

The Romanian Multimedia Theatre Dictionary – a Digital Historical Recovery Process

Project review: *The Romanian Multimedia Theatre Dictionary*



Besides an already troubled and uncertain background, the pandemic accelerated the need for digitization and digitalization as such. At the same time, from an optimistic perspective, it rushed this process in several areas. The lack of interest (and professionalism, we might say) for Romanian theatre's archives has led to an unfortunate consequence: they are either very difficult to reach or they are buried inside the basement of a theatre or of a library and completely forgotten. In the last thirty years, no dictionary containing a coherent and systematic recent history of the Romanian theatre emerged.

Therefore, the ARPAS¹ initiative, meant to recover recent cultural memory, is based on the needs of the present. The project curated by the theatre critic Cristina Modreanu, joined by two well-known Romanian universities, through their theatre faculties, namely Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, and the University of Arts of Târgu Mureş, both bringing together more than 20 specialists in the field of theatre and their students, became extremely necessary, while also addressing both the attention of the new generations and the researchers.

The project, which was planned to be exclusively digital, aims, as mentioned on the website, to bring, through the use of new media technologies, the history of the Romanian theatre closer to the new generation. The historical period that the project coordinators and collaborators assumed they would cover was 1950-2020. The project collaborators include theatre critics and researchers such as Miruna Runcan, Oltița Cântec, Anca Hațiegan, Mirella Nedelcu-Patureau, Oana Cristea-Grigorescu and others. By switching to the online environment, they redesigned the archives, ordering them into a user-friendly, free of charge and easy-to-access platform.

The dictionary, a novel approach in the Romanian space, currently comprises fifty files, being divided into two sections, that are alphabetically organized: *artists* and *performances*. Every artist (theatre directors, actors, stage designers) has an artistic biography, a teatrography, a filmography, photos from their performances and of their posters, video or audio conversations, chronicles and links to other relevant materials. For now, the artists' section contains thirty-one files with information about artists such as: Leopoldina Bălănuță, Radu Penciulescu, David Esrig, Cătălina Buzoianu, Margareta Niculescu, György Harag or Alexandru Tocilescu.

The performances' section greets the visitors with nineteen multimedia files, that include iconic performances, such as: *Cum vă place/As You Like It*, directed by Liviu Ciulei (Lucia Sturdza Bulandra Theatre, 1961), *O Trilogie Antică/ An Antique Trilogy*, directed by Andrei Șerban (Ion Luca Caragiale National Theatre, 1990), *Efectul razelor gama asupra anemonelor/ The Effect of*

1. ARPAS is the Romanian Association for Promoting Performing Arts, also the editor of *Scena.ro* quarterly.

Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, directed by Cătălina Buzoianu (Mic Theatre, 1977), *Macbeth*, directed by Aureliu Manea (Ploiești State Theatre, 1976), or *Livada de Vișini/ The Cherry Orchard* directed by György Harag (Târgu Mures National Theatre, Romanian section, 1985). Every file brings to the attention of the platform's visitors information about the performance in a dedicated critical article, the complete distribution, posters, photos from the performance, extracts from the chronicles, complementary links and, in the case of some performances, their program in the form of a notebook. The multitude of elements present in the mentioned files and their interactive character do not only manage to provide information, but also to redesign important events from the Romanian theatre, and to preserve the past in a current, contemporary manner, adapted to the times we live in.

At a time when the performative events take place into specific frameworks, the labour market – especially in the field of art – is becoming more and more globalized. In this context, the *Romanian Multimedia Theatre Dictionary* aims, by establishing the directions and criteria for the selection of the artists, to promote European values and to present those artists who have provided, in a restrictive context – namely the communist period – a link of communication between domestic and global practices: "(...) thus the selection comprises those creators who, during the period that we are analyzing, have made the connection between the Romanian scene and that of the world, despite the conditions of isolation dictated by a totalitarian system"².

The dictionary is a work in progress, the letters of the alphabet are not all present in neither of the two sections. As the initiators themselves state, their wish is to continue extending the project as they access the necessary funds. Despite the uncertainty generated by the lack of constant funding, the project is long-term oriented, and it will grow step by step, but quite slowly, unfortunately. The need for recovery, for reimagining and for the preservation of Romanian theatrical movement's history, as well as of

2. The Romanian Multimedia Theatre Dictionary, <https://www.dmtr.ro/>, accessed on July 13, 2021.

the artistic cultural heritage in general, is an urgent one and has been reported on numerous occasions by researchers, practitioners and people working in the cultural fields.

The fact that the Ministry of Culture does not prioritize, through coherent financing policies, such an approach as the one started by the *Romanian Multimedia Theatre Dictionary* demonstrates, once again, the lack of vision regarding cultural policies and particularly the management of archives by reactivating the cultural heritage.

Fortunately, at the time of writing this review, the Dictionary, awarded at the AFCN Gala (co-sponsor of the project), received a new grant, and thus, it will be completed with fifty additional files coming in November 2021. The emergence of the *Romanian Multimedia Theatre Dictionary* represents a small (as of right now), but important step towards the modernization of the Romanian archives, that gets us closer to the 21st century. Through the power of example, we hope that the approach will be emulated by other artistic fields.

We are convinced that the project will demonstrate its relevance over time (had it not happened yet) and that it will bring into question, in a concrete and articulate way, the need to rethink the archives in a digital format, in a thorough manner. The Dictionary will also create a bridge between young people and history, by using a modern and attractive language.

We can only hope that the project will be carried out, that it will achieve its mission and that it will influence other people to get involved and start similar projects. Even if it sounds utopian now, it would be incredible (and we think it's achievable) to have such digital archives, that also include a history of the Romanian films or, why not, of the visual arts or music. Until then, we are counting on the dedication, patience and perseverance of the project's initiators and, of course, we hope that it will be funded until the end – and accessed by as many people as possible, whether we talk about students, researchers or the general, theatre-loving audiences.

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