

*Independent... from whom? Independent... from what?
About independence as procedure*

Book review: Iulia Popovici, *Elefantul din cameră. Ghid despre teatrul independent din România, Cluj, Idea Design and Print, 2016*



The second half of the last year was, I believe, favourable for books on theatre, despite the fact that, with some sporadic exceptions, the dissemination of new publications continues to be rather insecure. Of course, almost all the festivals across the country and in Bucharest and, obviously, the National Theatre Festival are hosting book launches, when they don't associate themselves to the funding of such new publications; therefore, for the theatrical world, or at least for that part of it that is interested in the specific literature, the information is circulating somewhat unfailingly. However, contrary to what

most publishers believe, the book of theatre is not aimed strictly at the theatre professionals; it is also meant for theatre audiences interested in theatre. Therefore, I truly believe that marketing and distribution efforts related to theatre books should be steadier and, why not, a lot more ingenious.

After *A Stage by the Roadside* [*Un teatru la marginea drumului*], published in 2008 by Cartea românească, and after the coordination of the two very much needed bilingual anthologies *New Performing Arts Practices in Eastern Europe - [Noi practici în artele spectacolului]*, Chişinău, Cartier, 2014 and *The End of Directing, the Beginning of Theatre-Making and Devising in European Theatre* [*Sfârşitul regiei, începutul creaţiei colective în teatrul European*], Cluj, Tact, 2015, collections published in the FITS collection— Iulia Popovici returns with a volume written by herself: *The Elephant in the Room. A Companion to Romanian Independent Theatre* [*Elefantul din cameră. Ghid despre teatrul independent din România*], Cluj, Idea Design and Print, 2016. I believe that this book fittingly proves that theoretical thinking and applied argumentation have not become extinct in our theatre criticism, in spite of the struggling condition of the contemporary theatre critics. On the contrary, it is precisely this (pensively embraced, I'd say) precariousness of the theatre critic that seems to have encouraged an inquisitive resolve with which very few continue to want to align.

Without aiming to map exhaustively the space of independent theatre, the book chooses a structure that is meant, on the one hand, to generate terminological, methodological and contextual clarifications in the field; and, on the other hand, to emphasize a number of characteristics of just one single level of the kaleidoscopic offer of those rooted in the concept of "independent theatre": *documentary theatre* - or theatre with a documentary dominant in the procedures of artistic construction and development. On such a route, the formula chosen by Iulia Popovici seems to be one of a funnel; by it, the author is boldly and unwaveringly offering a spiral trip from the general to the particular, and from the objective, contextualizing view of the current and pervasive definitions and practices, to deeply personalized selections, options and critical evaluations:

In fact, the book is a puzzle of sometimes academic, some other times essayistic theoretical observations (about the production specificity of independent theatre, about the independent artists' condition, about documentary in general, about the genealogy of documentary theatre in Romania) and of applied work (like the chapter about documentary actors, a chapter very important for me)...¹

1. Iulia Popovici, *Elefantul din cameră. Ghid despre teatrul independent din România* (Cluj: Idea Design and Print, 2016), 8.

Of course, the starting point stems from the necessity to define correctly the notion of *independence* itself, in a political, social and aesthetic context that is specific to us, but which is adequately confronted with the situations of other traditions of support offered to culture in Europe and across the world. A theatrical company – and, for one and a half decades, we have seen a strange notional consensus regarding self-definition – is independent... from what? From whom? And especially to which end? Naturally, the basic characteristics extracted by the author from the older work by the director Theodor Cristian Popescu, *Too Many People or Too Many Ideas [Surplus de oameni sau surplus de idei]*² (in their turn defined from a model borrowed from Emina Višnić) provide a correct concatenation of “independence”: the theatre/the company is an initiative of a person or a group, it creates an internal managing and production structure, it does not depend (perhaps only partially, by some applied projects) on funding from the state. On the other hand, this type of simple operational definition is not offering the opportunity of a somewhat efficient separation between a private company, whose primary purpose is profit, and a team joined around a programme the end target of which is not profitability, but the construction of a specific artistic discourse aimed at an audience that needs to identify with it, sometimes even without being aware of this. The differentia, claims the author – and, until now, experience regarding the horizon of theatrical independence is confirming it generously – is given by the ethical establishment of theatrical discourses, corroborated with an inquiring, interrogative unrest, regarding Romania’s past and present political and social evolutions.

Iulia Popovici analyses carefully the (pre)history of the appearance of the independent wave after the year 2003, by also introducing other usual concepts, such as the one of *alternative theatre* or *experimental theatre*; she cuts out to a hair the zones that are tangential not only terminologically, but, much more significant, which regard the modalities of production and the ethical-aesthetic motivations. Critical investigation is also applied to the most frequent and more “powerful” opinions on the relationship between the formidable extension of independent practices and companies and the apparently inflationist multiplication of the graduates of faculties of theatre in the last decades. Last but not least, the author analyses, in a manner that is both sensible and daring, the relationship between the subsidized institution and the co-produced or only hosted independent projects, a relationship that is still unstable, hanging on a cliff, despite the obvious artistic and audience-related benefits delivered by the independent zone. (In fact, as we have been emphasizing in the last five or six years, and as the author is doing it several times, the social dimension of *construction and development of audiences*, as

2. Theodor Cristian Popescu, *Surplus de oameni sau surplus de idei* (Cluj: Eikon, 2013).

essential function of the theatrical company, has come into the focus of the Romanian theatrical world only in the last decade, by the direct contribution of some of the most active and most reliable independent teams).

The second part of the book focuses on documentary theatre, and its structure is as rigorous as it is surprising. On the one hand, the fourth and fifth chapters centre on the multi-stage definitions of the documentary, with applied insistence on the artistic practices that are subordinate or specifically engaged to it; the author propose a thorough discussion (with multiple references from everywhere) relating to the concept of "real", from the twofold perspective of the creation and of the reception.

On the other hand – and I believe that this is perhaps the most fascinating and most innovative/illuminating section of the book -, the very consistent last-but-one chapter is dedicated to the actor involved/specialized in the documentary praxis: it relies mainly on a survey conducted by the author with actors from our independent space, but also on a relevant international bibliography, and it sheds a special light on the new developments in the actor's performative-cognitive condition. The documentation techniques and the methods of character construction (mainly anti-Stanislvskian, inwardly, and more), the distances from the real public characters and the moral dilemmas in relation to the subjects of the interviews in the field, the involvement in the stage practice and in the overall theatrical creative process are reconstructed in plain sight by interviews, with the participation of Alexandru Potocean, Katia Pascariu, Nicoleta Lefter, Florentina Ţilea, Alice Monica Marinescu, Alex Fifea, Sînziana Nicola, Sever Andrei. Their argued, diverse and nevertheless symptomatically congruent opinions are compared with the points of view expressed by foreign actors, some of them famous, who are also involved in documentary theatre practices - such as Timothy West, Chipu Chung, Diane Fletcher, Jeremy Irons, David Morrissey, Michael Pennington, Henry Goodman and others. This fascinating ad hoc debate is completed, in the end, by a list of the most representative/emblematic performances of the genre, and by a summarizing chapter in English.

In my opinion, *Elefantul din cameră* is an essential book for the present theatrical history and theory, even if it is not intended, in a declared manner, a history or a theoretical approach, as such: the book is engaging, challenging, overtly personal, but also involving an inherent phenomenological, anti-impressionistic dimension. Its necessity, here and now, is obvious and it is safe to say that its echoes will be enduring.

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