

## *The Theatrical System's Reform as the Aim of the Theatre Director's Education in Romania*

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**Abstract:** This article emphasizes the profound interdependence between the theatre directing educational system and the cultural system, taking into account the specifics of the situation in Romania. Identifying the theatre director as a pillar who defines the *status quo* in the cultural system and that oversees the implementation of a given global vision in theatres, the article argues that the director's educational process naturally results in defining tomorrow's theatre practices. In this context, the article identifies the key skills that the young director should have when entering the cultural system and argues in favour of their importance starting from practical situations in the institutional theatre system in Romania. These basic skills are: a deep understanding of all the compartments of a theatre and how each compartment functions, being able to further educate actors about the basic concepts of theatrical art, the ability to conduct a profound text analysis and, lastly, a commitment to use a directing notebook as starting point for their shows. The article concludes that the main reasons why the education system currently fails to develop these skills are the lack of time allocated to theatrical practice, but also the prevalence of the desire to train a small number of exceptional directors to the detriment of training all student directors to become capable of operating in the cultural market.

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Every young director suffers a panic attack when he/ she first comes into contact with the Romanian theatrical system in its least disguised form: when he/ she begins work on his/ her first show in a professional theatre. The young director wakes up at the first rehearsal face to face with a room he does not know in which there are actors he does not know, whose first instinct is to do anything they can in order to test and understand who is the man or woman they are dealing with. Considering Peter Brook's definition of the theatrical act, in which all that is needed to create theatricality is a person walking across a stage and another person watching<sup>2</sup>, the director is now engaged in a theatrical act in which, ironically, he/ she is the actor, while the actors are his/ her spectators.

With this act comes an overwhelming sensation of stage fright, fuelled not only by the fear of being watched, as Bella Merlin describes the causes of stage fright in her book, *Facing the Fear*<sup>3</sup>. The director's stage fright comes with the fear of being judged, especially in the case of a cast with older actors; it comes with the fear of failure; it comes with doubts about the show he/ she is going to coordinate. The stake of the educational system should be to prepare the young director to face this truly critical moment. In this sense, there are two key aspects that contribute to the way in which the future director overcomes his/ her own fear of failure and launches constructively in creating and taking responsibility for the show.

On the one hand, the director must be trained extensively in the tasks he/ she will have to perform in order to successfully direct a show, regardless of the aesthetic formula to which he/ she adheres. In other words, he/ she must possess the set of practical skills necessary for the successful completion of the project. A good theoretical knowledge of the cultural field in which he/ she works is useful for the director in elaborating complex performances, anchored in the historical and present cultural practices and values. However, once the work on stage begins, the plethora of theoretical baggage becomes almost useless for the director. We believe that a director who successfully stages a theatre show that is not culturally and artistically brilliant is much more a director than another, who has thought of the most scholarly show possible, but who is unable to stage it in real working conditions.

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<sup>2</sup>. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996), 7.

<sup>3</sup>. Bella Merlin, *Facing the Fear* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2016), 33.

Unfortunately, the director's profession as it is generally practiced in Romania, namely as freelancing, with a small number of employed directors and the majority of directors who travel from theatre to theatre staging projects, becomes a profession in which surviving on the market is pivotal. Directing becomes a profession focused on dealing with radical changes: the different working conditions in each theatre and the fragile discipline in Romanian theatres. Taking these matters into account, the structure of the university programmes in directing pedagogy in Romania is deeply deficient.

Out of the total of 60 subjects studied by a director at the Faculty of Theater and Film at "Babeş-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca<sup>4</sup>, only 25 are practical ones, and their importance in relation to theoretical subjects according to the transferable credits system also undermines their importance. At the Faculty of Theater at "George Enescu" National University of Art in Iași<sup>5</sup>, the proportion is 32 subjects in total to only 12 practical subjects, while at the National University of Theater Art and Cinematography in Bucharest<sup>6</sup>, the proportion is 22 subjects in total to 8 subjects practice. As such, we can conclude that the theatrical educational system in Romania is not focused on transmitting the skills needed by the young director to complete a show, but rather on transmitting a broad cultural background.

On the other hand, the professional theatre system itself should be prepared for the first meeting with the young director. In other words, beyond the creating straightforward opportunities for collaboration with directors who are only now beginning their careers, theatres should also tailor their repertoire and troupe in such a way that they can follow the trends of younger generations of creators. Unfortunately, however, the theatrical system is not formed by itself, but is also formed by directors. So, the training of today's young director coincides with the shaping of tomorrow's theatrical system, which in turn influences other young directors. It can be seen that we could

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4. <https://teatrufilm.ubbcluj.ro/studenti/planuri-de-invatamant/>, accessed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2022.

5. <http://www.arteiasi.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PLAN-REGIE-2020-2023-docx.pdf>, accessed on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

6. <https://unatc.ro/devunatc/departament/artele-spectacolului-regie/>, accessed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2022.

enter a very dangerous cycle, that has for now become a downward spiral left to chance by the lack of vision of the rulers of Romanian culture. "Prenez un cercle, caressez-le, il deviendra vicieux."<sup>7</sup>

This cyclicity cannot be interrupted without a radical reform of the Romanian theatrical educational system, which should focus on the training of cultural trainers. Its current focus on aesthetics and theatrical theory as resulting from analysing all the curricula mentioned above creates a deficit in the ability of directors to define and intervene on theatrical practices within the artistic system. As stated in the curriculum for the Theatre Directing specialization at the "George Enescu" University of Art in Iași, the study program is focused on "stimulating creativity, innovation, courage to approach the original and stage truth, whilst training young people as professionals and researchers, in order to access master's and doctoral studies. The practical work of applied research stimulates the discovery and modelling of the student's artistic personality, of one's own vision about the art of the show."<sup>8</sup> The Romanian theatrical education system is focused on creating cultural innovators, often without taking into account the conditions on the cultural market.

Unfortunately, it is extremely difficult to talk about innovation in a system that is barely functional. From Ion Sava<sup>9</sup> onwards, the great Romanian directors constantly complain about the gross lack of qualified technical staff, the general indifference of the employees, the pride and egotism inside the troupes, but also the artists' lack of knowledge and common sense. Of course, the directors are to blame for this as well. Therefore, it is necessary to ask ourselves what would be the skills that the young director should have, both to survive in the Romanian cultural environment and to produce a change in this environment, in order to allow real research and innovation, from a cultural point of view. It is worth mentioning that the director, as he/ she is perceived in Romania, as the author of the theatre show, is the ideal person to implement this reform, as he/ she sets the standards according to which a show is staged.

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<sup>7</sup>. Eugène Ionesco, *La cantatrice chauve* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 72.

<sup>8</sup>. <http://www.arteiasi.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/PLAN-REGIE-2020-2023-docx.pdf>, accessed on the 28<sup>th</sup> June 2022.

<sup>9</sup>. Ion Sava, *Teatralitatea Teatrului* [*The Theatricality of Theatre*], notes: Virgil Petrovici, pref. Liviu Ciulei, (Bucharest: Eminescu Publishing House, 1981), *passim*.

A "Theatre Directing" Bachelor's Degree is one of the few lines of study that prepares the student for a position of power, from the first day of practicing the profession. Even the faculties of economics, which theoretically train tomorrow's entrepreneurs, do not have such a strong correlation with a leader position, taken upon himself by the student since the beginning of his professional life. By signing a first contract by which the director undertakes the staging of a show, the director commits that he/ she will coordinate, to a greater or lesser extent, all the departments of a theatre, from the artistic or technical ones, to the administrative one.

The director, in collaboration with the theatre's staff, not only establishes the stage actions or the way the text is uttered on stage, but approves the budget execution of the show, sets the rehearsal times, the cleaning schedule, establishes when the set should be built and taken down, he/ she supervises the implementation of contracts with collaborators and much more. For this significant side of his/ her work as a mature director, the young directing student is not systematically trained, except if happily, by chance, he/ she meets a coordinating Professor with a rich history of staging shows and who understands the need for such an intervention. However, this kind of meeting, no matter how fortunate, is a fortuitous one and cannot be the basis for the systematic training of directors in Romania as it is today.

Therefore, it is unfortunate that the student director carries out his/ her practical activity exclusively at the university and not in a real theatre. The only solution would be for this practice at university to perfectly simulate work in theatres or for at least one semester for the young student to work in an actual theatre. In this sense, we strongly align ourselves with the opinion of Gelu Badea, who, in his book, *Soliloquy*, highlights exactly this problem:

At the same time, we opine for a period of practice in theatres extended over one semester – or at least over three months – in the middle of the training period. This practice, together with the 3<sup>rd</sup> year graduation show, will give the future director greater confidence in approaching the mission of leading the process of completing the show. The contact with the theatre, targeting all its components – the artistic, the stage assistants,

the sets and costumes workshops, as well as the administrative-financial side – will make the future director able to provide answers to all the challenges that arise during the staging of the show.<sup>10</sup>

Placing the internship in the middle of the educational process would allow the young director to test the skills he/ she has acquired until then. Moreover, it would allow the students to more effectively identify their own shortcomings in relation to real working conditions. In addition, taking into account the typical age of the undergraduate student (18-21 years of age), and also the fact that the pre-university educational system in Romania is a rigid one, we must take into account the rebellious tendency of the majority of the students. Confronted with the professor's opinion on a certain educational aspect, they will often be inclined to oppose the suggestions in principle, asserting their artistic independence. From our experience in teaching students, but also by close observation of our own colleagues, the differences in opinion between teacher and student often disappear after the bachelor's exam, which consists in staging a show in a professional theatre. Here, the student is faced with the limitations of the system. Thus, by placing the internship in the middle of the educational process, we give the student time to accumulate enough revolt in relation to the teacher, but we make an intervention early enough to allow effective accumulation of information in the second half of the process.

It may seem strange that we are talking almost exclusively about state theatre, not also about independent theatre. The reality, however, is that the director earns most of his income from work in state-subsidized theatres. The independent Romanian theatrical system is, for the most part, also a system financed by the state, through project competitions carried out by various institutions. To truly support an independent theatre in Romania, namely from ticket sales, is an utopia. For example, the "Lucian Blaga" National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca was subsidized by the Ministry of Culture with 185

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<sup>10</sup>. Gelu Badea, *Solilocviu: fundamente ale regiei de teatru* [*Soliloquy. Basis of Theatre Directing*] (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Eikon, 2017), 26. Translation ours.

RON / beneficiary in 2018, with a total expense of 204 RON / beneficiary.<sup>11</sup> How can we expect an independent theatre to be able to sell a full hall of 200 RON / seat / performance every night? How to create performances that can compete at the artistic level in a sustained way in the independent theatre when the price of a ticket rarely exceeds 30 RON?

The previous digression is by no means accidental. It responds to arguments presented by professors in several public conferences, such as the Theatre Networking Talents festival, organized by the National Theatre "Marin Sorescu" Craiova, or the Festival of Theatre Schools, organized by the "George Enescu" University of Arts Iași. These arguments are also reflected in the curricula mentioned above, through subjects such as "Management of the independent company", but also through master's programs such as "Management and cultural entrepreneurship". Professors often ask the question "What kind of theater do I prepare the student director for?" The answer, regardless of the type of aesthetics we want to approach, cannot be in contradiction with the state system. The director's training, at least for the Bachelor's Degree, should not go beyond the borders of the state system. The director must be prepared so that he/ she can lead a normal financial life, which, for now at least, can hardly be imagined in unsubsidized theatres at a large scale.

This means that they must be trained so they can earn enough income to pay bills, secure a home, start a family, afford to finance their own intellectual and professional development, and so on. It is in vain if the system manages to train a truly great director once every three generations if ninety percent of graduates work in other fields because they are unable to cope with the theatrical system. Otherwise, we are dealing with a deeply discriminatory, elitist system without educational standards. An exceptional director would come out of three generations in Romania without a single educational facility dedicated to theatrical training, only with open libraries!

The second major skill that the young director should have is that of mastering a basic theatrical language with the utmost accuracy. From our own experience of directing shows in two universities in Romania, in four state theatres and in three independent theatres, talking to actors at rehearsals and

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<sup>11</sup>. <https://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/pagina-72/rapoarte-si-studii/>, accessed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2022.

festivals, actors from different faculties, from different generations, working in different theatres, we reached the conclusion that each of these actors internalizes differently elementary terms such as: *relationship, situation, extra-text, character, state, emotion, feeling, score, intention, gesture, movement, action, activity, pathos, meta-theatricality, conception, vision*, etc. This indicates that the directors these actors have worked with so far have used these terms in different ways and with different meanings.

Roland Barthes defines the ideosphere as “the linguistic system of an ideology, with this caveat from the outset that makes the definition already inexact: in my view, ideology, no matter which, is and is only language: it’s a discourse, a type of discourse.”<sup>12</sup> Today it seems that every theatre creator has his own ideosphere in Romanian theatre. This leads to inefficient and inaccurate communication between the director and the other co-creators of the show. This brings a great deal of harm to the theatrical system in lost time and lowered quality. It is not that the director “has no one to work with”, in the sense that the actors are not able to meet the director’s requirements, nor that the director “did not do his homework”, in the sense that he/ she is not prepared or does not know what to direct the actor to do. It is purely that what the director is able to name, to request, the actor cannot understand and internalize effectively.

It is fundamental to understand that the Romanian theatre constitutes an ideology in itself, in which there are, it is true, many artistic currents, some of which are valid, even if they are contradictory. However, even if we have different artistic conceptions, our global stake is (or should be) common: to be able to create the shows we want, in the most efficient way possible, making it as enjoyable as possible, both for us, the artists, as well as for our spectators. Our goal is to serve the public and to develop the Romanian culture, and this thinking must start from the common ground between us. This spirit of belonging to an artistic community is completely absent from the educational system of directing and is, perhaps, the factor with the most devastating effects for the development of a cultural system relevant and necessary to the society it serves.

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<sup>12</sup>. Roland Barthes, *The Neutral*, translated by Rosalind E. Kraus and Denis Hollier, notes by Thomas Clerc, coord. Eric Marty (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 86.



The third basic competence of the young director is the ability to perform a profound text analysis, relevant from the point of view of the characters' psychology. Changing the repertoires of theatres from classical toward contemporary plays, but also the emergence of modern aesthetic currents, such as postdramatic theatre, could lead us to believe that psychological analysis is no longer relevant today because the dramatic characters in performances no longer behave like believable psychological entities in contemporary aesthetics. However, to say that in current theatrical aesthetics the show no longer starts from a written text that requires a watchful analysis denotes a superficial understanding of the theatrical and educational system.

First of all, in Romania, whether we subscribe to this cultural vision or not, the vast majority of shows are built starting from texts with a classical narrative structure, or at least with a clear narrative structure. This will not change in the near future due to the requirements of both funding institutions and the public. In addition, the ability to make an eloquent text analysis is not only useful when approaching a realistic-psychological text. Text analysis educates the director to dismantle complex social phenomena. Only by exercising these analytical skills starting from the limited universe of the dramatic text can he/ she make the social analysis necessary for the processing of a show of collective creation. Only through the reflection of psychological analysis can he/ she guess the probable reaction of the public to a sign or set of signs. Damon Kiely shows in his book, *How to Read a Play*, how several devised theatre companies analyse their own texts and how they adapt traditional situational analysis to the play context they create in their own performances.<sup>13</sup>

We need to understand that the use of slightly archaic training methods in teaching young artists does not mean anchoring these artists in a cultural past. These techniques tested over time are intended to convey skills, not aesthetics. We do not believe that Perdekamp or Meisner can be understood without first thoroughly grasping Stanislavski and Grotowski. We do not believe that Sarah Kane or Eugène Ionesco can be understood without first making out Sophocles and Shakespeare. We do not believe that

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<sup>13</sup>. Damon Kiely, *How to Read a Play. Script Analysis for Directors* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 120-150.

Augusto Boal, Thomas Ostermeier or Silviu Purcărete can be understood without fully comprehending the works of Edward Gordon Craig, Vsevolod Meyerhold or Liviu Ciulei.

The fourth and perhaps the most essential skill that the young director must learn is that of working on the director's notebook, of getting used to exhaustively preparing the show. It may seem outdated, but the director's notebook is fundamental to the director's training. There are certain directors or theorists of the theatre who support creative directing, the show based solely on working with actors and the creative team. Personally, we oppose this vision of theatre. However, regardless of the option that the mature director will have regarding the way he/ she prepares his/ her show, the complete imaginary conception of the show is indispensable for the student's training.

This is also the opinion that Dinu Cernescu, the great Romanian theatre director, shared with us in a recent interview, still unpublished, in which he reinforced the importance of making a director's notebook, at least in the first stage of the director's career. Subsequently, the mature director can go through the stages of preparing the show without actually writing the notebook. Putting on paper these notes is though necessary for the first shows one directs in order to create the rigor required by the work on stage. Only by elaborating ample directing notebooks, in which to offer exact technical and artistic solutions, can he/ she learn to master the semiotic system of the show. In Western theatre, the director creates a new semiotic system with each artistic product. This confluence of signs from different artistic languages cannot be mastered by random creation. The freedom that the future mature director arrogates himself/ herself on stage is based on this training.

Only starting from a strong theoretical foundation, namely the director's notebook, can the young director face the actors, face his/ her own stage fright, evaluate his/ her ability to stage a concept, discover his/ her mistakes, his/ her obsessive tendencies and mannerisms. You can only improvise if you start from something concrete. Otherwise, it's a staged vague dream, a random creation, something that since Dada can no longer be called interesting from an aesthetic point of view.

Last but not least, there is a final reform of the Romanian educational system that must be undergone and that does not necessarily depend on the skills that the director must acquire: the time given to practice. The freedom

that a director has to work with the actor must increase considerably in terms of quantity. Working with the actor is something that the director has to learn, but it cannot be learned in a traditional, didactic way, with the professor sitting at the desk and the students taking notes. We are not talking here about practice in theatres, the importance of which we have talked about above, but about the research practice that the director should have at his/ her disposal with a group of actors, without necessarily being pressured to create a cultural product in a given time. The young director is subjected to specific working conditions in the theatre, and he/ she must respond brilliantly to all challenges. Thus, the freedom of theatrical creation and research that he/ she can afford to do is limited. The training period, in which the exam performances created by the director are not subject to a judgment on the cultural market, must be the place of true artistic research, which will give the director enough self-confidence to be able to find his/ her artistic vision in the first years of working in theatres.

How can the students learn to lead an improvisation when they have two weeks to put on a show, as is currently the case at the Faculty of Theatre and Film at the "Babeş-Bolyai" University in Cluj-Napoca? How can they give themselves time to make mistakes and rebuild, to create the cohesion of a group when they repeat a maximum of 4 hours a day? How can they focus on all aspects of working on stage with the actor when they have to do the lighting design during this time, to build the set, to buy the props themselves? We honestly think they can't.

These are, we believe, the basic aspects of the director's work that the students must learn in the albeit too little time they are protected by the educational system. In the Romanian educational system, we rely too much on talent, both that of the students and of the teacher. Without a serious central coordination, apparently opposed to the liberal principles of art, we have a deeply discriminatory educational system. This means that at Faculty X there are not the same standards as at Faculty Y. It means that Professor A's students are better prepared for the labour market than Professor B's, and this is not ethical. Before we try to train artists, we should, we think, try to create craftsmen. Then some will be able to become artists through their own work.

We have the misfortune of trying to prepare people for a profession that is, by definition, infinite.

This youngest art, a few decades ago, barely existed. The old director was just a technician or, at best, the organizer of a show. Nowadays, the director, apart from talent, must be endowed with a series of other qualities: high ideological level, a vast general culture, pedagogical sense, organizational capacity, developed sense of criticism and self-criticism, average knowledge of music, knowledge of fine arts, and more. Without them there can be no true artist. And all these qualities... to one man!<sup>14</sup>

Mihai Măniuțiu used to say in his classes that a director is fully trained only ten years after graduating from college. In order to be fully trained, however, the director must actually work during these ten years. For this he/she does not have to make extraordinary creations. He/she has the rest of his/her thirty-year career for extraordinary shows. At the beginning, he/she must be able to complete a show that is standing on its own, that is intelligible and that is at least mediocre, and all in a sustained way, project by project. He/she must fulfil his/her duty to the public honourably.

Before directing *Peer Gynt*, *Richard III*, *The Bald Soprano*, *Waiting for Godot*, before Sarah Kane, Richard Schechner, collective creation and socio-political theatre, the young director must be able to stage *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Jocul de-a Vacanța*<sup>15</sup> [*Holiday Play*] or *Paper Airplanes*<sup>16</sup>. One question remains at this point: how many of the directing graduates in Romania are really capable of this minimal performance standard. We believe that the proportion is way below our expectations and we wonder whether it is not due to directing professors in Romania trying to make students burn through stages because they want to create stars.

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<sup>14</sup>. György Harag, "Forța principală a spectacolului: munca regiei cu actorii" ["The Main Force of the Performance: The Director at Work with the Actors"], *Teatrul*, no. 9 September, year VI (1961), 11.

<sup>15</sup>. Play written by Mihail Sebastian.

<sup>16</sup>. Play written by Elise Wilk.

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### Online resources

- <https://teatrufilm.ubbcluj.ro/studenti/planuri-de-invatamant/>, accessed on the 28<sup>th</sup> of June 2022.
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