

Playing Identities, Performing Heritage: Meetings through Theatre

Theatrical Event: *This Home is not for sale*, Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj-Napoca, in the European Project 2014-2860, Creative Europe, *Playing Identities, Performing Heritage*.

When two individuals coming from different socio-cultural spaces meet, consequences occur: the curiosity towards the Other starts building up new relationships. The Other exists only when the meeting takes place. Otherwise we could gather some information about someone or something living outside our own cultural space, but its presence cannot be concrete until these two entities with two different backgrounds stand face to face, observing and analysing each other. The European project *Playing Identities, Performing Heritage*, funded by Creative Europe 2014-2016, is being structured around this very meeting, whose consequences are then being discussed from a theatrical and anthropological point of view.

How do artists interact when their cultural references are partly or completely different? Can an artist have an impact, from the outside, on a community he does not belong to? Is he able to create an artistic product that can have an actual meaning for that community? These are some of the questions that the University of Siena started with when initiating the project *Playing Identities, Performing Heritage*. The participants coming from four different institutions (The Lithuanian Academy of Music and Theatre in Vilnius, The Theatre Institute of Barcelona, Spain, The University of Kent, UK, and The "Babeş-Bolyai" University of Cluj-Napoca, Romania) made it possible for researchers to observe how a particular social phenomenon, that influences the dynamics of a community, can turn into a theatrical piece and how it can be perceived by the outsiders, the ones who are not directly related to that community, nor to that phenomenon.

In July 2015, in Siena, following a two-week workshop session, the working teams have been chosen for each country involved. Four performers – all of them studying in the same institution –, a young theatre maker and a mobilizer, along with their main coordinators and senior directors, would start their research on the main themes: sexual identity, the expansion of social media, migration and national identity. It is important to mention that the ones choosing the subject that would then be turned into a theatrical product were the performers. In this case, the theatre maker coming from a different institution, with a different social background, becomes *The Outsider*. The final results – the performances themselves – would then be presented at the Kilowatt Festival in Sansepolcro, Arezzo, in July 2016.

The students representing the Faculty of Theatre and Television in Cluj-Napoca (Blanca Doba, Norbert Boda, Dan Pughineanu, and Victor Tunsu), together with the young theatre maker, Harry Wilson, from the University of Kent, started working on *This Home Is Not For Sale*. Based on the “We Save Roșia Montană” campaign, which reached its climax in 2013 when people came out in the streets, fighting against Gabriel Resources and their mining project in Roșia Montană, *This Home Is Not For Sale* talks about Romania during



and after communism, through several human stereotypes. The stories of five typical characters – the farmer, the politician, the simple man, the activist, the TV host – are instruments through which the image of Romanian people is being re-constructed. It is not a matter of time and space, actually, but a matter of behaviour. We can talk about friendship and corruption regardless of geographical frontiers or political regimes.

The performance starts as a TV show called *Are you smarter than a Romanian?*, a TV show made for foreigners – which is why the lines are mainly in English. However, Ion (Boda Norbert), the farmer, refuses to comply with the rules, deciding to answer in Romanian, no matter what. He doesn't want to be a part of this game in which corrupted politicians like Viorel (Victor Tunsu) hold the power, and the simple man, like Dan (Dan Pughineanu) for example, has to step back and to make as little noise as possible.



Slowly, as if a new place is being built while Ion recites a poem called *What do I wish for you, sweet Romania?* (*Ce-ți doresc eu ție, dulce Românie?*), written by Mihai Eminescu, we go on to the next sequence of the performance, that takes place not too long before 1989. Just like in a silent film, with a soundtrack so well known by the Romanian pioneers – *Us in the 2000* (*Noi în anul 2000*), composed by Horia Moculescu – we watch how two friends become strangers day by day, how this relationship fades away in the process of growing up.

While one of them chooses to stay honest to himself and keep working hard to make a living – this is Dan –, the other one, Viorel, decides it is better to lie, to cheat, to fool the ones around you in order to win.

The young theatre maker wanted to tell this story through the Rock-Paper-Scissors game, a game that becomes more and more aggressive as it goes on. Round by round, their attitude towards one another changes, and we can see how the profile of these characters becomes more and more concrete. In the end, in order to defend himself, Viorel gives a speech about Romania's fear of economic and social development, based on the idea that selling the values of a country will help it grow in the actual European context. But, of course, his words are being swamped by the protesters who enter the stage shouting angrily that "*No corporation can make the legislation!*".

However, these two activists, although they fight for the same cause apparently, have different perspectives on what fighting means. In 2013, people were fighting in hopes of a better world, of a community that has enough courage to speak out against corruption and thievery. Just like them, the Activist, played by Blanca Doba, stands for solidarity, for community, for humanity. On the opposite side, there is Ion, who can easily turn "we" into "I", putting his own interests first. What happens to a community when, instead of functioning properly, as a social organism, it is decomposed into individuals who fight for their own status, for their own needs? *United we save Roşia Montană* became a question, instead of a revolutionary slogan. Do we save it? Are we united, actually? Who are we, as Romanians, as Europeans? What do we do to help each other?

Here's when Dan comes in, bursting into anger and frustration. The simple man can no longer take this hatred, this socio-political *selfie* in which everyone pretends to be something they're not. Indeed, Romania has known communism, destruction, lies, thievery, conflicts, but it is a home, still. Holding the Romanian flag while saying the words of a poem written by Ana Blandiana, *Everything*, he talks about family, about hatred, about society, about all these feelings, images and events united by the three-coloured flag. The good and the bad – that is everything that we have to pass forward, that is everything our identity is made of.

This being said, Dan hands in the flag to someone in the audience. In the same time, the other performers get rid of their costumes, standing up, facing the spectators. In the end, the Activist, the TV host, Ion, Viorel, Dan, they're all searching for human interaction – which is why now, when being free of their characters, they have the power to hold each other, to hug each other and to re-connect with one another. At this point, they also grab people from the audience, look them in the eye and hold their hands, as if it were some relay of kindness and understanding.



The Romania that we see in *This Home Is Not For Sale* is not the actual Romania, for sure. It doesn't even try to be so. It is more of a kaleidoscope in which there are stereotypes, there is caricature, satire, melodrama, protest, dirt, friendship, innocence, happening all at once. This Romania is portrayed through the eyes of a foreign theatre maker, of a television show, of some countrymen, of some students. It is a Romania that we are more likely to find on an emotional map, rather than on a geographical, scientific one. And this Romania, this home, these events and emotions are not for sale – they can't be.

Unfortunately, the director's choices are not always the best ones, and this is where we come back to the meeting we were talking about. *This Home Is Not For Sale* is the result of a bi-cultural collaboration: on one side we have the four Romanian performers; on the other, the British theatre maker. Therefore, we have two perspectives on Romania that might not always meet. And even if they do meet at a certain point, they cannot be the same, as their backgrounds, their experiences, their expectations are so different. Maybe this is why the characters are too much of a caricature, here and there.

However, the performance had a strong emotional impact on the audience at the Kilowatt Festival. These options made it easier for an international audience to connect and to empathise with the Others – with the Romanians. They could easily identify characters and situations that can create a more general but clear image, that can later be associated with the particular Romanian context, rather than the other way around. Yet for the Romanian

audience, because the performance has been presented in Cluj-Napoca in July 2016 as a work in progress, the reactions have been completely different. The spectators related more to those characters that had a complex psychological background, characters that were neither bad nor good but human. Later on, the team, under the help of their artistic advisor, Miklós Bács, introduced some sequences meant to deepen the relationship between the characters and their inner structure.



We must acknowledge, though, that a project of such complexity has its risks, too. Being one year long, it was split into four big stages: two weeks of workshops in Siena, at the end of July, last year, two weeks of research on the subject, another two weeks of work in 2016, and the rehearsals in July 2016 for the Kilowatt Festival. Basically, the teams had around two months of actual work with their theatre maker and the artistic advisor, and ten months of research. We can already see that the timing is not balanced at all, and may easily lead to stagnation. Not being able to work with the director constantly, the performers can lose their energy and reach a point from where they have nowhere to go. The absence of a dramatist makes it almost impossible to develop an artistic product that can be both complex and entertaining, if there is no “external eye” – except for the director’s – that can supervise the whole process.

Therefore, in such initiatives, communication is and must stay a fundamental principle, constantly put into practice, by everyone involved: from actors to mobilizers, from directors to technicians, from practitioners to theoreticians, and the other way round. Because, in the end, theatre is made by people who meet, discuss, exchange ideas, search for artistic solutions, transmit a message – communicate. If communication is insufficient, the results can be fragmentary and unsatisfactory. The meeting that we kept referring to does not only mean that individuals with different social backgrounds stand face to face; it means that they exchange cultural material, that they interact, giving one another something of their own identity, sharing their cultural heritage. It is essential to know and to want to know about each other identities, different and common viewpoints, and this is something which was extremely well high-lightened by the project *Playing Identities, Performing Heritage*.

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