

Theatre Is the People Who Make It
The Romanian Theatre-work Experience by an Italian Director

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Abstract: The present paper presents the journey of an Italian director in Romanian theatre, from the first encounter with Romanian great performances abroad, in Festivals, to the work on stage with Romanian actors, and for a Romanian audience, in Cluj-Napoca. The National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca offered the place of this encounter of different energies, ways of living, making and approaching theatre, and the space for an artistic challenge: to work not only in the experimental way the director was used to at the Laboratory in Pontedera, but to find the right path in the more strict system of a Repertory Theatre and for a much larger audience in a shorter laps of time. This journey is not only about theatrical places but also and mainly about people met there, about exchanges, work, challenges, wishes, artistic results in the past and the present and projections in the future.

Key-words: Romanian Theatre, National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, Theatre Laboratory, Era di Pontedera.

Acknowledgments

“Theatre is the people who make it”, these are the apparently tautological words belonging to a friend and a theatre master. And yet, in my experience at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, they sound absolutely true. So, I would like to thank a Theatre which, for some years, on three occasions, has been also mine. In Cluj, I have passed through experiences that in 45 years of theatrical work I had never encountered before and all that has happened with attention and lightness. I believe that I gave and that I received something, but above all I learned a lot.

We have been, all together, a Theatre.

Thank you.

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Theatre and Show

In Romania it is difficult to encounter, at least in my experience, a theatre which doesn't move towards the show.

The centralised organization of both national and municipal theatres often imposes a working approach aimed to the exclusive production and consumption of "shows". The attention on the size of the audience (generally even very attentive and prepared) implies a working process that, assumed the quality of excellent directors and actors, tends to produce plays achieving to an immediate "success" offered to an undifferentiated audience. It is a bit like it happens in the production of films, in which the art of cinema with its potential is directed from the industry to the films' market, with its stories frequently told by using narrative stereotypes, names of known actors, etc...

It seems to me that this is the way it happens with respect to the theatre when a decision is taken to produce shows for a general audience, forgetting in this way the potential the word "theatre" encloses. It has even come, certainly not only in Romania, to identify the art of the theatre with the building where the shows take place.

The working time often reduced, the use of spaces most of the time relegated to the relationship between seat/stage, the training of the actors and directors who can't look for other ways towards the "spectator" which are not the traditional ones, even if the tradition is renewed in its forms, all these factors reduce the spectator to a hidden number among the audience.

All of this has as a result a theatre which reproduces, in different ways, and sometimes even with high quality, only itself.

A theatre as a reflection of another theatre.

In my Romanian experience, this is the limit I could ascertain. The same happens in Italy with the official theatre even if this aspect is challenged by many groups and artists who have been able to find their own independent path by creating languages, places, production's models and experiences which make the word "theatre" itself plural, bringing back the audience to be "spectators".

That said, in Romania as well there are important experiences of directors who are looking for other possibilities in the theatre with sometimes

extraordinary shows. To name a few: Mihai Măniuțiu with *Electra* (the play which fascinated me and pulled the trigger on my long Romanian trip), Silviu Purcărete with *Faust*, Andrei Șerban with *Uncle Vania*.

But the theatrical machine and maybe the drama schools too tend to create a quality that is only conveyed to a profession producing “shows” and which doesn’t consider theatre as a territory to dig in search for its richness and potentialities.

This theme would be interesting to explore and, in my view, locations and institutions that could be “anomalous” with respect to the existing ones should be organized. I think that a new audience might be ready to lose himself along new and unexplored paths.

Just as painting and music have transformed themselves to the limits of their traditional definitions, theatre should research and experiment new dynamics inside the relationship between actor/ spectator.

Next Stop: Romania

I have known and worked together with the Polish theatre for many years.

Directos, actors, theatres, Festivals... Masters such as Jerzy Grotowski who lived and worked in Pontedera (where he died in 1999) for 15 years, Tadeusz Kantor, Andrej Wajda, Woitek Krukowski, Jarek Fret, Wodek Stanievskij and many others, they all are a part of my personal history into the theatre.

So it was for Russian artists and men of the theatre like Anatoli Vassiliev, Valery Shadrin (director of the Chekhov Festival), Yuri Kordonski. That is to say how Eastern theatre has always been an artistic reference point to me and a space of great personal friendships.

Then I arrived in Romania. Romania’s door has been opened for me by an old and dear friend who recommended that I see a beautiful “*Electra*” directed by Mihai Măniuțiu. The show was produced by Oradea State Theatre where I saw it for the first time in 2008, then I invited the show in Italy for the “Fabbrica Europa” Festival in Florence, of which I was the theatre director.

The old friend who guided me was Georges Banu, a great Romanian critic and intellectual whom I owe many other encounters with great artists which took place in the subsequent years thanks to his encouragement.

Mihai Măniuțiu directed then the Cluj - Napoca National Theatre and it was under suggestion of an American theatre professor (Robert Cohen), one of Măniuțiu's friends who saw my *Hamlet* in Wroclaw (Poland), that he invited me for the first time in Cluj to stage that play again with Romanian actors. And that is how I set foot on a planet I didn't know and that today has become, at least in my feeling, my second "Theatrical Home".

To stage *Hamlet* again in Cluj has been an experience that obliged me to enrich and transform the show thanks to the actors who didn't want to consider the original Italian one as a starting point but as a challenge to accept and then to win. And they had all the skills to do that.

So the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre became a working place of an unknown nature, because of the warm reception, the professionalism of the actors who over the years have become friends' of mine into the theatre, the spaces (the big stage I had never worked on in Italy), the human atmosphere created: Cluj has represented the perfect door to start learning about Romanian theatre.



Fig. 1: *Hamlet*, after William Shakespeare, National Theatre in Cluj, 2012

That's why in the following years I accepted two very difficult challenges such as *Livada de Visini* (*The Cherry Orchard*) and *Don Juan*.

I knew at this point how to guide the actors and the technicians, I had my back covered by Mihai's direction and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu's one, the literary assistant director who was always available for whatever problems we had.

A fundamental detail: my encounter with Maria Rotar (Assistant Director of the Excelsior Theatre of Bucharest), first *Hamlet's* translator, as well as the translator of other Romanian plays I directed, then assistant director and finally my wife.

"*Hamlet*" and "*Livada*" have also been presented in Italy, in Florence, Modena, Pontedera and, in addition to the Romanian community living in Italy, the audience's and the critics' reaction has always been very positive thanks to the actors' high professional quality which can be hardly found in Italian theatre. In particular, what's striking the most in Romanian theatre is the quality of "all" the actors on stage, even the one of those who, that night, are playing an apparently secondary role. Which rarely happens in Italy, for the quality tends to diminish according to the importance of the character the actor is playing.

Even if I came from a different theatrical culture and from being the director of a Center of Experimentation and Research I have created in Pontedera since 1975, the Cluj experience has represented for me a way to look at myself and my work in a completely new and different context.

In a sense, I've seen myself starting over, even though I had a long experience as a director, festival director and a Research Centre director which has become today the Tuscany National Theatre in conjunction with the Pergola Theatre of Florence.

In 2019 there will be the forth work to do, but every time I come back at the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre it's like the first time and I feel I can transform it into a new adventure.

From Cluj to Bucharest, then the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, and many other theatres, even in the small Romanian villages, when the National Theatre's door has been opened to me, that was the beginning of my journey made of many encounters with Romanian artists, a journey still going on today.



Fig. 2: Roberto Bacci with Maria Rotar, at the National Theatre in Cluj

In Cluj: Into My Garden

After Hamlet, Livada de Visini, and after Livada de Visini, Don Juan.

For me, each theatrical experience is a challenge and the challenge consists of two precise aspects: the first is to look at me in the mirror, the second is to guide the actors along a path we don't know yet.

If I am able with my theatre to look at myself and ask myself new questions, I'm sure I can bring into this research the audience too, even if not necessarily everyone.

Each play is a philosophical and existential subject with which theatre challenges me to observe myself from its craftsmanship. For me a theatre without this necessary condition would be a mere aesthetic exercise with which to capture the spectator's attention.

When I start a new theatrical work the "shipwreck" must always be possible, but for this journey I need not to be alone, so for me the actors are always my necessary companions in adventure.

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In Cluj I found excellent comrades in arms.



Fig. 4: *The Cherry Orchard (Livada de vișini)*, National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, 2014



Fig. 4: The main stage of the National Theatre in Cluj during the rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard*

Livada has been a complex experience also because of the short time available.

The working time represents the basis for each artistic production and when the institutions have to shorten the time due to economic reasons, the quality has only one destiny: the fast-moving consumption. To a fast production a superficial thought corresponds, however *Livada de Visini* has disclosed a world opened to this era's concerns that I could question to understand them better.

A disappearing world, the cherry trees to cut down, the new vacationers looming over, the memory of what has been moving and torturing us, imagining who we are not anymore with respect to the future awaiting us, all that asks us a question: "who have we been?". All this and more is enclosed inside a story that has to be brought up to life, to be witnessed even in front of only one spectator. To read each word and each dialogue, each pause, each hidden and mysterious sound like a cracking violin string... how many of us can travel in a similar way, how many of us can do that with trusted companions who show you what you wouldn't see if you were alone... this is for me the theatre I need to create and in Cluj I found people who helped me realize a theatre as a real philosophy.

Getting Lost: Finally

"To go where you don't know, you have to pass through what you haven't experienced". For me, this is the only possible practice. Not in general, but in every detail, in every particular, in every working moments. Not knowing where we are going, waiting for the "thought" and not the single "right idea" to create the conditions to understand which is the experience that has to be realized, what necessity is linked to, and only then understand how to realize it.

Suspending judgement on the form to dig into the substance. "Getting lost" is very difficult.

There was a time in my artistic life in Pontedera, before we turned into a National Theatre, in which getting lost was my rule.

Not knowing where to go to reach the unknown, turning back, starting again, throwing away what was too early found and that seemed working, being aware that what was abandoned through the process would have been in any case something that would have helped you to proceed.

For all this, when I asked Mihai Măniuțiu to work at the "*Nullafacente*" by Michele Santeramo with whom I shared two years' work only to define the text and its philosophical, economic and political aspect, and when Mihai suggested that I prepare it into the little Cluj theatre's room, I accepted straight away.

I needed to lose myself together with the actors towards a subject that concerns us all: our functioning as human beings in front of the weakness of our thinking in our choices.

Why do what we call "work" on the one hand and "real life" on the other hand have taken such different paths in our civilization?

Are we maybe heading down the wrong way without being able to turn back?

Being an Actor?

To connect oneself with another one: the character. To criticize it, love it, hate it, dialogue with an unknown entity which hides a part of us, a story we didn't know we could share and which offers us the possibility of another existence on stage, to confront ourselves with the director's ideas, to react to the space, to the sounds and to the lights with all ourselves...yes, it's an extraordinary experience to recreate such a true life that it is even more real than the one we live under the shadow of our ordinary life. Certainly, sometimes all this happens on stage, but there are two major obstacles: the profession's routine and the performances' repetition.

This happens wherever there is a stage to go on, a costume to wear, a text to play...

The challenge of truth fights against an institutional theatre (of any Western country), which each night needs the "performance" of a good professional. The first time, to repeat helps to deepen, but then it turns into

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something which loses life, the energy of the “first time” slowly dies down without the actor even being aware of it. The technique, the drama academy, the early enthusiasm, the energy coming from the audience can help...then the lie begins and the form becomes a shelter.



Fig. 5: Cristian Grosu as Hamlet with Miron Maxim and Cătălin Codreanu

This journey inside the profession and the routine has been the major issue the great Western theatre masters tried to report and solve but, unfortunately, the official or commercial (in Italy) theatre organization has been the enemy imposing its own rules.

In Romania I often discussed about these questions with very good actors and their difficulties to try to find a solution were quite clear.

If an actor can deal with fiction until transforming it into an occasion of a major self – awareness, can his professional routine arrive to betray also the spectator who is looking for a moment of authenticity into the theatre?

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Fig. 6: Cătălin Codreanu with
Cătălin Herlo as Claudius in
Hamlet



Fig. 7: Cătălin Herlo as Sganarelle in
Don Juan, 2016

Is there, using Grotowski's words, "a prostitution of the actor"?

And can the spectator be a prostitute of a theatre, too? Can a spectator "be a prostitute" of a theatre which replies, in different forms, basically itself, and can he accept attending it without even asking himself questions and without searching for a real transformative experience?

Those who look for a new quality of relationship into the theatre, even as spectators, end up choosing titles which leave them unharmed in front of a real confrontation with themselves. And yet, there are experiences which expand the word theatre and restrict the general definition of "audience" with the one of "spectator". Experiences which, as it happens with the scientific research, amplify the fields of investigation by experimenting new ways for those who seek "another" theatre which is not only about the next show.

I don't know to what extent this problem is being discussed in Romania, but certainly, given the quality of the actors and their need to get rid of the professional automatic tasks in order to make use of what theatre

and their profession offer them more freely and consciously, I think that spaces and times to search for other sources and definitions of theatre itself should be needed.

The theatre as a form of live “show” can be a possibility (for how much longer?), but if this is the only one, then it is doomed to see its roots dry. This is a common problem for the official Western theatre which, even though the great culture and beauty it has produced, risks keeping itself into a self-referential museum.

The Laboratory

The Romanian theatrical system is certainly one of the most prestigious and efficient in Europe. As far as locations, organization, fundings, and artistic qualities are concerned, few other countries can present the same result. The audience number can confirm that too.

However, precisely for this “strength”, “tradition” and “experience”, I think it needs to develop antibodies to survive and fight against the spirit of the times and the culture these “times” produce. Is the theatrical machine we know enough to reflect on and question the man of today?

Can it evolve and open up to new generations?

Are there some other theatrical art’s potentialities which haven’t been explored yet?

Is it possible to create locations where this research can develop with the collaboration of men of the theatre and of other disciplines’ too?

Time passes and, without us realizing it, the theatre is more and more closed, surrounded by needs it can’t answer to, distracted as it is by the “numbers” which make it survive in a routine show after show.

Without destroying all the beauty that has been created, we need to rethink a theatrical culture, its transmission (the drama academies), and how to “betray” it in order to make it grow outside what is repeated of itself. It is a great question which needs the collaboration of many people in order to initiate a change before it is too late and theatre becomes just its own reflection. For this new and necessary perspective the great theatre masters have coined a word and built a space: the “Laboratory”.

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Fig. 8: Matei Rotaru and Petre Băcioiu as Don Juan and his father, and the spirits of the commander's house (Diana Buluga, Paula Rotar, Alexandra Tarce)



Fig. 9: Matei Rotaru and Sânziana Tarța as Don Juan and Dona Elvira.

If we think about Western theatre history, the Laboratory (borrowed from the scientific research or the craftsman's work) has been the thinking and action tool that has opened new ways to the actor's, the director's and, why not, the spectator's work.

The Laboratory is a place of freedom from the automatic theatrical life producing shows.

In the Laboratory the actor's role can be questioned since the training, the director can imagine different times, spaces and new types of relationship between actor-spectator; the spectator can encounter theatre with a different definition and all the theatrical system can be helped to

rethink itself, dealing with the other media the cultural and commercial system impose with new tools and possibilities. The concept of a human being encountering another human being becomes the means and the goal of a new research.

The Laboratory is a place of free work.

It's Stanislavski, who during the last phase of his life worked from home with his young students on the physical actions' method; it's Grotowski who, starting from his Laboratory Theatre, took the way of the "Paratheatre", with the "Theatre of Sources", until arriving at the "Art as a Vehicle"; it's Peter Brook, who left Europe to go find in Africa the origin of the art of storytelling; it's Eugenio Barba, who travelled in search of the Theatre and Theatre Anthropology developed by the I.S.T.A. (International School of Theatre Anthropology) it's Anatoli Vasiliev and his research on theatre pedagogy.

These are only a few examples to show how the idea and the practice of the Laboratory has been and can still be today an essential nourishment to "move" the theatre from its defined tracks established once for all by the institutions. In my experience I could personally verify how these anomalous experiences can be realized if we pursue the idea of the Laboratory, that is to say by creating the conditions for new possibilities.

I will show only three examples I can't properly describe here, but of which there is documented evidence: *the first* as a Director of an International Festival, Santarcangelo Theatre Festival 1978- (the Town inside the Theatre).

For one week, groups coming from different countries (Italy, India, Poland, Cuba, Venezuela, the Netherlands, Indonesia) worked together, changing every day the space and the perception of this Romagna's little village starting from prefixed "themes": Fire, Music, Vertical Theatre, Mask and Food, Fair, Theatre all of a Sudden, Political Theatre.

Thousands of spectators came to Santarcangelo to attend and participate to a real street theatre's Laboratory which has entered into theatre's history books. Working tools never used before, unpredictable locations and hours in which theatre appeared into town changing its perception (the music waking up the town at 7.00 a.m.)

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Is it a Festival? Yes, it is. But conceived as a Laboratory, that is to say as if it were “the first”. Not a list of shows, but a unique one in which the artists create and realize something all together.



Fig. 10: Roberto Bacci with Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba

The second example: the Trilogy: Trip inside the spectator’s mind. A three-year work documented in a book and in a film produced by RAI. Three “pieces” created over the three years are presented on a single day for three days in a row.

The first work: Over There it blows (Trip around the world) from Melville’s *Moby Dick*.

The second work: Era (Trip within the two cities, the visible and the invisible one).

The third work: In the Flesh (Trip inside the dreaming mind), based on the actors’ dreams.

These three works, gathered in the Trilogy, have been experienced by five spectators at a time. Each of the works moved in between outdoor spaces (the town or the theatre's backyard) and the enclosed space of the Manzoni Theatre (our old headquarters composed of large rooms without a stage). The timetable: two works scheduled in the afternoon, when the city is alive and the other one during the night, when no one goes to the Theatre. The actors: some actors, some others who collaborated with Grotowski for the Theatre of Sources. The work, too much complex to be described here, has been defined as the "dramaturgy of the experience". Evidence can be found inside Theatre's History books.

Georges Banu has been one very special spectator of the Trilogy, realized in the early '90s.

The third example of my Laboratory's experience is still active after four years. It is entitled "Dreaming in Theatre". Even of this experience there are many written reports belonging to the spectators who took part of it. Duration: 12 hours, from 8.30 p.m. until 8.30 a.m. next morning. Participants: maximum 12 spectators. Location: moving in between the spaces of the Era Theatre or the Pergola Theatre of Florence. A fundamental rule: it is forbidden to talk. Subtitle: "How to escape for one night from ordinary life's prison".

A guide leads the 12 spectators through different experiences:

1. seeing a performance,
2. changing ordinary clothes with pyjamas,
3. simple and guided relaxing exercises
4. an infusion
5. proposal of a guided meditation about the subject of the self
6. ablutions
7. going to bed on 12 beds prepared on stage
8. an offstage actress reading a Michele Santeramo's text about sleeping
9. music to accompany the sleeping time (by Ares Tavolazzi)
10. wake up at 7 o'clock
11. ablutions
12. simple and guided awakening exercises
13. back to ordinary clothes

14. excellent breakfast in common, accompanied by a Michele Santeramo's reading about dreaming.

15. leaving the theatre and coming back to the use of words.

Here in these three abovementioned examples lies the idea of the Laboratory, in other words Western theatre's own attempt to make the very roots of theatre moving to search for new nourishment.

In Conclusion

After these brief observations which might need further reflection and, why not, a dialogue with those who know better than me the deep reality of Romanian theatre, I will briefly return to the principal subject, in conclusion.

Today's theatre, at least in Western countries and in Romania in particular, is a complex system made of different professions; of an economy essentially supported by public institutions; of so mostly defined "Italian-style theatre" buildings (with very limited exceptions). This big machine which implies and employs thousands of people is very difficult to transform just because of its size. If we think that thanks to the enactment of one or more state laws a great change or a transformation of the "system" can occur, I think we will be disappointed. Indeed, the first thing any long-term surviving system does, is preserve itself, and politics has all its own interests to consider theatre as a "public service" to be delivered (in the same way as water or lighting) to the largest audience possible without intervening to create at least the conditions for an alternative theatre. To accept this system with its automatisms doesn't certainly give a future to the art of the theatre, that is to say to all the surprising, vital and necessary aspects that can happen between the actor and the spectator. It must be admitted however that nowadays this "system" has also produced beautiful pieces of work even full of questions.

The question still remains: what has to be done?

Shall we wait for the spectators to migrate to forms and tools of communication that the Western cultural system is offering us, or shall we seek and experiment through the theatre alternative modalities to "make the

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audience work” and, with it, the actor? We must ensure that a new challenge grows from the very roots of the word theatre. What I see and feel in Romania is that I am in front of this challenge thinking about the theatre of the future instead of the future of the theatre.

But this is not just about Romania.

ROBERTO BACCI is the Artistic Director of the CSRT Theatre of Tuscany and founder of Fondazione Pontedera Teatro, from Italy. Together with Carla Pollastrelli he invited Jerzy Grotowski in Pontedera, in order to create an Institute, where to develop a permanent research activity. In 1986, Grotowski moved in Pontedera and he established, in the same year, The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski.

Roberto Bacci took part in various theatre projects, along with Peter Brook, Anatoli Vasiliev, Raul Ruiz, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Julian Beck and Judith Malina. Between the years 1978 and 1987 he was the Artistic Director of The International Theatre Festival of Santarcangelo di Romagna, and from the year 1990 until 1998 he has been leading The International Festival Volterra Teatro and Passaggio in Pontedera (the last known as Generazioni starting with the year 2000). From 2002 to 2015, he has been the artistic director of the theatrical section of the international festival Fabbrica Europa in Florence.

He directed over thirty performances in Italy and three performances on the main stage at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca.