

## **A celebration of a quarter century of Romanian “free theatre”**

### **Irina Wolf**

A red carpet covers the stairs leading to the brightly lit lobby of the National Theatre "Ion Luca Caragiale" of Bucharest which followed an ample process of renovation from 2010 to 2014. With seven halls and a total seating capacity of around 2550 (the Grand Hall alone can seat up to 900 people), the building located centrally in Romania's capital city is one of Europe's biggest edifices. Together with the Theatre Union of Romania, it has been the producer of the National Theatre Festival since 1990. This year's anniversary edition was held between October 23 and November 1 and featured 44 performances of the country's last season as well as three productions invited from abroad, all of them carefully selected by Marina Constantinescu, artistic manager of the festival.

One of the most eagerly awaited events was the debate called *Manifesto for dialogue* generated by **Antisocial**. The show signed by young artist Bogdan Georgescu addresses the disorientation and corruption of the Romanian educational system from the triple perspective of students, parents and teachers. In a high school, students create a secret group on a social platform similar to Facebook. Teachers infiltrate the group with the help of students and expose them. Who is the culprit? Inspired by a real case which occurred in the Romanian city of Cluj in the spring of 2015, Bogdan Georgescu, both author and director of the show, has used this starting point to build a complex and provocative story that combines the biographies of the actors with current social topics. Georgescu develops the project by his own method, which he calls *active art*. The seven-member ensemble is impressive, especially considering that it is made up of master's students of the Theatre Department of the University "Lucian Blaga" of Sibiu. The actors take over, one by one, convincingly portraying each different role. *Antisocial*, a production of the National Theatre "Radu Stanca" of Sibiu, has a sustained rhythm, highlighting in a very precise way the limited freedom of expression and the lack of confidence in each other as well as in the social system.

### **Aspects of war**

The main theme of this year's 25<sup>th</sup> edition was the current reality of “war” and, in general, of “conflict”, a highly suggestive choice. The festival opened with **Mein Kampf** by George Tabori staged by 60-year-old Romanian director Alexandru Dabija. Known for his iconoclastic approaches, Dabija's work, a production of the National Theatre of Cluj (the

only theatre present with four performances in the festival), amplifies the playwright's farce, urging even more to a laughter therapy. The young and provincial Hitler is portrayed as a caricatural character, dressed in a comical Tyrolean costume and wearing a ridiculous wig and a silly mustache. A singing funeral group made up of a Lady-with-sickle (the Death), her driver, her secretary and a chicken, periodically cross the stage in order to "choose their customers". Having both a gentle and ghostly appearance, the Death dressed in black lace creeps like a shadow about the Jewish occupants of the Viennese asylum, the secretary beats on a huge drum and the chicken clucks in an unmistakable comical way. It is this musical perspective of songs composed by Ada Milea and Anca Hanu – the latter being the performer of the chicken as well – which invigorates furthermore the atmosphere, ensuring a touch of originality to the show.

The grimmer side of conflict was addressed by two of the invited performances: *Front* directed by Luk Perceval, a production of Thalia Theatre Hamburg, and ***The War*** directed by Vladimir Pankov, a co-production of the Chekhov International Theatre Festival and the Edinburgh International Festival in collaboration with SounDrama Studio Moscow. Based on texts such as Homer's great epic 'The Iliad', 'Death of a Hero', the semi-fictional account of the First World War by British soldier Richard Aldington, and 'Notes of a Cavalry Officer' by Nikolai Gumilev, Pankov's opulent work questions the nature of battles past and present. Although the play follows the stories of three characters, it is the universal experience people face during an armed conflict that is represented on stage. The show is visually astounding. A 19-ensemble cast delivers an utterly remarkable performance. Besides acting perfectly, they play instruments and sing brilliantly, some of them featuring even operatic vocal tones. Additionally, Pankov merges the use of objects like oars, spindles, cloaks, gas masks, a huge chandelier and a piano, to create unforgettable images as the drama unfolds in 17 chapters during 150 minutes (without intermission). Moreover, the director, originally a musician, adds to the whole a constant backdrop of noise, intended to demonstrate the terrible atmosphere of war from an auditory point of view. The audience thus feels involved in the process and leaves the hall emotionally devastated. At least in my case, it was true.

### **Poetical scrutiny of the mind**

The festival also paid homage to Gellu Naum, an award-winning and prolific poet, dramatist, novelist and translator. Considered one of the greatest Romanian writers of the 20th century, he was a prominent member of the European interwar avant-garde movement and is best remembered as the founder of the Romanian surrealist group. As

2015 is Naum's birth centenary celebration year, an exhibition and two events were dedicated to him: *Apolodor*, a concert performance by Ada Milea after one of his most popular books of poetry for children and **N(AUM)**, a show inspired from his poetry. For the latter, young director Mariana Cămărășan creates a world which moves between dream and reality, emphasized by a suggestive light design. In the proposed word-based minimalist theatre form, two great actresses complement each other. The interpretation of Oana Pellea and Cristina Casian constantly plays with metaphors, probing areas of the subconscious in a similar way as Naum's texts do. And what remains in the end is the desire to discover or reread Gellu Naum's work.

Still, one of the most sensitive and poetic performances was **Vertigo**. Written and directed by 61-year-old artist Mihai Măniuțiu, the dance show tells a highly personal story of the director's deep suffering: the confrontation with his mother's terrible disease of Alzheimer. The whole scene is an image of the mind interior affected by this cruel disease. It is a mysterious and ethereal universe, showing at the same time unexpected asperities. Vava Ștefănescu and Andrea Gavrilu, two exceptional choreographers and dancers, plunge into this atmosphere, their two bodies trying to track one another. One is young and vital, the other one fragile, full of fatigue and losing its self-consciousness. They try to share memories, sensations and perceptions, while the off-voice of one the most famous Romanian actors (Marcel Iureș) recites poems written by Mihai Măniuțiu. Altogether, the performance is "meant to exorcise the pain and grief" of the artist.

Additionally, eleven exhibitions paid homage to great Romanian artists and seventeen books were launched. For the first time ever, the National Theatre Festival introduced, through a partnership with the Romanian Cultural Institute, live broadcasts of some of the most coveted performances included in the program, which could be watched in five Romanian cities as well as abroad. Founded immediately after the fall of the communist regime, the National Theatre Festival presented in 2015 "a powerful mirror of the Romanian scene", being both a retrospective and a celebration of a quarter century of "free theatre".