

„ I only became a playwright when I started to direct“

*Interview with Alina Nelega, dramatic author, professor and tutor of
the Playwriting MA at the University of Arts in Tîrgu-Mureş*

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Abstract: The present interview with Alina Nelega is centred on the contemporary Romanian dramaturgy. Our discussion focuses on the existing initiatives to encourage emerging playwrights, as well as on topics like the evolution of theatre in Romania after the fall of communism, the director-playwright relationship, the transition of the playwright to the status of dramatic author but also on the image of the country in the Romanian dramaturgy.

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Alina Nelega (b. 1960) is one of Romania's finest playwrights and authors. Among other distinctions, she has won the prestigious UNITER award *Best Play of the Year* twice (in 2001 and in 2014). She holds the „European Author” accolade (Heidelberg 244Stueckemarkt, 2007), as well as the *Fibula de la Suseni* (2015) insignia and diploma of excellence. Since 2008, she has been an Honorary Fellow in Writing of the Iowa University, and, since 2009, a Full Professor at the University of Arts in Tîrgu-Mureş. She was an Artistic Director of the National Theatre in Tîrgu-Mureş (2012 – 2017). Her plays have been translated, published and performed in Romania and internationally, in Europe (Budapest, Prague, Zurich, Warsaw, Paris, Rome, etc.), and in the USA (New York Fringe Festival, Lark Play Development Center, University of Connecticut, hotINK festival, New York University, New York Theatre Workshop). She has benefitted from international residencies, such as *The International Writing Program*, Iowa (USA) and writing programs of *The Royal Court Theatre* and *The Bush Theatre* (London). She also runs playwriting workshops, teaches and directs new writing.

Prof. univ. dr. habil. Alina Nelega is also the tutor of the Playwriting MA at the University of Arts in Tîrgu-Mureş, a course which 90% of today's most accomplished young playwrights have graduated from.

Elise Wilk: *Some years ago, there were very few initiatives to encourage playwriting in Romania. Just some contests, but most of the awarded plays were never produced. The situation has meanwhile changed. From year to year, more Romanian plays are being staged, both by state theatres and independent companies.*

Some theatres started to organise contests for young directors, based on new Romanian plays (National Theatre of Craiova, Apollo 111 Bucharest), there are even contests for teenage writers (Excelsior Theatre Bucharest, Tineretului Theatre Piatra Neamţ) and Reactor de creație și experiment, an independent theatre from Cluj, is providing a residency program for emerging playwrights.

20 years ago, you were one of the initiators of Dramafest, the first program which focused on the production of new plays. The 2 editions of Dramafest were followed by 5 editions of

DramAcum, a project that aimed at discovering new voices. And after this, dramatic writing was included in the curricula of two universities: UAT Tg. Mureş and UNATC Bucharest.

Still, there are not so many programs supporting young writers in their attempts to become dramatic authors, let alone residencies for writers. Considering this, do you think it's hard to become a playwright in Romania?

Alina Nelega: How can you become a playwright in Romania? Well, there are two main things you need to do. The first one is to think small: work with actors of your generation, negotiate your play with directors of your generation, seek small spaces, independent companies, find support from your community, find a reward in your own work, be patient and explore the process! The second one is to think big. Get your plays translated, send them to international competitions, join international playwriting networks, apply for grants, generate your own projects, become the executive director of your thoughts and plans, never cease to fight for your rights and royalties!

E.W.: *At the end of 2017, Odeon Theatre hosted a meeting of Fabulamundi. Playwriting Europe, a program that reunites 80 playwrights from all across Europe. During the meeting, the 10 selected playwrights from Romania spoke about their work with theatre representatives from eight countries. In the end, somebody told me he had noticed that all of us were complaining, in our work, about the situation in our country. Our plays speak about homophobia, intolerance and racism being widely spread in Romania, about the failing of our educational system, about poverty, labour migration, corruption and inter-ethnic conflicts. "You are writing about too many negative things", he told me.*

Do you think Romanian dramaturgy is showing a negative image of the country?

A.N.: Showing a positive or a negative image of Romania is not our job, nor is it our responsibility, as playwrights. We write about what we see, like the child who sees that the emperor is naked. It is not his problem to dress the emperor, but his utterance could help the ones who are in charge do their jobs. One sure thing about theatre and writing is that you cannot lie, you only get to embarrass yourself.

Whining, on the other hand, is something else. Blaming others, too. Homophobia, rascism, intolerance, education problems and poverty, corruption and nationalism are not only Romanian problems. Romania is not a champion of homophobia, nor is it number one across Europe in

terms of nationalism. To see only bad and negative parts of reality is to be extremely short-sighted. But when we imagine plays, as *play-wrights*, in our search for story, plot and characters, the negative aspects are the only productive ones. They feed our talent and creativity. What I mean is that, although talking about negative aspects of reality and human nature is perfectly legitimate, the perspective, the approach of the author is important. I should say that, even if the reality you refer to is negative, the approach needs to be positive – and what I mean does not refer to a moral thesis or to agitprop techniques, but rather to an encompassing and deeply humane perspective, which is to be found in all great plays, from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, to Garcia's *Agamemnon*. Don't ever forget to play, when you write a play. But you definitely know that, your plays are very intelligent and playful. Your *Green Cat*, for instance, deals with a negative reality, still it is touching, playful and the approach is positive, full of empathy.

E.W: *Some theatre critics are still talking about the “crisis of the Romanian dramaturgy”. Is this still a real problem? Is it because of the fact that in Romania, the playwright stood in the shadow for many years and there still is a supremacy of the director?*

A. N.: Crisis is good. It opens opportunities. You know the Chinese too often quoted the paradoxical ideogram of crisis: danger and opportunity. If the critics are right, we should celebrate the crisis... but is the supremacy of the director a reason for the crisis? Is there a real conflict between the playwright and the director? I don't think so, not any longer. We live in a postdramatic and post-directorial age. If a text is strong enough, it will find its way to the stage. And the person who directs is... always the director – he or she can be the author, one of the actors or anyone who feels that he or she can organize the show and take over the responsibilities of staging the play. My generation of directors (Măniuțiu, Dabija, Frunză) were not interested in new plays, they had other agendas, therefore we, those who were writing and looking for directors to share the energy and feeling of our plays, were extremely lost and disappointed. The numerous generations of directors were yet to come. We had to make do with our plays being published and translated, sometimes staged by international directors who had no problem in stepping back and acknowledging the playwright as one of the authors of the performance. Of course, we had to be lucky – opportunities were still very few.

At that time, I had to stage my plays, which, incidentally, was regarded as cheeky and inconsiderate towards the effigy of directorial prowess. I am very happy that I had the courage to do that, because I learned a lot. In fact, although I had been writing for more than a decade and had won the Play of the Year in 2000, I only became a playwright when I started to direct. But this is my way – others began by being directors and writing afterwards, others do not feel comfortable at all with staging their plays. There are many possibilities, but one needs to find her or his way, there are no recipes, no universal solutions. Just exemplary destinies or inspiring insights that other playwrights can share with us.

E.W.: *In Germany, there is a very important festival dedicated to new German dramaturgy, Mülheimer Theatertage. Every year, the jury is selecting 10 productions, taking into consideration all new German plays staged in the last season and focusing only on the play and not on the production. At this festival, I found out that 600 new German plays are produced every year in Germany. This is an astronomical amount. In Romania, I don't think we have had 600 plays since 1990. Could it be possible in the future to have, let's say, 50 new Romanian plays every year?*

A.N.: Ha-ha! I am not going to fall into your trap of negativity!

Some steps have been taken towards creating a context, a safe space for the emerging playwrights. We have stopped blaming the communism for manipulating playwrights and plays for propaganda, which apparently had explained the lack of appetite of theatres and directors for the new plays, in the '90s. A new play does not need a big budget, so we cannot blame the lack of funds. We are still fighting the indifference of theatres, and the lack of expertise, the traditional literacy gap regarding playwriting. I could, of course, name other obstacles that block the playwright: too few and too obscure playwriting competitions, therefore small chances to become visible, the idea that writing as it is, is a hobby and not a profession, the "genius" mythology, in a culture where people still play the national lottery, believe in becoming rich overnight, and do not believe in supporting long-term projects...

Ooops! I think I have fallen right into your trap!

E.W.: *What do you think is lacking in the Romanian dramaturgy?*

A.N.: More playwrights. A real association, a guild of playwrights who live their lives on the stage, who have found ways to empower themselves and have their voices heard.

E.W.: *In the last years, a certain tendency has increased: playwrights are commissioned to write about a certain topic, for a certain theatre. A director calls you and says: "I really like your writing. But don't you want to write something new, for me? Look, I have this idea". Or a theatre manager decides he wants a play about migration, and he talks to a playwright. Sometimes, the text is developed together with the actors and the director. For me, commissioned works are a little bit risky because it's almost sure that there won't be a second production. That means playwrights are encouraged to write „for single use only“. Aren't you afraid of this?*

A.N.: Not really, no. I have done this kind of writing myself, and it is extremely rewarding. I have also encouraged other playwrights to do it, but some find it difficult to be so flexible and not afraid of the process. After all, if you are the one and only author, you know you can count on yourself, but if you are part of a team, and do not run it (the director mostly does that), you have no control over the text that is born along with the performance, and it can escape you or take the wrong direction. The thing is, I guess, you need to be in control somehow: you either have a good chemistry with the director and you both run the team, as partners, or you just run it yourself, as an author. And that's that. But you must trust the stage, even if you are scared to death – if you trust it and pay attention to it, you can't go wrong.

E.W.: *You often speak about the transition of the playwright to the status of dramatic author, directing his own plays. For me, the danger is that such a work becomes so personal that nobody else would stage the play again. I believe in the traditional playwright, who is writing a play that will be directed by somebody else, giving new meanings to it. Do you think this kind of playwright will disappear?*

A.N.: No, not at all! You speak about a play as dramatic poetry, about playwrights who can write and construct, at the same time, a literary object for stage. These plays are very rare, very precious! Nevertheless, theatre has evolved from literary theatre to documentary theatre, devised and performative techniques of dramaturgical impact. Some great performances are not based on drama, therefore we can speak of postdramatic forms. Neither Kantor, nor Grotowski worked with respect for the text; for them, great stage authors, fathers of performance and promoters of anti-mimetic theatre, the show was the text. But you can't imagine Brecht without his plays, can you? All these forms of theatre have coexisted, some in wonderfully hybrid versions. And today, we are living all the possibilities, the stage is very open, you can experiment, explore, be non-conventional or very traditional. It is for the first time in the history of theatre that we have so many possibilities to work with multimedia, conceptual tools, in alternative spaces or on a fully-equipped stage. After all, the stage, wherever you may find it, has one fundamental rule: there is no right and wrong, there is only what functions and what doesn't.

E.W.: *Could you imagine living in another country and writing in another language than Romanian?*

A.N.: Oh, yes! I am a very imaginative person... but I'm afraid it's too late now. I need to rely on translations.

E.W.: *Many of the Romanian films after 2000 are dealing with the past. Some years ago, people used to say: "I'm tired of seeing another film about the Revolution". That's not the case of theatre, where plays are more about the present. You are one of the playwrights who wrote about the past - life in communism, the consequences of collaboration with the Securitate being themes you approached in your plays. Do you think we need more plays about the past? Or should theatre speak mostly about here and now?*

A.N.: I am not very sure about what theatre should or should not do. There are plenty of options, nobody forces you to watch a movie about the Revolution, if you couldn't care less. You needn't watch Lars von Trier, no, you can watch a film by Nora Ephron. The extraordinary thing today is that you have an option, and I wish we were intelligent enough to preserve

our options. Repertory theatres work one way, they care about tradition and conventional forms of theatre, independent theatre doesn't give a rat's arse about tradition and wants to provoke, induce reaction, it is hungry for immediacy and feedback. Theatre has invaded visual art, performing is an important part of poetry shows, you can take your pick and enjoy it!

The other half of your question – me writing about the past... a writer feeds on memory, personal memory as well as collective one. One of the consequences of playwrights being so young is that their memory expands over a short period of time. It is so natural that we have lots of plays about teenagers, when the playwrights are barely 21 or 22 years old! They cannot (with few exceptions) write about communism, since they did not live it, have no personal memories of it. And their interest lies somewhere else, good for them! They should follow their instincts and write about what tickles them!

But let me tell you a very short story: last summer, while running a workshop in Cluj, I was asked by a 20 year-old playwright, why was communism bad, since her parents and grandparents kept saying it was a lot better than what they were living at the moment. Her question triggered a huge indignation in me, a reflex anger. Not against her, but against our ability to forget.

I did write about the past, indeed, and I shall never get tired to do so, provided I can help not to repeat myself. Memory needs to be preserved and shared, and our culture is not big on preserving our memory and telling the truth about history, recent or not. If I can make a contribution to that, I shall never stop writing about the past. There are lots of young and very talented playwrights who speak loud and clear and about the present!