

Gianina Cărbunariu's theatre, a form of memory in recent history

OLTIȚA CÎNTEC¹

Abstract: My paper highlights the way in which, by documenting some Romanian histories from our recent past, Gianina Cărbunariu' theatre fuels our collective memory. Cărbunariu picks topics avoided by authorities, not enough or not at all analyzed by historians or sociologists, themes that are aesthetically treated focusing on small histories, real facts forgotten by researchers, facts that are pointed out through theatrical expressiveness. My study is build around the methodology developed by Paul Ricoeur in his book, *Memory, history, forgetting*, which I use as frame of my analyze. As content I have chosen a few of the most succesfull shows created by Gianina Cărbunariu and the most relevant in this analitic context.

Keywords: drama, Gianina Cărbunariu, recent history, memory.

In *Memory, history, forgetting*², when speaking about the Phenomenology method whilst developing its principles, Paul Ricoeur substantiates the relationship between the concepts giving the title of the book by asking three questions: 1. What do we remember? 2. Whose memory is it? 3. How do we remember and fuel our memory?. According this pattern, I will analyse the manner in which, by examining some significant recent events using theater-specific methods, theatre maker Gianina Cărbunariu³ actually puts

1. *Faculty of Theatre, "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași. oltitacintec@gmail.com.*

2. Paul Ricoeur, *Memoria, Istoria, Utilarea* (Timișoara: Amarcord, 2010).

3. Gianina Cărbunariu (n. 1977) (born 1977) is a theatre maker, graduate of the Faculty of Theatre Directing at the University of Bucharest. Among her recent creations as a theatre maker: *Ordinary people* (National Theatre „Radu Stanca” Sibiu, 2016), *Solitaridy* (co-production of the National Theatre „Radu Stanca” Sibiu, National Theatre in Brussels and Avignon Festival as part of the project Cities on Stage/Villes en Scene, performance presented in 2014 Avignon

public memory to the test. In the book I mentioned as the “frame” of my study, the French philosopher makes a clear distinction between the cognitive side of memory, consisting in searching and recognising past events, and the pragmatic side, that of acting once the memories have been triggered. Remembering doesn’t just mean getting, re-acknowledging an image of the past, but searching for it, «doing» something in this regard, as Paul Ricoeur would say. It is my belief that Gianina Cărburariu’s interest in revealing sequences omitted by recent history is filed, in artistic form, in such an endeavor of the pragmatics of remembering, of anamnesis. By doing shows that document events that are significant for community awareness, the theatre maker proposes a collective approach of shared memories.

What do we remember?

For about a month, in 1981, on the panels that stood as boundaries around a building site in Botoșani, as well as on the walls of the surrounding buildings, chalk inscriptions hinting towards rebelling against the communist regime had appeared. In full alert, the political police – Securitate in the town, as well as that in the neighboring county of Suceava, thoroughly investigated and found out that the culprit behind this very brave form of protest was Mugur Călinescu, a 17 year old student attending one of the city’s high schools

Festival official selection), *For Sale* (co-production of the Odeon Theatre and the State Theatre in Hamburg as part of the international project Hunger for Trade, 2014), *Typographic Capital Letters* (co-production of Odeon Theatre, dramAcum Association and Divadelna Nitra Festival as part of the Parallel Lives project - 20th Century Through the Eyes of Secret Police, 2013), *Sibian Tiger* (dramAcum production at the Comedy Theatre, 2012), *X mm of Y km* (a collective production Paintbrush Factory in Cluj, 2011), *Sold Out* (a production of Kammerspiele Theatre in Munich, 2010), *20/20* (dramAcum production and Yorick Studio in Târgu Mureș, 2009). Participation in international festivals: official selection of the Festival of Avignon, the Biennial New Plays From Europe, Wiener Festwochen Festival, TransAmerique Montreal Festival, Festival Dialog from Wrocław, Divadelna Nitra in Slovakia, LIFT London, Festival Kontakt in Torun, New Drama in Budapest, New drama in Moscow etc. The scenarios of the performances were translated and put on stage by other directors. The play *Kebab* was translated and had more than 20 stagings in theaters around the world, including the Royal Court in London, Schaubühne Berlin Kammerspiele in Munich. The performances start from contemporary themes or question certain aspects of recent history. These topics were documented through interviews and archival research and the documentation process was followed by improvisation with the actors. The script created was one of fiction where sometimes they incorporated elements of reality (excerpts of interviews with real people, real pictures of documents, objects etc.).

“A.T. Laurian”. The case was subject of an inquiry, code name “The Student”, and the files have been archived in the Securitate vaults up until the historian Mihail Bumbuş found it and brought it to light⁴. With the exception of the boy’s family, very few people remember in the post-communist years that a kid had had enough of queuing for hours just to buy food, of enduring censorship, ideological control and, influenced by the polish model of which he had randomly heard on the Europa Liberă radio had acted and pushed for people to rally together and to stop accepting the daily humiliations that the communist regime induced. The drama of Mugur Călinescu is that, after he and his family experienced first hand the gruesome methods of one of the most violent branches of political police, the Romanian Securitate, he fell ill shortly of leukemia (1983) and died in 1985⁵.

Mihail Bumbuş has studied the records of the inquiries in the archives of the Securitate, looking into the minutes, tracking reports, documentation regarding decisions, informative notes, he spoke with his mother, friends, former class mates (some of them appeared in the records as information sources for the investigators), but he also spoke with two of the officers who worked on the case (this happened in 2007). Gianina Cărbunariu took full advantage of this “readymade” material and created a show *Typographic Capital Letters* in which 4 actors take turns interpreting different parts, encompassing all of the characters involved in the drama, from the police officers to his family and school environment, using a young actor to fill the role of Mugur Călinescu. The docu-fiction created by Gianina Cărbunariu uses the case as an opportunity to remind the viewers of what used to be an unusual dissidence in the communist era (according to statistics, from a total population of 22 million, there were over 11.000 employed by the Securitate, and over half a million of informants, Mugur Călinescu being himself offered to become an informant to escape the consequences of his actions. Just to compare, now there are 15.000 employees in the Romanian Secret Services, from a total population of 19 million!) and of the lack of desire and action from the post-communist Romanian authorities to elucidate the decades of political police repressions. Gianina Cărbunariu’s theatre isn’t just a docudrama one, hat re-enacts real events from the past. It starts from documenting the subject in the archives,

4. Marius Oprea, *Şase Feluri de a Muri* (Iaşi: Polirom, 2009).

5. There are some rumors not yet proved that the Securitate used to irradiate the ones considered enemies of the regime. Mugur Călinescu’s family think that this might be the case for their son.

holding meetings and talking with the ones involved or with general relevant people to the topic. She just uses this valuable material she has gathered through solid research and shapes it in artistic format, transposing it into a docu-fiction. In a particular way, she uses recent history as a source of inspiration, picks some eluded sequences of our past and dramatizes those in a theatrical manner. In her creative work, the artist builds an aesthetic representation of the past that acts equally on the public's memory and imagination, methods of knowledge who stimulate each other, offering her audience a spectacular way to branch back into the past. The audience is always a "character" in the show. Upholding the strict guidelines of documentary theatre, Cărbunariu always keeps her distance, detailing the subject from as many perspectives and angles as possible, letting the audience pass judgement on what they see. In *Typographic Capital Letters* the viewers are integrated into the show – two spotlights reminiscent of the interrogation lamps are flashed right through their eyes, highlighting them, everyone being very close to the stage, filmed live while the images are broadcast onto a screen in front of them.

In an interview she did with Europa Liberă Radio, Gianina Cărbunariu mentioned: „I think that what theatre can do, what a protest can do, what activists can do is bring a whole new agenda into focus and, again, to apply pressure onto decision makers”⁶. Reexamining recent history through artistic manners combines the objective dimension of research and documenting with the subjective one that comes from choosing the topic, from the way in which the script is structured. This type of theatre does not issue rulings, does not pretend scientific objectivity, although it does refer to expert materials constantly.

Gianina Cărbunariu's theatre forces the viewer to process the variety of things discoverable in the acting space. In this regard, it is a participatory theatre as well. The theatre maker is attracted by „unclear, ambiguous things”, by pages of history lost willingly or unwillingly, that she can bring back into the general attention through theatre. A political theatre, socially engaged but equally valuable from an aesthetic point of view. Despite its' fragility from the perspective of temporal durability, her theatre is much more effective in impacting the public by being a living type of art. Her creation speaks of recent history through forgotten episodes, usually pertaining to a smaller chain of

6. Lucian Ștefănescu, „Mesajul unui gest de revoltă din trecut: libertatea și democrația nu vin de-a gata, ele trebuie recâștigate zi de zi,” Radio Europa Liberă, 2014, <https://www.europalibera.org/a/mesajul-unui-gest-de-revolta/25267778.html>.

events, closer to all of us, that the larger picture, the official speech has officially lost sight of. What Cărbunariu is doing is solid proof that history is an infinite source of new ideas and the small scale of history is also very important for any society.

Gianina Cărbunariu's theatre is a special kind of "mark" of history: the script (attested testimonies, but also a few subjective ones), the show (as a message aimed towards the public), talk-back sessions. Each time, the accuracy of information primes, alongside the combination between documentary and fiction in the scenic style chosen by the creative team. Her theatre has a dimension of recovering recent history, an ethical dimension driven by the point to point aesthetic intervention in which history has failed.

Whose memory is it?

Gianina Cărbunariu is known beyond the borders of Romania, particularly in Germany where she worked on a few projects. At Münchner Kammerspiele, for instance, she created *Sold Out*⁷, a performance about the massive migration of Saxons from Romania to Germany in the 70s and 80s, when, according to statistics, around 14.000 Romanian citizens with German origins have left the country. Not by following immigration procedures though, but by paying considerable sums to the communist state. Between 1967 and 1989, over 225.000 Romanians citizens with German origins were sold by the Ceaușescu regime to the Federal Republic of Germany, the whole business totaling, according to German statistics, up to approximately DM 1.127.737.770. The price varied depending on how much the Romanian state considered they had "invested" in those who wished to leave: young people were at the top of the selling range, students in particular, the top of the gruesome catalogue being formed by graduates.

The sums have varied across the years, the average being 7 000 – 8 000 per immigrant⁸.

7. Kammerspiele, München – *Sold Out* by Gianina Cărbunariu. Translator: Ina Tartler. Directing: Gianina Cărbunariu. Sets and costumes: Dorothee Curio. Lights: Christian Mahrla. Visuals: Daniel Gontz. Music: Pollyester. Assistant director: Carmen Coțofană. Dramaturgie: Malte Jelden, Julia Reichert. With Sylvana Krappatsch, Lasse Myhr, Hildegard Schmahl, Lenja Schultze, Edmund Telgenkämper și Michael Tregor. 2010.

8. According to the quoted book: someone with high level of education – DM 11.000 (approximately USD 3.000), an undergraduate – DM 5.500 (approximately USD 1.506), a technician – DM 2.900 (approximately USD 792), a person without education – DM 1.800 (approximately USD 490).

Gianina Cărbunariu discovered the topic by reading about it on various blogs and an interview with Ernst Meinhardt, a German journalist who documented the issue. Captivated by the phenomenon, one that escaped the interest of historians or sociologists, Cărbunariu tracked how the members of the two communities involved in the process, Saxons and Swabians holding Romanian citizenship on one side, and Germans from Germany on the other, have assessed this topic in our recent history. Staying true to her method of operating when social situations catch her eye, Gianina Cărbunariu has again developed a resourceful operation of theatre anthropology, learning through talking to a lot of people involved in the past in the process, the ones who had agreed to discuss their own experience. The story of the show is fictional, but it has been built on the basis of interviewing 40 subjects, all of them respondents to the press add she had put out. "Many of the ones interviewed wished to remain anonymous as some agents of the political police are still active today", Cărbunariu points out in the newspaper "Abendzeitung"⁹. She has massively relied on their testimonies to validate the truth of the text, to very accurately depict the way in which communist authorities would obtain money. Not only members of Securitate took advantage of this type of trade, but also those who brokered the deals, from party members to customs workers. The totalitarian regime is also evoked on stage through Daniel Gontz's visuals: the Ceaușescu couple at one of the Plenary Meetings of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, at Sala Palatului and an image with the map of the Socialist Republic of Romania surrounded by sparkling rays of sunlight, one of the cliché propaganda images specific to the years of Ceaușescu's communism. At the end of the show, actors also read fragments from the interviews that have stood at the basis of the script. Although inspired by real events, the show is not one of pure documentary theatre and, to facilitate its way towards the public, the creation team presented the real life situations with a touch of absurd humor. Relative to the way in which, as an artist, she relates to reality, Gianina Cărbunariu believes that the tension between reality and fiction is always important and inspiring. Countless sequences of recent history are neglected, even though they will have a long term effect and would explain certain specifics the Romanian society confronts now. A society that still contemplates pages of a long gone history, exaggerating their importance, but one that does not take enough care of the stages closer to our time.

9. Irina Wolf, "Sold Out – Un Spectacol Despre Vânzarea Etnicilor Germani [Sold out - a Show about the Selling of Ethnic Germans]," *Teatrul Azi* 9–10 (2010), 93.

The aesthetic approach of historical themes could be a smoother way of displaying delicate issues and, all the while, of answering questions relating to more obscure, less known parts of history. Through this project, the artist has proven that recent history can be reactivated through theatrical means, through memories brought back into artistic attention, sparking the curiosity of specialists, starting from objective, direct testimonies from those involved, from journalistic investigations and ethical obligation of carefully researching a topic, reinforcing it by adhering to a variety of sources. "Apart from the phenomenon of «selling», the theme has seemed important to me because it steers the discussion towards the entire communist era and the relationship between the East and the West, towards the theme of immigration and identity (what is it like being a German citizen and German Romanian citizen or German Turkish or, in a broader term, what is it like today to be a European citizen – in the sense that some are more «European» than others"¹⁰, Gianina Cărbunariu points out.

How do we remember and fuel our memory?

Gianina Cărbunariu focused on european citizens and community equality in another project of hers – *Speak Silence?/Sprachen Sie Schweigen?*¹¹, in which she tackles a phenomenon that, so far, has not been approached by neither sociologists nor historians. Her theatrical approach shines a light on a special type of mimesis that focuses on the present and recent past, aesthetically questioning a wide range of social issues treated with indifference by the authorities, turning the public attention towards dire circumstances currently ignored by the community. The theatre maker identifies and broadcasts situations ignored by the larger scope of history, or the official history if you will, but that impact people, showing circumstances with social significance. In this case, the artistic theme has been the freedom of the workforce to circulate in Europe, the hypocrisy of the continental authorities as its' basis,

10. Oana Stoica, "Statul Român și-a abandonat cetățenii - Interviu cu Gianina Cărbunariu [The Romanian State Abandoned Its Citizens - Interview with Gianina Cărbunariu]," *Dilema Veche*, August 12, 2011.

11. National Theatre "Radu Stanca" Sibiu (2017), a show by Gianina Cărbunariu, set design and visuals: Mihai Păcurar, Assistant Director: Sanda Anastasof, music: Alex Halka, documentation: Gianina Cărbunariu and Andrei Ioniță, translation: Fabiola Eidloth and Daria Hainz, with: Emőke Boldizsár, Daniel Bucher, Ofelia Popii, Valentin Späth, Marius Turdeanu.

translated through silence and lack of intervention in the countless situations in which the Eastern Europeans, not the ones from the „brain drain”, but the simple ones, who work menial jobs, are considered different from the Western Europeans. European legislation exists, theoretically it's mandatory and always applied, it's just that reality offers numerous examples of circumstances in which it is bypass, to the loss of those who are not protected by the system. The employment areas Gianina Cărbunariu focuses on are those avoided by westerners, of physical labour, paid worse, like constructions, looking after the elderly, slaughterhouses and, in patches, agriculture. Press articles, talks, mostly with Elvis Iancu, one of the Romanian born workers who, in 2014, have protested at the Mall of Berlin – Mall of Shame, because not all the rights of the employees there were respected¹², interviews and improvisations have been the means of research of the cases that have become the subjects in the show. The idea behind the text of the show comes from the organic connection with facts, the real cases, relevant to the topic, blunt realities, depicted by intertwining reality and fiction.

The sense of empathy with the subjects and the difficult situations they are in is normal, it comes from the fact that the theatre maker decides to choose their stories, she binds them in fragmentary scripts, structured in sequences, presented from multiple angles. Cărbunariu's creations manage to maintain a precious balance between the information in the field and the aesthetic/emotional traits, a condition which tremendously helps in building credibility. Although belonging to political theatre, they steer far away from ideology and promoting various thesis, all the while being convincing, offering a considerable plethora of sources and a wide range of perspectives. All wrapped up in theatre specific forms. Her shows have a perfect symmetry, an expression of her director logic and of total creative control when using the tools of documentary theatre. In the process of gathering informations and building characters, the artist uses both direct testimonies, creating sort of a diary or intermediary journal consisting of opinions and impressions of those involved. For *Speak Silence?/Sprachen Sie Schweigen?* the people did not intend or did not know how to keep personal journals, so the artists' creative team intervention has managed to collect an adequate piece of material. When effectively constructing the show, this piece of oral history,

12. Paralel networks that have brought construction workers from Eastern Europe, including Romania, treated them unfairly, making them work overhours, paying their salaries with big delays or not paying it at all, threatening and forcing them to lie in front of authorities.

undoubtedly subjective, has become, through assuming, selecting and building, part of a dramatic docufiction script. The preparatory operations thus become journeys into memory, remembrance, whose purpose is reflect and warn against a few unfortunate facts that plague the essence of European democracy. The script is brilliantly built, perfectly balancing the documentary basis with the scenic form imagined (fashion show, multiple part lesson, job fair presentation, scenic action etc.), going through different theatre moments in terms of content and build, using means specific to mockumentary too.

Speak Silence?/Sprachen Sie Schweigen?'s cast includes Emőke Boldizsár, Daniel Bucher, Ofelia Popii, Valentin Späth, Marius Turdeanu, each having tight connections with the artistically analysed theme, being brought on board for this reason precisely. Apart the fact that they are very good actors. In the structure of the show, therefore, multiple layers of information and meaning are combined, offering up a complex multi angled depiction of the problem. There are life details that the audience discovers in the *intro*, built like an awards show, on a huge red carpet where actors present one another. The selected elements of biography are funny and are all in connection with the theme theatrically debated. Daniel Bucher is a true blooded German, but he fell in love with Romanian actress Fatma Mohamed and, to be with her, has moved to Romania. Marius Turdeanu wanted to emigrate to USA, but tried an unusual route to get there – Ukraine, Russia, Alaska – only to be found in Vladivostok and sent home by the police. In one of his student break he went to Germany to make some money, got a job working in constructions, but then lost all his earnings in a local pyramid based game. Emőke Boldizsár is the most multi-cultural of them all: born in a Hungarian family in Bistrița, graduated a German high-school, her parents work in EU and she uses the money that they sent her to complete her university studies. Ofelia Popii has collaborated with a Theatre in Stuttgart, so has worked in the West, in a project undertook by the National Theatre "Radu Stanca", and her brother works in Germany. Valentin Späth is a young actor born and raised in Germany who, to the complete amazement of his family and friends, has decided to accept the offer of being a paid actor in Romania.

The script signed by Gianina Cărbunariu collects episodes significant to her topic, with a close timeframe to the present, but barely if at all known to the public, keeping the required grave tone but sprinkling in some humour into the real or docu-fiction situations presented from Germany and Romania. The actors create an alternate world on stage, inspired by true facts, a world from the underground of the EU, inviting us all to think about what the

European community really is and how equality in rights is really understood and applied. Romanians are „the cheapest offer on the market” and this inferior position is triggered by their lack of options and the poverty sweeping the nation. Of the „culture of silence” as an element of EU hypocrisy nothing is being said! Gianina Cărbunariu’s theatre pushes the viewer out of his/her traditional comfort zone, shining a light on history which „fabricates” reality, revealing situations that decision makers prefer to ignore. It’s not the first time she is preoccupied by freedom of expression as a democratical base. In *Regular People*¹³ she brings up on stage warnings on integrity and corruption in various EU countries by presenting several cases of whistleblowers. “These people have lost their careers, jobs, sometimes even families and health, their houses, all the while being under extreme pressure. They did not, however, give up their cause because in their hearts they believed what they were doing was right, that they own the moral high ground in a tough situation in which they are being forced to choose. People like them have always existed, yet new means of broadcasting a message into the public domain (internet, media), play a crucial role in sharing cases to a much larger audience. What this picture still needs is a legal framework that protects and rewards as opposed to the punishments they currently receive. The project harbors 8 cases of *whistleblowing* in Italy, United Kingdom and Romania, European countries in different development stages and with different legal frameworks in terms of integrity issues”, Gianina Cărbunariu mentions in the show’s booklet.

Multilingualism is an European trait and it is imprinted into *Speak Silence?/ Sprachen Sie Schweigen?’s*. Texts are spoken/translated into/from Romanian, German, Hungarian, but they have been rehearsed in English, the „official” tongue of the project. The clever, poignant irony is another quality of the show (red carpet to the EU, „the German kebab”, when first arriving in Romania Daniel Bucher’s passport had expired but not him, nor the border police noticed the „detail”, his family’s reactions when hearing that Späth had decided to take a job with a theatre in Sibiu etc.)

13. National Theatre "Radu Stanca" Sibiu, set design and visuals: Mihai Păcurar, music: Bobo Burlăcianu, video documenting: Veioza Arte - Tania Cucoreanu & Andrei Ioniță, cast: Florin Coșuleț, Mariana Mișu, Ioan Paraschiv, Ofelia Popii, Dana Taloș, Marius Turdeanu. The show is part of Be SpectACTive!, project co-financed by Creative Europe Program, together with Capotrave/Kilowatt Festival Sansepolcro (IT), Bakelit Multi Art Center Budapesta (HU), B-51 Ljubljana (SL), Domino- Perforacije Festival- Zagreb (HR), London International Festival of Theatre (UK), Tanec Praha (CZ), York Citizens Theatre Royal (UK).

Part of the experimental platform Human Trade Network, *Speak Silence?/ Sprachen Sie Schweigen?'*s is a political creation about the double standards of the EU, about hidden agendas and, in it's subtext, but in an equal way, about the blame attributed to disinterested Romanian authorities who couldn't care less about the status of his citizens abroad. It's a show about defending the defenseless, those who would need protection the most.

A special form of memoirism, Cărbunariu's theatre art dusts off from forgiveness, through relevant samples, important historic events, perfectly placed between the historic document and the aesthetic medium. An active art form, the theatre Gianina Cărbunariu produces is one that mediates, targeting pages that are harder to absorb for the official history from the near and very near past. It is valuable proof that theatre and history can intersect in favour of the truth. And they have to do so. In the end, both theatre and history can be seen as journals in which forgotten situations can be noted and revealed.

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Oltița Cîntec is a theater critic and scholar, artistic manager of Luceafărul Theater in Iași and President of the Romanian Section of AICT/IATC.Ro Group.

