The Dialogue of Arts in Romanian Contemporary Drama

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Abstract: The beginning of the 21st century is characterized in Romania by the emerging of a new generation of playwrights. Numerous actors or people coming “off the stage” begin to write drama, so that the playwrights become authors of the texts played on the stage. Thus, the playwrights join a trend that is common in Europe, being part of a category named by Bruno Tackels “les écrivains de plateau” – the writers of the stage. Nowadays, we witness a change in the way the young artists view drama – they do not only want to change the way of writing and performing drama, but they also want to change the world they live in. The contemporary performance has gradually lost its specificity by blending itself with visual arts, dance, music, technology, becoming a project. In our modern society the artists do not look for something meant to last forever, so the work of art becomes a continuous work in progress. Therefore, a bridge is being shattered – the bridge between nowadays and posterity.

Key words: Romanian theater, directing, playwrighting.

According to DEX, 2009 edition, contemporary is an adjective that designates “a thing that exists or occurs nowadays; of actuality”. Drama is a profound, complex and vast term so that, when we refer to contemporary drama we have numerous points of view (angles) from which we can analyse the phenomenon: contemporary drama, staging, directing, acting, setting etc. Yet, is there any way of finding a contemporary drama philosophy? We are about to find this out by exemplifying this article on contemporary Romanian plays since this field remains a milestone in my academic research.

The beginning of the 21st century is characterized in Romania by the emerging of a new generation of playwrights. Numerous actors or people coming “off the stage” begin to write drama. Eugen Radu Wohl thinks that the playwrights of the 21st century “are more and more aware of the role of
specialist that the playwright has to have while staging a play. The play gradually earns its own role of dramatic scaffolding, issue that cannot and should not be thought outside the stage”.

Therefore, the playwrights become authors of dramatic texts – a category that is encompassed by the contemporary trend that is common nowadays in Europe, becoming what Bruno Tackels names “les ecrivains de plateau”, the writers of the stage. The well-known representatives of this trend are Romeo Castellucci, Rodrigo Garcia, Pippo Delbono, Jan Fabre, Francois Tanguy.

The Belgian philosopher and playwright analyses numerous contemporary plays and highlights the changes that drama has undergone today: “What is common to all these playwrights is the refusal to build their performances on the scaffolding of a given text, written some time ago by somebody else. There is nothing coming from outside that interferes with the performance, everything arises from a type of creation that is done on the stage by all the members that are active in this process under the authority of an accepted leader. This leader wants and manages to assert himself/herself as an “author”, the undisputed master of the stage, the one that is responsible for all going on there and the writer of the stage”. George Banu thinks that the writers of the stage “reject the pattern of the solitary artist by choosing the typology of the federalist creator” – they “integrate the ideas of their partners in their work without abandoning the initial project. Thus, we witness the birth of another way of loving drama – one that is seen as a group activity, a method of handling multitudes, a work of art that encompasses the whole crew”.

In Romania, drama has been aligned to the European tendencies by the people belonging to dramAcum – Andreea Valean, Gianina Carbuñariu, Radu Apostol, Alexandru Bercan – the ones who have decided to give the floor to all the newcomers that believe to have something to say in this field of activity. However, dramAcum does not only discover new playwrights, but it also facilitates their activity on the stage. dramAcum has become a brand since it has stirred the interest of all the people involved in drama, including institutions, interest in the contemporary drama and the young playwrights. An example is “Mihai Eminescu” National Theatre of Timisoara which, from 2005, has been organizing The Romanian Drama Festival and The National
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Contest of Romanian Drama with the purpose of promoting plays that have never been staged under any artistic form.

dramAcum and its founders have been involved in our social life not only theoretically by revolting in their plays and by helping various artists with well-known institutions, but also actively by getting involved in social actions and by supporting independent theatre companies. “Social Theatre”, founded by Radu Apostol, has co-ordinated between 2001-2005 the project “Home, a House for the Street Children”; this project has led to the performance “Home”, staged at “Ion Creanga” Theatre and the donations obtained from this have been used in buying a social apartment. Some other important projects are “Zeppelin” and “Dear Country, We Want Our Parents Back”; the former has been meant to introduce Acting classes to secondary school students especially in the communities that have integration problems while the latter has been meant to bring migration into the spotlight and to make people aware of the negative effects of the Romanian parents migration to the Western countries.

Radu Apostol is one of the founders of Replika Educational Theatre Centre, a form of theatre “in which the participants educate one another, favouring creativity, spontaneity, mutual respect, the exchange of ideas and questions in order to generate artistic approaches of collective representations.” Thus, Replika Theatre is exactly the kind of theatre described by Bruno Tackels and analysed by Gheorghe Banu that we have previously mentioned. One of the most important projects harbouried by Replika Theatre is The Educational Art Platform that has as its purpose the exploration and pedagogical research of some themes that have high social and political relevance by means of performances, books, films, debates and theatre workshops.

As we could see, the purpose of the young artists expands beyond their desire to change the way drama is performed and written. In fact, they want to change the world they live in. Iulia Popovici considers that the purpose of drama nowadays belongs more to civic responsibilities than to artistic ones: “These contemporary performances are not only about the aesthetic trespassing of the limits of theatrical conventions, but also about a blunt way of expressing an ethical and assumed attitude towards the world we live in.
here now. This is how far reinventing theatre goes”. Referring to the same issue, Gianina Carbunariu, director, playwright and member of dramAcum has declared to us in an online interview: “dramAcum is not urging the young artists to write well because dramAcum does not know what this means. We do not want plays that can be taken as a bulk, we do not want masterpieces that need no further polishing. dramAcum is based on the principle of growing up together with the director and the actors. I have encountered in the UK and the USA many playwrights that know how to write well since there are special courses and recipes meant for that, but these playwrights do not make it on the stage unless they have something to say, something different. Sometimes, the playwrights whose plays make it to the stage are chosen just because their works are not written well and because they have learnt how to write texts meant exclusively to the stage”.

The number of theatre artists increased and the flourishing of theatre companies has been an inevitable process. The first independent theatre company was founded in 1990 by Valera Seciu. Levant Theatre had its first performance on the stage on The National Theatre of Bucharest with Hiring a Clown by Matei Visniec, with Nicolae Scarlat as a director. Although Levant Theatre chose highly valuable texts, famous actors and won several important awards, its activity ended only after six years and four performances due to financial difficulties. Excelsior Theatre and The Mask Theatre were also founded in 1990; Excelsior was a company meant to stage performances for children and got to be under the authority of The City Hall while The Mask was a company founded by Mihai Malaimare, exclusively intended to rely its theatrical performances on gestures, pantomime and body expression.

The independent theatre companies that were founded in the 90s could not pass the test of time since they encountered financial difficulties; still, once this path has been threaded on, many followed. In 1996, Mihaela Sirbu founded No Boundaries Theatre, the critic Victor Scoradet coordinated The Ark Theatre while Voicu Radescu was the father of Monday Theatre at Green Hours. It is true that the majority of independent theatre companies is to be found in Bucharest (The Arts Theatre of Bucharest, By The Way Theatre, Coquette Theatre, Living room Theatre, Backstage Theatre, Logos Theatre etc), but there are some to be found in the country – in Targu-Mures Alina
Nelega founds DramFest foundation and sets the premises of Ariel Underground Theatre. In 2003 Theatre 74 comes into light and its main keywords were established by Nicu Mihoc — “direction. sense. way. principles. values. searching. openness. communication. alternative.”

At Cluj, in 2003, the director m.chris.nedeea wanted to promote local young creators and the latest tendencies in art, so he founded The Impossible Theatre, an editorial workshop “The Library of The Impossible Theatre” and the magazine ManInFest. In 2009, the independent artists of Cluj get together at The Brushes Factory, “a space that is specific to contemporary artistic production” and in 2014 they found The Reactor Association that has as a purpose the promoting of contemporary artistic drama and the personal development of young creators and actors by drama. “Ooops Theatre” comes into being at Timisoara in 2010, promoting performances that are “simple, direct and make-up free” while the actress Andreea Hulughiuć founds Electric Theatre in 2013 with the purpose of being not only a theatre, but also a cultural centre. The only independent theatre company in Iasi is “The Fixed Theatre” that is “a means that ensures a good development of the phenomenon (with no names artists and scarce props), an artistic act that is cool and that has its own contribution to the massive artistic potential that is still slumbering in Romania”.

In our nowadays theatre, owing to the rising number of independent artists, a new term has come into use: that is a performance maker – the person that could be the playwright, the director, the actor or/and the staging responsible. The performance maker is an active part in the rehearsals unless he is not one of the actors or the director himself. Therefore, the art of acting has undergone several changes – many texts are written especially for specific actors by making use of details from their personal lives, their real names, physical resemblances and even personal memories. A good example would be the play Sop the Tempo by Geanina Carbunariu, a play that has been made together with the actors involved in it – Rolando Matsangos, Paula Gherghe and Maria Obretin. As a consequence, we witness nowadays a theatre of the natural things that makes a purpose out of being not only educational or instructive, but also social.
Our nowadays theatre has also a therapeutic role. One of the main supporters of this trend is the director-playwright Vera Ion who started in 2009, together with the actor Sorin Poama, a project entitled Write about you, meant to give the floor to anybody who wants to change their personal histories into plays. Vera Ion and Sorin Poama have intended to convince the young people that their life stories could be interesting and could become a real play.

A project that is based on the same principle is A Diary of Romania, a multidisciplinary project initiated by the director Carmen Lidia Vidu who had the idea of mingling experimental movie with visual arts and theatre: “I want to see what a less touristic, less mediatized Romania looks like, I am interested in an average style of life, but not the life of average people, but educated people. Mingling the life of actors, the life behind the scene and the cities of Romania can offer us a special image and discourse that are both profound and easy to understand”. A diary of Romania has generated up to now two episodes that were enacted in Sf. Gheorghe and Constanta, episodes that have been made into performances that have been described by the author as being “games of disclosures and secrets, photo samples of the lives of the six actors involved in the play, stories about origins, parents, grandparents, fear and patience, about being an actor, being a spectator, dreams, wonderings, love and patience, failures, breakups, solitude, breakdowns, shocks, confusions, money for the rent, children, being vulnerable and helpless, the temptation to flee and patience, losses, gains, revolts”. In other words, those six actors have impersonated themselves. The question that crosses our minds is: what has happened to the character? Can theatre be performed without characters or any actor/artist/performer is a character in himself/herself?

As the title of this article implies, we acknowledge the relationship that has arisen amongst the various domains of the theatre, but we cannot help notice that this relationship has lessened the communication between Actor and Spectator. If a play becomes too personal there is a risk in having less and less spectators to have access to it. Therefore, we witness a paradox: the fact that theatre becomes so popular actually leads to its exclusiveness. We do not deny the therapeutic effects of the theatre that bares the inner self of creators, but uncovering is not a synonym of creating. Our own personal choice is to
look in ourselves in order to create characters rather than make characters out of ourselves.

The contemporary performance has gradually lost its specificity by blending itself with visual arts, dance, music, technology, becoming a project. In our modern society the artists do not look for something meant to last forever, so the work of art becomes a continuous work in progress. Therefore, a bridge is being shattered – the bridge between nowadays and posterity: ”The wasting of aesthetic impulses in a temporary-contemporary, focusing on happening and performance, exclusively here and now for the exclusive use of those present here and now make critics useless. An art that writes on quick sands does not need archives, memory and systemic acknowledgement.”