

Performing the Self & Staging Agency

Monica Olivia GRECEA¹

Abstract: *When I feel like crying it's political* is a performance created through devised techniques, combining director-driven dramaturgy with content generated by the actresses-performers, in a process shifting the role of the director into one of a curator. Centered on self-representation, the work proposes a frame for empowerment while approaching sensible themes, such as the hierarchy of power in theatrical contexts (vocational schools and professional theatres) and the objectification of female performers. This paper contextualizes the concept and artistic process of the work, while proposing a work model based on care and owning differences.

Keywords: self-representation, performative theatre, agency, feminism, divergence, empowerment, pedagogy of care.

Creating context

*When I feel like crying it's political*² is a performance that proposes a frame for empowerment of female performers in the specific cultural context of Romanian theatre. From a production perspective, the performance frame was The Day of National Culture, an annual project of the Romanian Ministry of Culture funding one-time events to take place in January. The

¹. Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. olivia.grecea@ubbcluj.ro

². *When I feel like crying it's political*, concept: Olivia Grecea, by / with: Raluca Mara, Oana Mardare, Alina Mişoc, with the audio participation of Mariana Mihuţ, produced by Reactor de Creaţie şi Experiment in the frame of "Feminine perspectives in Romanian theatre", cultural project funded by the Ministry of Culture.

15th of January is the official Day of National Culture, a date chosen because it is the birthdate of Mihai Eminescu, the 19th century Romantic poet still considered Romania's national poet due to its unparalleled genius. As many projects financed by this mechanism are recitals by canonical poets created in a celebratory, nostalgic and reverent tone, it was our intention to create a different type of event.

As the time frame and budget do not allow for the production of a theatrical performance based on collectively creating a text and rehearsing it, the feasible choice was to work with devised techniques on a performance channeling the performers' experiences and creativity into a structure filled by experiences of women and inspired by a theoretical work on the first professional Romanian actresses, also written by a woman.

The starting point of the artistic process was Anca Hațiegan's *Dimineața actrițelor*, a pioneering research on the beginning of professional acting for women in Romania. Its reading served as an anchor for a debate of the artistic team on the differences and similarities in the public perception of the professional actress then and now, as well as for a subjective projection of what it means to act for a living in terms of goals, challenges and breakthroughs.

The gap between the 19th (the first Romanian actresses) and 21st (the present time) centuries was addressed through an interview with Mariana Mihuț, an emblem of the golden age of Romanian theatre. While the interview consisted of questions formulated by the three performers to a personality, a mentor, the dramaturgy of the performance was built on questions or performative tasks opening up possibilities that I addressed to the actresses-performers.

When I feel like crying it's political appeals to the knowledge and experience of living practitioner Mariana Mihuț and theorist Anca Hațiegan as a frame to curate personal experiences, challenges and reflections from the cast. An important point is that all the stakeholders involved in the making of the performance are women, in contrast to theatrical projects marketed as an all-female cast and focused on feminine issues, whose director is a male working in a traditional hierarchy with the other artists involved in the creative process. For me, doing a text-based performance on actresses with professional actresses playing the roles written by a playwright was insufficiently challenging a

concept. Doing the performance in such a way that the process benefited all parties involved and offered them space for formulating personal reflections was mandatory and part of the concept. I will refer to the three actresses involved both as actresses and performers, as they employ and deconstruct their acting experience and professional actress persona, becoming performers in the process.

Dramaturgy

The performance intro takes place in the dark, while the audience hears an audio fragment of the interview with Mariana Mihuț answering the performers' questions: 1. I assume you are familiar with the polemical discourse regarding the definition of the actor as an artist. What do you think about that? Is the actor an artist-creator? If yes, what is his personal and unique work of art in the greater ensemble of the theatre performance? 2. Would you call yourself a feminist? How would you define a feminist? 3. How do you deal with failure when you don't get a part that you want? 4. Have you felt the difference between being an actor and being an actress? In what way? 5. Were there times when you didn't act? How did you feel them? 6. What did you experience as a failure in your career? 7. What are the sources of your inspiration? What do you feed on artistically?

Once the intro ends, the lights fade in revealing the stage, a non-theatrical site populated by the three performers showing themselves with the aid of props of their own choice, punctuating and emphasizing moments from the past and present connected to their profession, which is inextricably linked to an emotional landscape and a tendency to introspection and reflection.

Performativity, and not theatricality, is the conceptual pillar of the work: no interpretative bravado, no character work. It is the mishaps of the profession and the patterns in it that build the personal, subjective layers of the dramaturgy during the solo scenes.

For the group scenes, tasks given to the three performers conceptualize the usual director's prompts in a theatrical rehearsal and are formulated on the basis of key skills related to the practicalities of the profession and its perception by people outside the arts. An example of a performative task is

crying on command, skill considered a leverage for an actress, as it allows her to quickly express sense and sensibility. Here crying is performed outside of any relation to a character or dramatic situation, as a pure technical skill.

The overall vibe of the performance is that of a living installation collating fleeting moments that might be overlapping or diverging, building on each other to add another layer to the figure of the present day young actress. Embodied by three individualities, the actress is depicted in her behind the scenes mode, questioning, reflecting and pointing out.

Dimineața actrițelor is quoted at the end of the performance through a fragment read on stage. Echoing the personal objects displayed by the performers and introduced to the audience as symbolic memorabilia connected to studying acting, performing or sharing experiences with peers, the text describes the funeral of Fany Tardini³, a prolific actress of the 19th century and founder of an independent company. Authored by a journalist who was her contemporary, the text depicts the poverty and anonymity surrounding her death, in stark contrast with her glamorous life as a valued professional and celebrity figure. It ends with the appeal of the journalist for the preservation of Fany Tardini's memorabilia, which could be deemed valuable by future generations.

The frame of *When I feel like crying it's political* connects with an authority on the issue of being an actress, whether it's the expertise of Mariana Mihuț or Anca Hațiegan. Its performative corpus is an organized, willed disorder, having to do less with an articulated common discourse or manifesto than with a critical process of self-reflection catalyzed by references and focusing on significant personal experiences.

Feminism – a dragon

In Romania, feminism is a term still perceived as destabilizing and avoided by the critical discourse of the arts and by the society in general. If we define it as "addressing uncomfortable topics"⁴ we are able to relate the

³. Anca Hațiegan, *Dimineața actrițelor* [*The Morning of the Actresses*] (Iași: Polirom, 2019), 261-63.

⁴. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta. Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (New York: Farras, Strass and Giroux, 2000), 161.

concept with a fairly common process of critical analysis. Avoiding feminism is therefore caused not by an irritation with the concept per se, but rather by the avoidance of discomfort, by an inability or disinterest to pressure the flawed status quo.

It has been pointed out that distancing oneself from feminism is connected to a fear of being misidentified: "That idea that all feminists are lesbian is scary enough to keep some women, even those who are equality-minded."⁵ Feminism regarded as a niche for specific political claims can be a deterrent for categories less politically involved: "Women who love lipstick and also love standing up for themselves, but are not politicized, are especially vulnerable to being conned into distancing themselves from the feminist movement."⁶ In the latter case, it is rejected as an extraneous movement, appealing only to the small category of people that are highly politically involved. Perhaps paradoxically, the notion of feminism can segregate instead of creating solidarity, when one labels feminists as a group acting in a frantic, excessive, extreme way or as a niche movement with a highly specific, foreign and incomprehensive agenda.

While some might agree with the claim of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie that we should all be feminists, cases when the F word is used with a derogatory meaning and even makes its way into hate speech are quite common in Romania. On many occasions women have used the term feminism as a pejorative to talk about other women they clearly distance from. Feminism is a dirty word, one that will most likely spark dissent, fear and aggression, a dragon in the room. It is a notion mainly approached with caution, when not entirely eluded.

In the case of *When I feel like crying it's political*, feminism was not acknowledged as a personal attribute neither by Mariana Mihuț, nor by Anca Hațiegan, who affirmed during the post performance Q&A that she came to write *Dimineața actrițelor* somewhat accidentally and not as an act of restitution for the less known female figures in the history of Romanian theatre.

5. Barbara Findlen, "Introduction", in *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, ed. Barbara Findlen (Seal Press, 1995), xv.

6. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta*, 163-164.

Performers' feminism, albeit not theorized or verbally owned as such, points out systemic patterns pressuring the young female artist in contemporary Romania: "Feminism is what helps us make sense of the unfairness by affirming that it's about political injustice, not personal failure."⁷

The issue of responsibility has only recently begun to be addressed in relation to ethics in the workplace of Romanian vocational education and professional institutions, which in most cases remain untouched, unreformed even after incidents leading to media coverage and a public showcase of disapproval. An unquestioned, inertial system only perpetuates its toxic mechanisms, while taking responsibility begins with the individual becoming aware of its role in the passing on of behaviors and values: "I need to know that every minute of every day I am being colonized, manipulated and ignored, and that minute by minute I am doing this to others who are not shining white and middle class. There's a system of abuse here. I need to know what part I'm playing in it."⁸ While writer Christine Doza refers to racism and classism, misogynistic discourses are also deeply embedded in vocational education and artistic practices, to the point where they have become part of the institutional culture. They are rarely challenged and questioned, although they are silently condemned.

One of the scenes in *When I feel like crying it's political* collates authentic lines the three performers heard from teachers, peers or family in relation to their vocational training or profession. While some stem from a misunderstanding of the artistic education or from a stereotypical portraying of actresses as bohemians, promiscuous, superficial and unreliable, others are intended as stimuli for a betterment of the emerging artist akin to the discipline and rigor imposed on athletes by their trainers. Some of the lines in this group scene underline the bodily normativity professed in vocational schools: as blondness is generally perceived as less threatening, therefore less damaging to the status quo, therefore desirable and preferred⁹, the thin, appealing,

7. Barbara Findlen, "Introduction", in *Listen Up*, xiv-xv.

8. Christine Doza, "Bloodlove", in *Listen Up*, 43.

9. "The worry is that this particular hair color promises 'the world' to these women. Can it be given? If white supremacy and antiblack racism remain fundamental structural modes of violence by which countries continue to govern, blondness might be one of our most

inviting, seductive female body is the only body type considered appropriate for a young actress. Of course, this limiting paradigm can be replaced by a more diverse and realistic representation of body types, similarly to the recent business-motivated changes undertaken by major fashion brands in their choice of models.

Feminism can push uncomfortable topics center stage, as long as it's not vilified or fearfully dismissed.

For a pedagogy of care

Astrid Henry points out to the familial trope in the evolution of American feminism: the second wave of the three feminist waves is positioned in a daughter-mother relationship with the first.¹⁰ The mother role implies here too a duplicity, that of both a mentor and an obstacle to be overturned in order to create one's own identity.

During the process behind *When I feel like crying it's political* my intention as a director-coordinator was to smoothen as much as possible the censoring status of the director and to create a frame that allows the three actresses-performers to reveal as much as they feel comfortable with in a form of their choice. Prompts in the form of questions or challenges were given to stimulate them to generate performative material. Another important work principles were respect and validation for the other's experiences and perspectives, as they surfaced during discussions and rehearsals pointing out divergence rather than consensus on most topics.

The notion of pedagogy of care is associated with early childhood development and building communities¹¹. Although this performance is a

passive and fluid modes of complicity. It points to white power and its values as desirable, whether the thought enters one's head or not.", Claudia Rankine, *Just Us. An American Conversation* (Graywolf Press, 2020), 156.

¹⁰. Astrid Henry, "Feminism's Family Problem: Feminist Generations and the Mother-Daughter Trope", in *Catching a Wave. Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. Rory Dicker and Alison Poepmeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 140.

¹¹. Further information can be found in Carol Garboden Murray's *Illuminating Care: The Pedagogy and Practice of Care in Early Childhood Communities*.

one-time live event, this principle can guide further co-created artistic processes based on subjectivity and personal stories. Here the subjects involved were professional actresses with experience with devised techniques based on their personal stories. In other contexts, when working with non-professionals, taking time to build a climate of care and security is primordial for an ethical process.

Taking into account the long history of abuse and problematic practices revealed by former students of vocational faculties¹², schools that form young actors and actresses appear as oppressive, toxic system dismantling those personalities that are subjected to humiliation and abuse. They seem to have no doubts in discerning between the worthy and unworthy, the strong and the weak, as a totalitarian regime that promotes some and discards others. Another ongoing investigation¹³ pursuing cases of sexual harassment shows with numbers the lack of information and procedures available to victims in order to lead to ensure a sanction is put in place. Too little space is given, procedurally and symbolically, to stories of less-than-perfection and less-than-celebration. Although it can be affirmed that not all schools or teachers are operating in this logic of intimidation and aggression, it is imperative for vocational schools and theatrical institutions to recurrently revise the core principles informing their activity. A new paradigm can be turning to the pedagogy of care, focused on developing assets and skills in lieu of operating with a brutal top-down standardization.

Revolution's question mark

Conceived as a platform for self-representation, *When I feel like crying it's political* did not become a manifesto as no consensual, unequivocal approach unifying the performers' discourses was explored or intended. The concept was to give agency through space for self-representation¹⁴ and

¹². <https://www.scena9.ro/article/hartuire-sexuala-umilire-viol-studenti-teatru> and <https://www.scena9.ro/article/marturii-hartuire-umilire-teatru-continuare-sibiu-cluj>

¹³. <https://www.riseproject.ro/catedra-de-abuz/>

¹⁴. An essay by Mihaela Drăgan on the importance of self-representation in Roma theatre is available at <https://howlround.com/cultural-appropriation-self-representation>

owning the derived performative eclecticism, in terms of tools and means used on stage. Furthermore, the actresses were the ones to decide which individual scenes they wanted to contribute to, with an image of the dramaturgy in mind. I imposed no participation in the scenes based on biographical, personal material.

A state of crisis, fragility and uncertainty is the red thread traversing the performance's dramaturgy, differently filtered by the performers. How can female artists be empowered while confronted with systemic disempowerment since the beginning of their careers in this professional field? For me, empowerment means embracing a divergence of opinions and experiences and considering differences while owning your personal experience. Some feminist theorists emphasize the need to acknowledge how some types of feminism might show a lack of empathy and produce discrimination. With this in mind, during the process it was important not to discard another's experience or perspective or label it, minimize it or make it enter a competition of superlatives.

Having agency over how and what they choose to present and the appropriate modes for self-representation fights the risk of exploitation of narratives by an outside figure. Most of theatre performances marketed as all-female are in fact all-female cast projects directed by a male director in a traditional, hierarchical artistic process. The director directs the actor who acts, contributing to the creation of a role attributed by someone else inside an exterior narrative. Apart from the exceptional all-female cast, which in part addresses the issue of the scarcity of roles available for women and places them center stage, they don't further challenge the prevailing dynamics.

New narratives are within reach when given space, when a frame to accommodate them is created. *When I feel like crying it's political* is an effort to counter testimonial silencing and testimonial smothering, notions coined by philosopher Katie Dotson¹⁵ to describe mechanisms of silencing and self-silencing put into place by a failed communication between a speaker and its audience and rooted in ignorance.

¹⁵. Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing", *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236-57, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23016544>.

If the male entitlement to power is based on the all-gendered assumption that men are more competent than women in positions of power¹⁶ and if there is a strong tendency to regard power-seeking women as off-putting¹⁷, allocating space for counter-narratives to challenge these biases is beneficial for a more inclusive and diverse professional environment of any kind, theatre included. If autobiography on stage can be an act of reclamation, reinvention, transformation or survival¹⁸, it is also one of empowerment and gaining agency.

REFERENCES

- Baumgardner, Jennifer and Amy Richards. *Manifesta. Young Women, Feminism and the Future*. New York: Farras, Strass and Giroux, 2000.
- Dotson, Kristie. "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." *Hypatia* 26, no. 2 (2011): 236-57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23016544>.
- Doza, Christine. "Bloodlove". In *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, edited by Barbara Findlen, 40-47. Seal Press, 1995.
- Findlen, Barbara. "Introduction". In *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation*, edited by Barbara Findlen, xiii-xvii. Seal Press, 1995.
- Hațiegan, Anca. *Dimineața actrițelor*. Iași: Polirom, 2019.
- Heddon, Dee. "The Politics of the Personal: Autobiography in Performance". In *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*, edited by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris, 130-148. Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Henry, Astrid. "Feminism's Family Problem: Feminist Generations and the Mother-Daughter Trope". *Catching a Wave. Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, edited by Rory Dicker, Alison Poepmeier, 139-153. Northeastern University Press, 2003.
- Manne, Kate. *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*. Penguin Books, 2021.
- Rankine, Claudia. *Just Us. An American Conversation*. Graywolf Press, 2020.

¹⁶. Kate Manne, *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (Penguin Books, 2021), 279.

¹⁷. Kate Manne, *Entitled*, 280-81.

¹⁸. Dee Heddon, "The Politics of the Personal: Autobiography in Performance", in *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*, ed. Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 133.

Online sources

When I feel like crying it's political performance recording:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdYXKjIA_To&t=705s

Post performance Q&A recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNOQslgr3lg>

OLIVIA GRECEA is an independent theater director. Since 2016 she teaches Directing at the Faculty of Theatre and Film (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca). She is the author of *Devised Theater. Utopia, Tool and Political Theater (Eikon, 2017)*. Her artistic work includes play-based and devised productions in state theaters and with the independent company *Reactor de Creație și Experiment*. Her main artistic and research interests are performativity, performative theatre and collaborative practices.

