

Chapter 32. Romania

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Abstract

In the thirty-odd years since the Romanian Revolution, theatre and performance artists have endeavoured to (re)align themselves with current European trends and to find a space for their practice in a diverse cultural landscape. There was a short-lived attempt to reform the old system, however, younger practitioners were not involved with this, and a novel ossification of institutional structures was ushered in. The co-existence of state-funded and independent theatres has resulted in rival cultures, which continues to trigger further opposition and inequality. Despite this, the Romanian theatre landscape is rooted in resilience and reinvention: there are performances in multiple forms, genres and languages, and several companies have broadened their demographic by reaching out to a national and, at times, global spectatorship.

Context: the Romanian theatre landscape

When addressing contemporary theatre and performance culture in Romania, it is still difficult not to reference the country's emergence from totalitarian rule in December 1989 (cf. Sellar 2009). In the thirty-odd years that have elapsed since the Romanian Revolution, theatre and performance artists have been preoccupied with (re)aligning themselves with current European and global trends and with finding a space for their practice in a diverse cultural landscape. Whereas during the communist era performances were subject to politically motivated censorship imposed by the Communist Party, and a number of topics were simply out of bounds, the post-communist period ushered in a free-for-all, albeit at a time when competition for audience attention was already shared with twenty-four-hour media consumption (cf. Klaić 2009, Popescu 2000, Malița 2006). Moreover, in the first few years of the new regime, immersion into the ongoing performance known as everyday life was equally appealing, with many previously loyal theatregoers opting to attend demonstrations or political rallies, rejoicing in their newfound opportunity to exercise their rights as citizens. Despite this initial hiatus in audience endorsement, most theatre makers did not hesitate to grasp the opportunity for a fresh start, on the one hand, by joining political

debates themselves, and on the other, by reflecting – through the lens and means of performance – on current events. There was arguably an attempt, albeit short-lived, to reform the old system, by offering managerial roles in most public theatre institutions to important expatriate figures in Romanian theatre, who were asked to return from exile in the early nineties. However, younger practitioners were not involved in this overhaul, some of them concentrating instead on setting up independent platforms.

Looking back from the vantage point of three decades, it is still essential to insist on further change. Despite the founding of UNITER (the Romanian Theatre Union) and the unprecedented wave of initiatives that energized Romanian theatre in the 1990s (including the introduction of financial support for artists in need), a novel ossification of institutional structures was soon ushered in that led to numerous discontents (cf. Ciobotari 2018). Cristina Modreanu's contention (2020, 91), that the co-existence of state-funded and independent theatres has resulted in two radically opposed cultures is highly accurate: the former benefitting from financial security yet generally steering clear of risk-taking approaches, the latter, battling an ongoing lack of financial means but passionate about fresh topics and innovative means of expression.

In this context it is fair to say that genuine change is driven by artists who approach theatre from new perspectives, keen to integrate a participatory dimension into productions. In parallel, we are also witnessing resilience and continuous reinvention. Despite urgent concerns over the controversial laws governing the funding and management of theatres that have direct implications on artistic choices (cf. Runcan 2018), it is vital to celebrate that theatres in Romania put on performances in multiple forms, genres, and languages – in addition to Romanian, in Hungarian, German, Serbian, and Yiddish – and there is an emerging movement to represent the experience of the Roma community. In this landscape, several theatres make significant efforts to broaden their demographic alongside serving a niche audience, and thus reach out to a national and, in some cases, global spectatorship.

Cultures of theatre-making: Trends, directions, and major practitioners

Two staples of Romanian theatre, for which it is internationally known, are its directors and well-oiled ensembles. Both during the communist period and in its aftermath, Romanian theatre has been characterized by bold productions, mainly of canonical plays, staged by directors seeking auteur status and working with regular ensembles, with whom they have perfected highly efficient collaborative methods. Typical in this sense is the work of Silviu

Purcărete with the Radu Stanca National Theatre of Sibiu, culminating in landmark events such as *Faust* (2008). This legendary staging of Goethe's play has toured to most international festivals and epitomizes Purcărete's penchant for monumental productions of total theatre that offer an overwhelming immersive experience (cf. Dundjerović 2010, Komporaly 2017b). In his creative processes, Purcărete is aided by regular collaborators – set designers Helmuth Stürmer and Dragoș Buhagiar, costume designer Lia Manțoc, and composer Vasile Șirli – and together they are responsible for what could be termed as the Purcărete brand. Notwithstanding the success of this aestheticising model, in recent years the director's approach has become subtly reinvented, in the shape of a turn towards popular forms of performance and site specificity, and this is an ambition for renewal that only few artists have managed to sustain.

In contrast to the scale and working methods of long-established directors such as Andrei Șerban, Mihai Măniuțiu, Alexandru Dabija, Gábor Tompa, László Bocsárdi or Victor Ian Frunză, who have forged a reputation for staging key dramatic texts in purpose-built theatres, younger directors move between a range of creative forms, at a variety of venues, and have re-appropriated political theatre to address topical concerns. Radu Afrim, considered the most talented director of his generation, stages both author-attributed and collaboratively devised pieces, while David Schwartz is involved in numerous socially engaged projects.. Modreanu talks about the 'rock star' status of Afrim and argues that his success is due to the immersive soundscapes that offer spectators an insight into the lives of marginal characters (2020, 58; 155). Botond Nagy is preoccupied with a similar relevance to the here and now as he excels in radical adaptations for alternative formats, thus updating the canon for a young audience. Rooted in a journalistic documentation of burning issues, the work of Bogdan Georgescu and Gianina Cărbunariu locates ethical considerations at the core of performance making, and approaches artistic projects from the point of view of contemporary relevance. Eugen Jebeleanu speaks up for gay rights, alongside a cluster of performers who draw on the tradition of performance art in order to forge a feminist politics in a predominantly patriarchal culture. Ioana Păun, Mihaela Drăgan, Mihaela Michailov, and Catinca Drăgănescu are emblematic figures in an effort to challenge sexism, domestic violence, and sexual abuse in society, while applied theatre projects such as *Homemade* (2016) braid scientific research and live performance in order to explore inter-generational relations and the role of the family in contemporary Romania. Devised principles are gradually becoming prevalent in performance (for example, in the GroundFloor Group's *Parallel* (2013) created from the proposals of performers and co-written by the team directed

by Ferenc Sinkó and Leta Popescu, addressing themes such as the body, sexual identity, acceptance and repression), and there is an emerging movement that champions improvisation and collective creation.

Romanian theatre structures have long included dramaturgs, and as a rule of thumb, plays are thoroughly researched, and translations updated. For instance, András Visky, resident dramaturg of the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, has been working with Gábor Tompa on the company's most successful productions, such as Eugène Ionesco's *Bald Primadonna*, but also with other ensembles and directors, for example with Purcărete on Imre Madách's *Az ember tragédiája/The Tragedy of Man*. Visky's work is underpinned by the concept of 'barrack dramaturgy' – emerging from the need to make confinement a shared experience, whereby performers and audiences become 'prisoners of [their] free will' (Visky 2015, 467). This entails enclosure into a space in which the performing and spectating areas are blurred, and the act of being locked in finishes with a mutual liberation through which participatory understanding is explored (Kompóraly 2017a). Theoretical reflection on creative practice has accompanied the work of Gábor Tompa and Mihai Măniuțiu, too, who published several volumes of essays and thus fused diverse skills underpinning the creative processes.

Notable in terms of collaborations is the rare case of a translator as part of the core creative team: the director-translator-dramaturg alliance of Zsolt Zakariás and Ágota Bereczky have worked together on Matéi Visniec productions at the Szigligeti Theatre in Oradea and the Sándor Tomcsa Theatre at Odorheiu Secuiesc (Kompóraly, 2020). George Volceanov, as the coordinator of the monumental series of new Shakespeare translations is another case in point, his translations and those of Horea Gârbea and Lucia Verona being the ones most contemporary productions have started to turn to, thus rejuvenating the language of Shakespearean performance.

Theatre criticism is a vibrant field and reviews are published in cultural magazines such as *Observator Cultural* and online platforms. The most important specialist journals are *Teatrul Azi* and *Scena.ro*, together with the Hungarian-language publication *Játéktér*. Influential theatre critics include Cristina Modreanu, Marina Constantinescu, Ludmila Patlanjoglu, Octavian Saiu, Iulia Popovici, Oltița Cântec, Miruna Runcan, Kinga Boros, and Andrea György, not to mention the Paris-based George Banu, who continues to be actively involved with the Romanian stage.

After the dearth of playwriting in the late communist period, the noughts saw an upsurge in writing for the stage. In parallel with playwrights who started their careers in the eighties such as the internationally renowned Matéi Visniec (cf. Kompóraly 2015), the new

millennium witnessed the emergence of a host of diverse voices. In addition to introducing variety in terms of form and content, the plays of Elise Wilk, Saviana Stănescu, Peca Ștefan, Andreea Vălean, Vlad Zograf, Alexandra Pâzgu, Alexandra Badea, András Visky, and Csaba Székely have also offered opportunities for collaboration with the independent sector. Moreover, they have modelled a transnational trend whereby several playwrights write in both Romanian and their adopted language, such as English (Stănescu), French (Badea, Visniec), or German (Pâzgu). The first platform dedicated to new texts was Dramafest (1997), which gave rise to Andreea Vălean's *Eu când vreau să fluier, fluier* (When I want to whistle, I whistle, 1998), to this day influential for its direct, up-to-date language. Particularly poignant is the work of Gianina Cărbunariu, who writes and directs her material, and who is also active as the manager of the Piatra Neamț Youth Theatre, thus straddling the independent and subsidised sector (Modreanu 2013, 2016 and Tompa 2014). Cărbunariu came to prominence as the co-founder of the platform for new writing dramAcum (dramaNow), which in its confrontation with real problems of everyday life can also be interpreted as 'theatre of urgency'. Cărbunariu is the author of *Stop the Tempo* (2003, published in English in the collection *roMania After 2000*), a piece that achieved manifesto status for a generation educated after the communist era, and of numerous productions with a bold social and political remit. International collaboration is also fuelled via the 'Fabulamundi' network (Alina Nelega, Michailov, Székely, etc.), and a number of artists such as Cărbunariu, Tompa, and Afrim have forged their own transnational connections. Fabulamundi has, in fact, included Romania in its latest survey of contemporary playwriting and theatre translation cultures in Europe, focusing on current systems and perceptions in place (cf. Laera, 2020).

Institutional structures: Hierarchies and funding

Moving from a centralized system of subsidized theatres with permanent companies in major cities, post-1990 the number of theatre and performance organizations has increased manifold, and many existing ones have changed status and focus. As Iulia Popovici observes (2015, 225), Romania did not have a samizdat (underground) culture, hence alternative theatre movements did not exist, and independent theatre only appeared after the 1989 Revolution, with ACT Theatre being one of the first such platforms that is still in operation. To this day, the mainstream is aligned to dominant power structures and the independent sector is situated in continuous opposition, replicated at funding level, which means that theatres classed of national importance fare the best (Bucharest, Sibiu, Cluj, Iași, Craiova,

Timișoara). For this reason, criticism has been levelled at national theatres, with Runcan arguing that a theatre 'paid for with public money and receiving National as a title, should be a space of cultural research through art, but also of public debate by way of art,' and not a museum of dated work (2018, 238). Runcan sees hope in some of the less generously financed state theatres, even if their denomination does not include this term. Most of them are successors of institutions harking back to the communist era, such as Oradea, Sfântu Gheorghe, Arad, and Constanța. In this category, there are a number of theatres staging work in languages other than Romanian (e.g. the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, the Tamási Áron Theatre Sfântu Gheorghe, the State Jewish Theatre Bucharest, the German State Theatre of Timișoara), as are in the category of municipal theatres. Also of municipal rank are many Bucharest-based theatres, such as the Mic Theatre and the Bulandra Theatre, former home to some of the country's best-loved performers and directors, such as Liviu Ciulei, Cătălina Buzoianu, Alexandru Darie, and the theatre responsible for Alexandru Tocilescu's legendary anti-totalitarian *Hamlet* (1985). One of the most recently founded municipal theatres (2016), named after Matéi Visniec, has already garnered attention due to its annual festival fronted by Visniec himself.

Hosting large  festivals has become a staple of several theatres, the most prominent being the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, rivalling Edinburgh and Avignon for its scale and ambition. The festival's founder, Constantin Chiriac is a major figure among European cultural managers, who has turned the relatively quaint Transylvanian city of Sibiu into a global destination. Though much smaller in size, the biannual Interferences Festival organized by the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj is also a platform for high-profile international encounters, in addition to which in November 2019 the theatre hosted the first Union des Théâtres de l'Europe (UTE) Festival in over a decade. As one of the two Romanian UTE members, the theatre led by Gábor Tompa is perhaps the most tuned in to international trends, by extensive touring and hosting visiting practitioners. As a result of such exposure, this theatre has pioneered translated surtitles for most productions, transcending its remit as a company for a minority audience and emerging as a theatre of the city, if not the country and the continent. The annual Shakespeare Festival at the Marin Sorescu National Theatre of Craiova is a similarly international affair, offering, on the one hand, an insight into top Shakespeare productions, and on the other, engaging with cutting-edge scholarship by nurturing links with academic institutions. The most important forum surveying the best Romanian theatrical outputs is the annual National Theatre Festival, complemented by the European Festival of Performing Arts/FEST-FDR Timișoara, , the Oradea Short Play

Festival, the International Encounters at the National Theatre of Cluj and REFLEX Festival Sfântu Gheorghe. The UNITER Gala Awards reward best performance in a number of categories, and are the most prestigious form of professional recognition.

When it comes to spaces for artistic experimentation, innovative agendas can be found at the Teatrul Tineretului in Piatra Neamţ, the Figura Studio Theatre in Gheorgheni – known as incubators for young talent already during the previous regime. The universities of Cluj, Craiova, Iaşi, and Sibiu conduct the training of the next generation of theatre makers – in addition to pre-1989 facilities in Bucharest and Târgu Mureş – while at Cluj and Târgu Mureş there is an opportunity to study in Hungarian, and at Sibiu and Timişoara in German. Pioneers of Romanian independent performance includes the Luni Theatre at the Green Hours Club, the Impossible Theatre and of course ACT Theatre, while projects exploring living room theatre have also started to thrive (cf. Cadariu, 2018). Among the institutions coming to prominence over the last decade, alternative venues such as Reactor, Fabrica de Pensule (Paintbrush Factory) and Zug.zone (powered by the Váróterem Projekt/Waiting Room Project) in Cluj, Theatre 3G-Târgu Mureş, UNTEATRU, and Replika in Bucharest are the most noteworthy, all of these attracting a younger demographic and practitioners who started their careers post-1989. Much of this work explores socially sensitive issues, often in collaboration with NGOs. For instance, the Waiting Room project has pioneered the provocative staging of classics in a classroom context, insisting on bold post-performance debates to shake up the conservative education system. The vibrant company Giuvlipen, currently campaigning for state theatre status, was founded with the aim to enhance the visibility of Roma performers and to bring taboo subjects to public attention (cf. *Roma Heroes*, 2019; Komporaly, 2021). Theatres for young audiences include a number of marionette theatres, such as Țândărică in Bucharest, Colibri in Craiova, Ariel in Târgu Mureş, and Puck in Cluj, alongside regional initiatives that are less permanent. Several theatres catering for an adult audience also put on children's programmes and, conversely, Puck Theatre in Cluj forged a reputation for staging subversive work back in the 1980s, at a time when most mainstream theatres would have been wary of undermining the regime in power.

In sum, it is important to strike a balance between highlighting achievements and voicing discontents about the current state of Romanian theatre – including the relative weakness of the independent sector and ongoing controversies around funding. While some theatres have introduced annually negotiated contracts to enhance artistic standards and to carry out a structural overhaul, others continue to be comfortable with the stability afforded

by relatively minor creative and administrative challenges. Thus, conformism is situated side by side to risk-taking, and radical interventions are balanced out by commercially oriented pieces of entertainment. Crucially though, Romanian theatre has the potential to display vitality, fortitude, and adaptability to change. In the wake of the COVID pandemic, several theatres turned to outdoor performing opportunities, building improvised stages in parks and gardens, some also adjusting their artistic concepts and rehearsal strategies to accommodate new forms of creation and spectatorship. As a result, the first Romanian productions fully conceived for an online audience premiered in spring-summer 2020, such as Radu Nica's reconfiguration of *Pool (No Water)* from a studio performance to a mesmerising installation at the boundaries of theatre and video art, another first in Romanian theatre culture. As artistic hierarchies get less relevant in the face of collaborative work, the boundaries between different contributions to the overall performance become increasingly blurred and, all being well, will lead to genuine cultural democratization and decentralization.

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