

Cristina Modreanu

Elements of Ethics and Aesthetics in New Romanian Theatre

Young Romanian theatre artists are very concerned to address issues from the recent past and in using collaborative art to educational and therapeutic ends. The implications of the increased ethical consciousness in their work is addressed here by Cristina Modreanu, who focuses on the productions of directors Gianina Cărbunariu and David Schwartz. She analyzes the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in contemporary work against the backdrop of post-Communist Romanian society and in a global context, as well as the dynamics connecting the new wave of Romanian theatre to international tendencies in contemporary art, as observed by authors such as Jacques Rancière and Claire Bishop. Cristina Modreanu's doctorate on Romanian theatre after 1989 is from Bucharest University of Theatre and Film, and she has also developed the subject in lectures at Tel Aviv University and Plymouth University. A Fulbright alumna and former Visiting Scholar at New York University, Performance Studies Department, Modreanu currently lectures in Contemporary Performance at Bucharest University. Her publications include articles on Romanian and Eastern European theatre for journals such as *Theater*, *Theater der Zeit*, and *Alternatives Théâtrales*, and for the anthology *Romania after 2000: Five New Plays*, edited by Martin E. Segal.

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AT KEY HISTORICAL MOMENTS, theatre, as the most political of all arts, is one of the most profound vehicles used to mirror and even shape societies, especially when they are caught in the midst of changes. There are signs that Romanian theatre is now passing through such a moment when artists are driven more than ever to speak about the imperfections of the world they live in, hoping to become again the conscience of a society that is badly in need of them.

In the past few years, a powerful trend in Romanian new drama has been the rediscovery of the recent past, a sort of expanded journalistic documentation on issues of vital interest for the development of Romanian society. Interestingly, these issues have been neglected by the media due to a generalized degradation of their status and frequent obstructions to freedom of expression. Breaking with traditional playwrights, whose work depended on an affinity with the actors and directors charged with staging their finished plays, new generations of playwrights and

directors have developed a collaborative working style, generating the most relevant productions on the Romanian stage in the past ten years.

The DramAcum movement (which translates as 'drama now/instant drama' and can be interpreted as a 'theatre of urgency') was launched in 2002, and emerged from the National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, a rather conservative institution. It started as a contest organized by a group of students about to graduate from the directing school who were not happy with the Romanian plays they found available as working material. They decided to search for new voices and organized a contest with the help of one of their professors. Besides its founders,¹ DramAcum eventually included many other young Romanian theatre people who associated themselves with the movement. DramAcum also had an offspring, the TangaProject, initiated by the next generations of young directors who graduated in 2005 and 2006.²

The DramAcum contest was an unexpected success in the number of new plays and translations of contemporary drama from different languages it generated – English, German, French, Russian, even Swedish, Bulgarian and Norwegian – which in time enriched the repertoires of all theatres in Romania. At the same time, it inspired the next generation of artists to build their own independent projects and to work in groups based on affinities, in an atmosphere not very encouraging of such initiatives. The DramAcum contest helped to structure an independent, non-institutionalized theatre movement in Romania that had not existed before 1989, as it had in other countries from the Soviet bloc. Today, the artists emerging from this movement comprise the most vibrant, innovative, and creative segment of Romanian theatre. And within the past decade the movement has spurred on a new generation of theatregoers interested in real-life subjects and an open, direct theatrical approach. Thanks to DramAcum, realism has a new incarnation, with young playwrights using it to address the problems of contemporary life they confront every day.

Ten years on, documentary theatre is relevant for today's Romanian society, caught as it is in the globalization whirlpool, because it maps out new issues in the present post-global context. This new generation of theatremaking in Romania already has a couple of defining characteristics that connect it to a history of socio-political theatrical movements: socially relevant themes, in some cases openly evident, in others more nuanced; professional documentation, the use of techniques inspired from journalistic practice, followed by dramatization and team-editing of the material included; the collective work process, based on inputs in which hierarchies disappear and the limits between creative departments blur; methods of involving the spectators and provoking the audience's immersion, either by directly addressing it, or by placing it in the performing space; and other components of artistic activism.

Most DramAcum-related productions focus on issues such as homelessness, racism against

the Gipsy population, inter-ethnic conflicts, as well as perennial problems of emigration, the gap between generations, power, and politics. Step by step, young Romanian artists are drawing the country's map on stage so that their society can be observed through the lens of performance. A similar process took shape in the British contemporary theatre where young playwrights 'rewrote the nation' (Sierz, 2011, p. 3).³

One of the most interesting aspects of this shift in attitude is that these new productions are more concerned with ethical matters than aesthetic ones, a trend that connects them to a global wave of artistic activism and participatory art. The ethical dimension is enhanced not only in their theatrical but also in their entire professional lives. Over time, the personalities that founded the DramAcum movement, while continuing the annual contest, also followed their own artistic paths: some remained in theatre, others worked in television (Alexandru Berceanu) or in film (Andrea Vălean). It is worth mentioning that almost all avoided permanent contact with state-financed theatres and preferred independent venues, even if those were much smaller and had only a paltry budget.

Paradoxically, the independent arts movement became the most dynamic and creative artistic sector despite enormous funding difficulties and the pervasive corruption of the system of subsidies. Corruption had not diminished when Romania joined the European Union in 2007 and continued to make cultural funding very difficult to source.

All these aspects of the working model are relevant because they represent a choice – an ethical position of a generation unwilling to associate itself with a theatre system that continues to use public money to create large-scale productions aimed at entertaining and providing audiences with a temporary escape from reality. On the contrary, young artists from DramAcum and TangaProject bridge the gap between large-scale commercialized productions and the socio-economic concerns of the real world, their work addressing life in urban and rural environments while also dealing with problems of all social classes, with an emphasis on the disenfranchised.

Documentary Theatre with Political Focus

The most influential among these young artistic personalities is the playwright and director Gianina Cărbunariu. Her approach to controversial issues learned from the experience of Romanian post-1990 realities has become a signature. After her debut in school, Cărbunariu wrote *Stop the Tempo*, which premiered in December 2003 in a small fringe theatre – the Monday Theatre at Green Hours Café.⁴ The play drew on the simplest and yet smartest staging concepts – complete darkness, in which three performers armed with lanterns were moving around between spectators and spoke with flashes of light on their faces, verbalizing the growing frustration of a young generation forced to live in a society obsessed with consumption and greed, confronted with a lack of true moral and cultural values.

Stop the Tempo was considered the manifesto of the millennial generation in Romania, a generation comprised of people who began their education and careers after 1990, in a ‘free world’. The play was later staged in many European countries, and had an influence on young people everywhere, because it gave voice to the perpetual need of the younger generation to change the world. In 2013 *Stop the Tempo* was produced in New York by the Origin Theatre Company and had comparable impact.

Other such productions written by Cărbunariu were *20/20*, a piece about the ethnic clashes that took place in March 1990 between Romanians and Hungarians in the Transylvanian city of Târgu-Mures, and *Sold Out*, focusing on the ‘selling’ of the German citizens of Romania to the German state, beginning in the 1970s and 1980s and up to just before the Romanian Revolution.

Another production, *Red Mountain/Politically and Physically*, was recognized as the best new Romanian drama of 2011 by the international jury of New Romanian Drama Festival in Timisoara. The work was a co-production between DramAcum and a state-financed theatre, the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj. It concerned one of the most prominent and controversial subjects debated by



Red Mountain/Politically and Physically, directed by Gianina Cărbunariu. Above: Csilla Albert and Levente Molnarin. Below: Csilla Albert and Cristina Toma.



Romanian media within the last couple of years, a long-awaited case of government approval for mining gold in the Romanian mountains. The pending outcome has high-level political implications and the case has involved years of press campaigns, accusations of corruption, and NGO activism with European funds. There are still many issues to be unveiled that the Romanian Government has failed to resolve as yet, which is

why it has taken real courage for the DramAcum team to tackle such an issue on stage.⁵

The text was written by Peca Ștefan, Gianina Cărbunariu, and Andrea Vălean, and the editing was collaborative. The scenes of the show were rehearsed separately by each of the three directors. The documentation for the production derived from the village called Red Mountain, the entire team being involved. Interviews conducted with Red Mountain locals and corporate representatives fighting for the exploitation of the place did not resolve all the aspects of the problem, as one of the actresses said in a discussion after the show. Sometimes preserving doubt is essential, especially when it comes to a show that doesn't aim to provide all the answers on a subject. Rather, the work is intended to provoke questions and bring them forward for public debate. The placement of the set-design elements and spectators around the performance space is meant to create a sense of involvement for the audience; spectators are included in the dramaturgy because, at the end of the performance, certain audience members are asked to read letters that one character received during the show.

The properties that can be seen on stage match those in the houses visited by the team while documenting the case in Red Mountain: a television set which only shows promotional election clips, a red microwave, and small replicas of the key monuments from the Red Mountain. All of the objects are displayed on high pedestals with a light on them, as if exhibited in a strange museum from the 1980s. With a mix of aesthetics – including realistic scenes and surrealist insertions of musical moments – *Red Mountain* has an intriguing kaleidoscopic structure which instead of confirming old formulas opens up towards new paths. The conclusion of the show remains open-ended, with the spectators being left alone on stage reading letters given to them by the performers: a fitting end for the unfinished business of Red Mountain gold exploitation.

The play written by Cărbunariu in December 2011, *X mm from Y km*, was gener-

ated by her research in the archives of the Romanian Secret Police (before 1989 known by the name of 'Securitate'). She centred her work on a nine-page document, proof of a discussion between the Romanian dissident Dorin Tudoran and representatives of Securitate and the Romanian Writers' Guild, in which the various parties tried to convince Tudoran to give up his desire to leave the country. Cărbunariu took a decisive leap beyond the realistic form and decided to replay a couple of scenes with different acting solutions, as if trying hard to piece together a puzzle.

As no one really knows how this meeting really went or how the participants behaved, the actors attempt a couple of versions of each key scene introduced by the words 'I resume'. In an essay documenting her research and working process published by the Romanian performing arts magazine *Scenaro*, Cărbunariu underlines the importance of this mechanism: 'The replayed scenes are at stake in the performance, they are the "translation" with theatrical means of the sensation of moving sands that I felt facing all those words' of the Securitate dossiers (Cărbunariu, 2012, p. 33).

In *X mm from Y km* actors are free to stop whenever they need and can switch roles. Two women and two men play the three men identified as the participants, and in each configuration one of the actors has to play the part of 'the anonymous eye', the person who wrote down what was said that day. Here, 'the eye' is a camera whose images are projected on two of the walls of the studio. The four actors thus function as an 'apparatus' meant to reproduce all angles of the episode, which could generate a potentially interminable series of re-creations if all the stories of those followed by Securitate in Romania – from the 'kilometres of dossiers', says Cărbunariu – were one day to be told.

For now, the concept of the production generated an intentional distillation and thus magnified the importance of the researched issue. Its goal is to consider all the evidence and decipher any hidden meanings between the lines of Tudoran's secret dossier by employing theatrical devices. The play pro-



Toma Dănilă, Paula Gherghe and Rolando Matsangos in *X mm from Y km*, directed by Gianina Cărbunariu.
Photo: ColectivA.



Another scene from *X mm from Y km*. Photo: ColectivA.

poses different frames of interpretation of power dynamics in the relationships of the time, as seen from a contemporary analytical perspective. In other words, it brings about 'a reframing of material and symbolic space. And it is in this way that art bears upon politics' (Rancière, 2009, p. 24).

Cărbunariu is the first of her generation to affirm the idea that her work is guided by ethical values rather than aesthetics:

Very early in the rehearsals questions emerged about how could we approach this issue, this material, these 'characters' (real people like us) and how could we deal with the audience. These are questions which are connected, not only to the

aesthetics of the performance, but in the same degree they are connected with its ethics.

(Cărbunariu, 2012, p. 33)

Directorial choices like keeping the audience in darkness and using lanterns to enhance the symbolic power of the actors in *Stop the Tempo*, as well as the way she devised an invisible character in *X mm from Y km*, using the camera in a very active way and creating a space for the 'not seen' – also the open-ended quality of her productions and the way she gives the spectators the chance of drawing their own conclusions, place Cărbunariu among the authors of those political works of art able to 'disrupt the relationship among



Alex Potocean in *Hot Heads*, directed by David Schwartz. Photo: Diana Dulgheru.

the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable without having to use the terms of a message as a vehicle’.

It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations. As a matter of fact, political art cannot work in the simple form of a meaningful spectacle that would lead to an ‘awareness’ of the state of the world. Suitable political art would ensure, at one and the same time, the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification

(Rancière, 2004, p. 63)

A Critique of Late Capitalism

Another good instance of taking the ethical position in art is illustrated by the team led by director David Schwartz, former Tanga-Project member, who believes in the role of theatre in changing the community for the better. Schwartz and playwright Mihaela Michailov are developing a programme for and with elderly residents of the Jewish

House in Bucharest, encouraging the residents to tell their stories of surviving the Holocaust and Communism and, at the same time, discovering a past often ignored. The educational and therapeutic roles of theatre are enhanced jointly by such projects.

But this team’s most interesting project, mixing ethical and aesthetic elements, is the one dedicated to Romanian miners, a class with a very complex recent history. These men were highly praised by the Communist regime, which built entire cities for them in the 1960s and 1970s, considering the miners one of the most important parts of the working class. Likewise, Romanian president Ion Iliescu – the first elected president after the fall of the Berlin Wall – called on the miners in 1990 to ‘restore order’ in Bucharest when people were protesting against his rule.

Today, miners are either totally forgotten, or considered evil: during the clash that took place in Bucharest’s University Square in 1990 miners were filmed beating students and intellectuals in an authentic class fight that frightened the civilized world. David



Underground, directed by David Schwartz. Left to right: Alice Monica Marinescu, Alex Potocean, Andrei Șerban, Katia Pascariu. Photo: Vlad Petri.

Schwartz and his team had the courage to address this now disappearing social class in two productions. The first, *Hot Heads/July 1990* (*Capete înfierbântate*), documented the clash between miners and students, while the second, *Underground* (*Sub Pământ*), examined present-day life in a mining city in the heart of Romania.

Hot Heads/ July 1990 (about the ‘minerade’, the shocking events that brutally ended the wave of worldwide sympathy for post-Revolution Romania in the summer of 1990) was the work of the playwright Mihaela Michailov, the director David Schwartz, the actor Alex Potocean and the visual artist Cinty Ionescu. It was based on interviews with key figures of that time, including ex-President Iliescu, whose very words inspired the title of the work: *Hot Heads*. While in 1990 Iliescu publicly called for the miners to ‘protect democracy’, interviewed after twenty years he just remembers the ‘hot atmosphere’ of those days. He continues to make excuses for the miners while placing himself outside the incident.

The radical minimalist staging of the production included only one actor, Alex Potocean, who is placed on a chair in front of a screen where real shootings from 1990 are being shown. In between elements of the show – a mix of performance, lecture, and monodrama – short explanatory notes are projected on to the screen. With very few costume changes, Potocean interprets seven different characters in an exceptionally evocative acting marathon.

This actor, along with Alice Monica Marinescu, Katia Pascariu, and Andrei Șerban, was also present in the next production, *Underground*, based on research done in Valea Jiului (the best-known mining community in Romania). This heartbreaking production features the stories of different people living a disenfranchised life in a ghost city. Aesthetic emotions are not the main concern of the creators, who use Brecht-style songs to create the interludes between the scenes. Again, the acting style is minimalist, as are the other elements of the production (lighting, costumes, stage design), creating

an example of 'poor theatre' with a highly political approach. Both *Hot Heads* and *Underground* produce an astute critique of a society which entered late capitalism with no awareness of its marginal components and no strategies for their absorption.

Conclusion

By exploring the intersections of theatre and late capitalism with its human collateral damage in a society like Romania – awoken from the Communist dream to face the reality of the cost of capitalism – young creators like Gianina Cărbunariu and David Schwartz find themselves in an uncomfortable position. First, because from the background of a totalitarian system, with little training for critical thinking, Romanians have spent the last two decades of 'freedom' chasing the capitalist illusion which the western world is already questioning.

Romanian society now find itself in a limbo between world crises – political, economic, social – and major problems regarding national identity in an uncertain economic future. Secondly, the local theatre world is not mature enough to understand its role in this kind of situation, so young creators like Schwartz and Cărbunariu have intentionally placed themselves on the fringes of the Romanian stage. Together with their teams and other young independent creators, they are the miners of today's Romanian theatre.

There are a lot of issues for artists to tackle within such an uncertain climate, but Romanian theatre-makers are beginning to pave a way forward. This artistic development has been delayed for almost a decade due to the long-standing effects of Romania's extended isolation, especially for the forty years of the Communist regime. While theoretical discourse in the world has already come to question certain aspects of the powerful wave of arts activism of the past several years (Claire Bishop, 2006, p. 180),⁶ there is no debate in Romanian theatre about the role creative activism can play in staging new theatre in the twenty-first century, or about the relationship between the ethics of art and the aesthetic context for a political

work of art. And yet, despite the delay in local theoretical discourse, the new generation of Romanian artists is moving closer to the ethical aspects of their profession without forgoing aesthetic concerns.

That is why the documentary theatre made by these young artists can be considered one of the most interesting trends in Romanian theatre today, in sync as it is with similar movements throughout the world. Not only is it extremely important for its role in local public forums to raise awareness regarding issues of public concern, but also for its intrinsic artistic merits.

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Notes

1. The DramAcum founders were Professor Nicolae Manda and the directors Andrea Vălean, Gianina Cărbunariu, Radu Apostol, and Alexandru Berceanu, all of them still working on the Romanian stages.
2. TangaProject included David Schwartz, Bogdan Georgescu, Vera Ion, Miruna Dinu, and Ioana Păun, whose works have an emphasis on collaborative theatre. From this group another interdisciplinary movement developed in 2006 – the Generosity Offensive, with a focus on building community awareness through theatre.
3. Sierz explains that 'by articulating the concerns of various tribes, British playwrights are deeply involved in the project of writing and rewriting the nation'.
4. The Monday Theatre at Green Hours Café, where many other young Romanian directors staged their first shows after graduating, had the same role in Romanian theatre as Café Cino in New York in the birth of the off-Broadway movement.
5. These brave artists include Gianina Cărbunariu, Andrea Vălean, Radu Apostol (directors), Peca Ștefan, Andu Dumitrescu (video), Florin Fieroiu (choreography), Bogdan Burlăcianu (music), and actors Cristina Toma, Csilla Albert, Andras Buzasi, Lorand Farkas, Csongor Kollo, and Levente Molnar
6. Bishop mainly refers in her writings to contemporary art, but her ideas can be applied to theatre. She emphasizes that the ethical turn in contemporary arts has also prompted a shift in art criticism.