

The Courage to Avoid "Safety Nets" in Theatre Costume Design

*An Interview with LUCIAN BROSCĂȚEAN by
TRENT M. SANDERS¹*

Through the years, Lucian has participated, with his *fashion/art projects*, at various national and international events: Romanian Fashion Week, Mercedes-Benz Berlin Fashion Week, International Fashion Showcase at London Fashion Week, MQ Vienna Fashion Week...

He won several awards including: 'Special Mention' at the International Fashion Showcase London Fashion Week, Arts of Fashion 'Wendy Jim and YKK' Awards at MOMA San Francisco, Beau Monde Magazine's 'Crystal Globe' for Best Romanian Designer, 3 times nominee for 'ELLE Style Awards Romania' Best Designer Category, 3rd place in the Fashion Design category and 42nd place in the general 'Top 100 Cool Brands' made by Forbes Romania.



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Trent M. Sanders: *So then, when you were working with the festival, The International Meetings in Cluj, this was your first time, right?*

Lucian Broscăţean: Yes, I was going to this festival just as a spectator, you know, at different plays and performances and spectacles, but this year I collaborated with Andrei Măjeri. I had my first professional approach in theater because I was the costume designer for *Meşterul Manole*.

T. M. S.: *Did Andrei approach you?*

L. B.: Yes.

T. M. S.: *How did you know him, did you have a relationship with him from before?*

L. B.: Actually a friend of ours, who is also a Director, she introduced us a year and a half ago, and afterwards we started to speak about different approaches in theatre. I was all the time, and I am, fascinated by theatre and movements and different theories related to theatre studies.

Growing up in Sibiu, I was a passionate theatre spectator. Some of my most formative experiences were with watching Mr. Măniuţiu's *Jewish Trilogy*, which he staged in Sibiu seventeen or eighteen years ago.

Coming back to your question, Andrei was the one who approached me and invited me to be one of his team members for *Meşterul Manole*. He himself was approached by Mr. Măniuţiu, who proposed the play for this very special centennial year.

T. M. S.: *That's very interesting for me because when I listen to you speak about theatre – I'm new here in Cluj – I just assume that your involvement with the National Theatre was longstanding.*

L. B.: I am actually a great supporter of the National Theatre and of the Hungarian Theatre and all of the independent theatres in Cluj, but I've not been so much involved (on the inside) until now. I've been on the other side, you know, watching and enjoying.

T. M. S.: *Why were you chosen?*

L. B.: By Andrei?

T. M. S.: *Yes.*

L. B.: Well actually, he saw my work, as I showed him my portfolio. I told him the story related to one of the biggest theatre costume designers that we have in Romania. She's been working since the 1970s in theatre, Doina Levintza. She was the one who discovered me while I was still in high school. Ever since she worked with me, it has come true what she said to me at first, "Your theatrical approach to fashion will definitely lead you someday to designing costumes." Recently I met her and she said, "You remember what I told you the first time that I awarded you in Bucharest?" I was certain that at some point I would go further in theatre because until now all my fashion shows that I worked on had a theatrical approach. I had fashion shows for Berlin Fashion Week and fashion exhibitions at London Fashion Week, which were inspired by theatre theories, for example, by Brecht and Mamet, you know. I think for me theatre theory was a kind of intellectual framework in which I could develop concepts related to clothing. I think this was what triggered Andrei to decide to propose this project with me.

T. M. S.: *Within the show Master Manole, the movements in my mind resembles the very regimented performance that is required in a fashion show. The movements seem so specific in Manole – basically the movements are big, the movements are developed to fill an entire space. You literally have this whole church in the background. The movements had to be large, larger than this world, if you will. So then, did the theme "Visions" pique your interest at all when you heard about The International Meetings in Cluj?*



Fig. 1: Lucian Broscăţean during the exhibition of the costumes he designed for *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj, *The International Meetings in Cluj*, 8th edition, October 2018

L. B.: Well, actually yes, because in the creative field there has been a lot of talk about the lack of visions in the last couple of years.

T. M. S.: *In the theatre?*

L. B.: In the theatre, in arts, in fashion. The organizers chose a very good theme because I think the critics that came here and also the public were very much interested in seeing visions: Are there new visions nowadays? How are the visions attached to a certain school of thought? How is *dogma* affecting visions? How are the visions developing for the younger audience or for the younger playwrights or directors?

Andrei is a young theatre director. I think he has great talent and I am very much inspired by his vision.

T. M. S.: *How would you define Andrei's vision, if you had to summarize it?*

L. B.: Transgressive, modern, complex, and with an extraordinary depth to it. For me he is *very* meticulous in his way of mapping everything – it's all the time a very creative process. We worked together for six months, and in those six months I discovered the man with a vision which inspires me. Of course it's polarizing because he tries to avoid the safety nets.

T. M. S.: *Define, maybe concretely, what a safety net would be?*

L. B.: Yes, a safety net would be to do a performance with all the clichés and every aspect that would definitely lead you to a *good* performance, not to a *brilliant* performance. A safety net would not be a mediocre performance, but it would use all the clichés and all the formulas in order to say something about a certain subject. Andrei avoids these safety nets and he knows that he will be criticized or deconstructed by certain critics, but I think he also likes that. He likes to polarize views.

Andrei also took me out from my comfort zone. What I wanted to say earlier is that the second reason why he chose me for the project is that all my fashion shows and all my fashion art projects were very much interested by spirituality and by Blaga's approach to spirituality.

I think Andrei was very much interested in how I can develop certain aspects of orthodox or Christian church identity. In my fashion shows I very much developed certain orthodox iconography, but in a *very* conceptual and abstract way. If I would have done costumes that were, for example, dark and minimal, *very* safe, it would not have been so polarizing. The costumes created much debate. Some of the critics saw them as attached to the whole directing vision. Others saw them as Avant-garde. Others wrote that they're brilliant. Others associated them with cartoon characters – so it was very different, it was not a very safe kind of approach. We knew from the get-go that due to the theme and due to the way we interpret it, *Manole* would also be about controversy and about different interpretations of it.

T. M. S.: *Along the lines of interpretation, how did you, as you were preparing for this festival, interpret the theme, "Visions"?*

L. B.: Well actually, as I said before, I'm very much interested in discovering new visions, whether it is a new playwright, or whether it is a new contemporary artist, I think it is interesting and refreshing to find visions.

One of my favorite social critics once said in the Martin Scorsese documentary, "There is nothing new because everything is soaked in nostalgia." I really meditated on what Fran Lebowitz said, and I find it very interesting because it can be applied also to the creative fields of course. If nostalgia is soaking everything, then you can't get new visions. They are the old visions, which are just recycled then up-cycled in a metaphorical way. But to find new visions, one has to be transgressive and destructive, not have a checklist such as: I have to make a performance which has to get to the audience, which has to be popular, which has to have beautiful costumes. I think it's also about risks, things that can really teach you something about doing a creative project. I'm all the time talking about the creative process because for me working at this particular theatre production was not about only fashion, it was also about movement.

The stage design was done by Mihai Păcurar, who himself has a very specific vision. He is all the time searching for new materials and new types of interpreting old symbolism or archaism. For example, here he worked with digital printed structures, which I also used for the costumes, and with lighting design, and he tried to interpret in a very postmodern way an archaic theme, which in most of the interpretations was more tied to Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* than to a *very* modern aesthetic.

I think both of them are transgressive and within the whole *International Meetings* I really liked the way that they've chosen the spectacles that they presented. Each was questioning in a way this idea of vision. It's a concept that has to be present in critical thinking. What can be visionary? What can be a vision? What can be a new vision? How can I have a new vision? It's very interesting, all this creative work which recycles and up-cycles ideas.



Fig. 2: The exhibition of the costumes Lucian Broscățean designed for *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj, *The International Meetings in Cluj*, 8th edition, October 2018

T. M. S.: *I find fascinating the need to think about creating if you want to create. You can't just create, can you? So that would be the critique within "Visions." You speak about the thing that is absent. But in speaking about the thing that is absent there are so many questions: Why was it ever lost? Was it ever there in the first place? And in speaking about vision, will we actually have something new come about?*

Let's think about the costume design now specifically. You've already mentioned some words like "disruptive, transgressive, polarizing, meticulous" for Andrei's vision, and then within your own costume design critics are saying "abstract, Avant-garde, cartoon, or brilliant," so what did you hope to accomplish in your costume design?

L. B.: First of all I wanted to say a story about how I interpret this very misogynistic orthodox tale because I wanted to have a very feminist approach to costumes, but in a subtle way. I didn't want it to become an on-stage protest about misogyny, but I wanted it to underline the fact that through costumes one can speak about very specific issues regarding contemporary culture.

Andrei from the get-go wanted to deconstruct this whole myth regarding *Manole* and how he made a human sacrifice, namely a woman, who is his own wife in order to arrive at the big accomplishment that was an Orthodox church. It's such a brilliant metaphor for nowadays because of the whole "#MeToo" movement. Within this new feminist context, the play was interpreted and was transformed into a spectacle. That's why all the women characters in the play are very tough and strong, even for example the two women that look like warriors in a way.

T. M. S.: *Was it your decision to give them guns?*

L. B.: No, actually it was Andrei's decision, but I modified the costumes so at first glance you can't see the guns. They are hidden beneath the layers of leather skirts.

After having this thought in mind about how to do the walling of the character, we wanted to do it in a metaphorical way. If you remember the moment of the spectacle in which the two characters Manole and his shadow remain only with the item of clothing and Mira vanishes, you can't know if it speaks about a true sacrifice or a symbolic one.

Another important aspect in creating the costumes were the cultural references. During the festival I had also a display at one of the exhibition places with all the cultural elements that were incorporated within the costumes. It's not only about creating the garment. For me, the creation has all

these layers of meanings because I also made references to my past collections. It’s interesting that some of the critics saw the costumes as cartoon characters or different blockbusters – which is fine, it’s their own interpretation.

If you see my collages with my references, you’ll see for example some of the elements I used ten or twelve years ago in different projects. For example, the hoods and orthodox inspired items or the symbolism I used in many collections – I tried to incorporate them in a fresh way.

I didn’t want *Manole* to become a fashion show. In some moments grotesque elements were needed. For example some of the characters had a grotesque element to them because that’s how we wanted to interpret them, but in no way did I want to make yet another fashion show. I wanted them to be costumes and to be an extension of the actors’ personality. I worked closely with Andrei Măjeri, Mihai Păcurar, the coreographer Sinko Ferenc and the actors, trying to understand what they need, how they move, what they want to say. Of course, I don’t know if these things can be seen, if they are visible, but for me it was very important.



Fig. 3: Dragoș Bârlea, Elena Ivanca, Irina Wintze, Adriana Băilescu, in *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj



Fig. 4: Romina Merei as Mira and Sorin Leoveanu as Manole in *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj

T. M. S.: *And this is something that I want to probe a little bit because your medium is the image, and the image cannot speak for itself: it needs an interpreter, and it needs an informed interpreter.*

What's fascinating about your image specifically, but I think that this maybe extends into the realm of postmodern art, your image is highly technical, and your image is stemming from a very rich tradition. As you are expressing this to me, the tradition is your own vision for fashion. That's fascinating because as we are discussing vision, you're expressing to me what is an outgrowth of your own vision of theatre, since your fashion as you are describing it really draws a lot of its energy and vitality from your own understanding of theatre theory.

For you as a designer apart from this interview where you can explain yourself and put it all out there, are there any performance elements you can think of that would even allow you to communicate this vision for the costume in a way where these critics' evaluations of "abstract, Avant-garde, cartoon", in a way where there criticisms are a little bit more channeled.

I guess what I'm saying is can you even provide an interpretive structure for the audience member to view the costume?



Fig. 5: The archangel scene in *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj

L. B.: It's *very* interesting what you ask me because I find that most of the time the ambiguity of the imagery that I'm doing is misleading. It's not specific, it doesn't take you to a certain place, and that's why the theatre critics and spectators that I was exposed to, who didn't know my work in fashion, interpreted it in a way that they either liked it or they disliked it. In this way, my costumes are misleading because I all the time try to maintain a certain ambiguity to what I do.

I think I learned a lot from reading about theatrical theory, and also from dance theory of the twentieth century, even from models of interpreting movement. Mr. Gaga / Ohad Naharin from Israel is a big influence in what I do. I think it's interesting that I began with theatre theory in order to understand the relationship between body and clothing. Now, I'm coming in a way back to theatre theory and to the practice of it by doing costumes. It's all a very complicated journey.