

*The Biggest Challenge is the Heaviness of Existence as a Human
Being Living in and Feeling Responsible for Today's World*

Ramona TRIPA¹

**Interview with Çağlar Yiğitoğulları, about THE QUEST,
a Shaman-Punk performance inspired by Farid ud-Din Attar's
poem *The Conference of the Birds*, at the National Theatre in
Cluj-Napoca, Spring 2023**



Çağlar Yiğitoğulları, April 2023, credits Nicu Cherciu

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Çağlar Yiğitoğulları was born in Ankara, Turkey, in 1977. He graduated in Theatre – Acting from the Bilkent University in Ankara, the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts. After graduation, during 2001-2003, he lived in Australia and studied contemporary dance.

Returning to Turkey in 2003, he started working for the Istanbul City Theatre, as an actor with a permanent contract. In parallel with his work at the Istanbul City Theatre, he began producing his own performances, bold pieces exploring the limits of corporeality, and presenting them in the country, as well as abroad. *Diss* (2008) and *Luvstory* (2009) are two of his most celebrated works. In 2017, disheartened by the limited freedom of expression in Turkey, he moved to Germany, where he currently lives and creates.

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları has been awarded several important prizes, including the International Association Of Theatre Critics (IATC) “Actor Of The Year” in 2010. He has worked with influential theatres across Europe, such as Abattoir Fermé in Belgium, Attis Theatre in Greece, Münchner Kammerspiele and Maxim Gorki Theatre in Germany.

THE QUEST, a Shaman-Punk performance inspired by Farid ud-Din Attar’s famous poem *The Conference of the Birds*, is the first production he directs at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca.

Ramona Tripa: *What drew you to The Conference of the Birds? Why a performance inspired by this particular text?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: The Iranian poem *The Conference of the Birds* brings many layers and aspects of life together into one beautiful story. The philosophy behind the story fits perfectly with any kind of existential or spiritual question which has defined our Shamanic path and sound.

The story of the poem also deals with that constant need of humanity to seek out or wait for our heroes to turn our world into a better place again. The story ends with the idea and ideology that the leader we seek is in us. No need to look for them on the outside. During these times of war, in the post-Corona age, I think it is important to remember and argue about such things with the audience members.

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The process of the making of this performance has been quite a special one. Tell us about your creative method and working with the actors from the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre.

My creation method demands full openness and equality in every sphere. Likewise, artistic risks are taken on an equal footing by every member involved in the production.

However, in my work, the idea of collaboration is somewhat a bit complicated, as the material I bring to the stage is mostly extreme. That is why when I direct or make choreography I always have the urge to get on the stage as a performer too, to encourage, even provoke the performers, and bring them to the level that I would love them to reach. Here, with the artists of the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre, it has been such an easy and perfectly harmonious type of collaboration. Emotionally, artistically, intellectually they were fully open and ready to do it!



Mihnea Blidariu, Diana Licu, Sânziana Tarța,
in *The Quest*, credits Nicu Cherciu

The method I propose is a wide-range one, bringing diverse artistic elements together, and in the end turning everything into an anti-Theatre event. But from this place, you can also create perfect method actors on a wider scale. It is a complex, mind-expanding topic, and a long discussion for another time.

How has your experience as a performer informed the way that you direct?

If there are no active, productive minds and bodies during the process of creation, you'll end up with no production at all. Actually, this is exactly what I would like to encourage the audience to aim for while they are watching my work: that point where their minds and emotions are also active and productive.

You've used the term "Shaman-Punk" to describe this performance. What does "Shaman-Punk" mean to you and how has it shaped this performance?

Shaman-Punk is the term that I created to define my work, but it is also what best defines my identity. I have Shaman roots on my father's side and I have always lived in an environment where the Punk subculture background is essential. I have never regarded Punk as an accessory or a fashion trend. In the case of this performance, Shamanism dominates the sound, texture and attitude of the performance. Punk is the ideology of my work, but it is a very subtle, almost hidden dramaturgical concept. You will hear the influence of Punk only at the end, which is also the moment perfectly rounded off by the text to create the ideology of the performance. Please let me take my freedom here to openly use the term "ideology", as I hope we can all agree that everything in life has an ideology behind it. Even saying "we want no ideology here" creates an ideology which I can oppose to. As I mentioned above, the story ends with the understanding that we need no leaders, no heroes, since we are the leaders of our lives. That is very Punk to me.

The performance is structured into 8 songs for 8 performers, who all have their own individual moment to express themselves within the story they are telling as a group. Those individual moments are also informed by the idea and ideology of DIY (do it yourself). Each performer selects and brings on the stage the smallest elements they need to express themselves. At this point, let me remind you of that slogan of the Punks which said:

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“even you know 3 chords to play their instrument, occupy the stage and express yourself”. That is the way I transfer and use the terms of Shamanism and Punk together as the key-concept and trigger of my work in general.



Sânziana Tarța with C. Rigman and Radu Dogaru,
in *The Quest*, credits Nicu Cherciu

The body plays a central role in this production, it is a meaning-bearing body. What is your view on the body as a tool for making art?

As an artist who is in voluntary exile, in my life, hence in my work, I am regularly dealing with limits. The “unlimited-limited” concept of the body amazes and scares me. It is a very existential hurdle, which finds its manifestation in human anatomy. The body is a moving geography.

In our performance here also, the body is the tool – with every emotion, idea, liquid in it, carrying us to that level of madness and ecstasy where we find the freedom of expression as artists who hold the role of the Shaman nowadays.



Cristian Rigman in *The Quest*, credits Nicu Cherciu

You are one of those artists who push the boundaries of performance art. What are the boundaries that The Quest explores and what has been the biggest challenge the team has faced on this journey?

The heaviness of existence as a human being living in and feeling responsible for today's world. I think that can be the concept of a lifetime, as well as a struggle, for an artist to find their motivation to create.

Music is essential to The Quest. How did you approach the process of composing for the performance?

Nothing had been composed, but everything was improvised by the performers during the rehearsal process. That makes the work even more precious, since everyone found or brought their own voice in(to) it. Sometimes it resonates with a Shaman drum, sometimes with a trumpet or guitar, and continually with the "vocals" of human anatomy. For every musical fragment

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or song we have, I had created the vocal part or melody beforehand, but everything was then transformed and developed by the performers. We have no single document to leave behind for the compositions. Only the performers have them in their minds and hearts. That is precious.

What would you hope the audience will be thinking about when they leave?

I believe that the curtain quality of the performance will make the audience enjoy what they hear and see. However, our concept, with every emotional and physical obstacle we bring forth, the transformation of the performers – which will happen live every time, again and again, in front of the audience – will add another unique and unexpected quality, which will encourage the audience to think about what lies beyond.



Mihnea Blidariu, Radu Dogaru, Anca Hanu, Diana Ioana Licu, Romina Merei, Mihai-Florian Nițu, Cristian Rigman, Sânziana Tarța in *The Quest*, credits Nicu Cherciu.

Note: The interview has been edited for clarity.
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