

“I’ve always believed that a critical spirit comes with
creative features”

*Interview with Cristina Modreanu, theatre critic, curator,
editor in chief of Scena.ro magazine*

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Abstract: The present interview with Cristina Modreanu focuses on her project Comedia Remix, a project meant to revive the Bucharest Comedy Theatre’s archives and present them in new formats to the contemporary audiences. The project consists of an exhibition, the publishing of a bi-lingual catalogue of the exhibition, a documentary and a series of conferences based on themes inspired by the research. The project places the evolution of the art of theatre in the larger context of ‘60,’70 and ‘80 decades from a cultural, sociological and anthropological perspective. The curator discusses the evolution of the project, the methodologies employed and the relationship between critics and curators in the current context of cultural journalism.

Keywords: performative archives, curating, Comedia Remix

Cristina Modreanu (b.1974) is a curator, theatre critic and expert in performing arts based in Bucharest, Romania and New York, USA. She holds a PHD in theatre from the Theatre and Film University in Bucharest and she is the author of five books on Romanian Theatre. Modreanu is currently the editor of the Performing Arts Magazine Scena.ro which she co-founded in 2008, curator for theatre and performance events and an associate professor at Center for Excellence in Visual



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Studies, Bucharest University. She is also a Fulbright Alumna and she was Visiting Scholar at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Performance Studies Department, New York 2011-2012.

Miruna Runcan: *How was the idea of the Performative Archive dedicated to the Comedy Theatre born? Did you have any pre-existing models in mind, or was everything elaborated/structured in progress?*

Cristina Modreanu: In 2014-2015, when we started the project *Comedia Remix* at the Comedy Theatre together with Maria Drăghici, we had several models in mind, especially those of our Polish friends and colleagues of the “Zbigniew Raszewski” Theatre Institute in Warsaw, as well as the exhibitions at Maison Vilar, Avignon, which I had visited every time I went to the Festival there. I remember one thing they have in common, which I would one day like to find in Romania as well, in a possible theatre archive open to the public: on the sunbeds on the grass in front of the Warsaw Institute and at the tables in the yard of Maison Vilar in Avignon, people found each other in conversations about what they had seen/read/found out and, through these discussions, they brought the past of theatre into contemporaneity. I think that this “derived effect”, imposed by no one, but naturally generated by the fact that the exhibitions, mediatheques, libraries created by these institutions are alive and interesting, is the supreme result of all the effort put into opening an archive. To this end, in the upstairs lobby of the Comedy Theatre, we have created dialogue tables whose purpose is to generate the same effect; unfortunately, it didn’t work, as access to the theatre is limited to the hours when performances are scheduled, which has actually isolated the theatre, reducing its possibility to communicate with the audience.

M.R.: *What methodology did you use, or how did you combine methodologies?*

C.M.: From the very beginning, I combined research in the archive of the Comedy Theatre with interviews with people who have lived in the heyday of this theatre, contributing to it directly. The second exertion was more difficult, as, in the meantime, people have left for different countries, and some of them are unfortunately no longer with us. But, in the end, we managed to interview key persons in the recent history of the theatre: Radu Beligan, David Esrig, Lucian Giurchescu, Sanda Toma, Stela Popescu. As I was saying, at Maria Drăghici’s suggestion, we tried to use a methodology

she had used in the project regarding the archive of the Rahova community, as well as in Sweden, also in her work with communities, i.e. the so-called “dialogue tables”, aimed at bringing people from different backgrounds to the same table - in the case of *Comedia Remix*, we brought people with different trainings and from different generations, who shared their own experience related to the theatre, in order to reach a new level of understanding of a phenomenon, in our case, the impact of history and of ideologies on the daily activity of a theatre in Romania.

M.R.: *How did the team form, and what responsibilities did each of you have?*

C.M.: The team was very small, basically made up of two persons: Maria Drăghici and I, but we had the support of the Theatre’s Literary Secretariat, especially of Corina Constantinescu and Ana Teodorescu, who helped us research, sort, index and digitalize the archived material. The theatre’s technical team helped us with the exhibition panels, while the tailoring workshops remade two costumes from the famous performance *Troilus and Cressida* directed by David Esrig, starting from Maria’s drawings. Judy Florescu also contributed by translating the materials for the bilingual catalogue of the exhibition into English, and throughout the work we have enjoyed the support of the theatre managers, George Mihăiță and Traian Petrescu. Besides, the Comedy Theatre Gala on January 5th, 2015 was directed together with Vlad Massaci and Cătălin Ștefănescu, with the latter also hosting the Gala alongside me; the Gala was attended by all the people we interviewed, from the country and abroad. The video recording was then used in the documentary *Comedia Remix*, that Maria and I made in the second part of the project. To me, the documentary is the biggest achievement, as it is very difficult to access the archives of TVR (Romanian National Television) and it was a miracle that we managed to get hold of the epoch recordings - thanks to the intervention of George Mihăiță, and the support of Demeter Andras and Claudia Duca of TVR Production Company. It was very difficult to search this archive, because many of the old materials are still kept on reels, and digitalising them is expensive and takes a lot of time. At the same time, this epoch footage that we found after many hours of watching old programs are extremely precious and evoking; without these, should reconstitutions only include words, or even photographs, contemporary viewers would find such an endeavour uninteresting, too stodgy.

M.R.: *What were your initial targets and did they change as the project unfolded? In other words, what was kept, what was lost, and what came on top of the initial idea?*

C.M.: The format changed quite a bit; to begin with, we reduced the size of the effort. Initially, the exhibition was designed for a museum, and our aim was to reconstitute several performances considered to be legendary, one per room, remaking costumes, video projections, reconstituting sets, etc. We had to cut back on the dimensions and adapt to the theatre foyer, but this way things were somehow more organic. The only downside in this case was that you could only access the exhibition before scheduled performances, we could not convince them that, in order for the place to become attractive for people who don't normally come to the theatre, access should be allowed outside of these hours. As they were not used to such exhibition, the theatre staff did not cooperate as they should have: they either forgot to turn on the screens projecting short edited videos of the interviews we had made, or, if they did turn them on, they forgot to connect the headphones, which meant that the viewer heard nothing, they did not encourage the spectators to also watch the exhibition in the upstairs foyer, etc. It's not that they were ill-willed, this was simply not a part of their routine when welcoming spectators, which is anyway quite poor in state theatres. I am sorry that the exhibition was only seen by people who are already in the habit of going to the theatre, thus becoming an addendum to their experience of seeing shows, rather than a self-standing cultural offer. The documentary was luckier, as it "travelled" in other cities in the country too, such as Cluj (thank you for the invitation!), but also abroad: this very spring, it was projected for Romanian communities in New York and Seattle. Its life surpasses that of the exhibition itself, and I hope it will also be useful to future generations.

M.R.: *How do you think your future self will relate to this experience? Has it had any effect on your own vision as a critic? How about your career?*

C.M.: Although, through the nature of my job, I'd had an interest in archives before this project too, *Comedia Remix* further opened my appetite for reinterpreting and reviving theatre archives. Subsequently, I made *Arhiva Remix. Revival of Theatre Archives*, a project in which, together with students, I reconstituted 10 legendary performances of Romanian theatre in creative formats, later publishing a file documenting the project in *Scena.ro*. At present, I am again working with Maria Drăghici at a new idea based on

theatre archives and on the broader, social role of theatre in communism; I am very enthusiastic about this new project. I increasingly believe in activating archives, in the regeneration power that old sources can have on contemporary projects, and in the role of the creative knowledge of the past, without which we cannot imagine the future. *Comedia Remix* has had a beneficial effect on my vision as a critic, as I was “bitten” by the bug of looking back to the past, by the wish to gather as many testimonies of those who created the theatre of yesterday and to analyse the role played by theatre in the Romanian society from a subjective perspective, of personal histories. For now, I’ve only gone back in the past to the communist period, after 1956, but I’d love to take such trips as close as possible to the beginning of theatre in Romania. I have recently seen the collection “The History of Romanian Theatre”, which is temporarily hosted by the “Mihai Eminescu” Museum in the Copou neighbourhood, Iași, as the house where the Theatre Museum used to be was reverted. This collection, including fabulous pieces from the beginning of theatre in Romania, has been crammed at a storey of a building in Copou for seven years now, in unfavourable conditions, which could cause us to lose some of the more fragile objects, especially costumes. In Bucharest, the Museum of the National Theatre was never opened after the very expensive renovation of the building was over, in 2015, and nobody ever explained why. Under these conditions, I can’t help thinking that we are the only country in the former Communist Bloc that has no Theatre Institute or Museum salvaging the past of this art for the contemporary public, despite theatre having played an essential part of Romanian social life, going through spectacular transformations and repositions depending on the political regime. If next year, when we celebrate 100 years of existence, we are not able to retrieve and salvage this extraordinary resource by using contemporary means, we never will. At least not at an institutional level, as there are independent initiatives, various projects striving to salvage as much as possible. What I find flagrant is the lack of a uniform strategy and of coherent state funding aimed at saving theatre archives and reopening them to the audience.

M.R.: *Considering the very fast and very deep mutations that have taken place in the professional field of theatre criticism all over the world, how do you see the relation between critics and curators?*

C.M.: The position of performing arts curator, borrowed from visual arts, has become more and more popular over the last years; it draws a lot on the experience of the theatre critic, an endangered occupation in the form that we know it. Just like the hierarchies of theatre institutions have seen constant status modifications, reformulations of “job descriptions” to fit the changes in consumption habits and relations with the audience, the theatre critic has to transform accordingly. Their influence through writing has dropped, as now only niche journals need specialists in this field, but their expertise can and has to be harnessed in other ways: in research, in curating interdisciplinary projects which also include theatre, in education (including alternative education). To this end, personally I have constantly used my experience as a theatre critic in the projects I created, from the performing arts magazine *Scena.ro* (which will be celebrating 10 years of existence in 2018) - itself an archive of a decade of theatre, to the creation of an *International Theatre Platform* (which reached its fourth edition this year), and even to a project which apparently does not have a lot to do with theatre, like *The Sensory Map of Bucharest* (after two editions in the Capital, we will make a *Sensory Map* of Iași). As a coordinator of culture pages in the daily press for over 15 years, I have exercised my critical spirit from the outside, by commenting on what others did, better or worse, until I realised this role was no longer satisfying to me and I joined the ranks of the doers. I have always believed that a critical spirit comes with creative features, which are worth exploring in as many ways possible; thus, I see this transformation of the position of critic as good news and a reason to work harder at the same time.

Translated by Camelia Oana