

New Dramatic Structures, Negotiable Imaginary Spaces. On Assuming the Experimental Condition

Theatre review of M.I.S.A. PĂRUT, by Alexa Bacanu, a production of Reactor, Cluj, directed by Dragoş Alexandru Muşoiu and Reacting Chernobyl, based on texts by Svetlana Aleksievici and Wladimir Tchertkoff, a production of Varoterem Project, dramaturgy by Raluca Sas-Marinescu, directed by Cosmin Matei

I believe that, nowadays, too little is written about *assuming the experimental condition* of a performance, in a self-standing niche of Romanian theatre, whether subsidised or independent. Because, we must admit, the last two or three seasons have shown a healthy (though still fragile) interconnection, both from the viewpoint of aesthetics and of the programme, between the two types of theatrical productions, as much as independent directors and even entire teams were invited to develop their personal projects on state theatres' (mostly studio, but not only) stages, without cutting back on their own long-term programmes. For understandable economic reasons, a reverse movement is more difficult, at least for now, but I'm sure that the osmosis process will continue...

However, it sometimes seems that reviews do not shine enough light on the innovative aesthetics of performances, which simultaneously appears at the level of the script (whether pre-existing or built on set, individual or devised) and of the direction. By insisting, at times into a full-blown cliché, on the "poor" condition to which the production is reduced, especially in independent theatre, we sometimes lose sight of the very complexity of the suggestions regarding the text, the staging, the construction of situations-relations, and the stylistics of actor's interpretation, even when the review is rather positive. The shift in co-participative load (since, in these cases, the performance is the result of a coalescent and equally assumed programme) and in the actors' interpretation techniques has been discussed multiple times, especially from the point of view of documentary or documentary-inspired theatre¹. Nevertheless, I think that, at least every so often, we should redirect our attention and refine our analysis tools towards the binomial writing-directing, which remains essential to the aesthetic quality of the performance.

1. To this end, see the chapter dedicated to documentary theatre actors in Iulia Popovici's *The Elephant in the Room. A Companion to Romanian Independent Theatre*, Cluj, Idea Design and Print, 2016.

Coral Swing

M.I.S.A. PĂRUT is a complex project, produced by *Reactor de creație și experiment*, Cluj, towards the end of a full season, in which, in March, the company (very imaginatively) celebrated its third anniversary. This season opened a new programme, called “*Exerciții de democrație. Investigarea istoriei recente*” (*Democracy Exercises. Investigating Recent History*). Thematic and operational, the performance openly springs from new, documentary-based writings – in this case, the basic material combines media speeches, legislation, European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) documents, and personal testimonies of members of MISA, following the 2004 huge media and police-legal campaign against the members of the “Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute” and, of course, against its leader, Gregorian Bivolaru. What do we know, what do we remember, what was the structure of public discourses, what did the authorities do, and, most especially, what do those behind the curtain say about themselves, i.e. ordinary yoga practitioners; how can we now see the gap between public and private space in this labyrinth which is contradictory up to hallucination? We must admit that this topic is among the most controversial, and the team’s courage to approach it directly deserves our appreciation indeed.



Fig. 1: Raluca Mara, Cătălin Filip, Bogdan Rădulescu & Oana Mardare
in *M.I.S.A. PĂRUT*

Alexa Băcanu - a playwright with a very personal voice (who is worth mentioning more often, see also the charming performance *În 4 D* staged two years ago, *Dispariția*, part of the programme Teen Spirit, but also the inciting *Call in Art* at the Euphorion Studio of the Cluj National Theatre) - structured the documentary material into a multi-tier script, in which the dramatic content of personal testimonies rivals in a juicy and contrapuntal manner with the sometimes grotesque comic of press excerpts, but, at the same time, is counterbalanced by elegant and reflectively efficient fragments from literature (from Mihai Eminescu's pornographic poem, to witchcraft incantations or folk enchantments). The result is a supra theme of the writing and of the theatrical experiment, i.e. a discourse on the staggering combination of the superficiality, the ignorance, the prejudice, the blind brutality, and the awful hypocrisy of collective imagination, which allows for a toxic demonization of all categories or groups seen as different, and thus undesirable/dangerous. When rearranging lines from various fragments as we would in a moving stained glass, we find that the play does not have characters as such, but voices that separate and reunite like a jam session played by a highly skilled jazz quartet.

Dragoș Alexandru Mușoiu is responsible for the staging, a young director venturing in independent theatre for the first time, after having worked at the National Theatre in Craiova (*The BreakIN* by Răzvan Petrescu and *Elephant in the Room* by Sarah Ruhl) and at the Comedy Theatre in Bucharest (*The Holiday Game* by Mihail Sebastian). As meticulous as a watchmaker, he builds a multifaceted universe, where, in an equally eloquent and strenuous dynamics, each of the four actors receive multiple tasks, both with regards to interpretation (in a sophisticated game of constantly interchanging distance and empathy), and to moulding their bodies. Oana Mardare, Raluca Mara, Cătălin Filip, and Bogdan Rădulescu make up a homogenously trained group, and, at the same time, are very capable of offering outstanding individual performances. Obsessive parents traumatising their children, exorcist priests, responsible or completely unprofessional doctors who torture their patients psychologically and with drugs, politicians, stars and TV ancors, abusive judges and police officers, brutalized clerks, relatives and neighbours, victims and headsmen – the actors' versatility and their ability to easily slide from one role to the other leave spectators with the feeling that this is a huge performance, populated by tens of moving faces: a squirming, hot world in itself, spinning like a carousel, which belongs to all of us.

We must emphasize that, in this case, the director has finely engineered each gesture, as well as the way in which actors are positioned and repositioned in relation to the dynamic of the whole. Spectators are left to figure out the multiple dramatic situations themselves – the distribution technique does not follow the

classic “one body=one character” convention, but testimonies are successively taken on again and again by different actors, to show the polyvalence of destinies. More than that, the stage design constantly modifies through and from four mobile angle-iron parallelepipeds, which are redefined by light design: transparent boxes hiding reality and then shoving it in our face successively and simultaneously – plasma TV, student dorm, flat kitchen, hospital bed – it is the spectator’s task to fill the transparency with the materiality of each specific context (set design by Anda Pop, who dressed the actors in refined costumes made up of multicoloured tights and white shirts embroidered with thin traditional patterns). The deep musical moments signed by Danaga confer a fourth dimension to the visual space.

“The first statement is the most powerful.” This line is the leitmotif which is obsessively repeated at the beginning of each chapter of this polyphonic construction. *M.I.S.A. PĂRUT* does not aim at “bringing justice” to the cult-group (it seems that ECHR brought justice, by compelling the Romanian state to pay more than EUR 200,000 to the 26 members who reported the ill-treatments and the invasions of their privacy by the authorities), but at triggering the audience’s reflexive availability. This is also the why the authors place Gregorian Bivolaru, the guru who was convicted several times for paedophilia, on a rather secondary plan. On the other hand, dramatically and very humorously, this bold and aesthetically powerful performance works like a test paper, revealing the hypocrisies and fundamental, systemic imbalances, that govern our daily thoughts, whether consciously or not.

The Paradoxical Revisiting of the Catastrophe

Another particularly complex experiment is the production of Varoterem Project, the Hungarian independent company in Cluj, also with a highly ambitious programme, which is worth writing about more often in the Romanian cultural mass-media, or what’s left of it. *Reacting Chernobyl*, based on texts by Svetlana Aleksievici and Wladimir Tchertkoff, is another script made up of personal stories, official documents, pieces of news, scientific and philosophical reflections, tons of references (including from books) - of bits and pieces, found and put together in an archaeological manner, after the original objects were shattered in the upheaval. The arduous reconstructive operation is the work of the playwright Raluca Sas-Marinescu (over the last few years, she has done many adaptations, including *I hired a contract killer* at the Sibiu Radu Stanca National Theatre, *La țigănci* at Baia Mare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, or *Fontana di Trevi*

at Satu Mare, as well as plays or original scripts, such as the *Promise of a Beautiful Life (as Chekhov told us)* together with the director Botos Balint at Râmnicu Vâlcea). The project was intricately built together with the director Cosmin Matei.



Fig. 2: Emőke Pál and Tímea Udvari-Kardos in *Reacting Chernobyl*

“The mind can take in a certain amount of horror before shutting down to protect itself. Starting from this logic, when the threat exceeds our imagination, we conclude that the danger is simply not real.” Based on this line, placed apparently by chance towards the middle of the performance, the dramatic structure follows four, consistently intersecting main levels: rearranging the memories about the disaster and its consequences, the memoirs of the survivor-victims, the more or less technical opinions of experts and managers, manipulation as political weapon. The playwright aims at taming this wide fragmentariness (by comparison to the exceptional book written by the Nobel prize winner, surely the selection effort must have been tormenting, up to exhaustion) by carefully constructing key situations, that cause an immediate human impact, as well as a reflexive, interrogative, philosophical and political reaction, as they are interconnected and contribute to building up each other’s tension.

Similarly, the work technique used by the performers' team is based on the creative participation of the whole group: the actors - Sebők Maya, Pál Emőke, Udvari Tímea, Imecs-Magdó Levente, Csepei Zsolt, accompanied by their former acting professor, Hatházi András, and seconded by the especially clever and emotional sound-vocal narration of Júlia Sipos. Each of them did previous documentation work and, as the project moved forward, improvised various solutions serving or developing the initial fragmentary structure, or reinforcing its situational nodes.

The space was created neuter, like a road between two sides demarcated by the audience, with the two ends bordered by a "technical" desk, holding sound and light organs and the materials needed for stage actions (thread, pencils, elastic, aluminium foil rolls, etc.); while the other end is a white screen set as an extension of the paper carpet, used at certain moments for the shadow play. The actors wear simple clothes, such as light grey jeans and white blouses, sneakers (although it was not specified, not even on the poster, the stage design was made by the director Cosmin Matei, who also studied fine arts).

The truly original directing element is the complete parallelism between speech and stage actions. Once again, the actor has a strenuous task ahead of him, that is nevertheless directly proportional to the spectator's task, who must simultaneously read and confer complex meanings to this parallelism between what is said and what is "done", but which, in key moments, opens towards intersecting situational bridges.

The continuity of the actors' physical discourse is ensured by the children's games (whether known or unknown, real or imaginary) – partially broken from time to time by the "incarnation" of a named or anonymous character, who tells his story in a fragmentary manner, holds a speech, or comes up with a comment, or of a group of characters reinventing a dramatic situation. Most of the time, the children's play continues between actors even during re-enacting moments, creating a continuous background, that circles and engulfs the theatrical reconstruction moment. Lots of "games" unfold before the spectator's eyes, ever more complex and dynamic, apparently not connected to the factual dramatic situations - but, in fact, intensifying them through a double stake: revealing the psychological distance separating us from the moment of the catastrophe, and counteracting, in a tense and anti-mimetic manner, the often-unimaginable tragedy of the real fact, that happened then and there. Games are finely brought back - with a smile, as opposed to the horrors bombarding us - such as: hide and seek, tag, catch, hopscotch, French skipping, ball, who steps on who, who puts their shoes on first, wrestling. Sophisticated objects and tinfoil dolls are made up in front of the audience, the dolls go to war against each other and die, or are executed by hanging, while the action unfolds; then, their remains are erased with a rubber or swept away with a broom, and so on.

The interpretational task proposed by Cosmin Matei to these wonderful actors, both as a group, and individually, is Brechtian at its core, and on edge, openly anti-Stanislavskian: the actor does not realistically “play” the character temporarily cast to him - not even in monologues or situational reincarnations -, whether the wife of a victim who is not allowed to see her husband, a woman giving birth to a monster-child, a criminal hiding in abandoned villages around Pripyat who befriends the feral nature, a scientist-public clerk coming from the capital to “investigate” the disaster, Mikhail Gorbachev, or the man requesting an audience with him. The actor slides in and out of his role as his body suggests a partly recognisable figure, in relation to which there is an almost tangible distance, like a translucid aura – a moral one, I would say, since the character can be “played”, unlike the identity status, which can only be symbolically represented.

There are some key moments when the complex interlacing between games and reconstituted facts acquire exceptional dramatic force: for example, the cutting of the moment of the explosion, while the actors play “dead”, or the two divers’ preparations for the plunge into the flooded sector of the reactor’s cooling system, in order to open the valves – their serenity completely unaware of the imminent sacrifice – while the others begin a French skipping game which the two are to join: the immersion is suggested by the gradual, acrobatic rise of the level of the elastic they must jump over. Degradation and death are suggested through the bits of protective tinfoil randomly detaching from them, due to the desperate effort of their rhythmic leaps. The divers keep playing their mad game even after the elastic is gone and the other actors begin an open, customized debate with the audience on the effects of the explosion and the very ambiguous concept of heroism. Or the almost grotesque scene when an evacuee couple visit their relatives in a less affected town, and the latter are overwhelmed/horrified with the fear of irradiation by any touch... By which time, in a *mise-en-abîme* textual intersection, while playing with their sneakers, the actresses sarcastically introduce lines from Checkov’s *Three Sisters*, about the nostalgia of returning to Moscow, or each man’s “responsibility to work” ... Or the highly fascinating scene towards the end, picturing the war between the tinfoil dolls (manufactured in plain sight), which are hanged behind the shadow screen, or destroyed one by one, imperceptibly sticking to the bodies of the fallen actors, while Imecs-Magdó Levente and Andras Hathazi resume controversial, political, social, humanitarian, and scientific perspectives on the disaster’s immediate and long-term internal and international consequences.

Quite surprisingly, the performance ends with a “civilian”, real monologue, uttered by the voice in the shadow, the musician-technician Júlia Sipos: a manifesto-monologue (picked up from some internet blog) on the responsibility of us all to take conscious action, to invest energy, as much as we know and can, in saving each and every single one.

MIRUNA RUNCAN

Reacting? To react by reincarnating everything left without a body. A performance which is demanding up to exhaustion for the high-performance actors, as well as inquisitive and challenging for the audience – a performance worth watching at least twice, I think. Because its daring originality requires a profound participation, above and beyond the immediate circumstances.

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