

## *The After-Pandemic International Meetings in Cluj*

### **Book Review: *Festival and performance review of the 11<sup>th</sup> edition of the International Meetings in Cluj, at the The National Theatre in Cluj (September 28<sup>th</sup> - October 2<sup>nd</sup> 2022)***

You would think that the 2022 Cluj-Napoca theatre festival, taking place in the flesh after a two-year hiatus provoked by the pandemic, would be a celebratory event, but theatre like so much in our high-strung early-twenty-first century life has dropped down the rabbit hole of the new crisis: an unjust and barbaric war waged on Ukraine. Not only are Romanians geographically neighbouring Ukraine but also, as local people in Cluj have told me, they identify strongly with the Ukrainian determination to remain independent and free, having themselves fought within living memory to regain independence from tyranny. Therefore, with the single-minded focus that has characterized Romanian festivals at least since Michael Billington reported (in *The Guardian*) on the Bucharest Theatre Festival in 2003, much of this week's program is devoted to producing, reading, or talking about theatre in the context of contemporary historical liminalities that affects identity. The theme of this 2022 festival is, indeed, "**Identities.**"

#### **Militarized Identity: Plays by Ukrainian Authors**

The opening day brought up the central theme with a moving reading of contemporary documentary scripts titled "Wartime Theatre", (*Teatru în vreme de război*), scripts blended into one continuous performance by Ukrainian playwrights Natalia Blok, Tetiana Kitsenko, and Natalia Vorobjit. It is directed by Ionuț Caras and translated into Romanian by Raluca Rădulescu.

The introductory play is the most savagely direct, and is documentary in style. A saxophonist who, it turns out, is a Ukrainian refugee housed in Cluj, set the scene by producing the alarming sound of an ambulance – or it might have been a bomb threat warning – on his instrument as we filed into the Euphorion Studio Theatre that is nestled within the west wall of the Cluj National Theatre. The stage displays a scattering of naked or bandaged body parts hanging from the wings. The reading begins with a play in which the reader is seated inside a wood-framed cage of barbed wire, a photo of three toddlers stuck into a corner. They are her three sons, now grown, who have been caught in or near the city of Kiev and with whom she gradually loses contact as the bombing worsens. The mother’s monologue describes how her husband had been offered the chance to flee the country by car with his three sons ahead of the bombing, but at the last minute something goes wrong – she doesn’t know what – and the four remain in Kiev. The traumatic anxiety in the wife/mother’s voice is palpable and contagious. Afterwards, the author of the piece, Natalia Blok, informed us that the piece is autobiographical, and that it was an act of therapy to write it; she now knows that her sons are safe, and she is herself residing in Switzerland.



**Fig. 1:** *Teatru în vreme de război [Wartime Theatre]*, production of The National Theatre in Cluj, photo by Nicu Cherciu

The series of staged readings ends with a play I summarized on this *Plays International & Europe* website<sup>1</sup>: Vorozhbit's *Take Out the Rubbish, Sasha*. The drama (which needs editing) concentrates on the living, mingling happy memories of a dead husband/stepfather Sasha with the ongoing extremely affectionate relationship between mother and daughter. It starts with the preparation of the funeral meal for soldier Sasha and continues until the two women greet their resurrected Sasha, again called off to battle. The psychological aspect of the drama, involving the inability to accept the physical disappearance of a loved one, combines with the symbolic image of the eternal Ukrainian soldier fighting to defend his homeland; this lends the piece a peculiarly surrealistic perspective.

There is an eerie echo in *Take Out the Rubbish, Sasha*. The echo involves the frequency of the word "frică", meaning "fear" in Romanian. The ever-presence of fear permeated Matei Vişniec's play *On the Sensation of Resilience When Treading on Dead Bodies* directed by Răzvan Muresan that was featured in the 2018 Cluj Centennial review<sup>2</sup> and in *Porn* by Andras Visky which Muresan directed in the 2019 festival<sup>3</sup>, and it was a leitmotif in *The Mirror*<sup>4</sup>. For some reason, this word "frică" stands out when spoken on stage in Cluj, and characters talk about that emotion frequently, even in comedies.

The second performance invoking the horrors of the Ukrainian war that I saw was directed by one of the two Cluj National Theatre's artistic directors, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu. Staged in the Cluj Art Museum, with a 16<sup>th</sup> century Roman Catholic altar from Jimbor, Brașov County in the far background visible through open doors, the drama titled *Survivor's Syndrome* begins with two young men playing a game with oversized wooden blocks, the names of ruined Ukrainian cities imprinted on certain of the long rectangular blocks they built up into a structure which collapsed ultimately. Then, the recitation begins, outlining what it was like to endure days of bombing. It is a poetic stream-of-conscience text that starts *terre-à-terre* with lines such as, "We used to go to the cinema, drink beer, and eat nuts ....

---

<sup>1</sup>. <https://playsinternational.org.uk/ukraine-staging-readings-of-plays/>

<sup>2</sup>. See: <https://playsinternational.org.uk/cluj-napoca-centennial-theatre-festival/>

<sup>3</sup>. See: <https://playsinternational.org.uk/national-theatre-of-cluj-napoco-together-dana-rufolo/>

<sup>4</sup>. See: <https://playsinternational.org.uk/in-the-mirror-national-theater-of-cluj-napoca/>

Our life now is a graveyard of all the plans we had before.” However, the interior monologue progresses, becoming increasingly self-interrogating: “The body does not need to know everything. Let it think it is alive.” And “Fear makes us slaves. But we have lost our fear. They want to turn us into zombies, but it seems that our nation understands that we have to preserve our identity and treat it like a treasure, because being human is not being a zombie.”



**Fig. 2:** *Sindromul supraviețuitorului [Survivor's Syndrome]*, production of The National Theatre in Cluj, photo by Nicu Cherciu

*Survivor's Syndrome* is by the young Andriy Bondarenko who, in the discussion which followed, “Theatre in Limit Situations”, states it is the result of him sitting down to describe in words exactly what he had been feeling during the bombing of his city when he was solitary and in hiding. The former block builders turn into narrator and character, with the narrator telling the story while the character moves about in a limited space, or sometimes lies

down, wearing a silver neutral mask that effectively kept the beautifully poetic text neutral, as if hanging in space – a story of terror, hope, and endurance for us all.

To continue the list of events dedicated to the war: The third readers' theatre performance was *Maidan Inferno* by Neda Nejdana staged by Tudor Lucanu on 30 September, and the lecture given by George Banu on 2 October. The noted French-Romanian author and professor (Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris 3) George Banu, gave a lecture on "Wartime Theatre and Politics". Beginning with the premise that "theatre transforms an immediate experience into an aesthetic experience", Banu referenced examples from literature, film, and theatre that deal with the "re-representation" of war through evoking its visceral effects – starting with World War One and Henri Barbus's personal account and the ironic *The Good Soldier Švejk* by Czech writer Jaroslav Hašek. He asks how theatre translates war, and concludes that one way is through the portrayal of excess, for example excess blood, as in the 2006 blood-saturated productions *Macbeth* directed by Jürgen Gosch and *The Oresteia* directed by Michael Thalheimer.

### **Identity and social injustice**

There is no doubt that I was among the most enthusiastic of admirers when the show "Hang Up, Calls Waiting" (*Nu mai ține linia ocupată*) by Alexandra Felseghi ended; I've worked on a street theatre project about trafficking of women, the theme this play tackles in a sensitive and not overly stereotypical way, and know how difficult a subject it is to dramatize effectively. Others in the audience were entrenched in a critical aesthetic perspective and were therefore less enthusiastic. However, I personally believe that the use of a red garbed chorus of women who denounce the perpetrators of sexual violence with resonating Brechtian fervour and the image of a rose suspended from the heavens that shifts in colour are effective scenography (designer Andreea Tecla), and the actors are compelling. Applause goes to the director Adina Lazăr for giving dramatic form to the problems of sexual abuse and sexual trafficking. With so many other problems assailing our societies, this issue has taken the back burner.



**Fig. 3:** *Nu mai ține linia ocupată*, production of The National Theatre in Cluj, photo by Nicu Cherciu

Two tales intertwine in “Hang Up, Calls Waiting”. The first is the drama of a pregnant teenage girl Andreea, sensitively portrayed by Diana Buluga, who has become the plaything of her absent mother’s boyfriend and his gang of criminal friends. The young girl is placed by the hospital in a safe place for women but naively, and fatally we fear, she returns to the older man on the whiff of a promise to found a family – only to be instantly set upon again by his gang who consider her as fodder for scorn and abuse of all kinds.

The second tale is that of a girl who disappears when she hitchhikes home, as she often did with her parents’ approval, after shopping. The most touching moment in the play is when the parents of the missing girl visit the safe place having heard that Andreea may be their daughter, and when they realize she is not and turn to depart, Andreea runs up to them, beseeching to be taken in place of their missing daughter. If only emotional transfer were that easy! The play reveals the terrible need a young person has to attach to someone and to feel loved by them. The complicity of the police -in this case the policeman himself has a criminal mindset – shows the complexity of the

problem of abuse – even worse, it shows how intractable the problem is when the policeman glibly dismisses the social worker’s complaints by telling her the nonsense that whatever you don’t die from makes you stronger.

Another drama evoking women’s rights, *The Competition (The Casting in Kursk) (Audiția)* written by the Russian Alexander Galin and directed by Ionuț Caras, is a humorous and sarcastic look at the lack of protection for the weak in Russia. It shows the problematic of women trusting and believing the lies they are told. Several Russian women are competing in a talent show orchestrated by a Japanese businessman where the winners will be sent to his nightclub in Singapore – a mythical land in their eyes, where they imagine they will be loved and admired, though we know full well that their function is bound to be more functional. The problem the play attempts to resolve is that these women have husbands, albeit rather indifferent ones, and the denouement is a series of clever repositionings in the couples that finally lead to restored harmony. Nonetheless, two fatherless girls, the youngest of the lot, will compete, believing their skills are finally recognized; their alcoholic mother (Irina Wintze) knows better but says nothing.



**Fig. 4:** *Audiția*, production of The National Theatre in Cluj,  
photo by Nicu Cherciu

In its call for empathy for the ordinary people who have no special talents, *The Competition* is an excellent choice for the “Identities” festival. It reminds us of the universality of the problem of social injustice. And of the problem of excessive naiveté.

### **Ancillary Talks, Panels, and Events**

The 2022 Cluj-Napoca Theatre Festival was remarkably balanced and can easily serve as a model for other and future theatre festivals around the world that are not only performative but which choose to explore the interface between theatre and society. Intellectual interventions and conversations between artists and audience members were integrated into the program on nearly a daily basis.

The well-known Romanian TV producer and theatre critic Marina Constantinescu lectured on her love of theatre [*Theatre, Mon Amour*]. On October first, internationally acclaimed Romanian author Matéi Vişniec gave a poignant autobiographical talk on how coincidences that can only be termed ‘good luck’ magically helped him to develop as an innovative and courageous author; the talk is titled “Dramatic Writing and the Motivations of Contemporary Playwrights”.

Also, several books on Romanian theatre history were launched: firstly, Cristina Modreanu’s *Teatrul ca rezistență. Oameni de teatru în arhivele Securității* [*Theatre as Resistance. Theatre People in the Archives of the Stasi – the Secret Police*] from Polirom Publishing House, praised on national radio by Adrian Cioroianu for proving that “in communist Romania there really was resistance through culture”. It is a book which in my opinion can’t get translated fast enough into English<sup>5</sup>.

Critic and professor Liviu Malița presented his book *Să nu privești înapoi: comunism, dramaturgie, societate* [*Don’t Look Back. Communism, Dramaturgy, Society*] from Cluj University Press. Additionally, UK-based Romanian academic

---

<sup>5</sup>. Read the review of Modreanu’s *A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism* at <https://playsinternational.org.uk/?s=Modreanu>.



Jozefina Komporaly presented the only book published directly in English: *Plays from Romania. Dramaturgies of Subversion* from Bloomsbury's Methuen Drama series<sup>6</sup>.

The academic and question-and-answer side events incorporated into the festival involved the audience and offered opportunities to probe behind the scene. They contributed to the seriousness of purpose in the eleventh International Meetings in Cluj, devoted this year to *Identities*.

**Dana RUFOLO**

Playwright and theatre critic

Director of the Theater Research Institute of Europe

danarufolo@gmail.com

---

<sup>6</sup>. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/plays-from-romania-dramaturgies-of-subversion-9781350214286/>