

Between extremes and self-examination, Romanian theatre is on its way to new horizons

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There aren't many airports left in the world where you can still walk from the airplane to the arrival hall. One of them is in **Iași**. Romania's fourth biggest city located in the Eastern farthest part of the country, near the border to the Republic of Moldavia, has traditionally been one of the leading centres of academic and artistic life, boasting an impressive building: the Palace of Culture. Just a few steps away is the Luceafărul Theatre. It is here that I witnessed the tenth edition of the **International Festival for Young Public** (FITPT). Under the motto *Horizons*, Oltița Cîntec, theatre critic and artistic manager of Luceafărul Theatre, focused for this year's anniversary event primarily on geographical horizons, bringing together artists from six continents and 29 countries. Another aim was expanding the aesthetics. Thus, the rich programme encompassed drama, dance, puppet theatre, circus, performances, exhibitions, workshops, lectures, book launches.

One of the highlights was the presence in Romania, for the first time, of Peter Schumann's famous company **Bread and Puppet Theater**. Their political show *Basic Byebye Cantastoria Extravaganza* was the festival prologue. According to the traditional Silesian recipes of Schumann's mother, the artists prepared themselves a few hours before the show the rye bread which they shared with the spectators after the performance. Another highlight was the Selfie Automation exhibition, which had represented Romania at the Venice Biennial of Architecture in 2016. Seven mechanical automata featuring 42 marionettes carved in wood were displayed from October 5 to 12 in the theatre foyer, where visitors were allowed to manually animate them.

The mornings were dedicated to school classes. Italy was represented by **Telaio Theatre** from Brescia. All 480 seats of the main hall were occupied for their show *Hugs* which turned out to a big success. Similarly, children stormed the scene after the performance *Penguin People* of Austrian **Theatre Asou** to touch the penguin colony which struggled against global warming. Yet the whole city turned to a performance ground as in the afternoon passers-by in the big shopping mall were astonished to see circus acrobatics from New Zealand, Africa or Canada and outdoor spaces were populated by Scottish men wearing kilts and playing bagpipes. Finally, one evening the host theatre presented their hit *The Green Cat* by Elise Wilk which deals with teenager specific issues and for which director Bobi Pricop used the silent disco system. In the small hall, a production of the

female gipsy group Giuvlipen, *Who killed Szomna Grancsa?* told the story of a 17-year-old Roma girl found hanging in her parents' barn. The independent scene proposed the multimedia show about depression *In Between Two Pills* (producer Cinty Ionescu) and *Run* featuring Nicoleta Lefter (shown in 2016 at the Festival delle Colline Torinesi). The most recent production of the Youth Theatre of Piatra Neamț, *Wolfgang* by **Yannis Mavritsakis**, examined in an unusual way loneliness and poor communication. Well-known director Radu Afrim who was also responsible for the sound universe adapted in his particular manner the story of Austrian Natascha Kampusch held captive in a cellar for eight years by Wolfgang Priklopil, who had kidnapped her when she was only ten years old.

Theatre of extremes

At least a dozen festivals take place nationwide in the first half of October. Simultaneously with FITPT, there was another one for youngsters programmed in Sibiu and three in the capital Bucharest. Between October 4 to 8, the seventh edition of the **International Meetings of the Cluj National Theatre** unfolded in Transylvania's main city. Under the motto *Extremes*, general manager Mihai Măniuțiu and artistic manager Ștefana Pop-Curșeu “questioned the ways we deal with extremes on stage and on screen in times of war, violence, terror, manipulation and fright”. This was best exemplified by novel adaptations. Director Răzvan Mureșan's *Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess was a shocking confrontation with what reality can turn to, symbolically stressed by Beethoven's 9th Symphony. A metal structure designed by Helmut Stürmer optically sustained **Kafka's** grotesque world of *The Trial* brought to life by Mihaela Panainte. The young director understood it perfectly to coordinate movement with text. The production gained rhythm, while the whole ensemble – “tiny wheels of Justice's impenetrable mechanism, emphasizing the will of power” – supported in timed motion the protagonist Ionuț Caras playing K. How ironically suitable this seemed to present-day Romanian reality, suffering from continuous corruption and a faulty justice system. The fact that Romanians are almost 30 years after the fall of communism still prisoners of their history was proven by *Playlist* of C.C. Buricea Mlinarcic, directed by Tudor Lucanu, which told the story of a Romanian-Hungarian family between 1989 and 2008.

The programme included *Goldberg Show – The Making of the World and Other Happenings* directed by Mihai Măniuțiu, based on George Tabori's Goldberg Variations, *God's Playground*, a concert-performance with Alexandru Bălănescu and Ada Milea, Andrea Gavrilu's solo dance performance *OST* (Organic Sound Twist) and *Why, Anton*

Pavlovici Chekhov based on **Matei Vişniec's** *The Chekhov Machinery* and, besides theatre, a series of cinematographic experiences. A special event was the avanpremiere of the film *Teeth* after Vişniec's play. Young film director Rareş Stoica brought to screen the absurd story of two men extracting golden teeth from dead soldiers' mouths when, suddenly, they meet on the battlefield full of corpses a soldier oscillating between life and death. A powerful visual trip to an unreal world. Most exceptional was the exhibition displayed on the first floor of the theatre. *The Extreme of Books* curated by Ştefana and Ioan Pop-Curşeu included books at opposite poles like the very big and very small ones, the book of life and of death or the book of communism and fascism.

Europe and Romania

Still in the first half of October, the **International Bucharest Theatre Platform (PITB)** questioned the validity of the European concept. The festival brought to life four years ago by theatre critic Cristina Modreanu was as well “a necessary self-evaluation through theatre of Romania's place on the map of this continent”. One of the main themes of the five performances presented during four intense days was migration, as ten years after Romania joined the European Union great part of its citizens keep looking for better working conditions in Western Europe. Inspired by the book *Sour Cherries* written by Liliana Nechit, *Rovegan* explored this phenomenon. Using the folk tale classic *The Goat and her Three Kids*, the production told the story of a mother who left her family in order to find work in Italy. Written and directed by **Catinca Drăgănescu**, *Rovegan* took the form of collective storytelling. Drăgănescu directed also *Good for Export* by Alex Tocilescu, which emphasized once more this problem of present-day Romanian society. About migration spoke also *Exit* by Árpád Schilling (Hystrio nr. 3/2017).

The international contribution of the festival was given by *Ogres*, a production of the homonymous company created in 2015 by French author **Yann Verburgh** and Romanian director Eugen Jebeleanu. In 28 scenes and covering 14 destinations world-wide, *Ogres* proposed a voyage to the heart of homophobia, at a time when a big part of the public opinion in Romania is ever more discriminatory towards homosexuals. The play resulted after an in-depth documentation of Verburgh, whereas director Jebeleanu guides five actors who give voice to 30 characters, presenting homophobia from different points of view: of the victims, of the aggressors, of the families and of the witnesses. But the special event of PITB's fourth edition was the project *Romania 100*. Given the fact that in 2018 the country will celebrate the centenary of its existence as modern state, curator Cristina Modreanu and casting director Florentina Bratfanof selected 100 Romanians to appear live

on stage. I witnessed thirteen of them, coming from all social classes, ethnic and gender categories, ranging from 18 to 65 years of age, who told their personal stories under the direction of Peter Kerek. It was a deeply emotional evening, which drew a complex picture of contemporary Romania. Film screening and a panel discussion about “How European is Romanian theatre today?” were other events included in PITB. Additionally, a collaboration with the National Theatre for Radio Drama aired for 24 hours seven audio productions selected according to the festival theme *Europe?*

An avalanche of shows

Quite interesting, this type of broadcast on radio is the oldest and strongest bond between audience and theatre professionals. No wonder that the **National Theatre Festival** held in **Bucharest** at the end of October for the 27th time, aired a total of 43 productions in honour of 84-year-old actor Victor Rebengiuc. From October 20 to 30, this edition packed in 56 shows and 25 book launches, lots of conferences, workshops, debates and exhibitions in a huge programme. Besides 53 Romanian productions, three international guest performances were presented. *Hamlet Collage* from Moscow's Theatre of Nations opened the festival. Actor Evgeny Mironov confined in a cube hovering above the stage interpreted all characters of Shakespeare's play, one by one, under the direction of legendary Robert Lepage. The ballet *Romeo and Juliet* by French company Preljocaj and *To live somehow (Barbara)* featuring Juliette Binoche and Alexandre Tharaud were the other two guest performances. The motto of the festival chosen by curator Marina Constantinescu was “theatre changes the world”, which paid special attention to the “resistance of artists to everything that is aberrant, shattering, shocking in our lives. In justice, in health, in culture and in education!” No wonder that shows like the already mentioned *Rovegan*, the *Trial* and *Playlist* were included in Constantinescu's selection.

A specific issue concerns the family debate, as in 2015 in Romania a draft law was published that proposed a radical redefinition of “family” by a constitution amendment of the wording “The family is founded on free marriage between spouses” to “between a man and a woman”. Deeply intrigued, **Eugen Jebeleanu** wrote a play consisting of twenty scenes which analyses this topic. It tells the stories of three families along a period of three years. Directed also by himself, *Families* is a work developed by a coproduction between the National Theatre and the University, both of Sibiu. The same theme was examined in the musical show *Sugar Free Family* by **Mihaela Michailov**, which included original poems by Bobi Dumitraş. The production of the Small Theatre Bucharest in partnership with Replika Centre for Educational Theatre perceived the family as “an intersectional concert

of voices of parents, children, grandparents, church, robots”. A definitely dynamic, funny and emotional show directed by Radu Apostol.

The Italian indirect attendances at the National Theatre Festival were Fausto Paravidino's *Job's Butcher Shop* directed by Radu Afrim – an impressive production of the National Theatre of Iași – and *Pirandello's Café* directed by Mihai Măniuțiu, a production of “Regina Maria” Theatre Oradea. Starting from the dramatic script written by **Anca Măniuțiu**, the latter is structured on two plays of Pirandello: *The Man with the Flower in His Mouth* and *The Mountain Giants*. Music and dance scenes abound in this absurd world. And all is happening in an abandoned late-night coffee shop situated near a railway station (a gorgeous set designed by young Adrian Damian, present in the festival programme with five productions).

As contemporary dance is evolving rapidly in Romania, two different and very good productions were selected to the National Festival. **Arcadie Rusu's** *Babel* in the new Independent Choreographic Centre Linotip was a performance about some of our daily experiences: the way we behave in a traffic jam, how we are standing in line, our experience at the hospital, etc. Rusu's choreography was very inventive, displaying a big sense of humour and irony. On the other hand, *Dorian*, a production of Control N Cultural Association, was built on the supposition that the end of the world is coming within the next 24 hours. The activities of this last day of the protagonist (solo actor-dancer George Albert Costea) were imagined by **Oana Răsuceanu** on the juxtaposition of contemporary dance and multimedia projection. The non-verbal show was about “the words which we never utter and which, in the end, are spoken too late”.

October 2017 was a great way to engage the senses in Romania, as culture was highlighted in abundance with festivals taking place in a variety of cities all across the country.