

“Us and Them” – A Transylvanian Story in Three Chapters

Performance review: 20/20, written and directed by Gianina Cărbunariu, a production of Yorick Studio, Tîrgu-Mureş; *Double Bind*, a performance by Alina Nelega and Kincses Réka, a production of The National Theatre, Tîrgu-Mureş, and MaRó by Székely Csaba, directed by Andi Gherghe, a production of Yorick Studio, Tîrgu-Mureş

Motto: “And after all, we’re only ordinary men...”
– Pink Floyd, *Us and Them* –

On the 1st of December, 1918, Transylvania was no longer a Hungarian territory. On this historic date, it became a part of Romania, a *status quo* which was going to be officialised in 1920, as validated by the Versailles Treaty. Thus, our Great Union Day happened a hundred years ago – a cause for celebration in 2018, when most Romanian citizens are rejoicing the Centenary openly, and few of them are hindered by whatever feelings this year-long feast might cause in the hearts of our co-nationals, the members of the quite substantial Hungarian ethnic minority. However, despite extreme, nationalistic reactions having been registered over the years both amongst Romanians and Hungarians in Transylvania, many of us are trying to live in the community and understand its mechanics, aiming at peaceful cohabitation.

Theatre, the most social of the arts, is a tool which cannot be ignored when one wants to deal with community-related issues. In the following “chapters”, I will analyse three performances (created by highly-qualified, awarded theatre professionals) each dealing with the relationship between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority in Transylvania. The reason why I chose to write about this specific problem in a journal whose current issue is celebrating the Romanian Centenary is the fact that there are some countries in which the tradition states that if it is your birthday, you are the one who is supposed to offer gifts to your friends and family. Let’s imagine, for a moment, that we live in such a culture.

Chapter I – 20/20

Yorick Studio, Tîrgu-Mureş – 20/20. Written and directed by Gianina Cărbunariu. Visual artist: Maria Drăghici. Translation and dramaturgy: Boros Kinga. Cast: Virgil Aioanei, Bányai Kelemen Barna, Berekméri Katalin, Carmen Florescu, Mădălina Ghiţescu, Korpos András, Rolando Matsangos, Sebestyén Aba, Cristina Toma, Tompa Klára. Opening date: the 14th of October, 2009.

20/20 is a documentary theatre performance, the title of which consists of a term borrowed from ophtalmology – a measurement indicating perfectly-accurate (hence, normal) vision. However, this title also refers to “Black March” in Tîrgu-Mureş/Marosvásárhely, as does the entire show. On the 20th of March, 1990, not long after the fall of communism in Romania, Hungarians and Romanians clashed in an interethnic conflict the consequences of which were bloody and gruesome. This conflict is the main topic of *20/20*, a theatre performance which aims to investigate how people saw the March events twenty years after they had happened.



Fig. 1. *20/20* poster (by Maria Drăghici)

The concept of the show is self-referential. Thus, *20/20* approaches the documentation process itself – it tells the story of how several young theatre artists from Bucharest have come to Tîrgu-Mureş to make a show about “Black March” and to interview people for this precise purpose. They are met with reluctance and refusal by many locals. But this is just one scene of the performance. Other scenes talk about the March events from the perspective of two foreigners, about the difficulties a Romanian woman encounters when trying to learn Hungarian, about borders, and, also, about what the relationships between Romanian and Hungarian neighbours looked like in March, 1990.

This latter scene is, in my opinion, if a little biased, the central scene of the performance. Its characters are a couple of Transylvanian–Hungarians who have guests from Budapest. Suddenly, their Romanian neighbours decide to pay them a visit.

Civilised conversation ensues, up to a point, and we find out that the Romanian neighbours have come to Transylvania from other regions of Romania (Oltenia, Moldova) to work at the Chemical Factory in Tîrgu-Mureş. At this point, I felt misrepresented: I was born and raised in Tîrgu-Mureş, just like my parents, and, due to cultural appropriation, I grew up listening to Hungarian rock bands such as Omega or Locomotiv GT and started using Hungarian interjections like “Na!” and “Jaj!” in my early childhood. The Romanians in this scene from *20/20* are not Transylvanian, they have peasant-like traditions and tastes. The portrait of the born-and-raised-in-Tîrgu-Mureş is absent. On the other hand, the visitors from Budapest are highly-aristocratic, they sing and recite poems and value “high culture” – an aspect which was ironically presented and accordingly laughed at by the audience.

Despite this small mishap of some Transylvanian-Romanians feeling underrepresented, the show is, otherwise, extremely lively, well-directed and professionally-acted. Theatre critic Philip Fisher writes: “*20/20* is played out in-the-round by performers sitting in a kind of sunken bear pit observed from all sides by spectators. This voyeuristic staging is effective in the light of the evening’s subject matter, events in March 1990 in the city of Tîrgu Mureş (sic!) (or Târgu Mureş) in Transylvania, during which clashes between the two ethnic groups led to fighting and five deaths.

Ten actors, split equally both male/female and Romanian/Hungarian, work with a verbatim text to illuminate the events, using virtually no costumes or props in the bare space. (...) The problems are largely related in reportage rather than action, although the strong feelings begin to emerge in a series of scenes during which the mutual hatred and suffering becomes increasingly apparent.”¹

¹ Philip Fisher, “*20/20*”, in *British Theatre Guide*, <http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/20-20-platform-theatr-7665>, accessed on the 18th of February, 2018;

The relationship between Hungarians and Romanians in Transylvania is a delicate subject matter. Gianina Cărbunariu and her team have touched upon this (un)healed wound and I remember feeling grateful for their performance and for the discussions with the audience that followed the premiere.



Fig. 2: Scene from *20/20* (photo by Maria Drăghici)

Simple, but not simplistic, tackling a difficult matter that still lingers upon Tîrgu-Mureş, *20/20* was a necessary performance. But have we really healed? And, if so, are our wounds old enough for us to have regained the perfect vision *20/20* refers to? Do we have the necessary distance to see things clearly, even now, after so many years have passed? The show itself ends with a question, addressed to the audience: “What do *you* think?”.

Maybe the answer to this question could be given by another performance:

Chapter 2 – *Double Bind*

The National Theatre, Tîrgu-Mureş - *Double Bind*. A performance by Alina Nelega and Kincses Réka. Cast: Monica Ristea, Berekméri Katalin, Elena Porea, Pál Emőke, Laura Mihalache, Csíki Szabolcs, Andrei Alexandru Chiran, Barabási Tivadar, Claudiu Banciu, Bartha László Zsolt, Cristian Iorga. Music: Ada Milea. Translation: Kacsó Judit-Andrea, Florentina Váry. Opening date: the 6th of December, 2014.

Just like *20/20*, the title of *Double Bind* is a borrowed expression. This time, the artists have approached the area of psychology, where *double bind* refers to a conflicting situation which cannot possibly generate a positive solution. Created by Kincses Réka and Alina Nelega, this theatre performance is a devised-documentary show, focusing on Tîrgu-Mureş, the same city where the “Black March” events took place, but it approaches the minority-majority issue from a wider perspective.



Fig. 3. *Double Bind* poster (by Kincses Réka)

A Hungarian reviewer of this performance states that “A megrázó előadásban sokszor előkerül a konfliktusváros motívuma is, amelyet egyik náció sem tud igazán magáénak érezni a vélt vagy valós sérelmek miatt.”² A Romanian theatre critic talks about “un oraş în care cele două comunități trăiesc alături, nu și împreună.”³

Besides life in this split city, or maybe not “besides” but rather mirroring it, *Double Bind* documents a summer workshop that preceded the performance, and in which actors from the Hungarian and Romanian companies of the National Theatre in Tîrgu-Mureş took part. The workshop was the first stage of the rehearsals - the participants told their personal stories, on which the performance is mostly based. Another similarity with *20/20: Double Bind* is self-referential, the actors play both themselves and several characters. There are many scenes which combine laughter with bittersweet mediation: a Transylvanian-Hungarian abroad can't explain her identity to two foreigners: she's Romanian, but she's also Hungarian; the writer-directors of *Double Bind* cannot agree on what a certain scene should look like in the show, because they have different views on history and on nowadays reality; a Transylvanian-Hungarian woman returns to Marosvásárhely after living abroad, only to discover that it has become Tîrgu-Mureş - meaning that the streets have changed their names from Hungarian to Romanian; a Romanian high school student, born and raised in a nationalistic family, treats a Hungarian girl badly; and, last, but not least, the central scene of the performance: a talk-show where the characters literally fight each other (Romanians against Hungarians).

I have mentioned that, having been born and raised in Tîrgu-Mureş, I had felt underrepresented in *20/20*. There were some spectators who felt the same thing about *Double Bind*; they were the sons and daughters of mixed families, i. e. one Romanian and one Hungarian parent – and the show did not talk about them. However, *Double Bind* did not aim to deal with the situation in Tîrgu-Mureş exhaustively, but rather, dynamically. And it is quite a dynamic performance! The actors masterfully switch between the documented and fictionalised scenes, between story, history and reality, while the script (the Romanian parts of which were written by Alina Nelega, while the Hungarian ones – by Kincses Réka) is beautifully-structured and thought-provoking.

² “In this shocking theatre performance, the motive of the conflict-city appears several times, a city which none of the two ethnic groups feels it belongs to them, because of real or imaginary insults.” - Csaba Lukács, “A főtér átköltözött Marosvásárhelyről Targu-Muresbe”, in *Magyar Nemzet*, Budapest, December 18 (2017);

³ “... a city in which the two communities live alongside, but not together.” – Oana Stoica, “Vorbește-mi, n-o să te ascult”, in *Dilema Veche*, issue 685, April 6-12 (2017).



Fig. 4: *Double Bind* rehearsal (photo by Sebesi Sándor)

Double Bind ends, just like *20/20*, with a question. Nevertheless, the question is rather different from the one in Gianina Cărbunariu's production. "Can anyone see me?" is the last line of the performance, and it is an invitation for members of both communities to look at one another, to really see each other, to live together, rather than apart.

Chapter 3 – *MaRó*

Yorick Studio Tîrgu-Mureş - *MaRó* by Székely Csaba. Directed by: Andi Gherghe. Set Design: Adrian Ganea. Cast: Raisa Ané, Botond Farkas Benedek, Csaba Ciugulitu, Piroska Fodor, Imelda Hajdu, Ştefan Mura, István Nagy. Opening Date: the 11th of November, 2015.

Another bilingual performance. Another show about Romanians and Hungarians living in Transylvania. Another production of Yorick Studio Tîrgu-Mureş. *MaRó* completes my theatrical triad: if *20/20* left the traces of tragedy in my mind's eye, while *Double Bind* was a tragicomedy, *MaRó* is definitely a comedy. But it is a bittersweet, dark comedy. *MaRó* (the title of which means "caustic" in Hungarian and "brown" in Romanian - but is also

an abbreviation of the words “Hungarian” and “Romanian”) is a bilingual show, just like the previous two. Written by Székely Csaba, who has found the appropriate director in the person of Andi Gherghe, the performance is wonderfully played by a team of professional actors.



Fig. 5: *MaRó* poster (by Hotgyai István)

MaRó has two so-called “curtains”, which are amusing in themselves – animated movies the protagonists of which are caricatures of Hungarians at the Gates of Heaven. The playwright structured his scenario in ten grotesque, absurdist scenes, meant to paint a picture of the same thorny relationship between Romanians and Hungarians in Transylvania. In *MaRó*, everyone is (mis)represented – both Romanians and Hungarians, since it is almost cartoonish in its unorthodox approach. The show builds on clichés, on stereotypes, deconstructing them through laughter. For instance, in one of the scenes, the father doesn’t approve of his daughter wanting to marry a Romanian, but the idea suddenly seems palatable after realising that the other candidate for her hand in marriage is a gypsy. The cruelty of the play’s humour is obvious in the scene where a Hungarian employee of the City Hall is asked by the

mayor to perform the part of Avram Iancu, one of the nationalists’ heroes, in a sketch. Another example of black humour is a scene where a Romanian nationalist finds out her DNA is Hungarian up to an overwhelming proportion.



Fig. 6: Scene from *MaRó* (photo by Volker Vornehm)

I had never thought I could laugh at the serious matter of complicated interethnic relationships. But *MaRó* succeeded in entertaining the audience with therapeutic laughter. Although this was a more traditional play than both *20/20* and *Double Bind*, which were closer to the performative aspect of theatre, it is no less valuable than either.

Epilogue

The fact that theatre professionals talk about Romanians and Hungarians in Transylvania is a good sign. It means there is room for dialogue, and that the aftermath of the grim events pictured in *20/20*, namely the parallel lives the two communities live – as pointed out in *Double Bind* – can be even laughed at, as those who have attended *MaRó* can testify.

All three performances originated in Tîrgu-Mureş, a city the population of which is made of, approximately, fifty percent Hungarians and fifty percent Romanians. We have lived together before and after the incorporation of Transylvania in Romania, and Tîrgu-Mureş, with its *Secession* buildings and its mixed cultural heritage is special today due to its interculturalism. One of the proofs is represented by these three theatre shows, all of which are crossing the t's dotting the i's of Transylvania's multiethnic and intercultural dimension.

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