

## *The Public Consciousness of the Transition*

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**Abstract:** The decade following the Romanian Revolution, generally known as “the transition,” saw radical changes in the economic and social fabric of the country, with one apparent exception: the public theatre system. At the same time, the monopoly the winners of post-communism developed on the discourse about the transition and the traditional practices of cultural production delayed any artistic representation of that period for at least another decade. The article tackles the issue of this delayed public reflection on the long-term effects of the transition, how the theatre managed to preserve its own oblivion to these effects, and how the independent theatre of a new generation of artists engaged, after the financial crisis of 2008-2011, in a public reckoning of the ongoing legacy of the transition.

**Keywords:** post-communist transition, political theatre, independent theatre.

What do we mean by “public culture”? Is it only about culture as the collective term indicating the totality of arts and other (collectively recognized) manifestations of human creativity and intellectual achievement, and public as opposed to private?

Does the primary reference for ‘public’ refer to ‘belonging to the state’ (in terms of production or financing)? Or, on the contrary, the meaning of the phrase we are talking about is a broad one, anchored in sociology rather than in arts and heritage, in which culture represents the whole set of beliefs, values, attitudes and practices of a society, and the adjective ‘public’ refers to

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their mediated negotiation, through the free participation of as many societal factors as possible (mainly in the press, and in recent decades, to an increasing extent, in *social media*)?<sup>2</sup> The ambiguity of the acceptance is due, we might say, not so much to the non-existence of an “intellectual art and production” anchored in a public policy and a “state” financing system in the United States (where the subject of “public culture” has been theorized on the most in a sociological, broader sense), but to the constant weakening, in recent decades, of the public component of culture in Europe, where it had become state policy in the first post-war decades. A constant weakening attributed to the social and political paradigm shifts, the struggle lost by Keynesianism in the face of libertarian economic theories and the privilege of the financial-objective perspective, to the detriment of that of “public good/service” one, when it comes to culture and the arts. And in terms of theater, as Dragan Klaic, a leading expert in cultural policy, explains at leisure in his book, *Resetting the Stage. Public Theatre Between the Market and Democracy* (2012), a rationale for the decline in support for subsidized production has been the success of commercial theatre since the 1980s, supported entirely by its own revenues.

In fact, and Klaic is far from being the only one who notes this, *the crisis* (of system, of mission, etc.) has been the constant state of existence of the theater since the 1960s – more precisely, with the dislocation of the homogeneity of the audience;<sup>3</sup> in other words, once the pact of common values that united the communities of spectators and artists was broken by theatrical movements concerned with what separates us more than what we share.

The very reason for the institutionalization of culture and its public funding has, historically (since the 19<sup>th</sup> century), to do with the creation of a homogenous society in terms of collective values – first of all, the feeling of belonging to a single nation (which is especially true for states that arose with the disappearance of multiethnic empires) and of an immutable social order.

We will approach, in this article, the independent theatre scene in Romania from both angles of the meaning of “public culture:” on the one hand, the fact that the performances produced on this stage often claim a

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Hariman, “Public Culture,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication* (Oxford, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See Guglielmo Schininà, “Here We Are: Social Theatre and Some Open Questions about Its Developments,” *The Drama Review*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (Autumn 2004): 17-31.

public service mission, in a landscape where, atypically for Europe, state institutions tend to become commercial producers, and on the other hand, that, in many cases (the examples we will deal with concern the representation of the economic transition in Romania), this scene functions as a space for debating some societal values and ideas, in circulation at a certain moment.

What we believe is worth discussing is, in fact, to what extent independent theatre – and, in the alternative, theatre in general – can contribute in a relevant way to the questioning of these dominant ideas, and whether theatre *can* be approached from such a perspective, an *effective* contribution to public culture.

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For a theoretical universe strongly infused, globally, by North American thought, “social efficiency” is a concept with interesting variations depending on the context in which it is used.

In the Anglo-Saxon space, its origin is closely related to a confrontation of ideas, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, on the mission of education, between the philosopher John Dewey and David Snedden, Commissioner of Education of Massachusetts. In this dispute specific to the boom stage of industrialization, Snedden argued for the need to separate vocational education (vocational schools), to prepare workers ready to enter production, from liberal ones, intended exclusively for “consumers” of industrial goods, while Dewey asserted that such narrow formation was tantamount to social predestination. Although, morally, John Dewey won this debate, in the long run and in terms of public policy, the shadow of Snedden emerges behind a crowd of contemporary politicians, including in the non-Anglo-Saxon world. David Snedden’s arguments also infuse opinions on the practical usefulness of artistic education.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, in societal organisations that offer an extensive set of social services, such as all continental-European ones, “social efficiency” concerns, almost exclusively, the extent to which the administration manages

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<sup>4</sup> More about this confrontation, from the perspective of artistic education, in M. A. Stankiewicz, “Social Efficiency, Beauty, and the World’s Work,” In *Developing Visual Arts Education in the United States. The Arts Higher Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

to deliver these social services to predetermined standards and costs, managing to contribute to an improvement in the targeted social situation (from schooling to, say, healthcare needs).

Beyond the fine words, about art that encourages thinking and creativity, there are obviously no tools to measure the actual “efficiency” of artistic discourses. Moreover, the introduction of – or even the simple search for – an instrument to measure the concrete “effects” of, in our case, theatre represents a deeply libertarian approach, which reduces any human activity to its quantification of pecuniary or of generating direct economic added-value.

Therefore, in the present perspective, the efficiency we are talking about strictly concerns two aspects: the way in which the production activity itself responds to the direction assumed discursively (about whose circumscribing we will talk in the article) and the capacity/strategies through which the theatrical discourse contributes to the public negotiation of the values and attitudes that constitute the themes of this discourse.

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Between 2017 and 2019, on the independent stage in Romania, the premieres of a remarkable number of performances with a common theme took place: (re)evaluation of the social experience of the first post-revolutionary decade, from the perspective of those directly (negatively) affected by systemic changes. Two of them – ‘90s and *The Miracle of Cluj* – have the same director (David Schwartz, b. 1985), another three – *The Miracle...* and *M.I.S.A. părut* (the title is difficult to translate; text by Alexa Băcanu, b. 1985, directed by Dragoș Alexandru Mușoiu, b. 1989), in 2017, and *Ballads of Memory* (collective creation), in 2019 – have the same producer, Reactor of Creation and Experiment, Cluj. The last (temporally) in the series, *Factories and Plants*, produced in Zalău (a city without a local theatre) by the Centre for the Study of Modernity and the Rural World, has as authors two graduates from Cluj, active on the independent stage here, Alexandra Felseghi (author of the text, b. 1987) and Adina Lazăr (director, b. 1987). Given that soon afterwards, at the beginning of March 2020, Romania was directly hit by the Covid 19 pandemic, which has majorly affected the production modes in the theatre, one can only speculate on the extent to which this thematic line could have evolved under the conditions of continuity of production.

It is obvious that the '90s are not a white spot in contemporary Romanian dramaturgy and spectacle, but the difference in approach between talking about the 1990s and talking about the post-communist transition is fundamental. It is, in fact, the difference between looking at the first 15 years after the fall of the Iron Curtain from the perspective of political-social consensus (economic transformations as non-negotiable) and looking at them *against* this consensus; in other words, between looking at the installation of Romanian capitalism as the moral struggle with the remnants of communism, and seeing it as an internal distribution of the state-owned property.

Written in 2008 and following the evolution of a Romanian-Hungarian family from 1989 to the end of the first decade of the 2000s, *Playlist* by C.C. Buricea-Mlinarcic (professor, at the Faculty of Theatre, for many of the artists of the independent stage in Cluj) is among the first texts (staged multiple times since 2008 until now) that address the intergenerational family tensions born from the experience of the transition – but a transition largely regarded as a failure of the purifying anticommunism, in which a place of honour is offered to the former *securist* turned businessman, on Romania's way to the market economy (the former employee of the communist political police as the winner of the post-communist transition is a ubiquitous figure in the spectacular Romanian mainstream).

A year before the "landing" of the stage representation of the transition, playwright Peca Ștefan and director Ana Mărgineanu were doing at the Teatrul Tineretului / Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț *The Missing Year. 1996*, the second show in a series started at the Teatrul Mic / The Small Theatre in Bucharest with *The Missing Year. 1989*, based on the documentation of daily life, especially of theatre employees, in moments with great historical charge (the year of the Revolution, that of winning the elections, for the first time, by the historical right-wing parties and, finally, the year of Romania's accession to the European Union). Despite the fact that *The Missing Year. 1996* was produced in a small town, deeply affected by the transition period, as was the entire North-Eastern region of Romania (where "in 1999 the regional economic downturn is 50% higher than the one registered at national level"<sup>5</sup>), the

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<sup>5</sup> North-East Regional Development Association, „Analiza tendințelor economice ale Regiunii Nord-Est”, 2014, [https://www.adrnrdest.ro/user/file/innovation%20ris%20implementation/a\)%20Assay%20socio-economic.pdf](https://www.adrnrdest.ro/user/file/innovation%20ris%20implementation/a)%20Assay%20socio-economic.pdf).

perspective of the authors of the show is one that wilfully ignores the broader political-economic context, and in no way aims to criticize it. The show focused (as, moreover, it happened in the productions about the year of the Revolution) on a relatively optimistic vision of, in today's terms, individual resilience. In this key is treated, for example, a central scene, of deprivation of liberty of a woman for the purpose of trafficking her – given that the trafficking of human flesh, extremely present in Neamţ in the last 30 years, is a phenomenon influenced by the post-1989 increasing poverty and diminishing social mobility. Although, unlike, among other things, the already mentioned *Playlist, The Missing Year. 1996* does not approach the period in question in terms of the failure of a moral purification and democratization, it certainly does not discuss it from a systemic-historical perspective.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, one of the least publicly discussed aspects of contemporary Romania concerns, paradoxically, exactly this era, otherwise highly analysed from the perspective of institutional changes and political confrontations: the social effects of the economic transition, of the “lost decade” 1990-2000, seen from the position of those who had to bear them (largely, most of the contingent of employees in the Romanian economy, especially in industry, subject to an accelerated privatization process).

Studies that analyse theatre in former communist countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain, including those dealing with the alternative scene, dwell at all times on how this theatre has gone through the era of social and economic transition (covering, for most of these states, the years 1990-2000) and never on how it reflected or reflects the era in question. In other words, it is not only the discussion about the representation of an important societal moment for these countries that is lacking, but also that of the possibility of theatre's reflection on its own recent development.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Among other theatre productions dealing with the 1990s there are Gianina Cărbunariu's *20/20* (2009) and David Schwartz and Mihaela Michailov's *Heated Heads* (2010), but both are dealing with specific public events (an interethnic conflict and the Mineriads/the organized assault of the Romanian capital by thousands of coal miners), without actually connecting them with the transition as a larger phenomenon.

<sup>7</sup> Most recently: Warner, Vessela S. and Diana Manole, eds., *Staging Postcommunism Alternative Theatre in the Eastern and Central Europe after 1989* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2020).

A similar phenomenon is happening in terms of cinema – a reference volume (and the only one) about the “film of the transition” like the one coordinated by critics Andrei Gorzo and Gabriela Filippi deals exclusively with the artistic production of the period, and not the subsequent one, dedicated thematically to this transition. The editors of the volume thus summarize the corpus of productions of the first post-revolutionary decade:

The hysterical miserableism, the debilitated-libidinous evasiveness, the retrospective and rudimentary anti-communism, being stuck in aesthetic formulas more or less exhausted, in any case practiced at a minor-epigonic level (...) are often invoked to characterize, almost entirely (...), the production of the time.<sup>8</sup>

Gorzo and Filippi's evaluation is, to some extent, inadequate if it were to be applied to the theatre performances of the same years – only partially, because the primary anticommunism and the aesthetic formulas blocked in the last stage of real development of the Romanian scene, the one from the 1970s, are to be found in the great mass of productions from the multitude of theatres of the country, productions lost to the memory of viewers. In the terms of theatre critic Marian Popescu: “The show is, also in this period, a preservative of theatrical aesthetics anterior to 1989.”<sup>9</sup>

One of the ingredients of the preservation in question is “the calling from abroad of some Romanian theatre creators,” which, being programmatic, “explains both the intention to bring back into the country some values that, for various reasons, emigrated or remained abroad, but also a therapeutic didactics regarding the contact with the West.”<sup>10</sup> At the very time of the publication of his study, the early 2000s, Marian Popescu found “a strange mix between the will to produce something new and theatrical modalities that are claimed from an aesthetic of the '60s scene.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Andrei Gorzo and Gabriela Filippi, *Filmul tranziției. Contribuții la interpretarea filmului românesc „nouăzecist”* [The film of the Transition. Contributions to the Interpretation of the Romanian Film of the 1990s] (Cluj-Napoca: Tact Publishing House, 2017), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Marian Popescu, *Scenele teatrului românesc 1945-2004. De la cenzură la libertate* [The Stages of the Romanian Theatre 1945-2004. From Censorship to Freedom] (București: Unitext Publishing House, 2004), 212. The period referenced is the 1990s.

<sup>10</sup> Popescu, *Scenele teatrului românesc*, 177.

<sup>11</sup> Popescu, *Scenele teatrului românesc*, 221.

In fact, the atmosphere of recovery of the youth (and theatre) lost by the generation of directors (Romania being scenically dominated by the figure of the director) at the peak of the creative power in the 1990s is openly declared at that very moment by Alexandru Tocilescu, in the first post-revolutionary issue of *Teatrul azi* [Theatre today] magazine (the descendant of the monthly *Theatre*):

First of all, the need for information of the public, who knows almost nothing about the universal theatre of the last twenty-five years, must be met. (...) Our audience does not fully know the theatrical phenomenon of the end of the twentieth century. From Örkény to Beckett and from Ionesco to Pinter everything is to be played in front of the audience, who, according to me, are waiting for that.

From the perspective of the context in which this issue of the publication appeared – the unrest of the months immediately following the fall of the dictatorship, the demonstrations in the University Square, etc. – the idea that the audience aspired to see the absurdist plays of Harold Pinter, seems, now, at least astonishing.<sup>12</sup>

Much more lucid (and a few years after the enthusiasm of December 1989), Alexandru Dabija, at that time manager of the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest, commented, on the one hand, on the experimental dimension in the 90s vision, and on the other hand, on the return of the great names of the exile as if time had not passed over the whole world:

The most dangerous thing is that the idea of workshop, of experiment, of new work was, of course, taken over by my generation – seen somewhat extended – because it did not take hold in its time. (...) In this frame must enter very clean people (...) or people who practically have nothing to lose, who have but a lot to say, to communicate, whom I would listen to with much love and much use. It would have been, for example, much more interesting a workshop with Liviu Ciulei than a mediocre show with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. From all points of view. As an artistic act and as a theatrical effect.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Reproduced in *Toca se povestește* [Toca is Narrating Himself], edited by Florica Ichim, 78.

<sup>13</sup> Miruna Runcan and C.C. Buricea-Mlinarcic, *Cinci divane ad hoc* [Five ad hoc Talks] (Bucharest: Unitext Publishing House, 1994), 106-107. Ciulei had directed *The Dream...* in 1991 at the Bulandra Theatre, where he returned as honorary director.



Thus, far from trying to represent or reflect on the immediate events (in fact, the same Marian Popescu repeatedly insists on the general inability of the leading directors to work with Romanian plays, much less contemporary ones), the theatrical scene of the 1990s dealt intensely with what might be called “recoveries:” the remaking, in Bucharest, of Andrei Șerban’s *Trojan Women*, initially staged in the United States, the reunification with the canon broken by the departure of its creators. Popescu notes that the promotion of the premiere with *Hamlet*, directed by the father of the Romanian theatrical canon, Liviu Ciulei, himself exiled for several decades, “insisted on the *return* – emphasis by the author – of the director, after nine years, in the theatre whose emblematic figure he is.” It was already the year 2000 at the time of this *Hamlet* (the nine years were numbered from the *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* withered by Dabija in 1993); a decade later, in the TV show *Back to the Argument*, moderated by Horia Roman Patapievici on TVR Cultural, Liviu Ciulei found that people no longer recognize him on the street, in Bucharest, and no longer stopped him for greetings, as it happened before (the show aired on February 18, 2010).

The canonical attachment of the Romanian theatre to the aesthetics of the art theatre of the years 1960-1970 (the local triumph of “director-centrism”<sup>14</sup>) is visible in two large dossiers, years apart: the first, initiated by the online magazine *Yorick.ro* (which has meanwhile disappeared), in 2011, which speaks not about the theatre of the transition, but about “the performances of the last two decades,”<sup>15</sup> the other, made by *Vatra* magazine in May 2020, of the “balance sheet” of the last 30 years of the local scene.<sup>16</sup> Not only does the overwhelming majority of the performances mentioned by participants, in both surveys, date back to the 1990s, but in some cases, the only titles mentioned are from the first post-communist decade. That,

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<sup>14</sup> The term “director-centrism” belongs to critic Miruna Runcan. See Miruna Runcan, *Theatricalization and network in Romania (1920-1960)* (Bucharest: LiterNet Publishing House, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> „Spectacolele ultimelor două decenii,” *Yorick*, <https://yorick.ro/category/numere-speciale/spectacolele-ultimelor-doua-decenii/>

<sup>16</sup> “The Romanian Theatre. Today”, published in two parts, on May 4 and 8, 2020 respectively. <https://revistavatra.org/2020/05/04/teatrul-romanesc-azi-partea-i/>, <https://revistavatra.org/2020/05/05/teatrul-romanesc-azi-partea-a-ii-a/>

despite the fact that those who respond belong to different generations and in some cases have certainly not seen these productions in a theatre hall. The substantial ephemerality of theatre as an art form, as well as the lack or reduced availability (including for technical reasons) of video recordings for the productions of the 1990s, make it impossible to reassess in time, artistically or contextually-socially, the performances in question, which contributes to their status as idealized models for successive generations, unable to relate directly to these pillars of the canon.

The generational aspect is important: the thematic and aesthetic diversification noted after 2000-2005 (the last year being the date of the appearance, in Romania, of the National Cultural Fund, whose first annual, then biannual, financing of projects led to the development of artistic production and education through culture outside the state institutional framework), both by Marian Popescu (in the cited study), and by the participants in the surveys in *Yorick.ro* and *Vatra*, is closely related to the theatre debut of artists who were, at the time of the Revolution, at the age of primary school, for whom the direct experience of communism is non-existent, and that of the transition was lived mediately, through their parents.

The emergence of independent theatre in Romania is therefore a phenomenon of generational change, but it is also one of transforming the means of production (and access to these means).<sup>17</sup> This transformation actually has its origin in the structural changes of the 1990s itself. The liberalization of university education – the elimination of control over the enrolment figures, the multiplication of the number of universities, public or private – and, subsequently, the adoption of a Bologna system with a three-year bachelor's degree (previously, the graduation in Theatre directing was obtained in five years) led, over time, to a significant increase in the number of theatre

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<sup>17</sup> For the genealogy and conditions of appearance of this scene, see Iulia Popovici, *Elefantul din cameră. Ghid despre teatrul independent din România* [The Elephant in the room. Guide about the independent theatre in Romania] (Cluj-Napoca: Colectiva/Idea Design Publishing House & Print, 2016). For market economy adaptations of the mode of production and distribution in public theatre starting with the transition period, see Iulia Popovici, „Cum s-a privatizat teatrul în România” [How Theatre Was Privatized in Romania], in Emanuel Copilaş (ed.), *Marele jaf postcomunist* (Iaşi: Adenium Publishing House, 2017), 298-307.

graduates (especially actors). The quasi-complete decentralization of the public performing arts institutions has led to the dependence of many of them on the subsidy received from some local authorities with limited financial capacities, which has led to the reduction of production and collaborations with artists and other institutions.<sup>18</sup> The death of the industry and the changes in the national economic model (towards what ultimately became the “land of cheap labour”<sup>19</sup>) have emptied small towns, leaving much of the national network of state theatres with too few spectators, making it impossible for them to find a role in the community (a classic case are the institutions in mining towns, mono-industrial areas devastated by the closure of coal mines).

After the failure of its own attempts to transfer the touring model of the 1980s, attempts fuelled by the mythology built, in time, around the private companies of the interwar period, the Romanian theatre decided, institutionally, to preserve the structures of repertory functioning and labour relations inherited from the previous decades.

The most detailed accounts about the adventures of the theatre artists in the realm of the market economy belong to an actress-manager, in the last 20 years, of a public performing institution, co-founder of the Bucharest Artistic Company:<sup>20</sup> a financial failure, from which the actors were protected by using the resources of public institutions (in the case of the Bucharest Artistic Company, a minibus of the theatre in Galați and a production taken over from the Bucharest Theatre Odeon), because they hadn’t resigned “from the state employments.” Conjecturally having the advantage of a long-serving minister of Culture (1996-2000), Ion Caramitru (at the same time, president of the Theatrical Union and, subsequently, manager of the largest institution in the country, the National Theatre of Bucharest), who came from the theatre and who was a leader, formally-informally, of the entire guild,

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<sup>18</sup> The most recent attempt to transfer national theatres, the last remaining in central administration, to local authorities took place in 2009. See *Scena.ro* No. 2, April-May 2009.

<sup>19</sup> The term is sufficiently widely used in the public space, including in the press, to have lost its original origin.

<sup>20</sup> Dorina Lazăr. Among the many interviews in which she talks about the subject, see “Dorina Lazăr, Actress: «When I was 5 years old, my mother ran away from home. Dad was unhappy all his life»”, interview by Dana Mischie, *Adevărul* [Truth], Jan. 11. 2020, [adev.ro/q3y7u4](http://adev.ro/q3y7u4).

the system of state theatres remained, factually, the only one who almost entirely preserved the monopolistic model of pre-1990 production – it preserved it literally, in the sense of keeping a highly protected space for those already inside.

In time, this has created faults of social and economic status not only between artists (and technicians, etc.) employed in public institutions and those working independently, but also between those who entered the system before 2007 and those who entered the profession later, who have not usually benefited from employment contracts for an indefinite period. The “reform” – one of the key words of the transition period (used aspirationally, along with “anticommunism” and “anticorruption”, until nowadays) – that the cultural decision-makers would have wanted, in the mid-90s, for the performing institutions remained, in its concrete details, a desideratum without precise contours, but its reception was summed up, 20 years later, so by the former Minister of Culture during the period of the great privatizations:

While I was at the ministry, wanting to do the reform, I did a survey. I asked 2,000 people, from all fields of culture, in 1997, what do they think about reform. Of the 2,000 people, 80 percent responded that they don’t want anything to change, but to have wages five times higher. The remaining 20 percent, the stars, who knew they were stars and that they would be sought after, wanted to go out on fixed-term contracts.<sup>21</sup>

There are no documents indicating that any of the hundreds of thousands of employees of state-owned enterprises made collectively redundant between 1990 and 2006 (the year in which political analysts such as Vladimir Pasti consider the post-communist transition to be over<sup>22</sup>), or the trade unions that represented them, were consulted on their preferred options, or that the general policy of abandoning previous production models was ever influenced by

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<sup>21</sup> Monica Andronescu, „Ion Caramitru: Trebuie o lege care să le permită tinerilor să intre în teatre” [Ion Caramitru: We need a law that allows young people to enter theatres], *Yorick.ro*, 2 June 2015, <https://yorick.ro/ion-caramitru-trebuie-o-lege-care-sa-le-permita-tinerilor-sa-intre-in-teatre/>

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Pasti, *Noul capitalism românesc* [The new Romanian capitalism] (Iași: Polirom, 2006).

the requests of those who were to be directly affected.<sup>23</sup> Except for the multiple statements made, from 2000 until his death in 2021, by former Minister Caramitru, there are no documents about the concrete start of a process of reform in the field of culture, although there are informal testimonies that the consultation of those employed in the system really existed. The bottom line would be that, in the desire for a momentary protection of the system, it was left to adapt alone to generalized societal changes, conserving generationally as much of the old modes of production as possible.

The generational change that led to the emergence of an independent scene with a high sociopolitical sensibility had at its core artists generally born in the decade 1975-1985 (who were, therefore, between 20 and 30 years old at the time of the establishment of the National Cultural Fund and of Romania's subsequent accession to the European Union).<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, it's about a cohort that caught the 1990s when they entered adolescence and felt its effects mediated through the experiences of their parents. On the other hand, the aftermath of the previous period and the tectonic movements of the social hierarchies, in the dynamics of the transfer to the market economy, has nevertheless preserved, for this generation, an extended access to general education, regardless of the place and environment of origin, and decent possibilities to support university education in centres with tradition (for theatrical education, that means, for the late 1990s and early 2000s, state universities in Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Târgu-Mureș).

The diversity of the social environments from which the actors and directors of the generation that completed their studies in the early 2000s come from – many, from small towns, from families of doctors, accountants/economists who became successful entrepreneurs, workers going through years

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<sup>23</sup> For a comprehensive summary of the relationship between systemic reforms of transition from the planned economy to the market economy and measures to mitigate the social impact, see Victoria Stoiciu, "Political consensus, social movements and criticisms of capitalism in post-communist Romania," in Sorin Gog, Miki Braniște, Claudiu Turcuș (eds.), *Critica socială și artistică a capitalismului românesc* (Cluj-Napoca: Cluj University Press, 2021), 49-76.

<sup>24</sup> For an introduction to the history of post-1989 political theatre in Romania, see also David Schwartz, "Genealogy of Political Theatre in Post-Socialism. From the Anti-'System' Nihilism to the Anti-Capitalist Left," *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Sociologia*, Vol. 64, Issue 2 (December 2019): 13-41.

of unemployment, teaching staff with secondary education, public servants, miners, etc. – is visible in the independent productions created by them: a good deal of their projects, including those about the transition era, directly exploit personal and group experiences. Especially for Directing studies (theatre or film) – but also for Acting, when it comes to the big cities and young people coming from outside them – the social spectrum is less wide. It has reduced alongside the access to tertiary education, in general, of young people from rural areas, with parents without higher education and with low incomes. For example, one of the few studies on this subject show,<sup>25</sup> based on a questionnaire-based sociological survey among high school students and first-year university students at state universities, in 2010, a middle-class dominance in higher education. At least as regards the entry to college of young people from rural areas and small towns, the data is also confirmed by further research, although none takes into account information on the average income of the family of origin, for example, or the social composition in the case of vocational education.<sup>26</sup>

Based, for the most part, on personal observations and discussions, for the purpose of an applied, ongoing research with professors from theatre universities in Romania (there is no statistical data on the evolution of social composition in such universities), it may be inferred that, at the moment, vocational theatre studies, in large cities, with increased maintenance costs and with prospects on the labour market perceived as limited, are accessible almost exclusively to young people from those cities and/or families with increased material possibilities. Even though these observations regarding Romania are empirical, the phenomenon is global: among other reports, the financial inaccessibility of the theatre studies for young people coming from the working class is one of the themes of the dossier on vocational schools published by the British magazine *The Stage* in the autumn of 2021.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Remus Pricopie et al., “Access and equity in the higher education in Romania. Dialogue with pupils and students” (Bucharest: SNSPA/Editura Comunicare.ro, 2011).

<sup>26</sup> Cezar-Mihai Hâj et al., “Access to higher education – a quantitative perspective. Analysis of the transition of the school generation 2017/2018 in the first academic year 2018/2019”.

<sup>27</sup> UK generalist publications such as *The Guardian* or *The Independent* noticed this phenomenon as early as 2013. See <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/education/schools/are-drama-schools-just-for-the-middle-classes-8869810.html>

The diversity of backgrounds is what largely ensures a diversity of personal experiences that are extremely important in general for the stage representation of the entire social spectrum, and for the connection with an audience, itself diverse. But in the specific case of the independent scene in Romania, this variety of experiences is even more important, because it substantiates a distinctive feature of this scene – its political sensibility and social involvement.

For a consistent part of the post-2000 independent theatre in Romania, the social and often political commitment is impossible to deny – it's not only about the performances themselves, but also about the entire paratheatrical discursive engagement, from the way of communicating the production to the discourse of the artists (in interviews, author articles and edited publications).<sup>28</sup>

The most remarkable such commitment, in terms of an assumed position, probably remains that of director David Schwarz:

For me, a basic purpose of theatre remains propaganda. And it's the well-made propaganda that doesn't seem like propaganda: [that is] a clearly politically assumed approach in one direction, but that convinces those who are neutral, it does not annoy them. At stake are the people who are not firmly convinced by either one idea or the other. I don't think theatre is going to bring the revolution to Earth, but I think I have to contribute in that direction.<sup>29</sup>

But a similar reference to the role of theatre as a sounding box for contemporary society is underlined, on behalf of the Replika Educational Theater Center, by Radu Apostol:

It is a cultural space where very important artists have created, within a year, performances that could not have happened on the "great stage of the country," socially and politically engaged performances, which reflect vulnerable realities

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<sup>28</sup> For the moment, the Replika Educational Theatre Center is the most prolific in terms of editing volumes reflecting its own activity and theorizing of their own practice.

<sup>29</sup> Ionuț Dulămiță, "A basic goal of the theatre is propaganda," *Scena9.ro*, 2017, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/un-scop-de-baza-al-teatrului-ramane-propaganda>

around us. Artists and citizens respond to community problems. This would be our motto inspired by Shakespeare, the mouse race staged by Hamlet: *An artistic mouse-trap for community issues*.<sup>30</sup>

Similar ideas are expressed by director Catinca Drăgănescu:

What (more) is the role of theatre in such a world? I think that's what the whole discussion so far boils down to. And my answer would be that the role of theatre is to generate collective experiences and create bridges of communication between different social categories. Its most representative function today is as a social binder, cultural mediator and space for debate. Art can no longer exist in itself. It must be and is fundamental by its essence a pioneer of social change offering experiences that are generating empathy.<sup>31</sup>

This sensitivity is, of course, also the result of their context of forming and developing a critical conscience – in particular, the development of left-wing intellectual groups, the austerity as response to the 2008 financial crisis, the protests against the privatisation of the emergency medical system in 2012, and those concerning the exploitations in Roșia Montană in 2013.

The contribution of this generation of artists to the public culture of reception of recent history is not isolated or singular, but part of an entire debate, interrupted primarily by the pandemic. Obviously, the concern for it manifests itself differently on different levels.

For example, unlike that of the Revolution or the Securitate/the political police (pre- and post-Revolution), the theme of the 1990s from a social perspective had no traction in the post-2000 Romanian cinema. At a first glance, one can find only *About People and Snails* (2012, directed by Tudor

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<sup>30</sup> Oana Stoica, „«Funcționăm ca într-un chibut» – interviu cu Radu Apostol” [“«We function as in a Kibbutz” – Interview with Radu Apostol], *Dilema Veche* no. 652 (August 2016), 18-24. <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/arte-performative/articol/functionam-ca-intr-un-chibut-interviu-cu-radu-apostol>

<sup>31</sup> Andrei Crăciun, “Catinca Drăgănescu, director: «Whether we like it or not, we are a society still retrograde, patriarchal, machist, hypocritical and quite intolerant»,” April 2021, <https://www.caleido.ro/catinca-draganescu-regizoare-fie-ca-ne-place-sau-nu-suntem-o-societate-%C8%8Bnca-retrograda-patriarhala-machista-ipocrita-si-destul-de-intoleranta/>



Giurgiu) and *I Am an Old Communist Biddy* (2013, directed by Stere Gulea), the latter being a film adaptation of Dan Lungu's novel with the same title (Lungu being a sociologist by training, with a very attentive ear to the currents of the peripheries). In fact, *About People and Snails* is the only fiction film whose subject is the privatization of industrial enterprises in post-communist Romania, and the way of approaching it is that of comedy. In other words, the film looks with a touching understanding at the naïve mobilization of some workers, in the face of the closure-privatization of the plant where they worked, to save their jobs. The infantilization of the "losers" of the transition is, moreover, a common temptation for the post-2005 representations of Romania's transition to capitalism – infantilized, although viewed with empathy, is also Dan Lungu's "old communist biddy," herself a representative of the working class; and in relation to this politics of representation, the distinction brought by the independent shows of 2017-2019 is openly visible.

The first performance that directly addresses the theme of the socio-economic transition of the 1990s, the '90s, a production of the MACAZ Theatre Bar Coop, does so by focusing on the experience of these losers, in a confessional structure – the text is written by the actors as an archive of family histories at the intersection of two political regimes, from the perspective of the child (played by another actor than the real protagonist). There are five short pieces, the set changes (recognizable furniture elements of the apartments of the time that are rearranged) are covered by musical pieces, performed *live*, audibly identifiable with Atomic TV, a symbol of the 1990s entertainment industry.

The frame of the show is given by the story of the mother who enthusiastically participates in the demonstrations of the Revolution only to reach in the end, not many years later, the limit of survival and hope. Between these covers there is the story of a makeshift trial organized by students against a university professor guilty of too little anti-communist enthusiasm (it's the first time in the theatre that the immediately post-revolutionary purifying euphoria is not treated with deference and approval); that of the family of doctors who lose their house claimed by the former owners; the fall into the passion of gambling and entrepreneurial initiative of a waiter; and

the contradictory discussion, at the table, between the intellectuals “from the centre” and a family of miners, about the benefits of capitalism. All the heroes of this production – never presented as victims, much less of their own inadequacy to the new times – enter the ‘90s convinced of the good that will follow and end the decade by paying with their life, health or family life (economic migration, in the conditions before Romania’s accession to the European Union, is part of history).

The same year, David Schwartz worked, together with the team of the independent theatre Reactor of Creation and Experiment in Cluj (alongside dramaturg Petro Ionescu), on a performance dedicated to a phenomenon specific to the 1990s: the Caritas pyramid scheme – a social hysteria of the years 1992-1993, permanently bankrupted in 1994. *The Miracle of Cluj* deconstructs, on the one hand, the mirage of easy gain in which money multiplies by itself, and on the other hand, the system of interdependence between the founder of Caritas, Ioan Stoica, and the elites – first local, then national, from politics, justice, press, the church: so that, in the end, the collapse of the pyramid scheme is equivalent to that of another saving myth, embodied by Stoica himself.

In both performances, Schwartz not only provides space for representation to those who have lost in the transition, but increasingly articulates what over time has become the hallmark of his directorial practice: contrary to the local theatrical traditions reproduced over the past half-century, he resorts to Brechtian techniques and principles (starting with distancing) that shape theatre as a live demonstration of superindividual narrative political mechanisms.

Another messianic figure of the ‘90s is at the centre of the *M.I.S.A. părut* production (text by Alexa Băcanu, directed by Dragoș Alexandru Mușoiu) – Gregorian Bivolaru, the leader of a movement of “integration into the absolute” (yoga/transcendental meditation) of great success in those years, especially among teenage girls. Bivolaru was later pursued and convicted for sexual crimes.

The performance not only captures the general lack of references of the young people of the period, in a desperate need for a horizon of order and hope, but also the permeability of a movement, theoretically of oriental inspiration, to folklore and local popular spiritualism, by-products of a religiously fuelled conservatism for which the 90s were a fertile ground, with consequences until now.

Unlike '90s (which staged direct family experiences) or *The Miracle of Cluj* (which captures the experience of a community the actors themselves are part of), *M.I.S.A. părut* does not seem to have a personal generating source, but, despite the high degree of fictionalization, it is a documentary production, based on the data of a case discussed at the European Court of Human Rights. Based on interviews with former employees of the Zalău Armătura, *Factories and Plants* (2019), instead, has as a starting point the fact that the father of the director Adina Lazăr worked at the Armătura Factory, one of the largest in the Zalău area, whose industrial collapse and, finally, closure is documented in the performance (again, a proof of the extent to which, for some artists of this generation, the experiences of their family environment are important). "What motivated me was the fact that my father was very upset that the factory was being torn down," says Adina Lazăr, in a material about the production, also published in 2019.<sup>32</sup> Although a consistent part of the performance documents life before 1989, *Factories and Plants* draws a terrifying picture of the decline in living standards, layoffs (collective redundancies) and, finally, the disappearance of a factory with 7,000 employees in 1990.

In tandem with the '90s, but also with other productions, usually independent, from the series of revisiting the transition (*Ballads of Memory*, which has as protagonist an "expert of one's own life," in the terms of Rimini Protokoll, recounting her own experience and that of her group of friends in the years of the transition to capitalism), tangential to this series (*Under the Ground. The Jiu Valley After 1989*, 2012, another project with the involvement of David Schwartz) or dealing with the dramatic theme of labour migration, *Factories and Plants* actively pursues the self-representation of the traditional working class, and the "rehabilitation" of its public image, against a dominant discourse that denies its dignity.

It is difficult to identify the general formative path that made the critical reflection on the period of the Romanian post-communist transition, from a political critical perspective, not only economic. It reached its point of maturity in 2017, the year in which the anthology dedicated to the film of the transition appeared, together with a series of other books that directly challenge the

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<sup>32</sup> Diana Meseșan, "The story of the largest factory in Zalau. «Hello, is that us?»" *Scena9.ro*, 18 October 2019, <https://www.scena9.ro/article/fabrici-uzine-teatru-documentar-zalau>

political – and cultural – consensus of the transition (democracy against privatization, who does not adapt or who complains is a communist) and the hegemonic discourse of anticommunism as neoliberalism: *Ideologies of Literature in Romanian Postcommunism* by Mihai Iovănel (Publishing House of the Museum of Romanian Literature), *Counterculture. Elements of Critical Philosophy* by Ovidiu Țichindeleanu (Idea Publishing House; edited at the end of 2016, it entered bookstores in 2017), *The Antisocial Apostolate. Theology and Neoliberalism in Postcommunist Romania* by Alexandru Racu (Tact Publishing House), *The Great Postcommunist Robbery: The Spectacle of the Goods and the Revenge of Capitalism*, volume coordinated by Emanuel Copilaș (Adenium Publishing House); and, the most publicly debated of all, *Common Places. Class, Anticommunism, Left* by Florin Poenaru (Tact Publishing House). (An important factor in this may have been the appearance of Cornel Ban's volume, *Dependence and Development: the Political Economy of Romanian Capitalism* – Tact, Cluj, 2014, distributed in 2015 –, a book of economic history that puts the transition in the terms of the intellectual left that had not addressed such a topic before.) What is certain, however, is that the moment of 2017 represented a generational affirmation of one's own perspective on a marked collective experience, discursively monopolized, to its own benefit, by the winners of the previous generation.

The spectacular set of theatre productions about the transition in the years 2017-2019 not only coexists with that of the historical-political contestation of the consensus on the socio-economic transformation of Romania, of revisiting the cinematic legacy of the 1990s or of the applied analysis of the ideologies that shape a literature built on the illusion of its own political autonomy, but enter a direct public dialogue with these systemic reassessments, which they conjugate by their own means.

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