similar political systems that imposed themes and rewrote national histories in the spirit of communist propaganda, promoting the idea of the "new man", of the ethically pure communist citizen. If, when it came to scripts, the approval of the censors involved the inspection and approval of the text in question, in terms of the performance, an obligatory preview would be held before opening night in front of a panel of censors appointed by the party and with the power to intervene, e.g. by banning certain lines, scenes or the entire production, and to punish the artists involved by forbidding them from working. As an art

form that is more difficult to censor in its live incarnation, theatre developed an Aesopian language that brought in the public, who, perhaps in an act of wishful thinking, hoped to find there something they no longer enjoyed in an increasingly oppressive society that was achieving historical levels of intolerability.

This allusive extratext was predominant in the 1980s and was correlated with a form of civic awareness, of resistance – albeit, in hindsight, a timid resistance in terms of its scope and means of expression – to the dictatorship expressed through the double entendres of suggestive gestures, facial expressions, the emphasis of certain words and scenes or characters that could be taken as allusions to the dictatorial couple and the harsh living conditions (e.g. the lack of heating in homes, the shortage of food and its controlled distribution based on ration cards, and the daily limits placed on electricity and fuel). Allusive theatre was a compensation for real rebellion, it was a tacit, implied form of camouflage that provided an outlet.

## The reconnection with international trends

The year of 1990 and the sudden liberalisation refocused public interest on the frenetic political scene. The joy of having got rid of communism was rapidly accompanied by feelings of uncertainty and confusion and an exploration of the possible avenues the country might then pursue, with the major historical events the citizens were directly participating in shifting the centre of attention towards the agora and leaving the theatres empty. Indeed, the spectacle of the public square was infinitely more interesting than that of the stage, where artists were attempting to reconnect with trends they had had only limited access to for the past half a century. One resource that facilitated this re-acquaintance with the artistic pulse of the world was that of the Romanian exiles, those deemed undesirable under the former regime and who intentionally "fled" the country to live abroad, i.e. Vlad Mugar, Lucian Giurchescu, Andrei Şerban, Lucian Pintilie, Stelian Tănase, George Astalos, Matei Vişniec, Liviu Ciulei, etc. Familiar with the artistic practices of the free world, they were quick to bring their knowledge home with them as a kind of creative import. In June 1990, the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamţ staged the first performance of Matei Vişniec's *Bine mamă, dar ăştia povestesc în actul doi ce se întâmplă în actul întâi* ("Mum, They're Telling Us in Act

Two What Happened in Act One", directed by Nicolae Scarlat), followed by Vaclav Havel's *The Garden Party*. In September, at the I. L. Caragiale National Theatre in Bucharest, Andrei Şerban, who had taken up the directorship of the theatre and was trying to implement a contest-based hiring policy, thereby opening the door to young actors from all over the country, presented to the public *The Ancient Trilogy* (*Medea*, *Electra* and *The Trojan Women*), which were versions of his highly successful productions staged in the United States, as well as *The Cherry Orchard* and *Twelfth Night* (1991). Lucian Giurchescu translated and staged *3 Havel* at this same theatre, while, at the end of the 1990s, in Craiova, Silviu Purcărete staged his *Ubu Rege cu scene din Macbeth* ("King Ubu with Scenes from Macbeth"). There was a natural appetite for new authors and new texts, taboo subjects and audacious reinterpretations involving intertextuality and elements of environmental theatre, there was a recourse to previously unexplored languages (dead languages unknown to the spectators), shocking a public that itself also needed to be shaped and required time to realign its mode of reception to western models. Alexander Hausvater shocked a conservative theatre with his staging of *And They Put Handcuffs on the Flowers* (Odeon, 1991), introducing a style of acting that required the actors to undergo special training, lighting with a semantic function, a theatre with a powerful impact, an aesthetic of naked bodies on the stage. A new means of constructing a text, a new theatrical aesthetics, acting techniques that departed from the Stanislavskian method and a broadening of the means of expression all served to re-orientate and guide theatre creators, in step with the public, along paths previously untrodden by Romanian theatre. Reconnection, recovery and transition were the key words of this period.

## In plain sight of the world

The events of 1989 also sparked a perfectly understandable interest on behalf of western countries for everything that came from behind the Iron Curtain and, therefore, also for Romanian theatre. An interest which, just as understandably, would eventually begin to wane, especially as Romanian theatre was incapable of holding its attention in the same way that, for example, the Polish, Baltic States and Hungarians (i.e. also from the ex-communist world) had been able to do.

Tocilescu's *Hamlet*, considered an audacious staging at the time, toured extensively in Great Britain, where it won much acclaim. The Marin Sorescu National Theatre in Craiova, during the tenure of Emil Boroghină as director, participated in all of the more important international festivals (e.g. Edinburgh, Avignon, the Holland Festival in Amsterdam, the Wiener Festwochen in Vienna, the Theater Der Welt festival in Munich, the Shakespeare Festival in Tokyo, the Israel Festival in Jerusalem, the Theatre Festival of the Americas in Montreal, the Arts Festival in Melbourne, the Performing Arts Festival in Sao Paulo, the European Theatre Convention Festival in Stockholm, the Lincoln Center Festival in New York, the Theatre of Nations Festival in Seoul, etc.), thereby earning Silviu Purcărete a reputation as one of the most innovative Romanian directors. Indeed, Purcărete was invited to work abroad and duly moved to France, although he also continued to work with Romanian theatres. During the first decade after 1989, he worked mainly with the theatre company from Craiova, while during the last decade and a half he worked with the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, where he found a favourable environment. To paint a clearer picture of the Romanian presence abroad and the way in which it has diminished, it suffices to mention that Romania was absent for a period of 18 years from the "IN" section of the theatre festival in Avignon, a long absence bookended by the performances of the National Theatre in Craiova (Silviu Purcărete) and the performance of Gianina Cărbunariu's *Solitarly*, produced at the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu in coproduction with the National Theatre in Brussels (2014). The National Theatre in Sibiu was also the only Romanian theatre to take part in the Edinburgh International Festival during this period, performing two works directed by Silviu Purcărete: Goethe's *Faust*, which saw Ofelia Popii win the Herald Angel Award for the role of Mephistopheles (2009), and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, for which the director also won the Herald Angel award (2012).

In terms of distinctions received at a European level, the most coveted must be that of the Europe Theatre Prize, which has been awarded since 1987. The list of nominations, in the "New Theatrical Realities" section, includes the names of three Romanian directors (Radu Afrim, candidate since 2007; Gianina Cărbunariu, candidate since 2011; and Bobi Pricop, candidate since 2017), although none of them has as yet won this award.

### The apostleship of the independents

Unfortunately, Romanian cultural policy over the last 30 years has neglected to encourage independent initiatives as an alternative to state culture. Everything that has been achieved in this sector is the work of a handful

of courageous individuals who realised the artistic importance of this type of creative endeavour and who pursued it on their own. New methods of production, new themes, new forms of stage discourse and a new way of understanding theatre emerged from the small underground stages set up in bars, restaurants, basements and attics with the goodwill of various benefactors and the efforts of various dedicated cultural animators who understood the importance of the creative development of these brave individuals in need of a space from where to express their artistic vision. The first independent companies would appear in Bucharest, a phenomenon that can be directly correlated with the prevailing economic circumstances, something that fostered an environment more open to innovative ideas. And it is still in the capital city that we find the greatest number of independent groups today. It all began in 1997 with the opening of Teatrul Luni at Green Hours on Calea Victoriei under the dynamic management of Voicu Rădescu, a theatre which became a catalyst of new ideas and aesthetic change. Indeed, it was here that an entire generation of directors and actors would find a place where they could experiment and take risks that would have been unacceptable at the state-funded theatres. The long list of artists associated with Green Hours also includes the name of Gianina Cărbunariu, currently one of Romania's best known directors and playwrights, who works on many international projects (e.g. at the Munich Kammerspiele, the Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, the Royal Court Theatre in London, the Schaubühne in Berlin and the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm) and whose works have been translated into many different foreign languages (English, French, German, Swedish, Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, Polish, Czech, Slovakian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Greek, Turkish, Portuguese, Japanese and Danish) and published and performed across Europe and the world. In 2000, with the encouragement of Nicolae Măndea, a professor at the National University of Theatre and Film (UNATC) in Bucharest, Gianina Cărbunariu, Andreea Vălean, Alexandru Berceanu and Radu Apostol laid the foundations of a movement that would make a remarkable contribution to the rethinking of theatre in all its different aspects: dramAcum. Officially set up as a non-governmental organisation, the dramAcum group aimed to "generate new drama, innovative playwriting and the production of theatre", using "playwriting as an instrument of social action". The team of original founders was joined in 2010 by Maria Manolescu, Ana Mărgineanu and Peca Ștefan. Its main activities comprised the holding of playwriting competitions and workshops meant to encourage new ways of writing and staging scripts, with the group also creating a series of ten productions. The



Ofelia Popii in *Faust* directed by Silviu Purcărete • photo: Scott Eastman

group would partner with Teatrul Foarte Mic, who hosted these performances and thus supported their pioneering work in areas that had yet to be explored artistically in Romania.

Gianina Cărbunariu's plays are intensely political, militant, shining a spotlight on issues otherwise overlooked by society, which she documents and then, as director-playwright, transposes to the stage. Through her work on small stages and the dramAcum initiative, Gianina Cărbunariu developed a type of theatre based on co-authorship. The paradigm of the director-cum-stage director is abandoned in favour of a type of production that begins with the author, who comes up with the theme, researches it and extracts the relevant parts together with the others, and then composes the script that is to be brought to the stage. The process is collaborative, the traditional hierarchy being redefined in a way that is more democratic in terms of artistic contribution. The writing is directly based on the concept of the production, which it shapes right from the start, with its transformations being closely correlated to what is eventually seen on the stage. The scripts are intended more for performance than reading (although many are still published), therefore being connected more with the stage and less with theatre as literature. The aesthetic is immersed in the social, with the themes of political theatre originating from the issues faced by a given community, issues otherwise overlooked by society and decision makers. It is protest theatre, engaged theatre, in which documentary and fiction join forces to achieve artistic success, which also depends on the



Cătălina Bălăleu in *Under every step...*, directed by Radu Afrim  
 • photo: Courtesy of Teatrul Tineretului Piatra-Neamț

impact of the production, and which explores the subject matter from as many angles as possible, without drawing conclusions, only problematizing. From the marginal spaces occupied by the independents, Gianina Cărbunariu then moved to the big stage, working both in Romania and other European countries. She is currently director of the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț, where she is implementing a project to refocus the state-funded institution towards the new realities of theatre today and to develop new audiences in a small city with 100,000 inhabitants.

The landscape of independent theatre companies is multifarious, constantly being redefined. New companies appear and do their utmost to survive, others disappear due to lack of financial support. Fabrica de pensule/Colectiv A in Cluj-Napoca, Auăleu Theatre in Timișoara, the Replika Educational Theatre Centre and unteatru in Bucharest, and Reactor de Creație și Experiment in Cluj-Napoca are some of those who survived and contributed to a change of paradigm in Romanian theatre. Independent theatre is defined by a scarcity of resources, its work being a kind of apostleship in material poverty. Over the last three decades it has produced the lion's share of experimentation and innovation, it has provided a platform through which the younger generations can express themselves. Some of the latter have made names for themselves on these minor stages, compensating with their creativity for the lack of even the most modest of budgets and later being accepted into the world of state theatre.

The most illustrious example of this is Radu Afrim, whose directorial endeavours began on the alterative scene in 2000, continued via small theatres and today find him being courted by the national theatres. The selection of his production of *Three Sisters* (produced for the Andrei Mureșanu Theatre in Sfântu Gheorghe) for the 2003 National Theatre Festival, a showcase of the preceding

theatre season that brings together the most accomplished productions, had the effect of a mini-revolution, similar in terms of its reception (by critics and the public alike) to that of the 1990s. It was a post-dramatic reinterpretation of Chekhov's play that heralded what would become the defining characteristics of Afrim's directorial discourse: a poetic visual quality; an interest for peripheries and marginal figures and for contemporary authors and texts, staged for the first time in Romania, with rare exceptions involving the stagings of canonical works rewritten to fit his own particular vision; and an attraction towards themes such as familial relations and human dysfunctions. While today we find him having composed his first script, written during rehearsals and staged at the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț: *Sub fiecare pas e o mină neexplodată dintr-un război neterminat cu tine* ("Everywhere You Step There Is an Unexploded Mine from an Unfinished War with You").

Professional experience gained at the Royal Court Theatre, the playwriting philosophy practiced there and during other internships abroad contributed significantly to the shaping of various new names in Romanian theatre, helping define their personal and singular styles. Mihaela Michailov comes from the field of theatre studies, but she reassessed her creative ambitions and chose to specialise in playwriting. A subject she in fact also teaches to her master's students at the National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest. Together with Radu Apostol, Mihaela Rădescu and Viorel Cojanu, she founded (2015) and coordinates the artistic mission of the Replika Educational Theatre Centre, focusing on theatre for young audiences and practicing community art based on documentary research, with all performances being free of charge and based on voluntary work. The centre's mission consists in "the cultivation of group creativity, as a form of acquiring knowledge and collective action, in order to achieve social reform

and the transformation of the community; the cultivation of personal contributions to individual and collective change through cultural interventions in diverse environments (schools, universities, homes for the elderly, day-care centres, etc.); the cultivation of courage, spontaneity, creativity, attention, respect, inquisitiveness, mistakes, trying, failure, illusion, social empathy, protest and the potential for change within and outside of us."

Bogdan Georgescu practices an active art that seeks to extract socially neglected themes from reality, an art of community engagement, defining himself as an "observational artist". He only stages plays he writes himself, which are born of forays into thematic areas unexplored by others and direct contact with subjects whose problems he seeks to bring to the fore and possibly help resolve.

Independent theatre is a vital platform that absorbs the graduates of Romanian drama schools and is a laboratory for testing the latest formulas. The prevalence of indefinite duration employment contracts and the lack of flexibility in staffing structures at the state theatres is not conducive to the creation of a real labour market in the arts, a market based on supply and demand, competition and current performance.

### The state theatre network, stable theatre companies

Most state theatres base their repertoires exclusively around premiere performances within a pattern of seasonal predictability and without causing any artistic upheaval or trying to reshape their publics. As the evaluation of managers – appointed based on project management competitions – first of all assesses quantity (i.e. number of productions, number of performances, income, number of tickets sold, etc.) and only then innovation and artistic daring, most state-run theatres adhere to a single model, involving the invitation of prestigious names, especially directors, a strategy that has already proven successful in other parts. The most in-demand directors have included, among others, Alexandru Dabija, Mihai Măniuțiu, Victor Ioan Frunză, Tompa Gabor, Silviu Purcărete, Radu Afrim, Cristian Theodor Popescu, Vlad Massaci and Cristi Juncu. During the last decade and a half, state theatres have become more open to members of the new generation, such as Gianina Cărbunariu, Bogdan Georgescu, Eugen Jebeleanu, Botond Nagy, Bobi Pricop and Catinca Drăgănescu. The creative universe of Bobi Pricop is characterised by an interest for contemporary plays with contemporary subject matters and writing styles, plays with a story, and an empathetic type of theatre with dynamic décors and modern stagings that make use of new technologies and are intended for a participatory audience.

Some state theatres are more dynamic, more open to the world than others (e.g. the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, the Mihai Eminescu National Theatre in Timișoara and the Marin Sorescu National Theatre in Craiova), and they take on challenging projects and produce important festivals (the International Theatre Festival in Sibiu, the Interferențe Festival in Cluj, the FEST-FDR festival in Timișoara, and the Shakespeare Festival in Craiova, etc.). Others stick to the well-trodden path. Many must make do with insufficient budgets, especially during the last two seasons, they have to meet huge salary and building maintenance costs to the detriment of the production of plays. Their success depends on the ambition, skill and dedication of their managers.

### Commuting between Romania and adoptive countries

A phenomenon that is of equal benefit to those who engage in it and to Romanian theatre is that of “commuting”, as practiced by the various artists who travel back and forth between the countries that adopted them and their home country. Matei Vișniec has enjoyed international fame ever since the beginning of the 1990s, with his plays also often being staged by Romanian directors. Of the younger generation, Alexandra Badea (since 2003) and Eugen Jebeleanu also made France their cultural home, where they are involved in various projects, while also not cutting themselves off from Romanian theatres, where they also continue to work. Alexandra Badea has written around 20 plays in the language of Molière and only one in Romanian – *Perfect compus* (“Past Tense”), which she also staged as a director-playwright, a role in which she feels most comfortable, together with the team from the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu in 2018. In France, she has worked as a director and staged her own works, with her plays also being staged by others. This year she is participating at Avignon with *Quais de Seine* (“Seine Quayside”), the second part of the *Points de non-retour* (“Points of No Return”) trilogy about the massacre of the Algerians in October 1962 in Paris.

Eugen Jebeleanu began his career from an early age as a dancer and choreographer. He graduated from drama school and worked as an actor, before deciding to leave Romania for France, where he furthered his training by studying directing and playwriting, founding *Compania 28* in 2010. Today he writes and stages plays in both countries.

Saviana Stănescu (playwright and faculty member at Ithaca University) moved to the United States. Her plays are performed in the US, elsewhere around the world, as well as in her home country. With an interest in new forms of writing, she has tackled emigration

and feminist subjects, which she treats from a progressive standpoint. Cosmin Chivu graduated in acting in Iași and has made a name for himself as a young man with many ideas and initiatives. He decided that New York, “the place where many try and few succeed”, as he himself puts it, was better suited to him and duly studied directing at the Actors Studio Drama School (2000). He has staged productions in many US theatres, has been nominated in the Best Revival of a Play category of the Drama League Awards, and today teaches at the Pace University School of Performing Arts, where he is also head of the acting and directing department. In Romania, he mostly works with the Radu Stanca National University in Sibiu.

This commuting between two cultures and the mixing of different cultural elements fuels creativity and artistic risk-taking.

In the world of Romanian theatre, aesthetics adapt to the realities of the day at the same pace as the rest of the country, albeit somewhat slower than in other parts and not always in the right direction. Chaotic cultural policies, a lack of continuity and vision, and an overregulated, confusing and unclear legal framework have served to maintain a way of working that favours quantity and the immediate over a long and medium-term outlook. Excessive politicisation is another factor that has encouraged inertia, especially among the state institutions, which in terms of their structure have changed very little over the last three decades. While from an artistic point of view the independent sector is more challenging, implying, given the limited availability of material resources, a total assumption of risk, then, from the point of material security, gaining employment at a state theatre continues to be the dream of young graduates in the performing arts. The lack of regulation and social protections for independent theatre creators is an issue for which a solution must be found without delay.



*Green Cat* by Elise Wilk, directed by Bobi Pricop  
• photo: Courtesy of Theater for Young audiences Iași

In a country with a population, currently estimated at 19 million, that is continuously falling – predominantly due to emigration, but also as the result of lower birth rates – theatre continues to be the most popular form of the performing arts among the public. In 2019, of Romania’s 7.9 million consumers of this type of culture, the preference of the largest group (45%) was for theatre, according to data compiled by the National Institute of Statistics based on information provided by relevant institutions.

This is an encouraging figure, although looking to the future, there is clearly still room for growth. The art of theatre is the most appealing way of shaping audiences, and boosting the number of spectators will only be possible by allocating the resources necessary to artistic creation.

*Oltița Cîntec* is a theatre critic, a holder of a doctorate in theatre studies, a curator of a number of performing arts festivals in Romania, an expert consultant and a coordinator of theatre projects. She is the author of a number of books of theatre and contemporary performance criticism, theory and history, many of which award-winning, and the co-author of various collective works published in Romania and abroad. Her articles and studies have appeared in prestigious academic journals in the field of theatre and culture, both at home and abroad, such as *Critical Stages*, *Colloquium Politicum*, *Euresis*, *Philologica Jassyensis*, *Colocvii teatrale*, *DramArt*, *Suplimentul de Cultură*, *Observator cultural*, *Scena.ro*, *Teatrul Azi* and *Dilema*. She has given lectures and presentations about Romanian theatre both in her own country and abroad. She is president of the International Association of Theatre Critics – Romania (AICT.RO).

# Dance and performance in post-communist Romania



*Cvartet pentru lavalieră*, 2016 • photo: Alina Uşurelu

In 1990, after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain, the only cultural institutions in Romania were state-run, trapped within a rigid institutional framework and with an artistic focus on classical themes and big productions with baroque décors. The officially recognised performing arts were theatre, opera, operetta (including musicals) and classical music, while, in terms of dance, there was only ballet, which was seen, however, as an appendix to the opera. During communism, contemporary dance was an exception, tolerated only in infinitesimal quantities. The choreographer Miriam Răducanu enjoyed the reputation of an avant-garde artist. At the end of the 1960s, she launched her *Nocturnes* at the Țăndărică Theatre, a series of performances in which dance was imbued with theatricality, placing it within a heterogeneous performative construct alongside music and poetry. After 1990, Miriam worked with the jazz musician Johnny Răducanu and her former pupil the choreographer Gigi Căciuleanu, who left Romania in 1973 and enjoyed a prodigious career in Europe and South America (where he was director of the National Ballet in Chile). Returning home after 1989, Căciuleanu founded a dance company for which he created choreographic interpretations of dramatic works (e.g. *D'ale noastre*, based on Caragiale, and *Folia, Shakespeare & Co*, based on Shakespeare) or in which he employed elements of theatricality – text, narrative and actors as performers, renamed “dansActori” (dancer-actors).

In 1990, two state contemporary dance companies were founded as appendages to

larger institutions (the Romanian Opera and the Tinerimea Română Centre), both being institutionally fragile, with unclear statuses and a bare minimum of funding: the Contemp Group (which had essentially existed since 1973 with no legal status), led by the choreographer Adina Cezar; and Orion Balet, led by the choreographer Sergiu Anghel. Both companies, whose choreographic language harked back to the 1970s and 80s, were disbanded in 2007.

Another choreographer to make a name for himself and who was also drawn to theatre was Răzvan Mazilu. He brought a touch of glamour to the stage; his appearances were spectacular and he developed the aura of a diva. Mazilu would stage flamboyant productions, whether in exploring extravagant figures (dandyism in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Gallants of the Old Court*) or in bringing a less visible genre to the stage: the musical (*Cabaret, Un tango mas, The Full Monty, Queen*, etc.).

Vava Ștefănescu was one of the first artists to show an interest in performative installations. One of her creations, *Cvartet pentru o lavalieră* (“Quartet for Microphone”), originally intended for art galleries but in the end staged in a traditional auditorium, was performed by 3 artists locked inside a telephone booth. The performance explored the idea of confinement, of one’s relationship with the other, of suffocating within our own lives. However, this work belongs to a genre of which it was the sole exemplar on the local scene in terms of format, plot, expression and intention, namely that of conceptual dance.

## The body politics. Performance, protest, institution

Conceptual dance in post-communist Romania began with a programme of performances and workshops by French choreographers held between 1991 and 1993 organised by the French Institute, the Romanian Ministry of Culture and various cultural institutions: *La danse en voyage*. This comprehensive programme gave Romanian artists the opportunity to come into direct and long-lasting contact with European dance and contemporary choreographic language. This was not merely an informal contact; it also represented the essential contribution of a rich choreographic culture (i.e. that of France) to the creation of a field (contemporary dance) almost from the ground up within another culture (Romania), by means of the professional training and specific support of the artists. The young Romanian choreographers and dancers who took part in this project would later go on to demand and obtain the establishment of the National Dance Centre, which was based on the French model of choreographic centres.

During the 1990s, contemporary dance in Romania was starved of resources: there were no rehearsal or performance spaces and no funding of contemporary culture and, implicitly, dance. Choreographers were self-taught, including in cultural management, setting up independent structures, such as Cosmin Manolescu’s DCM Foundation, which organised the first demonstrations of contemporary dance and seasons of performances in partnership with theatres and made it easier for Romanian choreographers to take part in international platforms and residencies, being the first contemporary dance structure to take on such missions for the community. There were also independent structures that worked symbiotically with public institutions, such as the (Inter)National Centre of Contemporary Dance, also set up by Cosmin Manolescu, which worked together with Arcub (Bucharest Municipality’s cultural centre), and the Multi-Art Dans (MAD) centre, headed by Vava Ștefănescu and located in the Nicolae Bălcescu Cultural Centre in Bucharest’s Sector 4 (the MAD had its own ongoing seasons of performances, offered training programmes for dancers, had a research and creation lab, devised cultural action programmes and was the first home of contemporary dance in post-communist Romania). But the fact that the Romanian state contributed nothing, that the situation of choreographers was always insecure and did

not allow for the creation of a long-term specific development strategy resulted in protests. So post-89 contemporary dance developed amid an atmosphere of protest and politics, thus acquiring a highly critical tone. Performative protest was not only the reaction of artists forced to take on the state in order to fight for their professional rights; it was also a means of exploring different forms of performative language, a stage in the development of their art. From the letter of protest read out at an event held at the French Institute, where in 2003 they had been invited to perform ("To hell with posterity, I want to dance now!"), to the dance protests held in front of the Ministry of Culture, choreographers campaigned performatively for their cause with the support of the international dance community and the local media.

In 2004, the Ministry of Culture ceded to pressure and decided to establish the Bucharest National Dance Centre (CNDB), a unique institution in Romania and Eastern Europe (it was the only body in the region in charge of contemporary dance). After years of protest, the decision to create the centre was taken in the space of 4 minutes, with the rushing of the decision bringing with it a number of hidden pitfalls that the choreographers would discover in time. Appearing overnight, without the performance of an impact study and an evaluation of its needs, the institution had neither a headquarters nor a budget – only an interim director, the experienced choreographer Ion Tugearu, and an organisational structure based on that of French choreographic centres. It was a structure without a body, and to flesh it out institutionally meant that further battles needed to be fought. Indeed, it was only in 2006 that the CNDB became functional. It was given a headquarters in the same building as the National Theatre in Bucharest (i.e. again as an appendix to a large state institution) and a budget it used on various different fronts: producing shows, establishing international contacts, holding dance workshops for professionals and amateurs, educating the public, retracing the history of Romanian dance and archiving the present, and granting non-reimbursable funds to the winners of contemporary dance competitions, etc. The centre placed a special focus on conceptual artistic language, post-postmodern performative formats (post-dance, non-dance, performative reading, performative identity, etc.), encouraged the discussion of sensitive subjects or subjects as yet undiscussed in Romania (e.g. LGBTQ+ rights), and was profoundly (though not exclusively) political, adopting a critical attitude towards power. All of which was sufficient for the CNDB to become a problematic institution in the eyes of the authorities because it did not fit the institutional mould. Not to mention that the field itself was incomprehensible to politicians and, moreover, it was a niche field, and the success of the centre, as confirmed

by awards and international recognition, was unquantifiable under the criteria employed by the Ministry of Culture (i.e. in terms of number of spectators). Indeed, in 2011 the CNDB lost its headquarters for good, being homeless for the next few years, before in 2013 renting a small space in a less central district that cost it almost its entire production budget. The situation remains unchanged today, although in 2016 the government allocated it a new space, the Omnia Hall, once used for meetings of the former Romanian Communist Party, a disused building in the centre of the city, as well as funds for its renovation (which is still ongoing and taking a long time). However, its survival is still not guaranteed, with the authorities providing only minimal funding and regularly issuing threats, both veiled and unveiled, as to its dissolution.

During its short-lived period of stability, i.e. 2006-2011, the CNDB served as a creative space for artists who would leave their mark on the recent history of Romanian contemporary dance. These included Alexandra Pirici and Manuel Pelmuş, who created Romania's contribution to the 2013 Venice Biennale entitled *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale* and which represented a turning point in the way performance in a museum is conceived. This work, however, was rooted in two earlier projects.

In 2008, the *What to Affirm, What to Perform/ Mapping Invisible History* programme got underway, a two-year project organised by Tanzquartier Wien together with the CNDB, the Centre for Drama Art Zagreb and *Maska* magazine from Ljubljana, in cooperation with the Allianz Kulturstiftung, the aim of which was to recover the history of choreography in Romania, Austria, Croatia and Slovenia. The programme included a performative reconstruction of the production *Ciocanul fără stăpân* ("The Hammer without a Master"), which was also performed, in 2018, at the Too Soon, Too Late: Performative Dialogue of Artists from 8 European Countries performative exhibition held at the BOZAR in Brussels as part of the series of events dedicated to the First World War Centenary.

*Ciocanul fără stăpân* is an iconic work of Romanian contemporary dance. Set to the music of Pierre Boulez, it was produced by Stere Popescu in 1965 for the National Opera in Bucharest, also being performed that same year at the Festival de Danse in Paris, where it sparked controversy. However, the political context at home, where the communist regime was promoting Proletkultism, was not favourable to the avant-garde. Accused of decadence (a notion which at the time also included alternative sexual orientations, which were considered a crime, and what with Stere himself being gay), the choreographer did not return to Romania, instead applying for political asylum in France. He would later move to London, where, in 1968, he



*Ciocanul fără stăpân*  
• photo: Alina Uşurelu, Courtesy of CNDB Archive

committed suicide. The production, of which there was only one performance in Romania, the only record of which being a few minutes of filmed footage and the recollections of the participants, in time became the stuff of legend, thus amplifying its status in the history of avant-garde Romanian choreography and affording it a mythical aura that enveloped the reality of the performance. This would also explain the difficulty faced by the authors of its reconstruction, Florin Flueraş and Brynjar Bandlien, in defining a re-enactment paradigm, with the initial version from 2009 being later adjusted to clarify the historical perspective.

The history of the re-enactment of *Ciocanul fără stăpân* is linked to that of another project: *Romanian Dance History* (RDH). Initiated by Manuel Pelmuş, Brynjar Bandlien and Florin Flueraş in collaboration with Ion Dumitrescu and Mihai Mihalcea, this project took Stere Popescu's production and his iconic personality as its starting point. In time there would be a number of different chapters to the RDH project, covering different themes, from the status of contemporary dance and the choreographer in society to the practice of dance as a social instrument (RDH VI consisted in a discussion of social dance and the sounds of the periphery, *manele* music, which contaminates official culture but is also part of the contemporary cultural construct). There was a paucity of research into the history of Romanian dance, and the RDH project had to negotiate this lack of material. How do you fill an absence, what do you replace it with and how do you relate to it? How does an art form define itself in the absence of a solid history – as a continuation of what, in opposition to what? The RDH project also saw the first occurrences of "hacking" and "hijacking" in the Romanian performing arts. This saw various artists disrupt the performances of famous dancers during mainstream shows in the name of Romanian dance history – a minor, marginal and, therefore, overlooked, history. They were claiming an unacknowledged artistic identity by feeding off the mainstream. The RDH choreographers

did this at ImPulsTanz, in Vienna, in 2010, provoking a harsh reaction by the festival director, who threw them out. A few months later, at the Tanz im August festival in Berlin, they repeated the stunt to a more relaxed response. These forms of intervention in public space, however, are not without risk: following the incident at ImPulsTanz, the festival in Vienna cut all links with the artists in question.

In April 2011, the decision to eject the CNDB from the National Theatre Building led to the first Occupy-type protest in Romania: "Occupy CNDB". The centre's headquarters were shut down as part of planned renovation works and duly surrounded by fencing. It was quite literally ghettoised. The artists then occupied the space for almost three weeks, during which time they held various events ("Occupy CNDB 24 Hours"), including performances, debates and workshops. The dancers took possession of the only space, with all its symbolism, the state had allocated them. They were thus affirming the existence of their field by claiming the space, for recognition of contemporary dance as a major art form had only been obtained after an institution dedicated had been created, the existence of an institution being the means by which the state validated a cultural field. The emptying of the institution of its content – the ejecting of the CNDB from its headquarters reduced it to an empty shell – meant a loss of identity for the field in the eyes of the state.

One of the interventions in the programme was that performed by Alexandra Pirici: the impersonation of the Caragialiana sculptural ensemble installed a few months earlier in front of the National Theatre. The statues had cost approximately 2 million euros, and this while the allocation of a new space for the CNDB had been put off on account of a lack of funds. The intervention in public space consisted in a recreation using human bodies of the statuary ensemble that lasted for four hours each day. The intention was to force a comparison between the imposing, costly monument to official culture (the statues depict icon characters from the works of the playwright I. L. Caragiale) and the same "monument", now depicted on a human scale and made out of a far cheaper "material", human beings, but which was not deemed desirable by the public purse. It was a subversive deconstruction of the monumental, of the notion of official art. At the same time, the occupation of the space outside the centre represented the opposite of the loss of the space within it. If the institutional space was public, but the state had abolished it, then the public space became a common space that could be claimed by cultural workers. In 2011, Pirici created a series of similar actions in public space as part of the *Dacă voi nu ne vreți, noi vă vrem* ("If You Don't Want Us, We Want You") project, which again recreated official monuments and structures using the performers' bodies. The project aimed to take art out of the performance venue and into public space while achieving a democratisation of culture by making it accessible: art and

the artist "placed themselves" in the path of the spectator, intersecting his or her daily itineraries. It also reflected the need of a niche art form – for performance art was new, little practiced and little known in Romania – to attract and challenge its public. At the core of these re-enactments lay a criticism of the monumental, of the valuation of the material to the detriment of the human, of the obsession for the massive as a subtle means of validating the state through the exhibiting and feeding of pseudo-patriotic sentiment. Alexandra Pirici was responsible for three different public re-enactments: one was a human copy of the Memorial of Rebirth, a monument to the Revolution of 1989, in the shade of which the artists lay down in a row, the human element being overshadowed by officially-sanctioned heroism and thus invalidated/crushed by it, like a performative paraphrasing of the proverb "nothing grows in the shade of a big tree"; another targeted the equestrian statue of King Carol I, with the performers recreating the horse as a comment on the gap between the value and heroic stature afforded to public figures and the lack of importance of the common man in the eyes of the state; while the final re-enactment comprised a replication of the architecture of the House of the People using human bodies and cardboard boxes in an allusion to the large number of homeless people, thereby denouncing the fact that this building does not belong to the "people" and least of all the most vulnerable category of people, i.e. the homeless (the building houses the Romanian Parliament and the people are kept out). Pirici carries out a performative analysis of how art is employed to validate the state, something which translates into an increase of authoritarian power in relation to the citizen.

These two artistic projects, *Romanian Dance History* and *Dacă voi nu ne vreți, noi vă vrem*, formed the basis of the work chosen to represent Romania at the Venice Biennale in 2013: *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale*. The project consisted in the recreation, using the performers' bodies, of over one hundred different works that had been presented over the years at the Venice International Exhibition. *An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale* represented a leap forwards in the relationship between museums and live performance: it was no longer a matter of simply animating the space and the exhibits in order to transform the museum into a dynamic space, but of establishing a direct link between the archives of the museums (the objects held, whether temporarily or permanently, by the museums) and the performative action. The artists' performances did not just take place *in* museums, they were also *about* museums. The performance moved from the living exhibit, as an alternative to the traditional object, to a critique of the exhibition, of the museum archive, of the relationship between the museum, the public, the financiers and business, etc. In effect, Pirici and Pelmuș swapped the objective (neutral) relationship between the museum and performance for

a subjective, direct relationship, i.e. they personalised it. And since the personal is more interesting than the general, the idea caught on and invitations to stage similar projects in museums and at exhibitions flowed thick and fast in the years that followed (e.g. at Tate Modern in London and Tate Liverpool, the Museum Ludwig Museum in Cologne, the Off-Biennale in Budapest, the Kiev Biennale, the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, etc.).

*An Immaterial Retrospective of the Venice Biennale* worked on a number of different levels: it was a continuous intervention in public space; it undermined the grandiose by representing material works with the performers' bodies in a state of quasi-austerity; it animated the material, creating works in motion and generating critical reactions to them; it questioned the idea of the archive and the way it comes to life; it explored the relationship between memory and history; it questioned the purpose of the Venice Biennale and its impact on art (the influence on artistic directions, the art market, and its relationship to society, politics and economics, e.g. for the fascist period of 1930-1940, which was dominated by Mussolini, the authors only reproduced works featuring animals and ignored official artists); and it turned the unofficial hierarchy in the Giardini della Biennale on its head by dint of the fact that the critique of the exhibition was being made by a small country, thus producing a critical rewriting of the history of the Biennale from the periphery to the centre, providing a marginal perspective on mainstream works which inherently expressed a form of discursive revolt (expressed physically, through the body).

Pirici and Pelmuș also worked on separate projects. Among others, Pirici created *Delicate Instruments of Engagement* in Berlin, a continuous performative action lasting for four hours in which public speeches, events, sounds and images are recreated by five performers, with the starting point chosen by the public from three possible options. It is a collection of re-enactments, such as the final speech of Salvador Allende, that of Michelle Obama as plagiarised by Melania Trump (the latter presented in parallel), that of Colin Powell announcing the invasion of Iraq, or that of Bill Clinton talking about the Monica Lewinsky scandal, pop music hits, the John Travolta meme, adverts, etc. The proposed events are objective, but the perspective from which they are viewed is subjective, being an investigation of the way in which they are transformed by memory, for reality is "manufactured" out of the objective and the subjective.

Alexandra Pirici's most recent work was presented at Art Basel this year: *Aggregate*, a performative installation in which for four hours a day over 60 performers create a time capsule of different elements of nature, culture, the arts and everyday life. The artists sing, dance and imitate the behaviours and sounds of animals. *Aggregate* hits a number



Dancers protesting in front of the Ministry of Culture • photo: Dance National Center archive

of targets: performative practices, man's relationship with technology, embodiment, the application of non-anthropocentric/non-bipedal perspectives (i.e. those that do not place man at the centre of the universe), interaction with the public, and the criticism of collecting as an accumulation of luxury objects and the transformation of live, performative work into an appendix to art objects. The performance took place in a pavilion designed by Andrei Dinu, an igloo which took its inspiration from Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome (and which will be recycled afterwards in a gesture of environmental awareness). However, what *Aggregate* sought to achieve first and foremost was to express an artistic opposition to the obsession with luxury, the obscene level of investment in art objects and not in art itself, i.e. in the object and not in the human. Presented at a luxury art fair, Pirici's work sabotaged the very context in which it was performed.

Manuel Pelmuş also works all over the world. His only work staged in Romania after Venice was his 2016 *Cuminţenia Pământului* ("The Wisdom of the Earth"), an uninterrupted two-hour-long performative action in a museum performed by the actor Cristina Toma, who recited a looping text in complete darkness, forcing the spectators to change perspectives by activating their sight instead of their hearing. The Wisdom of the Earth is the name of a small statue by Constantin Brâncuşi that belongs to a private collection in Romania. In 2016, the owner of the statue wanted to sell it and the state launched a public campaign to raise the money for its acquisition, a campaign that in the end proved unsuccessful. Manuel Pelmuş created an alternative to the material object: an immaterial admixture of opinions voiced in the public realm about the statue and the fundraising campaign which had divided public opinion. The ensuing debate activated the people's collective fears and obsessions (i.e. in terms of nationalism, confusion over the role of the authorities, the positioning of art as a marginal element of society, etc.). Pelmuş' *Cuminţenia Pământului* has more to do with our state of mind than with Brâncuşi's statue.

Another work by Manuel Pelmuş was commissioned by Para Site, the contemporary

art centre from Hong Kong. *Movements at an Exhibition* (2017-2018) is a paraphrasing of *Pictures at an Exhibition*, the suite of piano pieces by Modest Mussorgsky, which "translates" painting to music, i.e. it expresses one medium through another. Pelmuş does the same, using movement in two ways, i.e. both as a grammar of choreography and as an illustration of social protest. That is, dance movement and social movement. The work draws on three areas of research. One of these looks at the history of performance in the region; another explores protest music, the sounds that accompanied the student protests in Taiwan of the 1990s; while the third is that of social protest, studied in terms of the way the body occupies public space. It is based on the principle of subjective selection (of sources, of the relationship between components, etc.) and takes the form of an uninterrupted, four-hour-long action involving four performers who enact positions, sounds and actions that serve as memory, commentary, analysis and conceptualisations relating to the functions of the body at the intersection between the social and the artistic: the positioning of the body in space during the protests (e.g. kneeling), the way in which one becomes many, the contamination of movement (some protests were triggered by a single person adopting a given body position in public that was subsequently adopted by others), and the idea of a formation/group organised according to a certain pattern that then becomes recognisable and acquires the function of a protest, etc. Pelmuş depicts public and performative actions through embodiment and enactment as forms of representation of the social and artistic functions of the body.

Pelmuş' most recent work was presented this year in Vienna. *Collective Exhibition for a Single Body – The Private Score*, curated by Pierre Bal-Blanc, a collaboration between the Erste Foundation collection and Tanzquartier Wien, is thematically in the same vein as Alexandra Pirici's *Aggregate*. Thirty years after the fall of the Iron Curtain, against a backdrop of the global rise in neo-liberalism with uncertain consequences for the inhabitants of the former communist bloc, the Bulgarian Cultural Institute

in Vienna has commissioned a work about art and commerce in two parts and in two different venues. The house of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, built at the end of the 1920s and transformed during the 1970s into a cultural centre, is being used to exhibit a part of Erste Bank's art collection comprising works by Eastern European artists from the 1970s (e.g. Sarah Lucas, Artur Żmijewski, Katalin Ladik, Ion Grigorescu, Nilbar Güreş, Geta Brătescu, Stano Filko, the brothers Mladen Sven Stilinović, etc.) and displayed in domestic interiors featuring period furniture. In another building, built in 1995 for the Generali Foundation (part of Generali Investments, which supports contemporary visual art and acts as a museum) and today a commercial space, i.e. a Lidl supermarket, Pelmuş uses the performers' bodies, placed in between the rows of discounted goods, to bring to life the works on display in the first exhibition. The inspiration for this work was the 1980s, when large corporations saw an opportunity to acquire prestige by founding art collections and staging exhibitions. This performative diptych is a comment on the commercialisation of art and, given the respective histories of the two buildings, traces the transformation of art spaces into commercial spaces. An exhibition space becomes a private space (through the recreation of the domestic interiors), while a supermarket becomes an art gallery – that is, the functions of a space are fluid. The art works dating from the 1970s are brought to life, only that people are exhibited in their stead. In one place there are objects, in another a performative representation thereof within a commercial setting. Art has become a product.

In their works, Pirici and Pelmuş revitalise the analytical function of museums by activating (self-) criticism and question the economic, social and political context of art and the way in which it becomes a business, the obsession with the grandiose and disvaluation of the human, and the rethinking of public space as common space.

---

*Oana Stoica is a theatre and contemporary dance critic. She writes theatre and dance reviews for Dilema Veche magazine and for the theatre section of the Scena9 online cultural platform. She is artistic consultant to the Bucharest National Dance Centre. She has published studies on theatre, contemporary dance and performance in various books: Teatrul și publicul său tânăr. Realități românești; Teatrul românesc de azi. Noi orizonturi estetice; E-motional: Rethinking Dance; Romanian Performing Arts. Perspectives. 2015-2016; Identity. Move! and Noi practici în artele spectacolului din Europa de Est. She has been involved in the creation of various productions: Apă de mină ("Mine Water", as producer), Piesă cu responsabilitate limitată ("Limited Liability Performance", choreographic dramaturgy), Hamlet (adaptation of the play). She serves as an independent expert on evaluation panels for cultural projects.*

# Zoom out view of Romanian theatre after 1989



*King Lear, TNB, directed by Radu Penciulescu, 1970*  
• photo: Ion Miclea

Romanian theatre existed both before and after 1989 and so there is no need of a *tabula rasa* in order to mark a new history. And yet something changed, for beyond the political significance of the moment and all the inherent upheaval, time went about its business, heralding new truths, and new generations. I will look here at France, the favoured and adoptive land of so many Romanian artists, thus joyfully repurposing Emil Cioran's phrase about the paradox of no longer being "Persian", that is an "exotic" stranger, *apud* Montesquieu, in order to put an end to complex and false culpabilities.<sup>1</sup>

What is meant by thirty years of freedom? Where did this theatre come from? Are we dealing with a dead theatre, a theatre reduced to silence and then miraculously resuscitated one cold December's night?

1. "The paradox of being a Persian (or as the case would have it, a Rumanian) is a torment one must know how to exploit, a defect by one which must profit. I confess I once regarded it as a disgrace to belong to an ordinary nation, to a collectivity of victims about whose origin no illusion was permitted." E. M. Cioran, *The Temptation to Exist*, New York, University of Chicago Press, p.70 (Original text: *La tentation d'exister* Paris, Gallimard, 1956, p. 57).

Not quite, for while the entire country had been slowly sinking under the delirium of an authoritarian Power, Romanian theatre continued to breathe after its own fashion. Indeed, it survived and became a place of resistance where words and, in particular, subtext acquired new meaning. Despite the dictatorship, Romanian theatre before 1989 remained a living space, albeit one at times on the brink of suffocation, but designating what, with a certain stubbornness, was called "resistance through culture". Was it all but an illusion? Perhaps we should bring some nuance to certain excessive or contradictory interpretations between "glorification" and "flagellation".<sup>2</sup> Despite the initial conditions (and perhaps because of them), the 1960s and 1970s were a unique time, a kind of burst of sunlight amid the "winter of our discontent". After the relative thaw that occurred at the end of the 1960s and the real upsurge of a "liberated" or "re-theatricalised" theatre, even if the blade of the guillotine fell quickly, in 1971 Romanian theatre still benefitted from the contributions of some great directors, including Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Pintilie, Radu

2. Terms used by Iulia Popovici in "Les illusions du théâtre roumain: la mise en scène", <https://www.academia.edu/14186723/>

Penciulescu, David Esrig, Valeriu Moisescu and Andrei Șerban, some of whom were also welcomed and celebrated in the West, and in particular what were some risky endeavours for those times. To tell the truth during the years of lead involved the respecting of five conditions, as Brecht wrote somewhere,<sup>3</sup> one of which being cunning. To this we can add a special device of Romanian theatre, the double entendre, the satisfaction of cocking a snook to Power. Of playing with the "subtext", of simply manipulating the text. So, for Romanians, theatre was also a means of escape, of resisting, and, to the extent that this was possible, it was also an alternative space conducive to the creation of a community of perceptions and ideas predominantly targeted against the regime. And yet are we not at risk of throwing the baby out with the bath water? Art does not exist without constraints, without a certain discipline. I recall the words of Radu Penciulescu, expressed in that purely dialectic style that characterises him and which may come across as a provocation, in an article published in *Cahiers de l'Est*: "...censorship was, is, a wonderful and stimulating thing for the obstacles it erects, obstacles which encourage creativity. In fact, there is even a theory by Goethe, who viewed interdiction, censorship, as the blood of figurative language, and hence essential to art."<sup>4</sup> However, this was not a matter of political, coercive censorship, and nor did Penciulescu ignore the fact that the battle was being fought on other criteria. When you are able to say everything openly, the language of metaphor becomes poorer, he tells us, but we gain in truth, as demonstrated by the theatre of recent decades. The illusion I speak of is perhaps to be found at this level of playing with interdiction, which was merely bypassed and not abolished. Who was fooling whom? To whom were the double entendres really a threat? Today, the head of the Gorgon or that of political censorship has been severed, but the battle is still not won. While for a long time the theatre fed off the constraints that threatened its existence, today it has to deal

3. Bertolt Brecht, *Journal de travail, l'Arche, Paris, 1976, p. 508.*

4. Radu Penciulescu, "Parole impossible", in *Cahiers de l'Est, Editions Albatros, Paris, Revue trimestrielle, n° 12/13, 1978, p. 19*

with different constraints which also represent a threat to its existence. For there exists a different constraint that is just as difficult to overcome, the economic and financial threat, and above all, an irresponsible state policy vis-à-vis the theatre. The current state of Romanian culture in general and of theatre in particular proves once again that the threat is not only confined to the level of metaphor. Theatre is made by people and for people.

### Love and nonlove, or how to reconstruct an image...

I recall how, immediately after the Revolution of 1989 (for what else to call the extraordinary fact that we could now look through different eyes at this country we thought had been lost for ever), I took part, alongside a few other Romanian intellectuals, in a campaign organised by UNESCO to get people to donate books for the libraries that had burned down in Romania. An event was held to mark the end of the campaign that was to be followed by the dispatching of a few truck-loads of books to Romania. Eugen Ionesco, already ill at the time, was unable to attend but instead sent a pre-recorded audio message. So, it was there, in the immense hall of the UNESCO headquarters on the Place de Fontenoy that I heard him speak in Romanian for the first time. As long as I live, and never without a tear in my eye, I shall remember those few words: "Dragii mei, vă iubesc..." ("My dear friends, I love you all..."). It was the spring of 1990. Immediately afterwards I took part in another project, the life and soul of which at the time was George Banu, who as ever played an incredibly active role in Franco-Romanian relations. It was called "The Spring of Theatre" and brought together some of the greatest names of the French stage at the time: Antoine Vitez, Patrice Chéreau, Gérard Déarthe and Hélène Delavault, all of whom enthusiastically set out for Bucharest to discover this country which with much fury and noise had regained its freedom. There was enormous enthusiasm, a "burning" interest for everything to come out of Romania, with looping pictures being broadcast on French television and the Télé Cinq channel galvanising and feeding a passionate interest. (A French journalist, Jean-Pierre Calderon, died in December 1989 after being crushed by a tank in Revolution Square. Today, a street in Bucharest is named after him.) The theatre also played its part; indeed, we



*Points de Nonretour*, a production by Alexandra Badea  
• photo: Courtesy of Velica Panduru

should not forget that it was never completely absent from the French stage. So France began to discover a new side to Romania, enthusiastically embracing everything to come out of the country, amid the euphoria of experiencing together another revolution on the two-hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution. However, it should be noted that this interest and "ardent love" for their "Latin brethren", freshly liberated from tyranny, was quickly and all but entirely wiped out by the *mineriadă* of June 1990.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, Romanian theatre, far from being ignored by the West, had long been sending its "messengers" – isolated or even official voices who frequently crossed what at the time was known as the Iron Curtain. I'm thinking here of the performance of the productions of David Esrig and Lucian Pintilie at the Theatre of Nations Festival in Paris during the 1960s. Denis Bablet, director of research at the National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), a theatrologist and connoisseur of

5. *Mineriadă* is a term used to describe the violent actions undertaken at the beginning of the 1990s by Romanian miners, who were called upon by President Iliescu to crush the demonstrations against the neo-communist regime and the manipulation of the election results taking place in University Square in Bucharest. These events were dealt with in depth in two documentary theatre productions by Mihaela Michailov and David Schwartz: *Capete înfierbîntate*, in 2010, and *Teatrul subpământ, Valea Jiului după 1989*, in the summer of 2011, respectively. The trial of the leaders responsible at the time has been ongoing for some years.

Eastern European theatre, came to Bucharest after he had seen *Troilus and Cressida* and *D'ale carnavalului* ("Carnival Stories") in order to become better acquainted with Romanian theatre, publishing an enthusiastic and well researched article in 1967.<sup>6</sup>

Lucian Pintilie, with the almost 20 years he spent at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris, up to 1990, with his faithful partners Miruna and Radu Boruzescu, and his resounding hit with his performance, at the initiative of Jack Lang, of *Turandot*, in 1973 at the Théâtre National de Chaillot, was responsible for one of these cracks in the curtain.

We should also mention here again the great director and pedagogue Radu Penciulescu, who, having been invited to stage his *Ubu rege* ("King Ubu") at the Nancy Festival in 1976, turned the town upside down with the complicity of the American company Ridiculous Theatre.

The answer to the question as to how Romanian theatre is viewed in France, and in particular how visible it is, has evolved in time. Despite the enthusiasm witnessed immediately after the Revolution of 1989, the cooling off that occurred after the miners' riots risked ushering in a long hiatus, but, fortunately, all that was needed was to allow things to settle a little and, perhaps, to await the arrival of a new generation that was better integrated into the European theatrical landscape. After 30 years of freedom of movement, 12

6. Denis Bablet, "Vitalité du théâtre roumain", in *Lettres françaises*, n° 1212, 13 December 1967, pp. 23-24



*The Danaïdes*, directed by Silviu Purcărete 1992,  
• photo: Courtesy of TNCraiova

years of a shared destiny as part of the European Union, theatre no longer exists in a world without borders and for Romanian artists “to leave” is no longer identified with “exile”, that painful and desperate act.

#### Wide open stages or a theatre without borders

Romanian theatre came out of its isolation to find itself in a different political space. So, in 1989, everyone adored Romania... and the tours came one after the other. First was Alexandru Tocilescu's *Hamlet* starring Ion Caramitru (in whom the Parisian public still recognised the hero standing on the tanks during the Revolution) and Marcel Iureş, then *Noptile regilor* (“The Nights of the Kings”) starring Ştefan Iordache, a collage of Shakespearean soliloquys, directed by Alexa Visarion,<sup>7</sup> who was more familiar with American theatres thanks to his Fulbright scholarships. These productions crested the wave of immense sympathy triggered by the recent political events. Another divine moment was the *Eminescu* recital given by Ion Caramitru, with Emil Cioran in the audience, at the Théâtre de l'Athénée. Of course, they

*7. Nothing like the glacial atmosphere during the tour of Hamlet in 1975, starring Ştefan Iordache, directed by Dinu Cernescu and performed in the Salle Firmin Gémier at the Théâtre National de Chaillot before an audience made up of the Romanian diaspora and infiltrated by Securitate (secret police) informers. Polonius's advice to Laertes “To go to Paris and find out what the Danish in Paris think” caused much laughter among the audience, who had understood the double entendre, a technique in which they were well versed.*

were exceptionally well received because they existed in an exceptional climate and under extraordinary political and emotional conditions. Unlike playwrights, among whom Matei Vişniec is the most shining example, who need mediators or translators, directors acquired a new freedom, allowing them to wander back and forth across the European chess board free from the malediction of exile.

Having moved in 1969 to New York, where, in 1974, at La MaMa, he created *Fragments of a Trilogy*, also known as *The Ancient Trilogy* (*Medea, Electra and The Trojan Women*), based on Sophocles and Euripides, Andrei Şerban then returned to Romania after two decades of living in exile, restaging these works, in 1990, at the National Theatre in Bucharest in a Romanian production bursting with energy and creativity, subsequently also taking it on tour to Paris and the Grande halle de la Villette that same year. The production was unanimously well received, being described as an existential experience with mystical touches and declared a triumph by the press, the public and the diaspora alike. Şerban had already staged a production of *The Master and Margarita*, based on Mikhail Bulgakov and with stage design by Helmut Stürmer, at the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris in 1983, before in 2002 going on to put on a production, previously staged in Boston, of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* at the Comédie-Française. Not to mention his many productions for opera staged at the Opéra Bastille and the Palais Garnier.

Silviu Purcărete was quick to make a name for himself on the French theatrical scene. His productions at the National Theatre in Craiova

paved the way for international success: *Ubu Rege cu scene din Macbeth* (“King Ubu with Scenes from Macbeth”), based on Jarry and Shakespeare (staged immediately after the fall and death of the Ceauşescus), then *Titus Andronicus* by Shakespeare and *Phaedra* based on Euripides. *Danaidele* (“The Danaïdes”), based on Aeschylus and also staged in Craiova in 1994, was performed at the Avignon Festival in July 1996 in the Boulbon Quarry and then in Paris at the Grande halle de la Villette. That same year, Purcărete was appointed director of the Théâtre de l'Union-Centre dramatique National du Limousin, Limoges, where he would direct a number of productions, including *Oresteia* based on Aeschylus, *Three Sisters* by Chekov and *Dom Juan* by Molière. In September 1997, he opened l'Académie théâtrale de l'Union, a training centre for young actors that was later taken over by Paul Chriubă. His most famous production, known today throughout the world (with the exception of France, although it was performed in Brussels in 2011) began life at the festival in Chalon in 2004 in the form of his *Prologue à Faust* (“Prologue to Faust”), which prefaced his version of Goethe's *Faust* staged in Sibiu in 2009, when the city became the European Capital of Culture. There is not the space here to cover the entire international career of Silviu Purcărete and his time in Limoges, where he created a number of memorable productions. *Danaidele*, performed at the 50<sup>th</sup> Festival IN d'Avignon with a 120-strong cast, was described by Purcărete at the time as a “Babylonian spectacle”, with the press already noting the fact that it discussed Europe from the perspective of the right to asylum and the migrant crisis.

It is important to emphasise how his presence at the prestigious Avignon Festival helped establish a certain reputation for Romanian theatre. The decade was dominated by a number of great directors, such as Strehler, Chéreau, Vitez and Stein. Another positive effect was that Purcărete and his productions helped shine a light on one of the most important theatre festivals in Europe – namely the Shakespeare Festival in Craiova, founded by the tireless Emil Boroghină, who had coordinated the great tours of Purcărete's productions undertaken by the theatre from Craiova. The French public were discovering a director, not to mention a theatre and a festival, who would soon shine across Europe, from Stratford-upon-Avon to Gdańsk.

Romanian theatre has never stopped belonging to the history of European theatre. However, almost twenty years were to pass until, in 2014, we would once

more witness a Romanian production at the Festival IN d'Avignon, i.e. that directed by Gianina Cărbunariu, but this belongs to a different stage in the history of Romanian theatre abroad. It's clear that the new generation could no longer follow the same patterns. There had been a change in the society and, moreover, a change of codes.

### And the young guard attacked in closed ranks...

Again at Avignon, but this time at the OFF version of the festival, in 2008 Radu Afrim was presented with the "Coup de cœur de la presse" award for his *Paris Attic Overlooking Death* (French title: *Mansarde à Paris. Les détours Cioran*), a production he created in Luxembourg in 2007 for an international (Romanian, French and Luxembourg) cast, with the leading role played by Constantin Cojocaru (who also played the role of Ceaușescu in the Milo Rau film *The Last Days of the Ceaușescus*<sup>8</sup>screened at the Maison Jean Vilar). A different version of Vișniec's play, entitled *Sortez de l'armoire Monsieur Cioran!* ("Come Out of the Cupboard, Mr Cioran!"), was also performed at Avignon OFF by the Compagnie du grand Désherbage in collaboration with the Constanța State Theatre and directed by Radu Dinulescu. Radu Afrim returned to France in 2009, staging *The Sickness of the Family M*, by Fausto Paravidino and created at Timișoara National Theatre in 2008, at Théâtre de l'Odéon – Ateliers Berthier. The French critics wrote that the staging "raises the level of this subtle and unsettling text of a flamboyant symbolism", while also singling out the "solar grace of the young Eugen Jebeleanu, who, oscillating between joy and anger, appears to express the world's youth. This triple discovery – of a playwright, of a director and of an extraordinary company – marks a splendid end to an almost perfect season at the Odéon."<sup>9</sup>

The Festival OFF d'Avignon, always bursting with vitality, noise and provocation, is a veritable fair or market place of theatre of all colours, all genres, of poor theatre, commercial theatre and experimental theatre, and a place where we find many Romanian names. It brings together a great number of different productions and companies who go

8. Film produced by the International Institute of Political Murder and screened as part of the "Five Encounters with Romanian Contemporary Theatre" event, Théâtre du Bourg-Neuff ICR Paris and Scena.ro magazine. <https://room3.wordpress.com/2010/07/13/festival-davignon-theatre-roumain/#more-254>

9. Philippe Chevilley, "Famille dans les arbres" (*Families in Trees*), in *Les Echos*, 15 June 2009.

there at their own expense and at their own risk. It has grown from a few hundred in the earlier years, to the more than 1,500 titles at this year's edition. In 2005, Radu Dinulescu, a permanent feature at OFF d'Avignon, brought a mini-season from Arad, one of the more notable productions of which being that of another Matei Vișniec work, *Căi la fereastră* ("Horses at the Window"), starring Claudiu Bleonț and Victoria Cociăș. Over the duration of a month in 2013, the young actress Codrina Pricopoaia performed in Alina Nelega's *Amalia respiră adânc* ("Amalia Takes a Deep Breath"), directed by Bobi Pricop. The play, performed in French, was first staged in 2012 in the Byzantine Room of the Romanian Embassy in Paris under the aegis of the Romanian Cultural Institute. It's difficult to paint a comprehensive picture, but in terms of playwrights, one name stands out, i.e. that of Matei Vișniec, who was hailed in an article in *L'Express* magazine as "one of the four kings of Avignon" – after Molière, of course. Once more, Vișniec tears down all borders and surprises on all fronts.

As to the Festival IN d'Avignon, in terms of the Romanian participation, as I have already mentioned, there was nothing but silence until 2014, a silence eventually broken by Gianina Cărbunariu's production of *Solitaritate* ("Solitariness"), created by the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, with another of Gianina Cărbunariu's plays, *Tigrul sibiian* ("The Tiger of Sibiu"), also being staged, in 2016, by a Swedish company (directed by Sofia Jupither).

One of the circumstances facilitating Romanian theatre's encounter with the French public was the fact that it could be viewed as part of a generational trend. The theatre written and practiced by Gianina Cărbunariu, Alina Nelega and Nicoleta Esinencu is much closer to the young contemporary theatre of Sarah Kane, Biljana Srbljanović and Marius von Mayenburg than that of the Romanian classic playwrights, such as Camil Petrescu and Lucian Blaga. Theatre itself has changed in Romania, even if the conventional spheres, those of so-called "art theatre", still retain a privileged status. But what is of interest to us here is the emergence of a new generation with new aesthetics and new practices. And what may be of interest and pose more relevant questions to the West are precisely these new, suppler, more open forms.

The recent France-Romania Season was not wrong, therefore, when it chose to place young theatre in the spotlight.

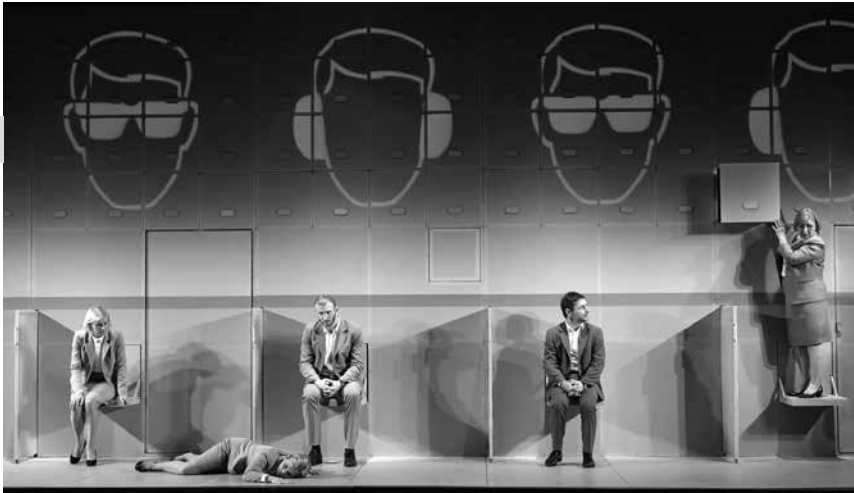
But the true spearhead of this generation remains Gianina Cărbunariu, one of the



*Mansarde in Paris* by M. Vișniec, directed by Radu Afrim  
• photo: Courtesy of R. Afrim

first Romanian voices to be heard loudly in France – initially in the productions of Christian Benedetti, staged between 2005 and 2009 at the Théâtre-Studio Alfortville, i.e. *Stop the Tempo!*, *Kebab* and *Alaltăieri, poimîine* ("The Day After Tomorrow, the Day Before Yesterday"), who was the first person in France to believe in her theatre. This vote of confidence was confirmed at the Festival IN d'Avignon in 2014 and later in the guise of many other tours with productions such as *Oameni obișnuți* ("Common People") and *Artists Talk*. (recently, as part of the France-Romania Season).

We should also mention the small but courageous publishers Edition de l'Instant, part of the Maison d'Europe et d'Orient (MEO), who have attempted to promote, alongside other Eastern European works of theatre, various new names, such as the aforementioned, which in this same spirit has staged play readings and encounters with the public in collaboration with the Romanian Cultural Institute in Paris. In fact, the stage of the Romanian Embassy, in the Byzantine Room, whose inspired name was given to it by a former director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Paris, in 2011 hosted a festival of young Romanian theatre entitled *Evenings at the Béhague Palace* with the support of then directors of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Paris, Katia Dănilă and Simona Rădulescu. And it was also no accident that there was already talk at the time of "a new wave" of Romanian theatre, with names launched there that would go on to achieve success on French and European stages, namely Alexandra Badea, Bobi Pricop, Eugen Jebeleanu, Peter Kerek, David Schwartz and Alina Șerban.



*Ordinary People, a production by Gianina Cărbunariu*  
 • photo: Adi Bulboacă, Courtesy of TNRS

### Milestones, itineraries and waiting for the world to change

Of this generation, which was increasingly in tune with European values, a few made a name for themselves, even becoming an integral part of the French scene, such as Alexandra Badea and others who continue to work between two countries, acting as a permanent bridge. Some more recent examples include Bogdan Zamfir and, in particular, Eugen Jebeleanu with his *Itinerarii sau într-o zi, lumea se va schimba* ("Itineraries or One Day the World Will Change"), which perfectly illustrates this mutual quest. The France-Romanian Season, which promoted the majority of the names cited above, attempted to highlight precisely this phenomenon, to explore and bring together two different cultures. What this programme showcased, beyond all the numbers, the plusses and minuses, "beyond clichés", was, first and foremost, an undiminished sense of curiosity and a desire for mutual recognition.

At the 2019 Festival IN d'Avignon, Alexandra Badea, who was born in Romania but has been living in France since 2003, staged the second part of her trilogy created at the Théâtre national de la Colline in 2018: *Points de non-retour* ("Points of No Return"). After the first part (*Thiaroyé, Quai de Seine* ("Seine Quayside")) is to be performed at Avignon in the summer of 2019 and again in Paris in November. Alexandra Badea, who studied directing in Bucharest, after staging the works of playwrights of her own generation (e.g. Mihaela Michailov, Sarah Kane and Nicoleta Esinencu) realised that she had her own truths and convictions and began writing in French. Hers is a political theatre, but it also deals in intimate things and is written in a fierce, violent, direct style. Her characters – in-between generations, in-between

different civilisations – are confronted with the shadowy parts of a past that cannot be forgotten, or the points of "non-retour" from which no one can come back. A theatre devoid of nostalgia, lucid and ultimately full of hope. Of a certain optimism about a Europe and world that is waiting to be built.

However, the performance that best illustrates the intentions that lie behind this dialogue between cultures, as represented by this dual Season, was without doubt *Itinerarii sau într-o zi, lumea se va schimba*. It is a French-Romanian production by dint of its authorship: written by a French playwright, Yan Verburgh, directed by a Romanian director, Eugen Jebeleanu, and featuring a mixed cast and mixture of languages – not just French and Romanian, but also Berber, because that is the language of the "representatives of diversity", the phrase used in France to describe immigrants, and aggressively anglophone, German because different peoples will mix together, etc. It is in fact a profoundly European production, expressing the fears and hopes of the young inhabitants of this continent that today faces constant threats. It is also a production that profoundly touched the Romanian public during its performances in Bucharest and Constanța, as well the French public in Valence, who resonated with the metaphor that speaks of travel or leaving, emigration and a new life.

And how could the spectators not recognise themselves, whether in Bucharest or in France, in the story of the family of Penguins who leave the Land of Ice or who recount their nights spent in Old Glacier Square calling for a fairer country and who set out in search of happiness in *The Other Country*. The production comprises a series of scenes performed by the six actors, life stories, mise-en-abyme moments, Chekhov, Strindberg, Sebastian, films, television shows, lines centred around

the themes of leaving, diversity, homosexuality, femininity, a painful relationship with one's father, the meaning of life... Playwright Yann Verburgh involved the actors, who contributed their own personal stories, some of which very intimate, essentially creating a collective work but whose script was revised and rewritten by Verburgh, a script pulsating with truth, energy and poetry. (He also wrote another play performed during the France-Romania Season, a well-known play in France called *Ogres*, which was also directed by Eugen Jebeleanu.)

The monologue by Ilinca Manolache, about the theatre that dies with Europe and rejects emotional theatre ("Theatre with roles, with emotions, with situations is dead") and even the political theatre she used to believe in, provides one of the most powerful moments of the production. "I used to believe that political theatre had the power to change the world. I no longer believe that theatre holds this power. I no longer believe it will save us from disaster. We all know this and still we believe in this great collective lie... When I think of the Europe of tomorrow, I see theatre dying. I see theatre dying in a Europe that will be nothing but a fortress. An open-air museum for rich foreigners..."

Despite this desperate cry, from the bottom of the heart, visceral and presented to the public with extraordinary force (what an amazing actor Ilinca Manolache is!), the production is heartrending (on some evenings in Valence certain moments were dubbed by a sign language actor, Géraldine Berger, thus rendering it even more moving, a world where the heart is a sign and tears a gesture) but still leaves room for hope. One day, the world will change. But in what way, that is the question. After 30 years of freedom, desperation and confused hopes, we now know that theatre cannot change the world, but it can make us think differently... This kind of performance has perhaps arrived just in time.

---

*Mirella Patureau graduate philology studies in Bucharest University and holds a PhD in theatre studies from Paris III Sorbonne. She is a theatre critic and member of THALIM/ CNRS, France, The Romanian Association of Translators, SACD and Romanian section of the International Association of Theatre Critics. Patureau authored numerous studies focused on new writing for the stage, new technologies in performance and Romanian contemporary theatre. Her work was published in collective volumes published by CNRS Editions and L'Age d'Homme. Her latest study – Voices and faces of reality on Romanian stages - was published in the volume Documentary theatre, Deuxieme epoque edition, Paris, 2019.*