

## Romanian theatre – three decades after the fall of communism

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Bucharest, October 19, 2019. “Here is Radio Free Europe!” Wait a minute! Wasn't this broadcast on short waves the only source of uncensored information during communist dictatorship to which people were listening in secret, fearing police reprisals? Of course. But this event is a historic meeting organized by the 29th edition of the National Theatre Festival, a tribute to memory which makes you get goose bumps. For ten days, the festival focused on investigating the freedom achieved during the 30 years after the fall of communism. The programme featured forty of the best performances of the country's last theatre season as well as four productions invited from abroad, all of them carefully selected by Marina Constantinescu, artistic director of the festival. The offer made under the superb motto “Theatre, the magic moment of history” was accompanied by no less than seven exhibitions, several book launches, conferences and workshops.

### A sampling of magical moments

From this year's international selection, strongly oriented to dance, the ballet performance *Eugene Onegin* from Saint Petersburg was for sure a delightful experience. Boris Eifman's dance version of Alexander Pushkin's novel in verses combines elements of classical and modern dance, propelling the audience into a maelstrom of conflicting passions set in a post-Soviet Russia of the early 1990s. Tchaikovsky's music alternates with Alexander Sitkovetsky's rock beats in an atmosphere of mystery and suspense.

The national showcase was proof of the country's multiculturalism: productions from Romanian, Hungarian, German and Jiddish theatres were invited to the festival. The well-known experimental Hungarian company Figura Stúdió Theatre from Gheorgheni presented a contemporary version of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* without changing the original text. Director István Albu proposed an itinerant staging through four spaces of the huge National Theatre building, starting in the foyer on the ground floor, continuing in two halls and ending finally outdoors, on the roof. In the lounge, doors opened towards the street, showing Natasha arriving in a yellow cab or Vershinin dismounting from a white horse. In one of the halls, Moscow was reconstructed from toy models, while in another room the walls of the house flaked like a burnt epidermis.

Strong visual images were used also in *Las Meninas*, a production of the Hungarian State Theater from Cluj. Andrei Măjeri's staging is based on the play of Mexican author Ernesto Anaya. The history of Velázquez's famous painting presents a society obsessed with

celebrity. The young director succeeds in reconstructing a monarchy which imposes its domination through self-flattering discourse. The rich sound effects and colorful costumes invigorate furthermore the atmosphere, ensuring a touch of originality to the production. The 9-ensemble cast delivers an utterly remarkable performance. Besides acting perfectly, they sing brilliantly, some of them featuring even operatic vocal tones.

One of the most eagerly awaited events was ***Richard III***. Two versions, both directed by Andrei Șerban, were presented in the same set design and with the same costumes, but by different companies: by the Bulandra Theatre from Bucharest and by the “Radnóti Miklós” Theatre from Budapest. Șerban is known for his reshaping of classics. In an era characterized by populist leaders such as Trump and Orbán, Shakespeare's play gains new political resonances. In the title role, actor Róbert Alföldi (former artistic director of the National Theatre Budapest) as well as his Romanian counterpart Marius Manole lead the way to theatrically significant performances. Of course both employed different acting approaches, the twofold enactment proposed proving to be an enticing audience experience.

### **Brief children's freedom guide**

“Freedom” was also the motto of the 12th edition of the International Festival for a Young Audience. From October 3 to 10, Oltița Cîntec, theater critic, festival director and artistic director of the Luceafărul Theatre Iași, transformed Romania's easternmost city into a hub of theatrical activity. Puppet theatre, a showcase of the host theatre, concerts, dance and circus performances, scenic readings, book presentations, exhibitions and much more – a fantastic program selection welcomed by a curious audience.

Matei Vișniec turned out to be an excellent author of children's plays. His newest play ***The Goat, the Little Goat and the She-Wolf Bitch*** was presented in a scenic reading. The text proves to have sparkling dialogues while being strongly anchored in contemporary politics. It is written as sequel to the “The Goat and the Three Kids”, a fairy tale collected in 1875 by Romanian writer Ion Creangă which strongly resembles the Brother's Grimm “The Wolf and the Seven Young Goats”. Vișniec's play ***The Alien who Wanted a Pyjama as Remembrance*** playfully deals with the serious issue of millions of Romanians working abroad for years, while their children are confided to the grandparents. The importance of lacking family time is underlined by an alien who slips out of one of the several gift boxes sent by the missing parents to their offsprings. The production of the theatre founded only three years ago in Suceava, which bears the name of the author, is full of humour and musical moments.

In a simple, but symbolic set design consisting of thirty cans of different sizes hanging on

three clothes racks, the Senegalese play ***Small Piece of Wood*** tackled the lacking freedom of African children. Actress Patricia Gomis from the group Djarama brought to life the stories of the “canned children”. Wooden dolls hidden inside the cans represented exploited street kids. The protagonist cleverly used body language and facial expressions to imitate different characters.

### **Succes and failures in post-communist Romania**

Just two hours away from Iași lies the city of Piatra Neamț surrounded by a beautiful mountain landscape. The local Youth Theatre served even before 1989 as a creative laboratory for entire generations of artists. “Success!” was the motto of the 31st edition of the festival which took place from September 18 to October 2 in Piatra Neamț. Curator Gianina Cărbunariu, manager of the Youth Theater since 2017, looked behind the façade of the “achievements” of the past thirty years.

One of the most eagerly awaited events was the premiere ***Frontal***. It is Cărbunariu's first staging since becoming a theatre manager. Inspired by Ion Creangă's fairy tale “The story of a lazy man”, Cărbunariu casts a glance on today's concept of poverty from a contemporary perspective, as unemployment is nowadays often explained by laziness. The tale written in 1878 is about a villager killed by his own people because he refuses to work. As usual, Cărbunariu signs responsible for text and directing. This was, however, a collective work. Sociologist Valer Simion Cosma as well as the eleven actors involved in the production have also actively participated in the documentation process. Numerous interviews were conducted with people of different ages and professions. Based on several events that have taken place in recent years in Romania and Sweden, Cărbunariu shows a collective portrait deeply rooted in the social environment. Using a variety of aesthetic means, the director creates a wide spectrum of opinion that reveals ignorance and malevolence towards recipients of social services. The show comes over quite unsentimental, but convincing. Only at the very end there are strong musical punk beats. This auditory apocalypse is visually marked by burning matches, reminiscent of Andersen's fairy tale “The Little Match Girl”. Contempt and irresponsibility lead to death.

But the festival had much more to offer. In figures, this edition meant 29 performances from seven countries, four concerts, five workshops, four book launches, two documentary film screenings, one jury made up of high-school teenagers. Performances were also shown in the neighboring towns of Târgu Neamț and Roman. Above all, the festival sees itself as a “meeting place for different generations of artists and spectators from various parts of Europe”. Thus, no less than 24 sessions of vivid audience discussions following each

performance have contributed to the special festival atmosphere.