

Anti-Establishment Documentary Theatre

Performance review: *Capete înfierbântate 2020* by Mihaela Michailov & David Schwartz, directed by David Schwartz, with: Alexandru Potocean, Oana Rusu, Teodora Retegan, Maria Sgârcitu. (A production of Centrul Educațional de Teatru Replika, October 2020)

Capete înfierbântate 2020 (*Heated Heads 2020*) continues the performing endeavour which started in 2010 with the homonymous performance and which brought the 1990 Mineriad back to our attention. This time, this second premiere of *Stagiunea Digitală de Teatru Politic 2020* (*2020 Political Theatre Digital Season*) has drawn inspiration from an acute contemporary situation: the crisis of the Romanian medical system caused (or rather revealed) by the fight against SARS-CoV-2. The project team reunited around this burning topic is made up of Mihaela Michailov and David Schwartz – co-authors of the text, the latter having also directed the performance, joined by Alexandru Potocean (the actor-performer of *Capete înfierbântate 2010/Heated Heads 2010*), and Oana Rusu, as well as Teodora Retegan and Maria Sgârcitu, the latter two having created the music accompanying the scenic movement, which was choreographed by Mihai Mihalcea. The scenography was designed by Irina Gâdiuță, and Cătălin Rulea was the graphic designer. An essential aspect of the text construction and the performance structure is the collaboration with Dora Constantinovici for research, as the authors highlight the role of the interviews with doctors and labour union members, first and foremost.

The performance raises political and social stakes, engaging in a real critique of the system's defects, thwarting its successive cosmetic improvements. Thus, it reveals its incapacities in a critical situation happening now, with the aim to ring a bell and find immediate solutions. Starting from this pain spot – talking about a crisis from within it – *Capete înfierbântate* addresses us all, not limiting itself to a sole perspective on reality, though not assuming a

prescriptive standpoint, despite its social commitment. The performance starts with a performative structure in which the actors take stands and requestion the official or mass-media data (the shutting down of certain institutes or hospitals, so-called actions meant to make the system more efficient, etc.), or excerpts from politicians' speeches. The musical-choreographic level layers over the textual (quoted) level, showing the (civic and civil) attitude of the four actors. Irina Gâdiuță's functional set is built under our eyes by the actors, who rearrange storage cases, as these turn into various set objects in conjunction with the metal frames, a reference to the medical universe (wheeled screens used to separate beds). Two laptops are used openly, as well as microphones for singing and talking once actors take their performer status, all within the framework of the same logic of minimalistic expression. Beyond the music itself, the soundscape is created by using object plays crystallizing the urgency of putting on the medical protective suit during the pandemic (zippers, gloves, pill bottles, scissors).



Fig. 1. Alexandru Potocean, Oana Rusu, Maria Sgârcitu și Teodora Rategan.
Photo by Oana Monica Nae.

A specific fragmental rhythm ensures the transition from this performative context to concrete, realistically-interpreted situations. From the young doctor who has to move because he works in a risk area, to the flat owner, who can no longer put up with the psychological stress or the cramming in her own house; from the businessman who asks to be infected to prove that the virus is harmless, to the Romanian nurse at the retirement home in Italy. Short characteristic scenes create meaning precisely through the multiple perspectives. The message is clear: the privatization may cause the health system (that should be social-oriented) to collapse; however, the speeches and monologues do not favour a sole vision on the truth. As the author suggested, the effects of the sanitary crisis cannot be the same for all of us: vulnerability and poverty become more acute among those who were already affected by these, and we ask whether these appear under various forms among the privileged or, on the contrary, reinforce their position of power.

The play is based on evident contrasts, provoking the (re)thinking of all types of emotions and empathy. The spectators must requestion and reconceptualize, according to their own system of values, what would normally constitute a form of justice, the ethical gesture, morality. People throw bleach on the doctor's door, so he is forced to leave his home; the landlady who had rented him the flat goes through a crisis ('four zoom calls in three rooms'), and the most significant line is: "Go be a hero at your hospital, not in my house! The battle for survival has begun!" However, the critical distance imposed through the performative character of certain moments, getting in and breaking character does not validate the ethical judgement of all these, as the spectators is the one to decide the culprits for each character's small drama.

The scenic discourse is devised on antithesis – visible in the case of the patients who call 911: an old lady with no one to care for her and in need of food and drugs, the detached, ironic hoaxers in contrast with the spreading and the seriousness of the virus. The same process highlights the contrast between appearance and essence of the private health system (the publicity and cover-up logic vs. the reality of the patient), in the situation showing the morgue nurse's empathy, as she slowly slips on the path of corruption. The public system lacks funds for equipment, the gaps grow

ever wider, leading to the resignation of medical staff, yet the social media-fed public opinion tends to focus on the sexist denigration of women or on the claimed corruption-incompetence rather than on the legitimacy of its opposition. Another revealing aspect comes in the form of the playful moments, based on real facts, discussing the way in which public money goes to waste in useless projects and purchasing procedures: from parks, to overpriced electronics, and Easter decorations in the middle of the pandemic – “we live in a fantasy world, as if there were no pandemic, right here at the city hall, where one can have anything, even if it costs hundreds of thousands of lei”.

Highly varied accents, from playful to comical, pathetic to emotional, or from powerful to rebellious, melt into civil attitudes, intentional fragmentations, songs, blackout, or changes under our eyes. The actor is not only “seen”, but is also the performer who thus directly draws spectators’ attention to the discourse manipulation they have been put through over time. The Brechtian character is assumed as the dominant aesthetic, while the political note of the show is not ideologizing; on the contrary, it refuses to be prescriptive to the benefit of awakening critical thinking.

Scenes such as the one with the Romanian nurse’s painful, acquiescent speech about the countless people who die in the Italian retirement home where she works, or that with the Roma woman living in one of the 170 shacks next to the landfill aim to get to our hearts, but also to finally make us aware of these truths. The political theatre promoted by the team focuses on representativity, especially when it comes to victims and the marginalized. The topic of the Romanian medical system collapsing during the pandemic also includes other socially relevant subthemes that develop very varied characters: the situation of the Romanian education system (“four zoom calls in three rooms”), gender discrimination (in the case of the ICU doctor), the illusion of finding salvation in the private system (“suffering is also not knowing whether you will be able to provide food for your family tomorrow”, “I now have no one”, “I have two children to support through college”), or those who take advantage of the collective suffering by selling overpriced rubbing alcohol, face masks, gloves, protective glasses – “the new currency”.

However, the show does not slip into melodrama, but touches the audience precisely to cause a Brechtian awakening: getting in and breaking character happens under the audience's eyes through minimal lighting and costume changes, spectacular metamorphoses that show how versatile Alexandru Potocean and Oana Rusu are. Moreover, the fresh, original contemporary music, the choreography, the irony and humour dissipate all melodramatic nuances, while amplifying, with notes of assumed cynicism, the seriousness of the themes and situations approached.

In terms of the research behind it, the performances is not aimed to be a mere re-enactment or archive of real situations (symptomatic examples for these techniques are the collage of political speeches, or of the restructuring of the position of businessman Viorel Cataramă). Realities and identities are fictionalized – the story of tycoons or particular social cases are not significant, but the social-scale representativeness of certain categories that have divergent opinions and visions on the same critical situations.

Incapacities and cosmetic changes are shown in parallel to the truth, both fragile and rough, of the system victims. The scene in which Alexandru Potocean shows the audience a young man dependent on dialysis who is forced to transfer from the public to the private health system (in which he is, in fact, cared for by the same medical team as in public hospitals) is created using the same contrast appearance-essence, through a simple musical and scenographic play. The antithesis is built on several levels – between the two discourses – one by the hospital, following the publicity logic, doubled by the narcotizing voice, and the other by Andrei, victim of a cover-up situation, as well as between the words and the actions of the two nurses.

A central element of the performance is the portrait of the doctor outlined on various notes: from a hero's poetic...

Your face in the mirror, Full of dark spots, Your cheeks, two slices of sweaty meat, Your eyes, two deep holes, Your hands, harsh wrinkled strips of skin, Your fingers, strips of crushed creases. You're but traces. Nothing but traces...

To acknowledging his limits in a vulnerable, deficient system:

Our protection – our body! (...) Sacrifice yourselves, for that's why you've chosen the path of medicine! Yesterday we were corrupt, today we're heroes. Second-hand heroes, sacrificed in depleted hospitals! To be able to fight, you should be alive, right?

The image of the realistic, empathic morgue nurse (who disinfects the banknotes given to her as bribery for cleaning the corpses and allows or takes photos of them for their relatives) is representative for the Romanian medical system, which is full of contrasts and in need of urgent saving.

The final scene ensures a circular end to these homonymous performances, by once again bringing to the limelight the political personality most prominent in the 2010 performance, who also inspired the title – Ion Iliescu. The criticism of the medical system is thus meant to find causes. As a pastiche of the final scene of *Richard III* or of the ancient tragedy, which shows the Erinyes, the former Romanian president is haunted by the spirits of the hospitals, the clinics, and the institutes that were gradually closed down by the so-called democratic government, which ruined the social health system.

Juggling between several registers – from tragic to comic, from re-enactment to fictionalization, social representativity or performativeness, by advancing Brechtian means of social and political critique – from distance and fragmentism to songs and multiple perspectives, *Capete înfierbântate 2020* is a fresh performance not only on the pandemic period, but also for the sore points of the Romanian health system.

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